Faculty & Practitioners' Views of Working, Commuting Students

Aligning Perspectives for Academic Success

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Purpose of the Study

Today's college students are more likely than those of past generations to work for pay while enrolled in college (Fox, Connolly, & Snyder, 2005). According to the most recent figures from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2010), over 42% of recent high school graduates enrolled in college participate in the workforce. These figures are even higher for all undergraduates; in 2003–04, as many as 77% of all students were employed while pursuing higher education (Perna, Cooper, & Li, 2006). Research has found mixed results as to the impact of working on student academic success (e.g., Choy & Berker, 2003; Hughes & Mallette, 2003; Perna, Cooper, & Li, 2006), and—save for a few qualitative studies (e.g., Matus-Grossman & Gooden, 2002)—has mainly described the prevalence of working among undergraduate students. Probing the underexamined daily college-going realities of working students is therefore important for higher education researchers seeking a better understanding of the range of college student experiences today.

Part of a broader study focused on working students, this paper reports on interviews and focus groups with faculty and practitioners at three commuter institutions—two regional universities and one multicampus community college—located in the same Midwestern metropolitan region. Specifically, we examine faculty and practitioners' perceptions of working student experiences and the role institutional policies and practices play in student success. This exploration centers on two research questions:

- What are faculty and practitioners' perceptions of working, commuting students and their experiences?

- What role do faculty and practitioners view themselves and their institutions playing in the academic success of working, commuting students?

Theoretical Perspectives

This research draws on previous studies regarding working students (Bradley, 2006; Choy & Berker, 2003; Hughes & Mallette, 2003; Perna, Cooper, & Li, 2006) and the role of financial aid in postsecondary access and success (McDonough & Calderone, 2006; Paulsen & St. John, 1997; St. John, Paulsen, & Starkey, 1996; Stage & Hossler, 2000). The studies of St. John and colleagues highlighted the need to contextualize models of academic success within a nexus of social, academic, and financial factors. While the quantitative measures and controls for student characteristics used in much of this previous research have produced informative results, this type of inquiry does not explain why students make certain choices, how they go about understanding their options in higher education, or how to consider the complexity of students' educational contexts—which include postsecondary institutions and the actors within them.

Although some studies have used qualitative data to understand students' perceptions of and experiences with work, financial aid, and college success (e.g., Matus-Grossman & Gooden, 2002; McDonough & Calderone, 2006; Santiago, 2007; Somers & Cofer, 1998), very few have included the perceptions of faculty and practitioners who interact with working students. McDonough and Calderone (2006) have called for research on student academic success to widen its view to examine practitioners' culturally informed perspectives, norms, and expectations regarding work, education, and money. Although few studies have responded directly to this call, Bensimon (2007) discusses practitioner *funds of knowledge* (Moll, 2000)—implicit theories about students, developed formally and informally, that shape practitioner sense-making about student success—and cites a need for more research on how practitioners adjust their knowledge and adapt practices to meet student needs.

This study responds to Bensimon's call as well as those of Stage and Hubbard (2007), Martínez Alemán (2007), and others for more research examining the role of faculty and practitioners in students' success. Faculty are the most consistent point of contact between institutions and students (Stage & Hubbard, 2007), and they play a principal role in student learning and success (Umbach & Wawrzynski, 2005). This is particularly true for commuting and working students, who visit campus almost exclusively for classes and class-related activities. However, the value of this interaction between faculty and students has been examined only in a cursory way, as Stage and Hubbard (2007) point out. Without further inquiry on faculty and practitioners as culturally contingent actors in these pivotal interactions with students, higher education research implicitly and uncritically takes the position of the institution, reifying students' and families' positions as "deficient" or "problematic." To stanch the damage caused by this kind of deficit-model reasoning in research, policy, and practice, more research is needed on the role of communication between faculty and students (Martínez Alemán, 2007) as well as on how faculty develop student support practices (Bensimon, 2007).

While previous research provides a framework for examining faculty and practitioners' experiences with working students, the theoretical perspective of our study considers both individual and institutional roles within the higher education system. In this effort we draw in part on a social reproduction perspective (Bourdieu, 1973; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1979, Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). In taking this approach, we assume that colleges and universities are to some extent involved in replicating social and economic structures, including inequalities, from one generation to the next. Our study builds on the understanding—also implicit in Bourdieu—that education policy and institutions simultaneously *replicate as well as transform* social inequalities. Research focused on understanding this dual potential of colleges and universities is

not aimed at showing that institutions, or actors within institutions, intentionally direct students into societal roles and positions defined by racial and economic power. Rather, this kind of research aims to see how these structures (racial and economic power in particular) inform all of our actions as educators and students, as individuals and institutions. In addition, research employing this theoretical perspective aims to understand how these structures and dynamics shape what we all (students, practitioners, faculty, and researchers) perceive as possibilities—as the natural order underlying and shaping our actions. To approach the study of faculty and practitioners' perceptions of working students and academic success in this way, thus, is also to deepen our understanding of praxis through and within institutions.

