

MOBILE WORKING STUDENTS

A Delicate Balance of College, Family, and Work

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I ncreasingly, education policymakers are turning attention to the access and persistence of the new college majority—a group that may be described as *mobile working students* (Ewell, Schild, & Paulson, 2003). Traditionally, much research on college students has focused on students who graduate from high school and move on to attend a four-year college on a full-time basis, graduating in four to six years. However, as Adelman (2006) and others show, even among traditional-age college students this pattern of linear enrollment is less and less common. Thus, as Kasworm (chapter 2) also argues, metaphors such as the education *pipeline* no longer fit. Instead, students are more accurately represented as moving along *pathways* or even *swirling* toward postsecondary success.

The experience of the mobile working student as conceived in this chapter encompasses multiple aspects of mobility and the varied, nonlinear, and evolving patterns of college going increasingly characteristic of students nationwide. One aspect of mobility in this complex and emerging picture centers on students' experiences at commuter institutions, *moving onto and off of* campuses. In addition, students enroll in multiple institutions, moving *between* them. Finally, because they move *into and out of* institutions as well, the concomitant issues of attrition, stop-out, and degree attainment are also important to this project.

The role of paid work in these evolving patterns of enrollment, college experience, and student success is central. As others in this volume also note, about 80% of American undergraduates worked while attending college in 1999–2000 (King, 2003). This rate represents an 8 percentage point increase over undergraduates less than a decade earlier, when 72% worked (Cuccaro-Alamin & Choy, 1998). Moreover, the percentage of *full-time* college students who are employed has risen steadily over the past three decades, from

36% in 1973 to 48% in 2003 (Fox, Connolly, & Snyder, 2005). The share of full-time college students who work at least 20 hours a week has also been growing, rising from 17% in 1973 to 30% in 2003. Perna, Cooper, and Li (2006) note the prevalence of work for pay among college students and argue that we must examine student employment patterns, reduce the financial need to work, improve the quality of students' employment experiences, and adapt educational services to better enable working students to achieve, persist, and graduate.

Many current education policies at the campus, state, and federal levels are based on the stereotype of the "traditional student"—one who moves through the educational system in a linear and predictable manner. In this context, many campus and state policies—on issues ranging from financial aid to academic probation—are not designed to serve mobile working students. Policymakers wishing to reformulate relevant policies for mobile working students, however, face a dearth of state- and campus-oriented policy research on working students.

The purpose of the chapter is to illuminate students' experiences balancing work, family, and college. Reporting on the analysis of focus groups and interviews with more than 90 working students attending three commuter institutions in a Midwestern metropolitan area, we explore working students' descriptions and meaning making, with the goal of developing theory and practice that support equity and success for these students.

The chapter serves the central questions of this volume in a number of ways. The chapter first highlights and differentiates the diversity of experiences typically included under the broad label "working college student." This discussion improves our understanding of how students make meaning of school, work, and academic success, thus illuminating how working students' strategies, decisions, and behaviors are conditioned by varying circumstances and structures. This kind of inquiry does not lead to causal explanation. Rather, this research contributes direct and nuanced expression from students and a contextualized critical analysis of how structures—which include socioeconomic conditions and previous educational experience, as well as education policy, institutional culture, and praxis on campus—shape students' experiences and ultimate success in college.

Students' daily lives and the obligations they strive to balance reflect the changing landscape of culture, economy, history, and college going. Hearing students' direct and detailed descriptions of these obligations and the reasoning used to balance them is essential to moving higher education research and institutional practice into areas and orientations that are consonant and supportive of students' lives.

In this research, we draw on previous work regarding working students (Bradley, 2006; Choy & Berker, 2003; Hughes & Mallette, 2003; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Perna et al., 2006), academic success and degree

attainment (Berger & Milem, 2000; Braxton & McClendon, 2001–2002; Calcagno, Crosta, Bailey, & Jenkins, 2006; Tinto & Pusser, 2006), and the role of financial aid in postsecondary access and success (Paulsen & St. John, 1997; St. John, Paulsen, & Starkey, 1996; Stage & Hossler, 2000). Taking these threads as a point of departure, we define the relevant questions surrounding working students as a convergence of these three problems. The nexus studies of St. John and colleagues (e.g., St. John et al., 1996) highlight the need to contextualize models of academic success within a nexus of social, academic, and financial pressures. Our study broadens this focus with the use of relevant qualitative data.

We also draw on a social reproduction perspective to expand the frame for understanding students' college-going behaviors beyond local processes and encompass the contexts and complexity of the broader social world. In adopting this perspective, we hold that educational institutions—and the structures that define and shape their practices—contribute to the replication and legitimation of existing social power structures from one generation to the next. The result of this replication is that students are channeled toward roles that reflect their class origins, defined in the United States by race/ethnicity as well as by economic class.

