

ARTICLE

Nontraditional Students: Understanding and Meeting their Needs in the Anthropology Classroom

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Abstract

In light of the fact that nontraditional students (those age 25 years or older) outnumber traditional students on many US college campuses, it is important to understand their needs and experiences in higher education. A key characteristic distinguishing nontraditional students from traditional-aged college students is the high likelihood that they are juggling multiple competing demands and stressors, including parenthood, work, marriage, and financial responsibility. The findings presented here are part of a larger study that included in-depth interviews with 25 nontraditional undergraduate students at New Mexico Highlands University (NMHU or Highlands). This article highlights the narratives of five of these nontraditional students to illustrate the range of experiences that emerged across the sample. The authors reflect on how learning these narratives has influenced their personal approaches to teaching and engaging with nontraditional students and provide strategies for supporting nontraditional students in the anthropology classroom.

Keywords: *nontraditional students; higher education; anthropology instruction*

Introduction

Gloria, a nontraditional Hispanic student, was the first in her family to attend college. She explained, "My whole family is [a] low middle-class family, and I have always seen my mom struggling, working very hard, and not getting paid enough. I decided I don't want this life for me." Her story is similar to that of other nontraditional students attending college in the small, rural community where this research project took place. Like Gloria, many students saw a college degree as a necessity for "making a good living." Increasingly, nontraditional students like Gloria are the norm on college campuses, rather than the exception.

During the forthcoming academic year, millions of nontraditional students – defined as those over the age of 25 years – will enroll in traditional face-to-face and online

college courses. These students will include both degree and non-degree seeking students. Among those seeking a degree, some will be enrolling in college for the first time, while others will be returning to complete a degree they began years earlier and never finished. Still others will begin working on an advanced degree for personal or career-related purposes. The reasons adults aged 25 and older seek college education vary. For example, some nontraditional students are retirees who find themselves out of the workforce earlier than they expected and who need to acquire new skills to get a new job. Other nontraditional students seek to launch a second career. Some are searching for a degree that will enable them to pursue a more fulfilling job. Additionally, there are those who seek out continuing education to satisfy professional licensure requirements.

Scholarly literature on adults seeking college education generally refers to these students as “adult students” or “adult learners,” “nontraditional students,” or “post-traditional learners” and notes that they increasingly constitute a substantial percentage of the undergraduate student body in the United States. Indeed, data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) indicate that of more than 18 million college students in 2007, 38 percent were 25 years of age or older (NCES 2009). In 2009, students aged 25 and older accounted for roughly 40 percent of all undergraduate and graduate college students. That figure is expected to reach 43 percent by 2020 (NCES 2016).

Some of the literature uses a broader definition of nontraditional students that encompasses characteristics beyond age, including the following: entry to college delayed by at least one year after high school completion, having dependents, being a single parent, being employed full time, being financially independent, attending college part time, and not having a high school diploma. When we consider these characteristics, the number of nontraditional students increases to 73 percent (Choy 2002). Regardless of how we define nontraditional students, their presence on college campuses in the US is likely to remain stable or increase during the current decade (Hussar and Bailey 2009), and we (faculty, administrators, and staff) must be cognizant of this student population’s unique needs.

Our objective in this article is to tell the stories of a handful of women and men who navigated the challenges of juggling school and life as nontraditional students, which included financial stress, addiction, chronic health issues, and parenting. We also reflect on what we have learned from their stories and how they have changed the way we teach anthropology and interact with nontraditional students.