Study Context & Research Methods

The region in which this study's three institutions are located has experienced dramatic changes in industry in recent decades, with the loss of thousands of manufacturing jobs and a consequential decline in the tax base for many communities in the area. In these shifts, the region is similar to many other regions in the U.S.

Changes in industry also have exacerbated residential segregation by race. African American (18.9%) and Latino (10.9%) populations make up almost 30% of the tri-county region, a significantly greater proportion than in the state overall. Moreover, according to 2000 census data, the population of the principal urban center is 84% African American and one neighboring urban community is 51.6% Latino. Nearby suburbs, in contrast, are up to 94% White. Gaps in median income have also widened, with the urban center showing a high concentration of low-income families and the adjacent, mostly suburban county having a higher median household income than the two other counties and the state as a whole.

Higher education participation rates in the region range from far below (19% in the urban center) to just above (35% in an adjacent suburb) national rates. Yet the region's higher education institutions play a major role in the education of the region's residents. According to the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), approximately 17,186 undergraduates were enrolled at the study's three institutions in the years of this study, with 60–65% of students at each campus being White. According to state-level education data for the region, a majority of students enrolled in the participating institutions in 2005 reported family incomes of less than $19,000. Further, statewide data also show that students who begin their education in the region remain in the area for the most part, with relatively few students transferring to institutions outside the region.

As commuter, region-serving institutions, these schools are likely to enroll working students. Previous research found that over 80% of students in the region were employed part time or full time, over 35% were employed full time, and 20% reported working over 40 hours a week (Hossler, Gross, Pellicciotti, Fischer, & Excell, 2007).

In 2008 and 2009, this study's research team conducted 31 focus groups and interviews at the three participating institutions with 71 faculty members, academic advisors, financial aid counselors, and other student services professionals who interact with working students at their institutions. We recruited participants via project partners on each campus. Practitioner focus group recruitment was driven by an effort to involve as many professionals as possible with roles in the following areas: academic support, financial aid, and academic advising. In addition, we recruited faculty members who worked extensively with undergraduate students early in the college studies, and sought to involve faculty from a full range of departments and units. With a few exceptions, practitioner focus groups were organized so that participants in each session

shared similar roles. Notable exceptions occurred on participating community college campuses

where the faculty and staff numbers were considerably smaller, and divisions between roles were

often more porous. Some faculty participants were interviewed individually due to scheduling

constraints. A summary of participants' roles, gender, race/ethnicity, and campus context is

shown in the table below.

		Participants
Role		
	Faculty	33
	Practitioners	38
	Total	71
Gender		
	Men	26
	Women	45
	Total	71
Race/Ethnicity		
	African American	24
	Latino/a	10
	White	37
	Total	71
Insitution Type		
	Community College	37
	Regional University	34
	Total	71

We adopted a semi-structured approach in these focus group discussions and interviews.

Topics covered centered on how practitioners and faculty made sense of working students'

experiences and daily realities as well as on how they understood their own roles in supporting

student academic success.

Data analysis began with low-inference coding and, through a collaborative process

among research team members, gradually built toward more focused, theory-defined coding and

categorization of experiences (Carspecken, 1996). Our early analyses of focus group

transcriptions revolved mainly around an iterative process with multiple rounds of open coding

followed by research team discussions generating an initial list of low-inference codes applied in

subsequent rounds of thematic coding. A qualitative data analysis software package, *Atlas.ti,* was

used to store and organize data and analyses.

To understand the role of norms and expectations in more extended exchanges with

participants, we used pragmatic horizon analysis (Carspecken, 1996). Consistent with the

recommendations of this approach, we examined focus group data in context and by theme in

alternation. These processes and the resulting analytical documents provided material for peer

debriefing sessions with outside and collaborating researchers in which we probed the inferences

folded into our emerging analyses.

