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## Nontraditional women at an Iowa community college: Challenges and issues

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## Nontraditional women at an Iowa community college: Challenges and issues

### Abstract

The face of the "typical" community college student in Iowa is changing. No longer can one expect this face to be that of an 18 year old male or female with few responsibilities outside of attending school. One of the fastest growing student populations in Iowa's community colleges is nontraditional women, those over the age of 24. These women often have children still in the home to care for, are frequently single parents, and many are also low-income. The challenges these women face and the obstacles they often must overcome to be successful in pursuing post-secondary education are quite different from those of their traditional-aged college classmates.

NONTRADITIONAL WOMEN AT AN IOWA COMMUNITY COLLEGE:  
CHALLENGES AND ISSUES

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A Research Paper  
Presented to  
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of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts in Education

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by  
Thresa Kay Morrissey

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has been approved as meeting the research paper requirement for  
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The face of the "typical" community college student in Iowa is changing. No longer can one expect this face to be that of an 18 year old male or female with few responsibilities outside of attending school. One of the fastest growing student populations in Iowa's community colleges is nontraditional women, those over the age of 24. These women often have children still in the home to care for, are frequently single parents, and many are also low-income. The challenges these women face and the obstacles they often must overcome to be successful in pursuing post-secondary education are quite different from those of their traditional-aged college classmates.

In response to their special challenges, many community colleges have established specialized reentry programs and services to help these women successfully make the adjustment to becoming a college student. Although some of these reentry programs have been in existence since the late 1960's, most were not formed until after 1984 when the Carl Perkins Act replaced the Vocational Education Act of 1963 as the main federal legislation governing vocational education. The Carl Perkins Act was based on the philosophy of "making vocational education programs accessible to all persons" and "giving the nation's workforce marketable skills." The Carl Perkins Act identified single parents and homemakers as specific populations for whom vocational education must be made available. After the passage of this act, many community colleges developed

reentry programs to begin to help meet the needs of these single parents, homemakers, and displaced homemakers. The Iowa community college reentry program available to women in this study is an example of one such program that was established in 1985 in response to the Carl Perkins Act.

### Literature Review

Several studies have examined the various issues faced by nontraditional females enrolling or considering enrolling in post-secondary education. However, none was found that examined the challenges of women in Iowa's community colleges, nor the effectiveness of the reentry programs established to help meet these needs.

Only one study was found that examined reentry programs in community colleges. Brootkowski (1989) studied three reentry programs at three different community colleges in California, all which had been in existence since the late 1960's or early 1970's. Brootkowski (1989) determined that these programs had their roots in the feminist movement. This is significantly different from the program in this study, as it was not created until after the passage of the Carl Perkins Act.

The Brootkowski (1989) study also did not explore financial needs of nontraditional women, but studies conducted in other states have explored this need. Many studies have found the need for financial assistance to be an important

factor for most nontraditional female college students (Hawaii Interviewing, 1986; Knox, 1983; Nelson, 1982). Not only do these women need financial assistance, they also may need: to be informed as to what is available; to receive assistance in completing financial aid applications; and to maintain public assistance benefits which are not impacted by obtaining financial assistance to return to school (Knox, 1983; Nelson, 1982).

Many nontraditional females who are classified as single parents and displaced homemakers receive some form of public assistance. Often the financial aid students receive to attend post-secondary institutions impacts the amount of public assistance the student may be eligible to receive. A study conducted in Wisconsin examined the issue of the impact of welfare on education (Nash et al., 1988). Of 1,172 women surveyed for this study, 103 had dependent children and were receiving governmental assistance. Seventy-eight percent of these women felt that current federal and state regulations discouraged them from obtaining further education (Nash et al., 1988).

In addition to supporting their children, these women also may need to locate and pay for affordable, safe child care so they can return to school as well as the workforce. The importance of child care to educational success was found in

at least two different studies, with it being the top consideration of four main areas for single parents and homemakers in Hawaii (Hawaii Interviewing, 1986; Nelson, 1982).