The broader project that this article draws from focused on 25 nontraditional undergraduate students who took anthropology courses during the 2017-18 academic year on the main New Mexico Highlands University (NMHU or Highlands) campus in Las Vegas or at the Santa Fe Center. Tamir recruited participants from anthropology classes offered in her department. Except for one student who identified as Native American and one who identified as non-Hispanic Anglo, all of the participants self-identified as

Hispanic, Hispano, or Hispana. Tamir conducted open-ended, semi-structured interviews with each participant. In an effort to accommodate the schedules and comfort levels of the participants, Tamir allowed participants to choose the time and place of interviews, which took place at a variety of locations, including Tamir's office, a coffee shop, the student union, campus library, and one via Skype. With the participants' permission, Tamir voice-recorded and transcribed all of the interviews. Interviews focused on eliciting participants' stories about entering college, navigating the challenges of juggling academics with other life responsibilities, and understanding how college fits into their values and life goals. This study was approved by the university's Institutional Review Board.

A key characteristic distinguishing nontraditional students from traditional-aged college students is the high likelihood that they are juggling multiple life roles while attending school (e.g., employee, spouse or partner, parent, caregiver, and community member). These roles may be assets to nontraditional students, both through the social supports they provide and through life experiences that may help older students make sense of theoretical constructs that may be intangible for younger traditional students. However, these multiple roles also present challenges to nontraditional students' use of time for both studying and for participating in campus-based activities.

Questions that guided this project include the following: What values and life goals influence nontraditional students' experiences in higher education? What really matters to them in terms of ordinary and unpredictable dimensions of life experiences? What unique challenges do nontraditional students face? How can anthropology instructors address the needs of this student population? In this article, we share the narratives of five nontraditional students from Highlands and reflect on how learning these narratives has influenced our personal approaches to teaching and engaging with nontraditional students.

New Mexico Highlands University

In 1893, the Territorial Legislature established New Mexico Normal School. Anthropologist Dr. Edgar Lee Hewett became the first president of New Mexico Normal School in Las Vegas, New Mexico, when the school opened its doors to students in 1898. In 1917, five years after New Mexico joined the United States, the School became a four-year teacher training college. In 1941, the college was renamed New Mexico Highlands University. Currently, Highlands is an open-enrollment Hispanic Serving Institution with a main campus in Las Vegas, New Mexico, and with centers in Santa Fe, Rio Rancho, Farmington, and Albuquerque. During the 2017-2018 academic year, the university's 3,363 students enrolled in undergraduate and graduate programs in liberal arts and sciences, as well as in business, teacher education, and social work. Students at Highlands generally enjoy small classes and considerable one-on-one time with their professors.

A clear majority of the students identify themselves as ethnic or racial minorities. During Fall 2017, 46.1 percent of all students identified themselves as Hispanic (Hispano/a¹, Latino/a, Chicano/a). The university also serves a considerable Native American student population, with 8.2 percent of the students identifying as Native American – mainly Dinè (Navajo), Apache, or members of one of New Mexico’s nineteen Pueblos². Of the remaining students, 28.5 percent identify as non-Hispanic White/Anglo, 3 percent identify as African in origin (African American), 1.4 percent identify as Asian, and 1 percent did not report ethnic identity. Most Highlands undergraduate students, 78 percent, call New Mexico home; 20 percent are from other US states and territories and 4 percent are international students (NMHU Office of Institutional Effectiveness and Research). Most students, 54 percent, come from low-income backgrounds (Tamir 2017). A total of 1,199 Highlands undergraduate students, a whopping 36 percent, are nontraditional students. Most of these students, 738 (or 64 percent), are Hispanic (Hispano/Hispana, Chicano/Chicana) and Native American. Of the 1,199 undergraduate nontraditional students, 391 (33 percent) are enrolled in the college of Arts and Sciences, 265 (22 percent) are enrolled in the School of Social Work, 220 (18 percent) are enrolled in the School of Education, 183 (15 percent) are enrolled in the School of Business Media and Technology, and 140 (12 percent) have not declared a major (data provided by NMHU’s OIER).

Narratives of Nontraditional Students

This section presents the in-depth narratives of five nontraditional students at New Mexico Highlands University. These five were chosen to illustrate the range of student experiences that emerged across the sample. In sharing the stories of these students, we aim to illuminate their experiences and the unique challenges they faced as nontraditional students.