Findings

Several general findings emerged from interviews and focus groups with faculty and

practitioners at the three commuter institutions in this study. First, findings from the interviews

suggest participating faculty and practitioners have extensive interaction with students that helps

to ground their perceptions. While the experiences of traditional-age, dependent-status students

at residential campuses continue to be a salient reference point for many, these study results also

show that participating faculty and practitioners have adapted their approaches in response to the

complexities they perceive in working students' lives. Further, with students' being employed

considered the norm at these institutions, faculty and practitioners' comments suggested a more

complex and multifaceted image than the somewhat monolithic conceptualization of the working

student experience that is currently dominant in higher education research and practice-oriented

literature. Three important themes have emerged from our analysis: 1) awareness of students'

multiple roles and obligations; 2) perceptions of student academic success, including barriers to succeeding; and 3) the ways faculty and practitioners connect with students and the types of connections they forge. Each of these themes is discussed and illustrated in further detail below.

Awareness of Students' Multiple Roles

The faculty members and practitioners who participated in this study described interacting with students in a number of capacities—as advisors, instructors, and counselors on a range of student services. Many participants carried out more than one of these functions in their roles at the institution.

Participants conveyed a common, implicit understanding that working while enrolled in school was a given aspect of students' lives. During almost all of the practitioner and faculty interviews and focus groups, participants expressed general and in some instances more specific awareness of the multiple demands that working students balance in their multiple roles—roles they described as defining characteristics of these students. Further, participants described strategies that students—academically successful students in particular—employed to balance these multiple demands.

Distinct characteristics of working students. Faculty and practitioners alike acknowledged that for many of these students, being a student was not the primary role or facet of their lives. A university faculty member, for example, noted, "Going to school is just a part of their lives. It's not their life; it's a part of their life. And quite frankly, in many cases, they have other parts of their lives which are more important, or more pressing at least." In a community college focus group, a student services practitioner described how working students' schedules must take into account their multiple obligations:

[Some less-prepared students] think, "I'll take those classes, it's only two or three days

out of the week, I can do that." They're not thinking ahead. They don't have the

perspective of, you take these classes, this is this many hours out of the week, but then

you have to tack on one or two hours, three hours per week per class for study time

…And then if you have children, there's that many hours involved with your children.

And if you're working part-time, then you have to add those many hours on.

The practitioner's perspective in this description reflects an awareness of the obligations and

complexities faced by many students at her institution. At the same time, it highlights a

perception that students in this situation fail to account adequately for the time that course work

will require. The comment is somewhat inconsistent with new qualitative findings on working

students' experiences in the region (i.e., Hernandez et al., 2007; Ziskin et al., 2010), which

showed working parents enrolled at the institution practicing highly intricate time management

skills in balancing work, childcare, and school.

A balancing act. Whereas faculty and practitioner comments suggested a widely held

understanding of students' multiple roles, some emphasized the balancing act required of

students to manage these roles, pointing to this as an essential skill required for students'

academic success. For example, a university faculty member shared this observation about a

student with whom she had interacted:

A guy, about mid-30s, who was a straight-A student here, and an impressive student

really, very well prepared, and I just happened to realize he's got a wife and two kids, his

wife works full-time too, and I asked him how did he do this, how's he doing so well in

school, and he laid it out to me like it was a business plan. He said during the week, I

don't study, I just come to class two nights a week and the other time I'm with my family

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[…] Sunday morning, he would come to the library and it's the one time of the week he would study. He would get here in the morning and he would just start going through his courses, it was only like two or three classes, and doing all the readings for the upcoming week, working on his papers and projects, and he says he's always done before the library closed.

This comment reflects not only an awareness of the multiple demands on students' time, but also a recognition and even praise for this student's efforts to manage his time and fulfill his obligations as father and husband as well as student. Another university faculty member shared similar sentiments when talking more generally about students and about her perceptions of students' time-management strategies: "[T]hey focus by separating their life. And those that do well are able to segment their life. And where the segment of time is allocated to doing that work is appropriate to the amount of time that needs, those are the successful ones." Participants referred to this "segmentation" in students' lives not only in their descriptions of students who had roles as parents and spouses but also in their comments about working dependent students. These findings not only indicate these faculty and practitioners recognize that students have multiple roles and that they compartmentalize these roles, but the findings also suggest that these faculty and practitioners believe students *should* compartmentalize their multiple roles to promote their academic success.

