

**“A Journey with a Thousand Miles Begins with a Step”:
Nontraditional Students’ Descriptions of Challenges, Past and
Present**

Minkyung Choi

Bronx Community College (BCC), City University of New York (CUNY)



Author Bio: Minkyung Choi, PhD, is an Assistant Professor of Education and Academic Literacy at Bronx Community College (CUNY). Her research interests include the use of narrative to examine the lived experiences of students, refugee populations, and immigrants. As a teacher of early childhood education and integrated reading and writing, she is also interested in literacy development in children and postsecondary students.

Introduction

Although age is generally used as the determining factor that separates traditional students from nontraditional students in higher education, the circumstances surrounding nontraditional students are complex and unique. The National Center for Education Statistics [NCES] characterizes nontraditional community college students as those who are over the age of 24, have at least one dependent, and are employed. Studies show that nontraditional students enroll in community college with specific goals in mind (Hart & Park 124), but their responsibilities and circumstances present them with greater challenges than those of traditional students (Johnson et al. 4). For one, they spend less time on campus, which means that it is difficult to take advantage of the academic and social resources available. Furthermore, balancing family and employment generally leaves less time to concentrate on academic obligations. In many

cases, nontraditional students are placed in developmental courses because they are deemed unprepared for college-level work. Collectively, these factors contribute to the sense of “outsiderness” among nontraditional students (Lanford 501). Moreover, they reinforce narratives of failure that are often associated with nontraditional students.

It is important to recognize that for many nontraditional students, academic progress neither follows a linear path nor is defined by a singular idea of success. As varied as their trajectories are, nontraditional community college students are not best served when traditional notions of academic success and motivation are applied to their academic growth. In fact, stringent and narrow definitions of success and failure may result in pushing students further away from academia. This study of four nontraditional students examines how nontraditional community college students describe the challenges they face, past and present. Specifically, the study seeks to address the research question *How do nontraditional community college students describe past challenges?* The findings, based on student interviews, reflect a need for better understanding of the unique academic circumstances and histories that students bring to the classroom. The findings also necessitate solutions that may offer both students and faculty effective strategies to navigate the often complex but rich lives of community college students.

Deficit Discourse and Nontraditional Students

According to McKay and Devlin, nontraditional students are frequently seen as ‘other’ compared with more traditional students (347). Often, they are viewed through a deficit lens because of their unique experiences that may run counter to what is perceived as the ‘standard’ or ‘mainstream’ (Smit 373). Associated with low entrance scores and standards as well as academic struggle and failure, nontraditional students are seen as not belonging in universities (Smit 373).

A study on South African high school math classes found that deficit thinking impacted students and their learning contexts (Swanson). The study suggests that social disadvantage is recontextualized as low academic ability and has pedagogical implications as well. Additionally, Garcia and Guerra indicate that deficit perspectives impact teacher expectations of students as well as instruction.

Description of Study

The study consisted of four first-year students enrolled at a community college in New York City. Over one semester, the students met weekly with the researcher to share their experiences of attending college. Due to Covid-19, all interviews were conducted via Zoom. Cody, who had previously withdrawn from a four-year university, was a first-year education student. Georgene was a pre-nursing student from Burkina Faso who was placed in lower level developmental English and was currently working as a security guard at homeless shelters. Maureen, a political science major, was a mother of two who enrolled in BCC after receiving her GED and was working as a food aide at a charter school. Dana was a home health aide from Togo who hoped to be a nursing major. All four students were characterized as nontraditional students although their backgrounds and experiences differed. Through the interviews, they shared their motivations, fears, and stories.

“I don't see it as a challenge, I think it's a privilege”

All of the participants spoke about obstacles to learning. Cody's experience at a four-year university made him realize that not only did he miss his family, his choice of major, marine biology, was not the right fit for him. “I've dealt with a lot of problems, and I just feel like the

environment wasn't really that welcoming to me,” he explained. “It was really hard to make friends my age. I was mostly friends with the seniors and juniors, but they all graduated and stuff. So by the time I was a sophomore I was kind of alone.” While Cody was at his university, he met a professor that inspired him to want to become a science teacher, which motivated his choice to pursue early childhood education at the community college. While he did not graduate or complete his sophomore year at the four-year university, he was more confident about his decision to major in education at the community college.