Laura

Laura (all the participants’ names are pseudonyms) is a Native American student from out of state who had just completed her B.A. at Highlands and started a graduate program in creative writing at another institution. Tamir first met Laura, a woman in her 40s, during an evening class Tamir taught. They spoke frequently during the breaks about various topics, including Laura’s health, art, and social justice issues. Laura often sought Tamir out via email and during office hours for informal conversations because, as she put it, “I feel we have many similar interests.” They met for the interview at Laura’s favorite coffee shop in Santa Fe during a quiet afternoon after finals. Laura came to the

¹ Hispano/a refers to individuals who identify as the direct descendants of the Conquistadors that settled New Mexico.

² Pueblos are Native Americans in the Southwestern United States who share common farming, beliefs and practices, and material culture. The Spaniards coined the term Pueblos upon entering the region in the 16th Century when they encountered multi-story villages they called Pueblos.

interview with her adult daughter who is also her caregiver. During the past two decades, Laura has been living with AIDS and Parkinson's disease. Despite her illnesses, Laura – who is a petite woman with dark, long hair and dark bright eyes – looks every bit the former gymnast that she is. Before the start of the interview, Laura took medication to control her Parkinson's-generated tremors. As the interview progressed, however, the efficacy of her medication began to wear off and the tremors returned. Still, Laura insisted on completing the interview and even stayed a little longer afterwards to socialize over another cup of coffee.

Laura's life has been entwined with tragedy: her artist father was murdered (he was shot several times) when she was only two years old. An older brother who she admired was stabbed to death near his home when she was in her early twenties. A few short years later, within a two-week period, Laura was diagnosed with both AIDS and Parkinson's disease. After her AIDS diagnosis, Laura learned she would not live long enough to graduate from college.

I said to myself, why bother with college? I'm going to die soon anyway, so I dropped out. But I lived, and nowadays I like to go out and educate people about this deadly disease [AIDS], you know. The diagnosis was totally stunning, yeah, but I felt OK with dying because, you know, I'm going to be where [my brother] is. That was fine because, you know, at least I knew how I'm going to die – I'm going to die from AIDS. Then it did not look like I'm going to die because of this new treatment and all these pills I take. It then became a goal for me to see how much education I can get in my condition as a woman living with AIDS and Parkinson's. Getting lots of college education has been my way to win.

After her brother's murder, Laura raised his only daughter as her own, and she fostered Lakota children from the reservation, where her brother lived with his wife, who was also murdered. Tragedy, however, continued to follow her: "My [biological] daughter that I raised, she was murdered in my hometown. She was stabbed to death by her husband in my own kitchen. I had to move away from my hometown and from the state I grew up in." Smiling, Laura summarizes her drive for seeking higher education: "It is kind of weird. Every time I have a major life tragedy, I think about college. I don't know why. It is my escape route now. It is not easy to go to school with my conditions, and it is harder for me to deal with Parkinson's than with AIDS, but it is what I do."

Diana

Diana is Hispana and from northern New Mexico. She was the first in her nuclear family to go to college. At the time of the interview, she was in her mid-thirties and married with two children. Both Diana and her husband enrolled as full-time students. While taking a Learning Community course in anthropology from Tamir, Diana quickly became a role model to her much younger freshmen peers. They respected her

commitment to education, envied her good grades, and sought out her advice on a variety of issues. To several of them, she was akin to a quiet, unassuming older sister. Tamir and Diana met at the library, at a location Diana and her husband frequently used for studying.