Additional reasons exist for why nontraditional women struggle to enroll or stay enrolled in post-secondary education. Patterson and Blank (1985) conducted a study to develop a profile of the mature woman who seeks a post-secondary education. Many of these women experienced test anxiety, time management problems, and role conflict (Patterson & Blank, 1985). Knox (1983) also found that study problems were frequently cited as a reason for quitting school among low-income women.

Knox (1983) suggested that there may exist a "revolving door" of education which admits these women to programs, but then fails to provide for their special needs, thus resulting in their dropping-out. The study conducted in Hawaii found similar problems, with services provided often being fragmented, and services provided by community colleges which "miss the mark" due to inadequate outreach or lack of regular input from participants (Hawaii Interviewing, 1986).

Nontraditional women in post-secondary education also need emotional support (Knox, 1983; Nelson, 1982; Patterson & Blank, 1985). Knox (1983) recommended that supportive services, including strong counseling and guidance, were crucial to the retention of low-income women in college programs. Patterson



and Blank (1985) also found that many women expressed a great deal of guilt, especially in relation to their roles as mothers versus their roles as students.

Another unexpected area for stress was that many of the women experienced strained interaction with members of their old social networks once they became students (Patterson & Blank, 1985).

From previous studies conducted, several main concerns for nontraditional women attempting to return to post-secondary education were revealed. These studies found women may need: information on what is available to them for educational and financial challenges; to locate and receive assistance in paying for affordable, safe child care; financial assistance for educational purposes which does not interfere with continued governmental assistance for food and housing; and a strong emotional support system in place to help them deal with their self-doubts and guilt (Hawaii Interviewing, 1986; Knox, 1983; Nelson, 1982; Patterson & Blank, 1985).

Although other studies found these concerns to be the greatest for nontraditional women returning to college, this study sought to determine if, in fact, these were also the challenges and concerns of women at a community college in Iowa. Additionally, it sought to determine if the reentry program currently in place was meeting their challenges, or was "missing the mark."

## Context and Methodology

### Site

This study was conducted at a public community college in Iowa with a total student enrollment of over 3,000 students. Tremendous growth in enrollment had been experienced in the two years prior to the study, due to the addition of a liberal arts transfer program. In the 26 prior years of the college's existence, it had served the public as a vocational technical school. This community college is also in a rural location, with only one recently built apartment complex within walking distance of the campus. The college also had a day care center open across from the campus in the last two years, which was established to serve the needs of the students.

The average age of the vocational students enrolled on campus was 28, while the new transfer division had an average age more within the traditional range. During the Fall 1993 semester, 745 of the students were women of nontraditional age. The reentry program at this college serves approximately 200 women a year, but many of them are not formally enrolled on campus. Services include personal advising, career exploration, referral information, personal workshops, and some limited financial assistance for courses or books. This program has experienced funding cuts within the past two years which have further limited the financial assistance provided.

### Survey Responses

During the spring semester of 1994, a written survey was sent to 80 nontraditional women enrolled in vocational or transfer level programs who had participated in the reentry program's services. These were the only 80 women of nontraditional age on campus who had actually utilized the services of the reentry program. Of the 30 surveys returned, only 25 were usable to compile data.

Although the response rate to this survey was lower than desired, it did yield some interesting results. It seemed to confirm that the nontraditional women from an Iowa community college who participated in the survey were not so different from the women surveyed in Hawaii, Texas, or Wisconsin, in that some of the basic challenges appear to remain fairly constant. Financial aid for school was ranked as the first or second barrier in returning to school by 48% of the women, and 32% indicated first or second in importance, the locating of, and paying for safe, affordable child care. Forty-eight percent also ranked their own lack of confidence in their ability to handle the coursework as first or second, which would fit with the other studies indicating self-esteem was an important issue to deal with for educational success. The respondents also indicated that time to study and attend class ranked first or second as barriers 40% of the time, where

other studies had not revealed this barrier to be so strong. Most women also indicated that family responsibilities were the main reason they did not complete as many hours studying each week as they felt would be adequate.

Although there were common themes of need for child care, time, and financial aid, as well as self-confidence, many of the services the women ranked as most important, which were provided to them by the reentry program, were extremely varied. Of the 15 different services listed on the survey, only one, budgeting assistance, had not been utilized by any of the respondents. Also, no one service was identified as the "most important" by more than four respondents. Based on this, it would appear that the services being offered are not "missing the mark" as some previous studies had suggested.