Dichotomy of student types. The faculty and practitioner accounts revealed a prominently shared perception among them of a dichotomy in the experiences (or even "types") of students on their campuses—traditional-age students comprising one distinct group and adult learners the other. Comments from some faculty and practitioners illustrated this dichotomy quite explicitly. One university faculty member, for example, described the differences between

these two types of students as like "night and day" and discussed the greater difficulty he saw facing older, working students. In comparison, he found younger students to "have more ability to juggle their time and more control over juggling their time. […] they're a lot more relaxed and […] they have a lot more focus even within that juggling act. And it's very clear which students are in which situation and the stresses upon them." Thus, faculty and practitioners who spoke with us drew subtle distinctions in describing how students' multiple roles affect their college experiences in varying life situations. Participants often implicitly or explicitly compared traditional-age working students with their peers at residential institutions—while, in contrast, they often described adult learners as motivated by family obligations and economic necessity. Practitioner comments regarding adult learners in particular also frequently included references to their low academic self-confidence.

In contrast, experience gained prior to postsecondary enrollment—shaping his or her role as student—was also perceived to be a distinctive implication of a student's age. One university practitioner shared his perception of the influence of precollege employment on students' focus on their education:

> [T]he older student that's returning, that's been out there, that worked, that know there's nothing out there, that know "I need education," those students when they come back to school, they're focused. Now I'm not going to say they don't have issues with family, and "my kid is sick so I can't come and take this test," and things like that. But all around, I think they make better students than those coming directly out of high school.

This quote clearly illustrates a view, shared by several other participants, that adult learners on campus drew on their life experience to become more focused and successful in their studies. The example further highlights the implicit dichotomy—common in many participants'

comments—between traditional-age students and older adults studying at these institutions. Also reflected here is the implicit value of higher education as essential for fulfilling employment and the perception that this value is shared by older students. Interestingly, however, the two contrasting examples included here illustrate that some faculty and practitioners emphasized the additional stresses and disadvantages experienced by adult learners on campus, while others highlighted the adult learners' strengths.

Perceived Barriers and Strategies for Academic Success

The comments of participating faculty and practitioners alike focused on what they perceived to be barriers to and strategies for students' academic success. Among the most prominent threads emerging out of the study focus groups and interviews were comments highlighting the tensions that complicate working students' efforts at academic success in college. Comments in this vein centered on the multifaceted role that employment can play in students' college experience and the underpreparation for college that many students experienced in terms of both content knowledge and structural knowledge.

Multifaceted work experiences. While viewing working for pay as a reality for the students on these campuses, faculty and practitioners perceived the complex dimensions of work to have varying implications on students' academic success. It depends, they seemed to say, on the situation. The definitions of student employment implicit in participants' descriptions included various aspects of working: the type of work; the work's relevance to the student's field of study and career goals; the location of the workplace, i.e., its location on or proximity to campus; the number of hours spent at work during a typical week; and the reasons for employment, whether as a primary source of income or as a supplement to household incomes. As captured in the comment of one university practitioner, "[U]ltimately it will come down to at

dismissal time, why were you dismissed, ultimately it always is 'I put in too many hours at work.' And it's not a work place that's professionally geared."

The relevance of the student's work to the student's academic program was a factor some participants perceived to have a great effect on the student's success, and some participants even encouraged students' working if the work was in their chosen field of study. A community college faculty member in culinary arts, for example, described the benefits of culinary arts students' working in the food industry:

> It is helpful for them. We try to always encourage them to work, and it's very obvious the student that comes back or the student that starts the first week on their cutting skills. Through the semester, they go get a part-time job, it's pretty obvious and pretty quick how fast their skills improve because they're working in the industry as opposed to going home and cooking, not taking their knife sets home, or whatever. But their skills improve immensely by having a part-time job.

This perspective was shared by several faculty members across various disciplines, particularly in reference to adult students who attended college as a means of professional development. A regional university faculty member stated, "These students [with significant work and family obligations], I mean they're really, in a lab class or any hands-on class, you can pick them out. After the first week, you know who they are because they kind of come in with a different mentality."

Academic underpreparation. In these interviews on working college students, a salient concern expressed by faculty and practitioners alike was students' insufficient academic preparation—both in knowledge about content as well as in knowledge about how to navigate the institutional environment. Commenting on students' need for better preparation in reading,

writing, math, and study skills, several participating faculty noted high enrollments in remedial courses as an indicator of poor college readiness. A university practitioner shared, "[M]any of the students have to take remedial courses before they even start to take the courses that they need for the requirement for that degree. So I do feel that the students are ill-prepared when they come to the university."

Several other faculty and practitioners emphasized structural barriers to educational opportunity and school underperformance. The comment of a community college faculty member, for example, illustrated a more situated view of academic preparation:

> The students definitely want to complete their studies, but it's not always possible…
> because many of them, they can't; that's the reality. I don't know what happened… in the
> country. ... In the last probably 20 years, … math was … not very efficiently taught. I
> would say that there's… a problem there, because the students are absolutely afraid of
> math.