I was born and raised here [Las Vegas, New Mexico], though my family did move around a little bit when I was younger. Las Vegas is nice, and I have a lot of family from here. My aunt graduated from here [NMHU] so there is a little bit of family tradition to go to NMHU. After I graduated from high school I did not go to college, but I actually ended up working for the University when I was 19. Everybody I knew was going to school here at the time. I was just thinking of working, and I was not thinking ahead about the future. I didn't think about going to school when I was younger. I figured my schedule was very hectic as far as family situations – being married. So, I took a year off after high school and went to work for one year, and that one year led to 17 years off (laughing). Life happened, you know. A couple of years ago I was ready to go to school and I thought, well if I do not go to school now I probably will not ever do it. So, I came back to Highlands, this time as a student. I want, you know, to set an example for my kids; to do something for myself; to be beneficial to the family; and to be educated in general. I want to become a psychologist and Highlands has a very good program, so that is what I am doing.

Diana and her husband tried to schedule all their courses and do all their coursework during the hours their children spend in school.

I go to the library and try to get as much homework done as I can before I go home because once you get home it's the kids and afterschool program that you always have to help with. I try to take all my classes between 10:00 am and 2:00 pm so that I am home for the kids when they return from school. I love being in class and talking with the professors in their offices. I feel that I am a real person, not a number. There are a lot more responsibilities when you are older. I have a second grader and a seventh grader. After school, it gets really hectic for us with all their afterschool activities. We are busy (laughing) until it is time to go to bed. We try to get as much homework done as we can while we are at school. I want to be a role model to my kids, so that they will go to school too.

Diana was looking forward to completing her B.A. degree, and she planned to apply to the graduate program in psychology at Highlands. She also wanted to be a role model for her children. Diana said that both she and her husband hope their children will enroll in college immediately after high school before having families of their own.

David

The first time David, a Hispano from northern New Mexico, walked into Tamir's office a couple of years ago dressed in black jeans, a black t-shirt, and donning a black knitted hat, he came across to her as a rough guy. Tamir's first impression could not have been more wrong. David was in his late 40s, polite, and soft-spoken, sporting several tattoos on his arms. He was an army veteran who initially started attending college at Highlands more than 20 years ago and dropped out of college within a year. He re-entered Highlands a few short years ago and has been a model student. David worked full time at his family's business and attended college part-time. He was a senior at the time of the interview and on schedule to complete his B.A. that December. To accommodate David's working schedule, Tamir interviewed him via Skype.

I started at Highlands in Fall 1986 and I was actually expelled after that semester. At the time, I did not know what I was doing and partied all the time. I failed my classes and was kicked out. I went on to become a truck driver and was on the road driving eighteen-wheelers from coast to coast for almost three years. It was a tough job and I used to come home dead tired. I started drinking. Then I got into the army and served three years. After my military service, I returned to Las Vegas and started drinking again. That is when I realized I needed to do something to keep myself busy, away from drinking. I decided to go to school. My GPA was a 1.73, and going back to Highlands with such a low GPA was impossible. So, I went to Luna [Community College] to study Business. I transferred to Highlands and changed my major to anthropology. I was still drinking. Every person in my family drinks; this is what they do. This is what I saw growing up, and this is what many people here [Las Vegas] do when they have time. I realized that I had a [drinking] problem. It is not easy, you know. I checked into rehab and Roy [his partner], he stuck with me when I told him I was going to a treatment facility. He has been very supportive throughout the whole ordeal, and we have been together for the last seven years. Being a recovering alcoholic is a daily struggle for me. When I got out of high school I just didn't care about classes. I only partied. Now that I am older and a recovering alcoholic, you know, I want to show people that anybody can change their life around no matter what drugs or drinking you are involved in. I talk about my struggles with alcohol with students; I do presentations about it in classes. I want people to know that dealing with drinking is hard, but that there is hope. School and work keep me busy and away from drinking. I think I will go to graduate school to remain sober.

Due to his work schedule, David would sometimes arrive to class a few minutes late. But, as he explained, "The professors here know every student. They know about my [work] schedule and let me come a little late. They know I care about class and do not miss classes." David loved attending classes, and, unlike other older students, he was

engaged in campus life and openly talked to students and faculty about his struggles, and triumph, with drinking. After graduating, he planned to continue in a graduate program, in part to satisfy his academic interest and in part as a vehicle to remain sober.