Finally, these women offered many positive comments and suggestions for future services. They seemed to portray a stubborn resolve that they were going to make it and succeed despite the overwhelming odds. One woman wrote on her survey, "I want to go much farther in life than sit on my rear. I had the grades in high school, and I will overcome any obstacle to work at a good job..." Another wrote, "Na-Na-Na-Boo-Boo to those who thought they were so arrogant as to say I couldn't!"

This survey also seemed to offer these women a chance to have their voices heard and feel as if their opinions did matter. Some even used the entire back of the last page to write comments. Because of this unexpected response, it was decided to follow up the survey by conducting face-to-face interviews with a few women who participated in the reentry program from a cross-section of women served, to obtain a more detailed picture of the women surveyed.

### Interviews

Based upon survey questions, as well as an additional open-ended question format, face-to-face interviews were conducted during the spring semester of 1995 with four women who had been sent the original survey. All four women had been enrolled in post-secondary programs at a community college for at least two semesters prior to the interview, and all had personal familiarity with the interviewer, as all had attended a two-week career exploration workshop with the interviewer who served as facilitator of that workshop. The interviews lasted from 45 minutes to 60 minutes, with the time variation directly related to how much additional information the interviewee wished to share. The stories of these women are shared, as their experiences were richer than could be reflected in statistics (their names have been changed to maintain confidentiality). Interviews with the four participants were conducted on January 4, January 20, February 6, and February 16, 1995, respectfully.

Carol

Faced with an unexpected divorce at the age of 31, and with no real marketable skills for a career, Carol decided to return to college. But this decision did not come easily nor quickly. Carol, now 33, had many health problems, including depression, to gain control of before she entered a college classroom. She felt the reentry program she found at this community college helped her to develop enough courage to walk into the classroom, by first offering self-exploration workshops including career exploration, and also offering her extensive personal advising. The reentry program coordinator even traveled across the state to testify on Carol's behalf during her divorce proceedings. Carol did obtain time-limited alimony to return to school, which was important since she did not have any children.

Carol was in her fourth semester of enrollment at the time of the interview, and felt that classes were going very well. For someone who did not even consider going to college after high school, Carol had definitely set some new career goals for herself, hoping to go on to law school after she completes a four year degree. She was getting some valuable experience, serving as a victim's advocate through a crisis services center for her work study position. For someone whose greatest barrier to returning to school was her own lack of confidence, Carol certainly appeared to have grown in this respect. Her greatest barrier had since become

financial aid, as she explained that few programs exist for displaced homemakers with no children, which is how she would be classified. Her alimony also will run out before she finishes school, but she noted that she worries less about this than she used to. Carol felt her parents had been very supportive of her, and she had developed many new friendships since enrolling in college. Her greatest lament was that she had no social life because she spent most of her free time studying.

### Ann

Ann, a 38 year old African-American single parent, was in her last semester of enrollment and planning to obtain her Associate of Arts degree in general education at the end of the semester when she completed her interview. Prior to enrolling in college, Ann had worked in a seasonal position at the local dog track, but had decided she wanted to do more with her life, and sought out the reentry program. She attended a two-week career exploration workshop, and from there, determined that she had the ability to go to college. For Ann, this was not something she had dreamed of when she dropped out of high school in the twelfth grade in order to go to work. She obtained her GED in 1986, but did not go on to college at that time.

Ann's children, a son now 19 and living on his own, and a 16 year old daughter still at home, did not need child care when she returned to school, so that was not a barrier. Instead, Ann's biggest barriers to returning to school were her

lack of confidence in her career choice and her lack of confidence in her ability to handle the coursework. Ann felt that all of the services the reentry program provided to her had been important, and suggested that they provide even more outreach services to the community. Ann also has set her career goals high, intending to continue on for a bachelor's degree in education, and follow that with a counseling degree. She also felt she had grown immensely as a result of being a college student. She has been very active on campus, as well as with her church, and felt that although that active involvement sometimes interfered with study time, it had helped her to grow. Although Ann still did receive some public assistance, she described her main source of income as her work study job, which also was giving her relevant educational experience. Ann's advice to other nontraditional women considering going to school was to believe in themselves, and to never give up, even if they did not succeed the first time, advice she appears to have taken well herself.