Whereas Bourdieu's (1973) original critiques sought to emphasize the replicative role of schooling in the face of contemporaneous emphases on the transformative potential of schools, this chapter builds on the understanding, also implicit in his work, that educational institutions simultaneously accomplish both transformative and replicative roles (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Focusing the chapter this way provides us with important advantages. For example, taking this approach allows us to acknowledge the dedication and resistance that faculty, advisors, and students practice in these institutions. Dedication and resistance of this kind are rooted in a belief not only in social mobility, but also in the potentially transformational roles of these institutions in that mobility. At the same time, it is important to see and understand the replicative workings of educational institutions and to broaden the view on improving equity and educational opportunity beyond the discourse of institutional improvement. Engaging in research to understand these workings is not to attribute purposeful or deterministic direction of students into roles defined in part by racial and economic power. Rather it is to see how these structures inform all of our actions as educators and students, as individuals and institutions. In addition it is to understand how these structures and dynamics shape what we are able to perceive as possibilities, as the bounds of our actions. Thus, to approach the research of student experiences in this way is also to deepen our understanding of praxis through and within institutions.

Within this social reproduction perspective, Berger's (2000) framework is particularly relevant because it posits that both institutions and individuals

seek to optimize economic and cultural capital. Berger sees this as one central mechanism shaping students' enrollment decisions and ultimately their success in college. Incorporating this view into new research holds potential for understanding how colleges and universities work within the broader social, economic, and political structures that define and shape educational opportunity.

Drawing on extensive qualitative data, this chapter sharpens the focus of higher education research on working students. The findings contribute to the development of research and theory surrounding the academic success of commuting, working, and independent students. In addition, this chapter lays a foundation for education policy and practices based on real experiences and actual enrollment patterns increasingly characteristic of students across the country. Where professional development and expectations on campus are based on misaligned conceptions of student experience, faculty members, institutional policymakers, and student services professionals will struggle to skillfully communicate with and support students. The resulting social distance can undermine students' efforts to develop a viable path toward completing college, especially for those students balancing complex interdependent goals. In all, this situation exacerbates the replicative potential of educational institutions and weakens the transformative contributions and orientations that administrators, faculty, practitioners, and students bring to these campuses. Exploring the tensions described in social reproduction theory in this way provides a more direct and nuanced sense of the obligations and understandings that shape students' experiences balancing family, work, and college at these institutions. As a result, this chapter contributes improved tools and frameworks that institutional leaders in particular may use to shape practice.

Previous Research on Working College Students

Higher education research based on the traditional college student experience has focused on linkages between academic and social integration, and on the resulting positive impact on student persistence (Bean, 1985; Kuh, 1995; Pascarella & Staver, 1985; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1983; Tinto, 1975). Not surprisingly, studies of working students have found that as students devote more time to employment they are less likely to be as engaged in academic and social activities (Fjortoft, 1995; Lundberg, 2004). Several studies report a negative relationship between working more than 15 hours a week and social and academic integration (King, 2003; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Perna et al., 2006), as well as persistence (Cuccaro-Alamin & Choy, 1998; Kulm & Cramer, 2006).

Other studies have found paid work to have a positive effect on student persistence (Choy, 2000; Horn & Berkold, 1998; King, 2002). Students who

worked 1 to 15 hours per week had a higher rate of degree attainment than did students who did not work and students who worked more than 15 hours per week (Choy & Berker, 2003). Other research demonstrates that the number of hours worked per week is unrelated to academic achievement as measured by standardized tests (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005) or grade point average (Bradley, 2006; Furr & Elling, 2000). As other authors in this volume contend, the seeming contradictions in research examining the relationship between working and student engagement, academic achievement, and persistence warrant further investigation.

Bradley (2006) notes that the literature in this area is defined mainly by four threads, each separately testing an underlying proposition regarding the relationship between work and college going: (a) that work is detrimental to students' academic success, (b) that there is a negative correlation between the number of hours worked and grades, (c) that work in excess of 15 to 20 hours per week is detrimental to academic performance, and (d) that the quality or relevance of the work moderates the effects of work on academic success. Citing less widely pursued conclusions within the literature, Bradley notes a few studies with findings that support a fifth proposition: (e) that "there may be no reliable relationship between paid work and academic performance" (p. 484). Clearly, more research is necessary to resolve the contradictions that characterize the literature and to develop our understanding of how paid work influences academic success and degree completion.

The extent to which these threads of research adequately consider institutional context is unclear. Whereas Levin and colleagues (chapter 3) observe that few studies look at working students at community colleges, we also note that little research has examined working students attending four-year commuter institutions. Hughes and Mallette (2003) recommend that future research focus on students at commuter institutions separate from students in residential institutions.

This chapter considers working students in the context of commuter institutions in a metropolitan area where work for pay outside of the college environment is considered the norm. Our focus on urban commuter institutions is supported by data from recent studies. In 2003, for example, 59% of undergraduate students attended college on less than a full-time basis, and 40% of undergraduates attended community colleges (American Council on Education [ACE], 2005). Urban institutions in particular tend to attract more working students, a trend that is likely to increase considering that 37% of undergraduate students at four-year institutions were financially independent in 2000 (Choy, 2002). Moreover, urban universities tend to serve commuter, first-generation, and minority students (Elliott, 1994). These attendance patterns make research on urban commuter institutions critical to understanding the changing picture of student success. Carol Kasworm (chapter 2) offers further support for the focus on commuter institutions.