Daniel

Daniel, a fifty-something student from eastern New Mexico, waited for Tamir near her office door. He heard about Tamir's project and was eager to tell his story. Many years ago, Daniel attended Highlands for three semesters. For reasons he could no longer recall, Daniel decided at the time that a college education was not for him and dropped out of school: "I think coming out of high school and going to college right away is not a good idea. I don't think you can truly appreciate life experience; you do not appreciate who you are and what you do. I dropped out of college and joined the army." About fifteen years ago, married with three children, Daniel moved with his family back to Las Vegas for a career opportunity in the region. They enjoyed living in town until his life took a dramatic turn a few years ago:

About five or six years ago, I started to develop horrible pain all over my body. It got to the point where I could not function. I was afraid I was going to cause problems for [my family] and I was always afraid of the pain. I went to many doctors, but they could do nothing for the pain. I was so frustrated with the pain that I started to develop suicidal thoughts. These thoughts really scared me, and I decided to talk to my wife about what I was going through. By then I could not work and went on disability. My wife and I decided I should see a specialist, a psychiatrist that may be able somehow to help me deal with what I was going through. We also thought that maybe the reason I am going through this pain was so that I can help others. The specialist I went to in Santa Fe really helped me. So, I re-entered Highlands because I want to become a psychologist and help others. So, I first took the summer classes (smiling) as a trial run and it wasn't so bad, so I decided to take courses during the regular semester toward a degree.

Daniel's older daughter had already graduated from Highlands and was admitted to the University of New Mexico's medical school. Another daughter, who occasionally took courses with him, graduated last May. Daniel liked attending classes and felt like he was setting a good example for his younger classmates.

I sometimes feel that they [traditional students] look up to me and listen to me because I am sort of like a father to them. Other times I tell the students I think it would be best if they kind of live life and get a little bit of experience. I also go to classes and talk to students and faculty about my struggles with mental health and how I manage to bring my mental health under control. I want people to be more open about mental health; I want

people to talk about it and not to be ashamed of it. This is also why I wanted to meet you and tell you my story. I want people to know that you can be a good student and a good person even if you have mental health issues. This is my goal these days. This is why I go to school.

Victoria

Victoria was the only nontraditional student Tamir encountered during the study who attended college almost solely for credentialing purposes – she needed an academic diploma to advance her career. Victoria, a single mother of two in her forties, is originally from northern New Mexico. At the time of the interview, she lived and worked in a community near Albuquerque (about a two-hour drive from the university). In addition to juggling a full-time job and single motherhood, Victoria attended classes on Highlands’s main campus twice a week. She chose Highlands for several reasons: because years ago she attended classes on the main campus; because her father graduated from the university; and because Highlands allowed her to transfer all her Central New Mexico Community College (CNMC) credits toward a degree. Attending classes in Las Vegas also provided her with many opportunities to visit with family members in town and have meals with her mother twice a week.

I attended Highlands before, in 1999. When I got a job at Intel in Rio Rancho, I left school and worked there for 16 years. After I was laid off, I went to CNMC [Central New Mexico Community College] for a paralegal certificate. My boss asked if I would like to further my education if it was free of charge and offered to also pay my salary for the days I was in school. So, I said yes. I chose Highlands because I went to school there before and I have family here [Las Vegas] that I can come visit a few times every week. It is so hard to go to school while raising my kids, but my ex-husband cares for the kids during the days I go to classes and it really helps. It is so hard to further my career path while having a job and kids. But I needed to increase my income to support my children. So, when my boss gave me the opportunity to get education for free and paid for my classes and my salary, I decided to go for it. All I need after each class period is a signature from each professor on a form stating that I was in class. Although Highlands has always been very affordable, my boss’s offer made it possible for me to take the time to go to school. For me, because I live two hours away from Highlands and have two little kids, I would like to have some courses online. Taking an independent study course with you really helped. I did most of the work at home, and we discussed the material in your office before the other course I took from you. Sometimes it is just very hard for me to study and to take care of the kids. I had a total meltdown last weekend. I was just so tired, the kids kept me so busy with their stuff, and I could not study. The drive to the university is sometimes

just too much. But I'm going to finish the degree. I want to have better pay at work, and I want to be a role model for my children.

