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MOBILE WORKING STUDENTS

A Delicate Balance of College, Family & Work

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Describing the College-Going Experiences of the “New Majority”

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Mobile Working Students

Moving *on* & *off*
campuses....

...Moving *between*
institutions...

...Moving
in & *out* of
higher education

- “Dynamic mix of time and space that marked student pathways in the 1990s” (Adelman, 2006)
- Ewell, Schild, and Paulson, 2003
- The complex and increasingly prevalent experience of employment

The Literature & the Theory: Progress, Critiques & Disjunctures

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- Typical focus on linear enrollment patterns and traditional student experiences
 - ▣ Tinto, 1993
 - ▣ Studies that extend and critique these models
 - ▣ Bean and Metzner, 1985

- Current theory about college-going and student success does not describe processes of mobile working students well
 - ▣ Explains comparatively less about students at commuter institutions
 - ▣ Illustrates the complexity of the role of employment
 - ▣ Reflects time lines more typical of traditional student employment
 - ▣ Has not generally incorporated qualitative inquiry or students' own descriptions

Research on Working Students

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- Complex effects of work on student success
 - ▣ Perna, Cooper, and Li, 2006
 - ▣ Bradley, 2006
- Points us to further research not only to understand more, but to understand implications more
 - ▣ McDonough and Calderone, 2006

Mobile Working Student Collaborative



The Mobile Working Student in Northwest Indiana is a two-year policy-oriented study that the Project on Academic Success (PAS) is pursuing in collaboration with Indiana University Northwest, Ivy Tech Community College Northwest, and Purdue University Calumet.

Funded by the Lumina Foundation for Education, the project focuses on *the new majority student experience in higher education--that of the mobile working student.*

Research Questions

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- What are the characteristics, perceptions, and college experiences of mobile working students?
- How do the sometimes competing demands of college, work, and family life play into the academic success of these students?
- How do these students understand the roles of the institutions they attend—and their own roles at these institutions?

Approach to the Study

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- Collaborative with three institutions
- Applied ethnographic approach (Chambers, 2000)
- Focus groups and interviews
 - ▣ Students
 - ▣ Faculty
 - ▣ Practitioners
- Combined with analyses from a SLED, which allows us to place qualitative findings in context by both region and state

Student Focus Groups

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- Semi-structured interview protocols
- Focused on students' sense-making
 - ▣ Educational and career goals
 - ▣ Campus experiences
 - ▣ Experiences on the job
 - ▣ Family responsibilities
 - ▣ Strategies for academic success
- 92 participants recruited through required general education courses and campus contexts



Differentiating the Working Student Experience: Two Focal Areas

Time Structuring

Experiences on Campus

Time Structuring

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STUDENT VOICES

Michelle*—I schedule work around my classes. Work is just not even that important. It's not my career. So I really don't care about it.

Dara—Working [until late], and closing—like I like to go [out] after work too sometimes, or study—I have to give myself at least a later class. So ten's about a good time, because then you, there's a lot more classes around ten and one, so that's how I pick my classes. And then...I did one day longer and one day earlier, so on those days that I get out earlier of school I can get more hours in at work. So I did schedule at the beginning and after work pretty much.

Joe—I just like going two days a week [It allows] just more time to study too. I have Wednesday and Monday to finish what I need. So I can do a class for each day if I wanted to.

Rob—I usually do the opposite of that. I usually go to school Monday through the Thursday, because I know if I have those two extra days off I'll end up working those two days and then I won't have any—I'll lose time that I'd be either studying or doing homework, or something like that.

Caitlin—I just go around the time I think somebody can watch the baby.

* These names are pseudonyms.

Time Structuring, cont.

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STUDENT VOICES

I only work on the weekends. So I do 12-hour shifts ... Friday, Saturday, and Sunday. ... I go to work at six o'clock in the morning. I don't get home until six pm. So if there was homework that I needed to get done—a lot of teachers give you homework Thursday or Wednesday, because I had two separate classes each day [last term]—and it had to get done by that weekend, so it was—I didn't have the time to do it. ... I was always stressed doing homework, and there was never no family time. It was either homework, or work, or that was basically it.

Mondays and Wednesdays I have one class and I'm done by 11:15, but then I go straight to work and then I work until 7:00 or 8:00. Then the good thing about my daycare is that she stays open to 11:30. ... So if I need to stay late she'll keep her for me ... Then Tuesdays and Thursdays ... I'm in school from 8:30 to 5:00 ... Tuesdays and Thursdays I don't work but every other day I do work. And then Saturday and Sunday [my daughter]'s with my mom ... She's off on the weekends so she keeps my daughter.

Experiences on Campus

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STUDENT VOICES

The reading lab, last semester, I had to go to all the time. And the girls knew me by face, “Oh, just sign in, [Tina]”... It’s kind of nice to know that they remember who you are. It’s more person-to-person ... here. Your class settings aren’t as big. You get that one-on-one, or the attention that you kind of need. I couldn’t imagine myself in a classroom with 700 people or 1,000 people, kind of just like a number I guess. To me, here, it’s just more personal.

But when you go ... to financial aid they feel like it’s coming out of their pocket to give you money to pay for your classes. They’re worse than working with the folks at the aid office. They talk to you like you don’t know nothing, like you’re dumb. To me that just makes me really teed off.

I am past my plan for where I was supposed to be at this age of my life, but being here has made me feel like it’s okay. It’s “you were supposed to be here, you’re supposed to finish and graduate, your undergraduate here. We have the resources, and we have the reputation, and we’ll get you to the places where you’re supposed to be.”

Discussion

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- Time Structuring
 - ▣ Differentiated experiences
 - ▣ Key dimensions
 - Reliable income for basic needs and college-going
 - Reliable childcare, and other support for family obligations
- Experiences on Campus
 - ▣ Positive experiences and descriptions emphasize one-on-one interaction and personal connection
 - ▣ Salience of education's "sorting functions" in students' descriptions

Implications

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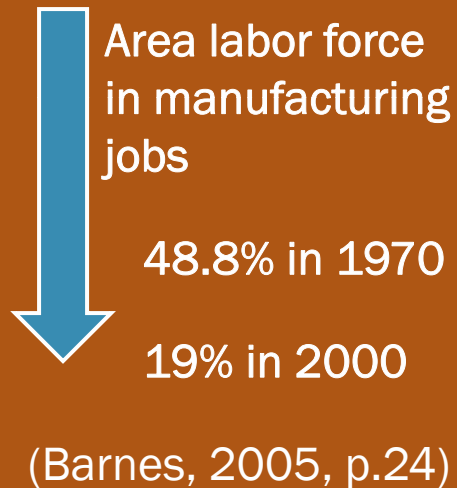
- For Policy and Practice
 - ▣ Financial aid
 - ▣ Childcare
 - ▣ Student support and interaction with faculty

- For Research and Theory
 - ▣ Differentiating the conditions and experiences of working students
 - ▣ Social reproduction theories and stratification by institutional type
 - ▣ Salience of metanarratives and counterstories about academic merit and who “belongs” in college

Situating Insight & Action

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Decline in jobs



- Attention to context
 - ▣ Economic , political and social dynamics in the region
 - ▣ Regional perspective on higher education participation

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