As also noted by other chapters in this volume, studies on the effects of work on academic success seldom examine the effects of working on older and nontraditional students, who, given commitments to supporting a family, may not have a choice whether to work (Baum, 2006). The literature considering community college students, as described by Levin et al. (chapter 3) and other researchers, sheds light on the experiences of this group of students. In a large-scale qualitative study of working students at community colleges in several states, Matus-Grossman and Gooden (2002) found that juggling work, family, and school was a major reason many students reported for not completing their degree. Lapovsky (2008) offers the following observations regarding adult learners and independent students:

The group we define as independent students based on our current financial aid definitions makes up about half of all undergraduate college students in the United States today. The students in this group are extremely diverse; they are characterized by factors that lead them to have a lower probability of graduating from college than dependent students. (pp. 154–155)

Consistent with these recommendations, Tom Bailey and his colleagues at the Community College Resource Center are shedding light on the variegated and complex world of students enrolled at community colleges. Calcagno and colleagues (2006) found that older working community college students enrolled in remedial courses showed greater levels of academic intensity than younger students did. Nevertheless, Bailey, Calcagno, Jenkins, Kienzl, and Leinbach (2005) also report that adult community college students are more likely to enroll in certificate than associate's degree programs; these two types of programs may be affected in different ways by policy and practice.

These working students—nontraditional students and students enrolled at commuter institutions and at community colleges—share experiences that are both underexamined and central to understanding how to ensure their genuine opportunity and academic success. Because regional, urban institutions and community colleges are more likely to enroll part-time, nontraditional, and working adults (Elliott, 1994), the context for this study is an important contribution; this intersection of students represents a large proportion of students at the three site institutions for this study. Consequently, this research contributes empirical knowledge on little-understood student experiences that are relevant to the assessment and improvement of education policies and practices.

Research Methods

Structured to expand the focus beyond what one institution can do for “its” students, this study explores and describes college going, working, family

demands, and academic success among students attending institutions in a single metropolitan region in the deindustrialized Midwest. The chapter relies on extensive qualitative data and situated description to examine these phenomena. Our research questions and methods focus on students, student experiences, and the potential influence institutions and the context of the region as a whole can bring to students' experiences. More specifically, the chapter explores the following research questions:

1. What are the characteristics, perceptions, and experiences of mobile working students who enroll in postsecondary education in this region?
2. What roles do the demands of college, work, and family life play in the academic success of mobile working students?

A regional focus is necessary because, as we note earlier, a traditional model of linear college attendance at a single institution does not provide an accurate framework through which to understand the complex postsecondary patterns of nontraditional students and students who attend commuter institutions. Moreover, the region of interest in this study offers an opportunity to understand how economic trends intersect and interact with education. Like much of the United States, this region has seen a marked decrease in manufacturing jobs over the past few decades. Job growth in the region has occurred in healthcare-related industries, which often require postsecondary credentialing. The region's demographic trends also parallel broader national trends. African Americans and Latinos make up a growing portion of the overall population, including students enrolled in K–12 education. In the next 10 to 20 years, the face of postsecondary education in the region will literally and figuratively look much different from how it has historically looked, and will change in ways that are similar to what much of the country will experience. Taken together, these trends suggest that, although this chapter does not produce broadly generalizable results, many of the findings may be applicable to higher education throughout the United States.

The students in the Midwestern metropolitan region we study epitomize mobile working students. In 2003–2004, approximately 15,000 undergraduates were enrolled at the three institutions that participated in the study (regional campuses of two public universities and one multicampus community college). Few of these students fit into the category of *traditional* student; they instead have the following characteristics:

- Nearly 26% were age 30 or older, whereas only 25% were under age 21.
- Just 44% were enrolled full time.

- More than 50% neither received nor applied for any form of financial aid.
- Nearly 30% reported incomes below \$30,000.

Students enrolled in these schools are also likely to be working. A recent survey conducted by the participating institutions showed that more than 80% of students were employed part or full time, more than 35% were employed full time, and 20% reported working more than 40 hours a week (Hossler, Gross, Pellicciotti, Fischer, & Excell, 2005).

Study Design

The primary research design for the larger study combines an applied ethnographic approach (Chambers, 2000) with a range of descriptive and inferential analyses using a statewide longitudinal student unit record database. In this chapter, we share findings from the qualitative portion of the larger project. Applied ethnographic research and robust qualitative data are used to understand the experiences and identify ways to foster the success of mobile working students.

The academic success of college students revolves around an interaction between institutions and students. Culture is often an operative part of complex social interactions such as the ones that occur as institutions of higher education adapt to evolving student realities. Previous research on student success has been criticized for its limitations in understanding the processes and experiences relevant to the persistence of many students: students at nonresidential institutions (Braxton, Hirschy, & McClendon, 2004), low-income students, students of color (Bensimon, 2007; Giuffrida, 2006; Rendón, Jalomo, & Nora, 2000; Tierney, 1992), part-time students (Adelman, 2007), working students (Perna et al., 2006), and students who attend multiple institutions over time (Adelman, 2007). This study seeks to illuminate the underexamined aspects of these interactions in ways that are currently not possible with existing data sets and the limitations associated with quantitative survey research methods. It is difficult for surveys to capture the critical or less socially desirable understandings of students and institutions (Chambers, 2000; Converse & Presser, 1986; Groves et al., 2004), but it is possible to capture these understandings through qualitative data and the approaches adopted in this study.