Here, as was reflected across several other interviews as well, the faculty member referred both to local schools and to patterns he perceived in the U.S. more generally. Some participants even made explicit references to the role of local secondary schools in preparing students for college-level learning, as captured in one university practitioner's comment:

> What we can do better is maybe work with the local high schools because they're not
> prepared when they come in here. They're not at all academically savvy enough to
> know...Beyond [not knowing what questions to ask], they don't have the study skills or
> the discipline to even know that it's okay if you crack the spine on the book, it won't hurt
> it. You can actually open it and read the pages within. And I just don't think they're
> academically prepared.

What is further captured in this statement is the perceived responsibility of K–12 education to prepare students not just in terms of performance in school subjects but also in terms of study skills and navigating student services and the university environment. A university faculty member echoed these sentiments: "What is prevalent over here is lack of interest. It is like people want to have the degree, but they don't understand what it takes to get there." While the content of the statement focuses on an observation about students' knowledge of the college context, the tone is unmistakably distancing, even pejorative.

Moreover, some attributed barriers to academic success to first-generation-student status. In reference to students who are the first in their family to go to college, perceived to be the majority on these campuses, one university faculty member shared his view:

> [First-generation students] are really blind quite honestly, walking into this thing blind.…You can see that they're not prepared coming in, so they get lost and they get frustrated, and they leave…So that's the population that we deal with, coming into [this university]—needy, first-generation students.

The prevalence of the theme of underpreparation in the interviews showed that—while faculty and practitioners' interpretations of this phenomenon varied—it was a highly salient problem for the study participants as they tried to make sense of their students' college experiences.

Connecting with Students

Several faculty and practitioners spoke of connecting with students—interacting with them on an individual basis and building interpersonal contexts for future interaction—as a vital aspect of their experiences with students. These participants perceived that effective connections with students depended on (a) having individual interactions with students (b) adapting their own

practices, and (c) sharing experiences with students. Participants also commented on the role of (d) the institutional context in their connections with students.

Individual interaction. Several faculty and practitioners emphasized one-on-one interactions with students and building interpersonal contexts for future interaction, and they described investing time in developing relationships with students. One university faculty member illustrated this perspective, for example, saying, "One of the things that you have to do …is I try to build as much as I can in the relationships with students that will permit them to come to me and talk to me." These personal interactions were also described by some as a key part of their practice and students' success, as in this participant's remark:

It's like from an academic advisor or a professor, it's all about caring. And sometimes the only connection that they have to somebody that cares is from us. And, if we're encouraging and inspiring them, we can motivate them to stay with us sometimes… It's just caring and taking that extra step…It is wrong to stereotype any students... It's all about experiences, what they've been exposed to up to this time, were they foster care kids, a whole new project out here now in trying to get them into … postsecondary education.

This statement seems implicitly focused on traditional-age students, in pointing out the relevance of foster-care experiences, for example. Furthermore, this statement seems to reflect the perspective of a social/academic integration model, which in this case highlights the positive role of the institution and the negative aspects of students' precollege experiences. In this and other examples, participants indicated that developing relationships with students allowed them to garner information about students' expectations, family, and work obligations—information that

would be difficult for students to convey in the routine short-term or depersonalized interactions of college experience.

       Adapting practice. To cultivate such interactions with their students, various faculty and practitioners shared, they adapted their individual practices and sometimes academic or service center policies to meet student needs. A community college practitioner, for instance, shared how she had tutored over the telephone, an uncommon practice, a student who had called from work. Several practitioners described the practice of *"triage"* or *troubleshooting* with students to identify their specific needs—and then adapting their approach accordingly. Faculty commonly expressed the importance to their practice of flexible adaptability in connecting with and supporting students, as noted by a community college faculty member:

> I'm a lot more flexible because I want to keep them happy… It's not our job to keep them happy but it's our job to help them succeed, and it's our job to help educate them because I feel really personally responsible if I send them out into the community and [they're not prepared to perform their job].

What this statement also suggests is that these participants perceive a connection between their students' satisfaction, their students' success in the classroom and after graduation, and the participants' own self-perception within that role.

       Relating to students. Some of the participants talked of sharing a common background with their students: being from the same geographic area, facing similar economic and personal challenges, and even having previously been students at the same institutions where they now worked. Practitioners in particular emphasized their shared experience with students as a key component of relating to them and being able to translate that knowledge to improved practice, as captured in the comment of a community college practitioner:

That's one of the advantages of my tutoring staff, it's part-time students, they've been

there… [Full-time professionals] provide a great deal of service, but if they haven't been

through the program, they don't know it intimately and what it's like to be here, the

instructors, and that's an advantage at this point…We have had a few from other

universities, but generally speaking it's worked better to have students who have gone

through [this college's] associate degree program.