Emerging Themes

These stories highlight the complex lives and unique challenges of nontraditional students. Despite the difficulties of juggling multiple roles and responsibilities, these students found college to be deeply rewarding, and they maintained their focus on academic success regardless of what was happening in their personal lives.

Two themes emerged from these narratives that have informed both authors' approaches to teaching and interacting with nontraditional students. First, each of these students communicated and demonstrated a fierce commitment to succeeding in higher education despite multiple barriers they faced. Barriers for these five participants included chronic illness, ongoing struggles with substance abuse, mental health issues, competing demands that included children and jobs, long commutes and tight schedules, a history of academic failure, financial stress, and residual emotional trauma.

When faced with these seemingly insurmountable challenges, each of the five participants demonstrated an unwavering dedication to succeed in school. They had all either dropped out or failed out the first time around; however, this time they had clear motivations and goals that kept them on track academically. For Laura, college represented "a way to win" despite her chronic health issues and traumatic life experiences. College provided an "escape route" from the emotional and physical pain in her life. Similarly, for David and Daniel, college represented success in the face of substance abuse and mental health issues. Doing well in school provided an opportunity to show themselves and others that their struggles do not define them. Victoria, as a single mom with a full time job, was motivated to further her career in order to earn a higher salary and be a role model for her young children. Despite the four-hour round trip commute to Highlands on top of all of her other responsibilities, Victoria was committed to earning her paralegal certificate so that she could financially support her children. College enabled each of the five students to refocus their narratives of struggle to instead highlight perseverance, grit, and making second chances count.

Second, these students brought a wealth of life experience to class discussions in anthropology. They offered younger, traditional-aged students opportunities to learn from their experiences and, in some cases, they informally mentored traditional students. For example, Daniel felt like traditional students looked up to him and listened to him because they saw him as a father figure. In an introductory and an upper division anthropology course Tamir taught recently, the nontraditional students whose stories are outlined above regularly contributed to rich class discussions. Laura's and Daniel's serious illnesses and David's struggles with alcohol addiction occasionally provoked deep and complex emotions in class, from fear and bewilderment to awareness of unrecognized values about what makes life matter. Laura, Daniel, and David transformed their life

predicaments into newfound outspokenness and activism on behalf of those living with AIDS, Parkinson's, mental illness, and addiction. Victoria and Diana, who were almost twice the age of their classmates, managed to use their struggles with juggling home life, caring for their children, and school, to informally mentor their classmates. In the process, we (professor and students) all learned from their wide-ranging experiences and life struggles.

Strategies for Supporting Nontraditional Students

Establish Personal Connections

The success of the nontraditional students interviewed for this study was greatly facilitated by interpersonal connections on campus, particularly one-on-one time with faculty both in and out of class. Because participants' identities as college students were so deeply intertwined with their life histories and ongoing struggles, sharing their stories with and getting to know faculty members was important to them. They highly valued office hours and face-to-face conversations with their professors. Nontraditional students showed up more frequently to office hours and stayed longer than traditional students. These connections were so important to them, for example, that Laura insisted on finishing the interview with Tamir and even stayed afterward to socialize despite the fact that her Parkinson's medication had worn off. Daniel, like other students in the study, sought out Tamir when he heard she was interviewing nontraditional students. He explained that he wanted to meet her and tell her his story so that other members of his college community would "know that you can be a good student and a good person even if you have mental health issues." In fact, helping people through sharing his story was one of Daniel's primary goals in college.