Data Collection Procedures

In the first year of this study, we conducted a set of focus groups and interviews centered on students' experiences with work. Specific interview questions probed: (1) how students' educational goals and the demands of their programs play into decisions related to family and work, (2) how students

understand their work lives as affecting their educational decisions, and (3) how students pay for their education. We also conducted focus groups and interviews with institutional practitioners and faculty on each partner campus. Although not the focus of this chapter, faculty and practitioner data have enabled us to derive a complete picture of the interactions at the center of student success.

To ensure the representation of a broad range of student experiences and perspectives, student focus group participants were recruited through required introductory general education courses and ad hoc recruitment in areas visited by a high volume of students on each campus. The 92 first-round student focus group participants ranged from age 18 to older than 55, were representative of the region's racial and ethnic diversity, and included students with and without children.

Data Analysis Procedures

Data analysis began with low-inference coding and, through a collaborative process, built toward more focused and theoretically defined coding and categorization (Carspecken, 1996). Early analyses of focus groups and interview transcriptions revolved mainly around an iterative coding process whereby multiple rounds of open coding and discussions among the research team led to an initial list of low-inference codes to be applied in subsequent rounds of thematic coding. We used a qualitative data analysis software package *Atlas.ti* to store and organize the data and analyses.

To understand the role of norms and expectations in more extended exchanges with students, we used pragmatic horizon analysis (Carspecken, 1996) and focused alternately on "discourses-in-practice" and "discursive practice" as outlined by Gubrium and Holstein (2000). Consistent with the recommendations of these approaches, we examined interview data in context and by theme in alternation. These processes and the resulting documents provided material for peer debriefing sessions in which we discussed analyses with outside and collaborating researchers to probe the inferences folded into our emerging analyses.

Quotes included as examples in the results section below represent prominent patterns from the analyses. Although we chose one excerpt over other examples because of its particular features—a succinctness in some cases or an additional, contextual point brought to the fore—each quote is drawn from within groupings of similar examples in the focus group data. In presenting each point, we also include information about the prevalence of the pattern within the focus group data. We also employ a reflexive process in selecting examples, probing our own reasoning and perceptions in the analysis, and probing counterexamples for further nuance.

Trustworthiness, or the quality of the research process; was supported not only through these reflexive practices but also through the use of a

research team to collect and analyze data. Each person on the research team represented different life experiences and each had some experience as student, researcher, or employee at commuter institutions like those considered in this study. Peer debriefing further allowed multiple perspectives to be considered when the codes were examined.

Results

In this chapter, we focus on how students make sense of their roles, actions, and conditions with regard to work, family, and college. Our analyses led us to highlight two areas of students' descriptions: (1) the range of obligations shaping their daily lives, and (2) their college experiences and perceptions of connection and disconnection on campus.

Delicate Balances: Students Describe Obligations and Daily Lives

To answer one of the most basic questions at the heart of this research—What are the daily obligations of working students, commuting students, and adult learners?—we explored in depth how participating students described their daily lives and routines. In preliminary focus groups (Hernandez, Ziskin, Gross, & Fashola, 2007), we found that working students often described heavy, highly structured daily and weekly schedules. In the full round of student focus groups conducted in 2008, we asked students to tell us about the events, obligations, and contours of their daily lives.

The nature and scope of these patterns varied greatly across students with different financial and family situations, as illustrated in a brief exchange among five regional university students:

P2: 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.

P3: . . . 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 from school I can get more hours in at work. So I did schedule at the beginning and after work pretty much.

P1: I just like going [to class] 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.

P5: 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.

P4: I just go around the time I think somebody can watch the baby.

Although all the students in this exchange appeared to be traditional-age students, the conversation highlights important differences in their personal situations as well as in their approaches to balancing work and family obligations along with college study. One participant (P4) was a mother in her early 20s with two part-time jobs. Another, a full-time student in her mid-20s (P2), worked about half time. A third young woman, a dependent student in her late teens (P3), carried a full-time course load while holding down two part-time jobs totaling nearly 40 hours per week. The remaining two participants were young men—a father with a part-time job (P5) and a late teen dependent-status student (P1) working about 35 hours per week. This passage provides a particularly concentrated example of the variations in approaches and personal context that emerged in nearly all the student focus groups.

Of course this variation reflects variations in life circumstances—of having children or having parental financial support in some way. We saw some variation among older students as well, again reflecting different underlying circumstances. Some lived in multigenerational settings, while others shared a combined family income either with partners or other relatives. Just as with the traditional-age students in this example, family obligations differed for parents and nonparents and with the ages of participants' children.

Dividing the Week

Participating students described how they structured time as a basic strategy in balancing work, family, and college. The most common time-structuring pattern divided the week in varying schedules day-by-day in regular patterns. This might take the form of planning for classes on Tuesdays and Thursdays only, for example, to reserve Monday, Wednesday, and Friday for work and other responsibilities. Perhaps because of its advantages in consolidating transportation runs and general compatibility with the flexible hourly scheduling characteristic of many retail and service-industry jobs, this pattern was described by financially dependent students as well as by students who relied principally on their earnings to support themselves and their families. This strategy is illustrated by P2's preceding quote. In many instances, participants presented the resulting routines as stable and manageable. One participant, for example, described a familiar pattern of weekdays focused on school work and a part-time job scheduled primarily for the weekend:

It's not really that hard to balance it. I always have like the week would be, I'd be up from 7:00 to 10:00 every day doing homework and school and

work. Like I'll have, I'll do all my [school]work during the week and on the weekend I'll just work and have some time off. So I just have five long days and two days where I can just work and relax. It's not that hard to juggle.