In this quote and in other excerpts like it, practitioners identified sharing common

experience as a primary source of knowledge for carrying out their roles. Faculty, in contrast,

often used socially distancing language as opposed to the language of proximity used by

practitioners. One university faculty member, for example, recounted an in-class exchange with a

student:

[In a previous class] I [had] said, "I would be glad to stay with you as long as you need

to, to understand it." And I said, "And what was your response?" And she just shook her

head, and I said, "Your response to me was well you have children at home and you have

other things to do." I said, "That was your choice, not mine." I said, "I was willing to

stay with you to help you. If you have other more important commitments, my question

to you is why are you here? Because you're wasting your money and time." And she

just looked at me…

This speaker's story emphasized hard distinctions between his responsibilities and those of the

student and, furthermore, characterized the student's unavailability after class as entirely

discretionary ("your choice")—in a way that is likely too simplistic. Finally, the back-and-forth

recounting of this anecdote reflected the speaker's somewhat confrontational stance—one in

which he was the victor ("And she just shook her head…just looked at me"). This example is

somewhat an exception in its extremely oppositional tone. Nevertheless, a significant minority of faculty members used distancing language more subtly in describing students. A community college faculty member remarked, for example, "The majority of the cases, they are ill-prepared to start these courses, and we cannot go back and start teaching basic, basic stuff." In this example as with the earlier example, the faculty member drew hard distinctions between faculty and institutional responsibilities and student responsibilities, as if to defend the distance between the two. On a subtler level she also referred to the students abstractly, as "cases."

Institutional context. Many faculty and practitioners seemed to share a perception of their campuses as small, collegial environments providing for regular interaction between themselves and their students. This characterization was often contrasted to that of the state's large research universities. Particularly in reference to the classroom environment, a community college faculty member shared what he had perceived to be students' sentiments:

[This institution] does a good job of making students feel like it's a big house or a big home or a welcoming area. There are some students that come from other campuses….They come in saying, "I really didn't connect with the instructor. We were in this big auditorium and I needed more help and I couldn't connect. I couldn't relate. I felt like I was just a number, where everyone else was okay with it." But to that one person they couldn't do it. But when they came here they're like "I got that extra attention. I was able to comprehend better. There's not that much going on and I can just focus." But it made them feel as if it was a one-on-one lecture.

Several faculty members shared ways in which the institutional context also provided for more informal interactions between students and themselves, often in hallways and other areas on campus. A comment from a university faculty member illustrated this point, "With a small

college, you get to see them in the hallway, talk to them and chat about all kinds of things, and that really builds up a good connection and relationship." In this and other similar examples, participants emphasized the "fit" between the regional and community college contexts on the one hand and the "needs" they perceived to be prevalent among their students. These examples highlighted the features of the institution that allow them to connect with students in ways they perceive to be helpful and effective.

Faculty and Practitioner Recommendations

Throughout their accounts of students' experiences, the participants made direct and indirect recommendations for institutional policy and practice. Generally, these recommendations reflected their desires for institutional policy and practice informed by and adapted to faculty and practitioners' knowledge of students' experiences.

Participants' specific recommendations for improved institutional policy and practice reflected a recognition of needs for increased services and adaptability in various aspects of the institution, from student services (e.g., walk-in times for financial aid advising hours as opposed to current appointment-based practices) to campus life (e.g.., availability of dining facilities for students so they can stay on campus and eat between classes). Several practitioners expressed a desire for enhanced publicity on institutional efforts already in place, as expressed by a community college practitioner, "We need to get more people into instruction and we need to tell people about what we do here," and echoed by a university counterpart, "We need to educate our students of our processes, so they're better informed so they don't get upset." The tone of these and similar statements suggests a strong sentiment regarding the visibility of campus efforts—and possibly also their own personal efforts—within the broader campus community.

Further, participants' recommendations also called for more appropriate measures of performance and efficiency to better reflect student and institutional realities, as described by a university faculty member:

> So much of universities are corporate so they're always looking for a corporate clarification … to demonstrate their accountability…and so forth, and I don't think that it always applies, and it shouldn't. And I think our campus, regional campus, since it's ours, who we like to call it, there's differences. [The public research universities] have more resources. They have more students, and all that other stuff. And I just don't think that we're treated exactly the same in that way.