### Betty

Betty, a 43 year old white female, also decided to return to college after a divorce. However, she was left as the custodial parent of two teen-aged daughters. Betty described herself as someone who was ready to make changes in her life, and felt that the career exploration service through the reentry program was the most helpful service for her. She was in her third semester of enrollment



when she completed her interview, and had dropped to nine hours after attending two semesters full time, mainly due to financial and family needs. Betty has continued to work while attending school, but describes her main source of income as child support. She also received time-limited alimony but it will end before she completes school, since she now plans to continue for at least a four-year degree in a health or wellness-related field. Betty's biggest barrier also was her lack of confidence and, although she described herself as an over-achiever, she was doing very well in her classes. She felt that returning to school had afforded her a new life in many ways, evolving from "isolated housewife" to someone who was now being exposed to the arts and culture she never had previously experienced. Her daughters have remained supportive of her educational pursuits, as does her new fiancée, whom she met since returning to school.

### Sue

The final interviewee, a 30-year old white female, Sue, had quite a time making a scheduled appointment, needing to re-schedule twice. This was somewhat reflective of her life, being a married mother of three children, daughters age eight and 11, and a nine year old son. Sue's oldest daughter had been in the hospital, causing the first re-scheduling, and she had a car accident herself, resulting in the second re-scheduling. Yet, with all of the family and personal

issues she deals with, she seemed quite resilient. Sue felt she had been successful because she wanted this so much, and also felt her parents and in-laws had been very supportive of her. Her husband, however, was not described by Sue as being supportive at all. In fact, she revealed that she had felt close to divorce at least twice since enrolling in school.

Sue enrolled in school due to a physical necessity to change careers because she had permanent nerve damage in her shoulders from working as a cosmetologist. She was in her last full semester of the medical laboratory technology program and was looking forward to graduating at the time of the interview. She felt the greatest benefit, besides career training, in being enrolled in college was the improvement in her own self-esteem, which was readily apparent. Sue also offered advice to women to really "want it" and to set small goals for themselves to reach the ultimate goal of graduation and employment.

### Summary

All of the women interviewed expressed an increase in their own self-esteem since enrolling in college, especially since the lack of confidence in their own abilities was their greatest barrier to returning to college in the first place. Time was also a strong consideration for these women, as all worked at least 20 hours per week besides attending school anywhere from nine hours to 18 hours a week. In addition, financial assistance was also discussed as an important

need by all women. Child care was only a concern to Sue, and she only experienced problems in the morning when she had to be at the lab before her children went to school. All of the women interviewed also felt they were some of the most out-spoken students in their classrooms, and even described traditional-aged students coming to them about questions. This seemed to be a source of pride for all of the women. Also, every woman could describe someone important in her life who was supportive of her. However, all but one had a friendship sour that they felt was based upon their returning to school. Yet, it was also very apparent that every one of the women interviewed had experienced personal growth that went beyond the educational. All verbalized an increase in their self-esteem. It was this confidence, expressed and observed, which most struck the interviewer.

### Conclusions

If this study has revealed anything not previously found in other studies, it has shown that, although there are many similar basic challenges for nontraditional women returning to post-secondary education, there are also many differences. Reentry programs, therefore, need to continue to offer the wide variety of services such as those currently offered, and possibly expand upon these. More up-front outreach services including financial aid information and personal workshops could help alleviate those pre-enrollment fears many women expressed in this study.

Also, including the women being served by a reentry program in decision-making could further increase the effectiveness of such programs by remaining aware of ever-changing challenges.

Further studies of this population could be beneficial if they were to be expanded to include all nontraditional women enrolled in community colleges, not just limited to those already served by reentry programs. Additional challenges could be revealed by this expanded study.

Whatever the outcomes of such surveys, it is readily apparent that nontraditional women will continue to be a growing population on community college campuses. As they gain confidence and a "voice," they will surely let their needs be known, if we are only prepared to listen.

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