Dana was working two jobs. On Tuesdays and Thursdays, she worked from 7 in the morning until midnight. She worked every day but Monday. Because she was taking online classes, she was able to connect to her class while at work, but sometimes, she had to juggle listening to class and working at the same time. Yet, she did not see her job as an obstacle to her studies. “I don't see it as a challenge, I think it's a privilege,” she indicated, also commenting that the financial aid she received reduced the amount of out-of-pocket tuition she was required to pay. Georgene, like Dana, grew up in a different country and was new to the education system in the US. As a security guard, she worked 40 hours a week. She worked every day from midnight to 8am. Each evening, she was notified of the shelter at which she would be working. Sometimes, she would take the bus down to a shelter in Manhattan; other times, she would hop on a train to Brooklyn. In the wake of COVID-19, her job posed more risks due to the frequent contact she had with people at the shelter. Still, she noted: “Everything is challenging, but you don't have to give up. If you give up, you are never going to get better. You are going to be in the same place, so you have to keep going, trying to change things and one day, it's going to be okay.” Georgene did acknowledge that not knowing where she would be working each day made it difficult to

calculate her commute, but she was not fazed, seeing it as part of a process toward her goals.

Maureen dropped out of high school and described her younger self as someone who quit when things became challenging. “In high school, I got pregnant, so I never graduated. After I had my baby, I never decided to go back. Then, I tried for the GED. I tried to, but then I just quit. Until last year.” As a mother of two young children, Maureen received her GED and enrolled in community college without telling her partner and family. “I know [my partner] was going to tell me, ‘You're not going to do it.’ Well then, when I told him, he told me, ‘Oh, wow. I didn't know.’” Maureen was suffering from a pain in her legs that made it difficult to stand for a long time. Balancing her studies with her job, family, and health was not easy. Yet, she was determined to persevere. “I could say I have more reason to do it, more motivation I can say. Now I have two kids. I'm 26 years old. I'm left behind. I have goals to do. One of those goals is to have my degree. I need to have a college degree in order to improve, to move on,” she said.

Rethinking Failure

The lives of nontraditional students are characterized by pauses, unexpected detours, and nonacademic obligations. These qualities can result in the view that nontraditional students fall behind traditional students and enter college with several deficits. A deficit-perspective, together with the stigma of failure, fails to recognize the diversity that nontraditional students bring to colleges: socio-economic status, language, cultural and educational background (Smit 377). The responses of the four participants show that their challenges, both past and present, can be generative, whereby setbacks are seen as natural and “formative” (Feigenbaum 14). This is not to dismiss them as insignificant or to reduce them; it is to recognize that the lives of nontraditional students are constantly shifting and *becoming*. As such, it is important to not view failure as a

“summative judgment” (Feigenbaum 14) but as a process that is shaped by sociocultural factors.

In higher education, the resilience and wealth of experience that nontraditional students bring can offer myriad advantages to both their peers and the institutions. At the same time, it is necessary to acknowledge that nontraditional students have specific academic and social needs that colleges must support to ensure retention and continued success of nontraditional students. Given the number of nontraditional students in US institutions of higher education, it is worth examining how they make sense of, and navigate the ebb and flow of their academic and personal trajectories.

Sources Cited

Feigenbaum, Paul. “Telling Students It’s O.K. to Fail, but Showing Them It Isn’t: Dissonant Paradigms of Failure in Higher Education.” *Teaching and Learning Inquiry*, vol. 9, no. 1, International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (ISSOTL), 2021, pp. 13–26, doi: 10.20343/teachlearninqu.9.1.3.

Hart, Jennifer, and Sanghoon Park. “Exploring Nontraditional Community College Students’ Motivational Experiences for Goal Achievement in a Blended Technology Course.” *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, vol. 45, no. 2, Routledge, 2021, pp. 124–38, doi: 10.1080/10668926.2019.1647903.

Johnson, Marcus Lee, et al. “Motivations of Traditional and Nontraditional College Students: From Self-Determination and Attributions, to Expectancy and Values.” *The Journal of*

Continuing Higher Education, vol. 64, no. 1, Routledge, 2016, pp. 3–15, doi
10.1080/07377363.2016.1132880.

Lanford, Michael. “Making Sense of ‘Outsiderness’: How Life History Informs the College Experiences of ‘Nontraditional’ Students.” *Qualitative Inquiry*, vol. 25, no. 5, SAGE Publications, 2019, pp. 500–12, doi: 10.1177/1077800418817839.

McKay, Jade, and Marcia Devlin. “‘Low Income Doesn’t Mean Stupid and Destined for Failure’: Challenging the Deficit Discourse Around Students from Low SES Backgrounds in Higher Education.” *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, vol. 20, no. 4, Routledge, 2016, pp. 347–63, doi: 10.1080/13603116.2015.1079273.

Smit, Renee’. “Towards a Clearer Understanding of Student Disadvantage in Higher Education: Problematising Deficit Thinking.” *Higher Education Research and Development*, vol. 31, no. 3, Routledge, 2012, pp. 369–80, doi: 10.1080/07294360.2011.634383.

Swanson, Dalene M. “‘Disadvantage’ and School Mathematics: The Politics of Context.” *International Journal of Learning*, vol. 9, 2002: 1471-1480. *Stirling Online Research Repository*, U of Stirling, hdl.handle.net/1893/18305.