This statement might also suggest a call for practitioners and faculty members to have a greater say in how institutions are evaluated so as to better reflect their distinct identity, challenges, and student differences.

Discussion

In the preceding presentation of findings we have outlined the most prevalent themes that surfaced in our analyses of faculty and practitioner interviews on the three commuter campuses involved in this study. The results summarized here produce a somewhat complex picture of faculty practice and practitioner knowledge. Participants' comments include important insights for improving institutional climates and policies. They also provide a glimpse of how faculty and practitioners' sense-making can reflect widely held definitions of college access and success that exclude, constrain, and disadvantage first-generation students and students with significant work and family obligations. Taking a careful look at faculty and practitioners' views in this way adds to our understanding of how these expectations may play out in students' experiences with faculty and practitioners on campus.

Funds of Knowledge: Faculty and Practitioners' Frameworks and Resources

The results of this study showed a predominant pattern in which faculty and practitioners exhibit somewhat nuanced knowledge of students' multiple obligations. For example, as noted above, both faculty and practitioners drew a distinction between traditional-age working students and adult learners on campus. In recognizing the diversity of situations structuring their students' lives, faculty and practitioners often showed a detailed and useful level of knowledge that would help them to see and contextualize the complexities of their students' situations and, therefore, to be better prepared to support them. For the most part, these practitioners applied a conceptual framework in which it was expected that their students worked and balanced multiple obligations in addition to college study. With a few exceptions, faculty and practitioners on these campuses seemed at ease with the idea of adapting their practices to meet with the variation of students' life conditions and the multiple modes of college-going that goes with this variation (e.g., "… change some course curriculum to match this change that I've noticed over the last four or five years.")

And yet this "adaptation" stance is interesting in itself. Although several practitioners and a few faculty participants drew on experiences that were similar to those of the students they served, most faculty participants at these institutions followed "traditional" college-going pathways themselves, including full-time enrollment, dependent status, and part-time or no outside employment. Thus their descriptions of students often started from a "traditional" image of college students and then *reworked* the details of a practical approach aimed at that kind of experience—to make it relevant to the contrasting conditions they knew their own students were facing.

Evidence of such adaptation was absent in the comments of a few participants whose comments veered into overgeneralization and stereotyping (e.g., "they're not prepared coming in, so they get lost and they get frustrated, and they leave…so that's that population that we deal with"), distancing language (e.g., "What is prevalent over here is lack of interest"), or even expressions of futility (e.g., "The majority of the cases, they are ill-prepared to start these courses, and we cannot go back and start teaching basic, basic stuff"; "Many of them, they can't; that's the reality"). For these participants adaptation might be associated with lowering of standards; a view not shared by all faculty. In contrast, practitioners in particular described how they and their colleagues applied funds of knowledge in practice. In a community college focus group quoted above, for example, academic support professionals emphasized the importance to the effectiveness of their work of sharing common experiences with students.

In both kinds of examples, faculty and practitioners apply frameworks of personal experience along with adaptive knowledge about their students' lives and obligations, and this forms the basis of their judgment and practice in interaction and work with students. This is the type of practitioner knowledge and praxis that Bensimon (2007) and others have urged researchers to explore further.

Stratification and Cultural Capital in Faculty and Practitioners' Sense-Making

In addition, it is important to discuss the ways in which our findings resonate with social reproduction theory. Participants' perceptions about students' "needs" in some cases rested on a sense of the small scale or relatively lower pressure associated with working at a regional institution -- implicitly in contrast with a research university 'norm' (e.g. 'like a big home'; 'you get to see them in the hallway'). Examples of this 'institutional context' theme highlighted above reflect, to some extent, the role of cultural capital in reinforcing the stratification of higher

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education. Faculty and practitioners' comments in this vein revealed a rationale based on student comfort or needs in explaining the concentration of first-generation and working students in regional campuses—making this stratification seem normal, logical, or even adaptive.

The results of this study showed the faculty and practitioner participants to be knowledgeable, though often drawing primarily on the framework of more "traditional" college-going experiences in their sense-making. Moreover, they expressed worries over students' academic success, and—true to flawed but highly influential student retention research models—they emphasized barriers and "external pulls" over resilience and strategy. In this vein many participants agreed that successful students who balance multiple roles do so through strategies that proactively manage and contain these "external pulls"—for example, compartmentalizing time for course work and benefitting from jobs aligned with their college studies and future career. This is important to note, first, because it is not always possible or desirable for working, independent-status students and students with significant family obligations to achieve this kind of compartmentalization. In order for a parent to compartmentalize sufficient study time, for example, she or he must have access to highly reliable and flexible childcare. Likewise, employers of working students need to offer flexibility, predictability, and sufficiently high wages to provide the context for the kind of compartmentalization of work and college responsibilities described in these interviews. This expectation of compartmentalizing could also represent a lack of understanding for the issues faced by first-generation in college students. Some faculty members and practitioners may see students as underprepared or uninterested, for example, when in reality as first-generation students they are actually only struggling to navigate college contexts.