The adult learners we have encountered in our anthropology courses often sought us out and seemed to value the time they spent face-to-face with us and their other professors. Tamir occasionally used Zoom and Skype to accommodate unconventional meeting time requests, and she even met a student during the student's break at a local supermarket where she works. Making time to talk with students, traditional-aged or nontraditional, is very important. As Diane said, "I love being in class and talking with the professors in their offices. I feel that I am a real person, not a number." It is also important to understand that nontraditional students may require help navigating barriers related to university policies and procedures, financial aid, veteran certification, and so on. While a one-stop-shop for all their needs would be ideal, it will never replace the quality face-to-face time they need with their professors/mentors.

Create Flexible Course Policies

Notwithstanding their contributions to class discussions, the nontraditional students Tamir encountered often also needed flexibility with office hours, deadlines, class offerings, and class attendance policies. To some professors, it may seem that these students were not committed to learning: they were regularly arriving late to afternoon classes, like David; occasionally missing classes, like Laura; missing or repeatedly cancelling appointments, like Victoria; and handing in assignments late, like Daniel. Because of their busy schedules and multiple competing demands, emergencies were more frequent among nontraditional students than among their younger counterparts. A strict “no late work” policy could turn a nontraditional student’s success into a failure very quickly. When possible, it is important that professors make time to understand the broader contexts of their students’ lives. Learning about the values and life experiences nontraditional students bring with them to college is rewarding and humbling; it also helps professors understand who their students are as human beings. Understanding the full context of nontraditional students’ lives provides their professors with foundations for personalizing course materials when necessary as well as advising and mentoring this growing sub-set of the undergraduate student population.

Make Course Content Relevant

We recognize that it may not be possible for some faculty to build relationships with nontraditional students through one-on-one interactions outside of class time. Many instructors teach large sections and/or manage heavy course loads, often in addition to research and service work. Here, we offer strategies that can be employed in a class of any size. For example, connecting curriculum to practical skills that students can use in the workplace and in their everyday lives may help nontraditional students stay engaged. According to research, nontraditional students are “unlikely to stay committed to their schooling if they cannot justify it with outcomes that will improve or better their life situation” (Chen 2017, 5). In terms of specific teaching strategies, Taylor often begins the semester by introducing connections between anthropological concepts and real world job skills. Once the foundation for these connections is in place, she and her students revisit them in the context of course readings during the semester through both informal class discussions and think-pair-share activities. For example, Taylor teaches an applied anthropology class that is designed to prepare students for jobs, and the curriculum focuses on understanding and learning to communicate about how anthropology translates into real-world skills. Not surprisingly, this class tends to attract nontraditional students. (See Morey and Taylor in the current issue for more details about how Taylor structures this class.)

Taylor finds opportunities to connect anthropology concepts to real life skills in other classes as well. For example, a major component of the medical anthropology class she teaches is exploring structural violence through healthcare, food systems, and mental

health and substance abuse treatment programs. In this class, she addresses how policies and procedures at all levels contribute to unequal health outcomes. Every student in the class has had some experience, either directly or indirectly, with health, illness, and the US medical system. Inevitably, multiple students have a family member who works in a medical or government agency that directly impacts health, or someone in their family has sought such services (e.g., housing or food assistance, Medicare, or mental health treatment). Taylor encourages students to share their own stories and experiential knowledge about how institutions operate from both insider and outsider perspectives. Many nontraditional students have a rich and varied history of work and life experiences that can truly deepen these discussions. With a typical enrollment of 40-50 students, discussion in this particular class can be challenging, but it is not impossible. Taylor has found the think-pair-share strategy to be successful for generating discussion in larger classes.