This dependent-status student, in his early 20s, was carrying 16 credit hours per term and working a flexible part-time job. In addition to characterizing his routine as not very difficult to manage, the participant stipulated through added detail that he was both completing his course assignments and regularly sleeping 8 hours per night.

Others' descriptions of time structuring were characterized by intensive multitasking, stressful episodes, and very long weeks. Weeks with major portions of each day predesignated for either work or school were typical of this second group of week-dividers:

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 6 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.

This participant described her week as completely full. Because she worked long shifts through the weekend, she noted that it was particularly stressful trying to fit in enough time to complete assignments between weeks. In a similar way, another participant—a mother working full time and enrolled in a community college nursing program—described a week characterized by an intensive 7-day schedule and long hours:

Well, I get up every day at 6:00. I have classes four days a week. . . . 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 she has a home daycare. . . . She's a real Christian lady and she takes care of my daughter really well. So if I need to stay late she'll keep her for me. I just have to call her and let her know. And she's there five days a week. Then Tuesdays and Thursdays are my long days. 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.

This student drew extensively on multiple sources for childcare. With reliable and flexible childcare in place, this student was able to push the limits

of her weeks and meet obligations for family, work, and her degree program. Later in the discussion, this student expressed a sense of missing her daughter. Despite the intensity and sacrifice, however, the student's strong determination to graduate was reflected in her confidence and in her detailed description of the remaining steps for completing her degree.

Dividing Days

Another prominent pattern described by participants incorporated both work and school into multiple days. In this pattern, a student might work in the morning most days, and then attend classes three or four afternoons in the week. This pattern was most often associated with work situations that did not offer flexible scheduling, but regular and predictable hours. Students describing this pattern generally performed shift work or held long-term jobs in industry, business, or healthcare. Although a small number of dependent-status students described this pattern, for the most part independent students described their days this way. As is apparent in the following quote, participants who divided time like this often referred to fatigue and long, difficult days:

Well, during the period that I was working it was, it was a little difficult at times. I would be a full-time student, be here during the mornings and afternoons and then have maybe an hour or two to rest or get something to eat and then go straight to work and work at night from 5:00 to 10:00 or sometimes a little bit later, come home, eat and be too sleepy to want to do any homework and then have to wake up in the morning and do it pretty early before I would go to school again and do the schedule all over again.

This excerpt shows a student recalling a recent arrangement that she found untenable. Likewise, in the following brief exchange among three women enrolled in community college, one participant encapsulates the dynamic of long days and sleep deprivation in her current situation, while two others comment:

P3: I just work straight midnights so my days are free [for classes].

P2/P1: That's hard. You get tired though.

P3: My eyes are crooked, but at least I'm available.

This is a particularly concise example of a pattern described by several students—a pattern they typically characterized as resulting in diminished alertness while sitting in class or completing course work.

Improvisatory Combinations

A less prominent but still notable pattern of how students structure time may be characterized as "improvisatory." Routines in this category were often but

not always presented as unmanageable and driven by intensive multitasking. In many cases, this pattern coincided with a particularly flexible work schedule. In some of those cases, students nested their descriptions within the broader goal of prioritizing school. In one example, a full-time community college student described the parameters of her week:

Well, with me I usually get up at about 5:00 in the morning with my husband and make him a lunch because that's about the only thing I can do for him. He has to make dinner every night and he does everything. I have a flexible [work] schedule. I'm lucky. So whatever my school classes are I just work my job around it. I just need to get my 40 hours in. Then, like I said, I play sports some nights but I also work another job of bingo on Monday nights. Monday through Wednesday I'm not usually home until about between 10:00 and 11:00. And then if I have to work late on Thursdays I do, or some Fridays because I work for [a community organization] and we have different programs. And I work Saturdays. So I work usually six days a week. Most of my homework gets done when I'm taking my kids to their soccer games. So while they're playing or practicing or whatever that's when I usually have the most time to do homework. Some I do at work and then some of it I do here.

In other instances, this kind of routine focused on students' need to fit school around work and family obligations that were either very demanding or not entirely predictable. Nearly all parents participating in the study described a pattern of studying only late at night, after their children were asleep. One student, for example, described this pattern, detailing the childcare and transportation considerations shaping her daytime hours:

P4: You maybe study at nighttime when the kids are asleep. I have a teenage daughter who is a freshman at [a local high school] and I have to be on her like hot water. So I have to make sure that she's taken care of first. Then I go down to my [younger children]. I make sure that they have their things together. . . . Then when Monday comes I'm just blessed to have a babysitter. She's able to pick them up and drop them off. Then I don't have transportation, so I catch the bus and come to school. By the time I get home my 10-year-old beats me home. So then I've already decided and planned out what we're going to have for dinner and get that ready and prepared by the time they get home. "Eat and do your homework, take a bath, get ready for bed," and start it all over the next day. . . . I don't go to bed until like 12:30 or 1:00, sometimes later than that. Sometimes I may get like three or four hours of sleep.