For decades researchers have been extending, critiquing, and refining the empirical base supporting Tinto's influential model of student departure (Astin, 1993; Braxton, Sullivan, & Johnson, 1997; Hurtado, 1997; Jalomo, 1995; Murguia, Padilla, & Pavel, 1991; Nora, Attinasi, & Matonak, 1990; Nora & Cabrera, 1996; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Porter, 1990; Rendón, Jalomo, & Nora, 2000; Tierney, 1992). The extensive discourse surrounding student departure—centered so pervasively on the interactionalist model and its variations—has been cited frequently in higher education research as an example of theory building (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005) and also as a cautionary tale (Bensimon, 2007). Critiques of Tinto's and Bean and Metzner's conceptualizations of student departure for nontraditional students have noted, in particular, that these models based on academic and social integration do not adequately account for the positive resources at students' disposal through their lives and experiences off campus. Furthermore, research in this tradition typically fails to recognize the nondiscretionary necessity of work for pay for great numbers of students pursuing postsecondary degrees. To understand and support the academic success of adult learners, first-generation students, working students, and students with significant family obligations, campuses and researchers need to reorient to a norm incorporating these student experiences. For praxis, campus climate, and opportunities for success to match the realities of today's college students, postsecondary institutions need to become places where students' outside learning is recognized and utilized by faculty and practitioners, where students' life experiences, values, and interests are seen to resonate with those of others on campus and to be useful for academic success—as is already the case for more privileged students. This again, of course, highlights the role of cultural capital in how the faculty and practitioners in this study have made sense of their interactions with working students on their campuses.

Implications & Conclusion

This study helps articulate the perspectives and experiences of individuals most directly charged with supporting students and implementing state- and institution-level higher education policies. It offers an institutional perspective of students' experiences and transactions within their educational contexts. Given that "[p]ersons are not just independent, unsocialized actors, but are also shaped and conditioned creatures" (Keller, 1998, p. 269), special attention to this context is crucial. Responding to gaps in the research literature identified by Bensimon (2007), Martínez Alemán (2007), and Stage and Hubbard (2007), this study contributes to the understanding of the role of faculty and practitioners in students' educational contexts and academic success. Because perceptions are grounded in the experiences of those who hold them, there is a need for research to assist practitioners in challenging perceptions with data about the students they serve.

Furthermore, this research has considerable implications for practice in enhancing understanding of practitioner and faculty funds of knowledge—understanding that can in turn be used to inform and develop more relevant praxis among those who serve in critical roles along students' educational pathways. Institutions might consider further exploration of faculty perceptions of student experiences, facilitating data-driven professional development discussions, for example, that hold stereotypes and other perceptions of traditional and adult students up to the light of institutional data. This implication would require in-depth analysis and disaggregation of data by age and attendance patterns. Institutions, and faculty and practitioners within the institutions, can use these discussions to create more closely targeted interventions to help students in need. In discussions where stereotypes, expectations and perceptions do not match up with the data, further opportunities for professional development

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will naturally arice. The institution has an obligation to help faculty and staff understand that their own biases may not reflect the realities of the students, and facilitated data-drive discussions will create an organic context for that learning to occur. This implication reflects the need to orient faculty and staff at commuter urban universities about student experiences at their institutions, rather than allowing for individual biases to rule behaviors.

These findings point to promising directions for faculty and practitioners' professional development and for institutional policies and practices that support faculty and practitioners in serving multiple student populations. It is imperative that institutions consider explaining the student experience as part of the professional development of its employees. Without these explanations those that draw only on comparisons are left to feel that the institution is a lesser place rather than an alternative place. Institutional policies regarding student pathways should consider the natural flow of students' lives rather than implicitly imposing images of 'traditional' college-going on students for whom such assumptions are irrelevant, or even detrimental.

Finally, this study highlights the need to consider more research on working college students' experiences and on how these experiences are interpreted by those in positions of power at higher education institutions. The goal in understanding the perceptions of both groups is to build successful practices rather barriers to success.

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