Use Active Learning Techniques

Nontraditional students tend to prefer interactive, discussion based classes rather than lectures (Pelletier 2010). Even in large classes, lectures can be infused with other activities to promote student engagement (see Barkley 2010). Using a think-pair-share activity, an instructor can have students respond individually to an open-ended question related to the lecture, then turn to a neighbor to briefly discuss their responses, followed by a handful of groups sharing what they talked about with the whole class. For example, the medical anthropology class Taylor teaches was originally designed with primarily a lecture format. However, upon teaching it for the first time, Taylor immediately noticed some students, especially the nontraditional students, tuning out. She quickly switched gears to incorporate discussion questions about the readings into each lecture. Initial discussion questions for each topic generally require students to analyze main concepts in the readings and connect them to other class readings. Subsequent questions ask students to connect the readings to a personal experience or observation. Students come alive during the discussion portion of class. In particular, sharing personal narratives provides an opportunity for nontraditional students to shine, as they often have more life experience than their younger counterparts. It provides a space for their voices to be heard and valued and for them to connect their life histories with anthropological concepts. Flexibility is, once again, crucial in facilitating classroom engagement with nontraditional students. Tamir and Taylor have both found that encouraging questions during lecture is an important way to keep nontraditional students, who tend to ask more questions and challenge issues in class (Pelletier 2010), engaged in learning. This may mean that you cannot “cover” as much material as you would like; however, allowing space for students to make experiential connections to the material and discuss and debate concepts with each other facilitates engaged learning.

Summary

The nontraditional students Tamir interviewed at Highlands tended to be ethnic/racial minorities who present unique personal histories, academic aspirations, and individual needs. Tamir, who has been teaching at Highlands for more than 20 years, is committed to working with all students, and she tends to spend as much time with each student as a student wants to spend with her. One of the real joys of teaching anthropology at Highlands is the fact that small classes lend themselves to strong face-to-face interactions with students who, for the most part, really cherish personal interaction with professors. In Tamir's experience, nontraditional students need a little more time with her and with other professors than traditional students. They often seek mentorship that is not solely for the sake of academic progress or for their interest in anthropology, but for assurance that a professor is there for them – no matter what. Indeed, nontraditional students at Highlands listed smaller classes, face-to-face courses, and accessibility of professors as their top needs. However, instructors of large classes can also use strategies to keep nontraditional students engaged, such as incorporating active learning techniques and encouraging questions during lectures. Our role as instructors is to help the students who take anthropology courses succeed, grow, and learn – especially in the face of life obstacles and the stresses they experience.

Generally, the social and economic forces that have led to nontraditional students' increased participation in higher education in recent decades are not likely to decline anytime soon. These forces include a diverse population, the rapid pace of technological changes, and the constantly shifting demands of workplace skills. University administrators are increasingly under political and economic pressures to prepare students for the job market from skill-obsessed education accreditors, Boards of Regents, and politicians – often at the expense of much needed personal professor-student mentorship. Nontraditional students at Highlands, who are often academically motivated by life experiences, hardships, and uncertainties, taught Tamir that they primarily want to work toward life goals and be role models to their children and to their peers. For them, participating in higher education and obtaining academic credentials are often vehicles for reaching these goals.

The stories of the five Highlands nontraditional students described here are not meant to be statistically representative of the student body at Highlands, nor of the students who sign up for anthropology courses. The life experiences of nontraditional students from the Schools of Education, Business, and Social Work are likely to add shades and colors to the impressionistic painting of adult learners we painted with an unscientific sample of College of Arts and Sciences nontraditional students. Still, their stories provide a glimpse into their needs and experiences in higher education. Their stories also offer insight into how central life insecurities are in our nontraditional students' worlds. Getting to know our nontraditional students better has provided Tamir

and Taylor with a better foundation to meet their needs, enhance their enjoyment of anthropology, and boost their positive college experience in general.

Acknowledgements

This research would have not been possible without the participation and support of the Highlands anthropology students. We are also grateful for insightful comments from the peer reviewers and journal editors that have helped improved this paper.

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