Interviewer: So you're getting up early too. . . .

P4: . . . I wake my 10-year-old up at 6:00 because she has to catch the bus by 7:00. I get the kids up at 7:00 and then get them dressed. We're all ready by 8:15. By 8:30 [the sitter] picks them up and by 8:35 I'm at the bus stop. I get to school anywhere between 9:30 and quarter to 10:00. Then when I leave my last hour about 2:45, I wait for that bus to come out, or if my mother is off she'll pick me up. Then I'll call the babysitter and tell her I'm at home. By that time it's about 3:30 or 4:00 and I'm preparing dinner, getting them ready for bed by 7:30 or 8:00. By 9:00 they're in the bed.

Two things to note in this description are that schoolwork is fit in mainly at the expense of sleep, and that each day's schedule is predesignated in fairly tight intervals for school and family obligations. These intervals are stipulated nearly down to the minute in the morning, as she gets her children out the door and herself ready in time to make the bus. If the sitter or a bus is late, or if a child is sick, much of the whole routine is affected.

Many students juggling school, family, and work naturally raised questions about how to manage competing priorities. The following example, from a community college student and mother in her early 30s, illustrates this complexity.

They were telling us that when we start clinicals that we can't work . . . because they can't guarantee that we have either day clinical or night clinical. But it's hard because I can't just work weekends. It's just really stressful because it's like I barely see my daughter as is and then it's . . . almost two years of this between—. . . It's like, "Okay I have to quit the job that I have, or just work Saturday and Sunday, and then do the clinical." But then I'm not getting paid . . . at the clinical. . . . I mean in the long run its good, but then it's a sacrifice in between.

Numerous concerns and questions are raised in this example. The student describes needing to balance multiple pressing goals. These demands include not only fulfilling the requirements for the degree program, but also seeing her 2-year-old daughter more, working enough hours on Saturdays and Sundays, and managing the consequent personal and financial sacrifices for her family. In concluding, she places all of these aims within the context of a final goal: arriving at a better financial situation by obtaining the degree. A majority of students who spoke with us exhibited an orientation—somewhat surprising to us in its prevalence among student comments—toward an understanding of college principally as a vehicle of social mobility. In many cases participants' explanations implied that this was the understood purpose of pursuing college. This excerpt is one of the many examples in which students from all participating institutions puzzled through worries about

finances and family life juxtaposed against the belief that graduation will improve the family's financial situation.

Taken together, these time-structuring strategies illustrate that, with few exceptions, working students scheduled specific, limited time periods for school work, rather than taking the time necessary to complete assignments. Most participants made the homework fit their work schedule instead of fitting their schedule around the amount of homework assigned.

Connection and Disconnection on Campus

To explore students' college experiences, we cast a broad net for stories and descriptions that included statements about students' direct and indirect experiences at their current institutions. Because students often introduced their direct and indirect experiences at other colleges as a referent for their current college experiences, we examined these descriptions as well. We analyzed these statements with a particular eye to the norms, pressures, understandings, and strategies embedded in what the students shared.

Students' comments in this area predominantly focused on the possibility of being negatively or positively judged in their programs. Although other topics were raised in these excerpts, this theme was the most prominent. Not surprisingly, statements about being accepted or judged often tied to discussions of academic success or struggles, but examples of more generally personal descriptions are also present. The following passage focuses on the theme of feeling accepted—and therefore supported to succeed—regardless of nontraditional status:

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, you're an 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."

This student, who originally attended a residential college out of state right after graduating high school, characterized herself as behind where she thought she would be by her late 20s. She noted, however, that her more recent experiences in college have offset that feeling: "It's okay." Citing her perceptions of the institution's particular strengths—and possibly also implicitly referring to the affirming presence of other older students on campus—she feels that this perceived delay will not prevent her from achieving her goals (i.e., arriving at where she is "supposed to be").

Many focus group participants recounted experiences at these institutions in highly positive ways, as demonstrated in the preceding quote. It is both affirming and important to witness students relating these rewarding experiences. What is of even more interest to this study, however, is how and

in what contexts participants introduced these positive descriptions. Positive feelings regarding campus life stemmed, in example after example, from the perceived availability of one-on-one interpersonal connections in interactions on campus. In one excerpt, an adult learner community college student recounted a course experience that fostered a sense of connection for her:

I actually had a professor that had a buddy list which she gave us—copies of . . . everybody's numbers and everybody's name. This is how we developed our relationship. If I didn't have a homework assignment and she didn't have a homework assignment we went to that buddy list. . . . And that was agreed upon . . . every student had to agree with that. So that opened this up. Our class that we had, well we're in English right now together, but our business class we were just like a big family. And my teacher was like I've never had a class like you all. So that was beautiful.

According to this participant, the buddy list not only provided a way for students to contact each other for missed assignments. Rather, the arrangement—and the group's collective agreement to it—facilitated a sense of connection and exchange among students (e.g., "So that opened this up"; "We were just like a big family"). In addition to the student-to-student connection, this participant also remembered the instructor expressing a personal connection with the group. The student found these exchanges not only rewarding but also personally meaningful; she characterizes the experience as "beautiful."

A third example from another institution similarly illustrates the central role that one-on-one connection—or, in contrast, an impersonal setting—plays in students' understandings of campus environments.

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.

In expressing her preference for the type of campus she was attending and attributing the amount of personal attention to the institution's small size, this student implies that one-on-one interaction was important to her ability to succeed in college.

Often presented in less directly personal terms, negative experiences were described in conjunction with feeling either helpless or judged. One student, for example, began an explanation speaking about nontraditional

students in general, without including herself in the category until a few sentences later, and then only implicitly by referring to “when we were in high school.”

P5: We have nontraditional students and we have traditional students. Our traditional students are coming out of high school. Our nontraditionals have been out of school for 10 or 20 years and they're coming back. They're not catching the stuff like that. The math that they taught in high school now is nothing like what we had when we were in high school and [faculty] don't understand that.

P3: Well, there are some that understand and they just don't care.

P6: Yeah, they don't care.

As we suggested earlier, this quote is somewhat unusual—although not unique—among the student focus groups because it includes some negative description of the institution. More relevant to this discussion, however, the exchange is typical of how the community college participants made sense of the dynamics of academic success for older students on campus. The student asserted first that nontraditional students at this community college were having academic difficulties. She then theorized that the difficulties stemmed from years of being away from school and, in particular, from how the material, in math, for example, had changed in the intervening years. According to this explanation, courses are built on the current high school math curriculum and do not match what older students learned in high school. Finally, in this scenario, the faculty do not realize this situation and therefore fail to adjust the course or offer a way for nontraditional students to bridge the gap. The alternative explanation, offered by another participant, is that instructors understand the trouble but either do not think it matters if nontraditional students struggle or fail to identify it as their responsibility to help. This description not only centers on curriculum and faculty practice, but also suggests a distance in communication between students and faculty.

A second example brings out further complexity in college experiences. Students' perceptions about connecting with institutions most often implicated academic difficulty, as in the following story:

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. So I have to excuse myself because, see, I have a very potty mouth. I say things that ain't right. So I excuse myself and leave until I'm in a better frame of mind. This is my second go around here. I graduated from [community college] with an associate's degree in early childhood education. So now I'm back for nursing. The [entrance exam for the nursing program]! Like

these ladies over here, my worst subject is that math. And that's probably everybody else's too. I have just decided that I'll just take one class during the summer and practice the [exam] . . . so that when I do decide to pay my \$30 maybe I'll pass. But I'm like them. I work part time and I have three kids at home and I'm trying to pay rent. I'm the only person working in my household. So between trying to juggle rent, car note, [electricity], cable, and whatever else I may want to do, I have to do it out of my income. And \$30 to give to somebody that I know that I'm not going to pass a test is stupid. I'm not going to do that.

This student first recounted some sensitive exchanges surrounding financial aid. We cannot know the real course of events in these interactions but can conclude from this description that the student perceived resistance from the financial aid staff. The student related specifically the feeling of being talked down to, suggesting once again the consequentiality of perceived social distance in how students experience college. Moreover, the student saw this behavior as normatively incorrect and believed that she responded in ways that worsened the exchange (“I say things that ain't right”). The frustrating quality of her financial aid example was then linked immediately to more global frustration with the college experience.

The second half of this excerpt focuses on academic difficulties described within the context of the student's stretched financial situation. Whereas the final sentences focus on the decision not to pay an exam fee—and therefore not to take the entrance exam—the repeated references to her own expectation that she would not pass the test despite having completed prerequisite coursework clearly reflect an important part of her frustration.

Although positive descriptions far outnumbered negative descriptions of campus experiences, both exemplify two sides of the same perception from students. This perception centers on the belief that they are at risk of being judged out of place in college—whether they attribute it to age, race, financial situation, academic performance, or work and family obligations—and they link this risk to their ability to succeed. Throughout the many positive and negative descriptions offered in these focus group discussions, students' comments hinged on the perceived possibilities of interpersonal connection and the perceived acts of judgment or affirmation from faculty, staff, and fellow students.

Discussion

This chapter focuses on how students in one metropolitan area balance obligations related to work, family, and college. The range of experiences represented in the focus groups is wide and complex, encompassing multiple dimensions of balancing these combined demands. By examining how the

study participants make sense of their experiences, we begin to see how structures, norms, and implicit theories shape their strategies and ultimately condition their academic success. Moreover, we begin to see how questions regarding the academic success of working students, commuting students, and adult learners can be understood not only in light of previous research on student success, but also with an eye to understanding the workings of social reproduction through the educational context. With this type of analysis, findings can be extended to illuminate ways to improve practice to enhance equity and academic success for these college students.

Prior to this volume, much higher education research on working students has narrowly focused on traditional images of college going. The increased prevalence of employment during college makes it plain that working students are neither exceptions nor a monolithic group. This chapter illuminates the central dimensions along which mobile working students' experiences are differentiated. For example, whether participants described college going while balancing family and work obligations as manageable or unmanageable seemed to depend primarily on the reliability of income for basic needs (in some cases associated with dependent financial status) and, for parents of young children, the availability of reliable childcare.

This finding shows the workings of social reproduction in multiple ways. It shows that the stability needed to make this delicate balance *work* is more easily accessible to students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds and less accessible to students whose financial and social situations do not provide the necessary resources to troubleshoot and recover when disruptions inevitably occur (e.g., a car breaks down; a child with a fever cannot go to childcare). On a concrete level, the necessary resources include accessible, reliable, and flexible transportation and support for family obligations (most predominantly childcare). Neither financial aid policy nor broader public investment in social supports (e.g., childcare, public transportation, student aid, healthcare) provide the level of support necessary to maintain and succeed in the situations described by participants. Those students who have private access to these resources are more likely not only to sustain their efforts and recover from inevitable disruptions, but also to be seen as stable, serious, and capable in college contexts. In this way, social reproduction is clearly under way.

It is against this backdrop that students, practitioners, and institutions work to resist these replicative pressures and create transformative spaces and experiences within education. Highlighting these two dimensions in the variation of student experience provides an important direction for future research. It also points to implications for practice, confirming, for example, the continued centrality of financial aid, transportation, and childcare in institutional efforts to support the academic success of students as they balance work, family, and school.

Students with different obligations follow different paths and obviously face different pressures. Nevertheless, this chapter suggests some commonalities across situations as well. With only a few exceptions, participants organized their days around tightly packed intervals of structured activity. Open-ended time for studying and course assignments—only rarely mentioned by study participants—may be a casualty of tight financial circumstances, but perhaps also of a societal orientation legitimating work for pay and structured activity over other types of endeavor. Material needs and conditions clearly inform students' time-structuring decisions, but cultural norms about work and money may play into the pattern as well. If students with tightly structured schedules are driven by both economic factors and the predominant norms at institutions where most students pursue work and college simultaneously, and if more privileged students are subject to norms that allow for less tightly structured schedules, the potential for social reproduction is plain. These complexities show how subtle and entrenched patterns of social reproduction through schooling can become (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1979). Institutions and researchers need to understand more about how culturally situated pressures exist and shift across time and between regional and economic contexts. Moreover, as McDonough and Calderone (2006) suggest, inquiry should focus on how cultural norms around work and money inform the expectations and experiences of both students and practitioners. A nuanced and empirically grounded understanding of both conditions *and* norms can help higher education researchers break loose from models for student success that presuppose continuous enrollment and 6-year graduation rates and can inform practitioners in ways to advise and connect with working students.

This chapter also identifies academic difficulty as a pivotal matter to many students. Moreover, results underscore the relevance of the sorting function of education in students' implicit theories regarding college. Together, academic difficulty and the consequentiality of interpersonal connection form a crux for the positive and negative college experiences our participants described.

There is a component of education that is itself discursive. Students, faculty, practitioners, and policymakers (and researchers) all attend to the discourses of selectivity, merit, and the sorting function in college. These arguably comprise an important part of what we write about and experience as the workings of capital in research on student academic success. Understanding that you belong on campus—and that an institution believes in that belonging and your potential—are important assets in succeeding as a student. Privileged students most likely take this acceptance for granted and trust implicitly in its truth. Our findings suggest, in contrast, that these questions remain open and salient for participants in this study. Students' comments suggest that combating the expectation of being judged saps their

energy, complicates their interactions on campus, and undermines their academic success. In this way, the norms and structures of educational institutions, including the institution of higher education research, channel students toward class- and race-defined roles that reflect their current positions, thus undermining the potential for social mobility and the transformative purposes students often cite as the reason for going to college. Stigma-resistant forms of academic support and broad-based efforts to foster one-on-one interaction between students and others on campus are bound to increase the affirming experiences that so many students described. The same strategies may also decrease the kind of negative distancing experiences students also described.

Students' positive comments also reflect the workings of social reproduction and resistance. While suggesting the likelihood of continued student success, participants' assertions that they prefer the environments at these institutions may also point to troubling implications with respect to college choice and the cultural capital of institutions (Berger, 2000). In these appreciative statements, students implicitly contrasted the regional campuses and community college with institutions they characterized as higher status. Statements about preferring how things are in these institutions (implicitly designated as lower status) suggest that forms of *habitus* may be at work in students' college choice process.

Conclusion

In summary, this chapter highlights important dimensions of the experiences of working students. Exploring time-structuring strategies suggests how students are able to sustain their efforts. The central dimensions marking the tenable from the untenable included basic financial resources (including transportation, and money for books, childcare) and support for family obligations. The focus group results also show how personal interaction and the discourse of being judged come together as a crux around which students experienced connection and disconnection on campus. This dynamic comes into particularly strong relief in students' experiences with academic difficulties.

Building on implications forwarded by McDonough and Calderone (2006), we recommend further study of cultural norms pertaining to work, money, academic merit, and institutional prestige among students, college counselors, financial aid professionals, and college faculty. Continued inquiry in this vein can provide differentiated and contextualized descriptions of the structures and norms within which working students operate. This kind of finding is necessary for researchers, practitioners, and policy-makers to see the complexities and varied experiences often conflated under

the single category "working student." Moreover, by exploring how the norms adopted by practitioners come together with working students' norms and expectations in educational contexts, this kind of research will prepare institutions and practitioners to offer the kinds of interactions, advice, and academic support that will connect working students to campuses and support their success.

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