Refereed Article

The Role of Counseling Centers for Serving Non-Traditional Students in Higher Education

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Abstract

The number of non-traditional students in institutions of higher education has been increasing in the past decade. These students face unique challenges during their course of study and the institutions in which they are enrolled are responsible for taking steps to better understand their needs and help them fulfill their academic goals. Non-traditional students are often balancing multiple roles in their lives, which reduces time for participation in traditional programs that are designed for retention. While some programs are in place for all students and technological advances allow further opportunities, non-traditional students may still have difficulty engaging in the campus environment and tapping into resources they may need. These students also have rich and complex lives outside of the campus community that may at times be utilized as support. Institutions of higher education and Counseling Centers must be active and creative in assisting non-traditional students through innovative outreach programs designed to facilitate understanding of their diverse backgrounds, learning styles, and preferences for social connections.

Introduction

For non-traditional students, pursuing a higher education degree may be just one of their many roles. What stands out for these students

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is their uniqueness—the fact that a one mold approach is inadequate for understanding them or appreciating them. Non-traditional students are very diverse and have many different types of lifestyle patterns, different levels of psychological career maturity, and varying developmental milestones. For the purposes of this article, non-traditional students will be characterized as being over the age of 24, working full or part-time off campus, returning for a higher education degree after a delay or interruption of their initial start, and commuting daily to campus. Consequently, University Counseling Centers are encouraged to examine their policies and practices to ensure that they accommodate the changing needs and demands of these students. In the context of this article, Counseling Centers will refer to mental health centers on campus that provide a variety of psychological services to students. Commuter institutions of higher education, which have a high percentage of non-traditional students, do not have the same degree of influence over students as their residential counterparts who can more readily offer programs to captive audiences. Though University Counseling Centers can be affiliated with a variety of different campus units, the present exploration will concentrate on centers whose primary work is focused on student mental health and wellness as demonstrated through mental health outreach, individual and group counseling, and mental health crisis services. This type of Counseling Center is well positioned to contribute to the academic success, health, and retention of non-traditional students.

The Non-Traditional Student

Non-traditional students are characterized as being over 24 years old, are oftentimes employed full time, and have families (Forbus, Newbold, & Mehta, 2011). Non-traditional students are more likely than traditional students to be commuter students, the first generation in their family to attend college, married, or residing with a significant other (Newbold, Mehta, & Forbus, 2010; Forbus et al., 2011). They also engage in more hours at their place of employment (Forbus et al., 2011).

Given the complexities in the backgrounds and experiences of non-traditional students, it is very challenging to design programs to fit their diminishing available free times. Additionally, due to the lengthening academic days, that is the offering of classes prior to 8 a.m. or after 5 p.m., as well as on weekends, it becomes an increasingly daunting task for these students to try to connect with peers, programs, and resources that could enhance a deeper sense of affiliation to the institution and

decrease the sense of isolation that they often experience. These students are pulled in very many different directions and often academic demands, though important to them, are not placed as the top priority. If given the option to attend an evening lecture by a speaker or participate in an evening dinner and homework with the family, the latter may win out of sheer necessity. Institutions of higher education have an important role in staying empathically attuned to the challenges these students encounter as they help to facilitate their adjustment.

Historically, institutions of higher education have provided both academic and co-curricular or extra-curricular programs to facilitate students' retention and success. Fifty years ago the typical college student was able to focus primarily on academic goals and utilize the support systems in place to enhance learning and to foster connections. There was much emphasis on the traditional experience at residential colleges with activities designed to encourage involvement, to assist in transition and adjustment to the college environment (Tinto, 2006). Upon returning home to their communities for short breaks or longer vacation periods, students used to be enthusiastic about sharing their enriched experiences with families and friends who were equally enthralled by their student's new undertakings. Their narratives centered on achievement and connections to peers, faculty, and administrators, all of whom contributed to making a difference in their lives. There was time for participating in discussion groups or meeting in dyads to exchange ideas and debate theoretical perspectives. There was less multi-tasking and less juggling of multiple roles as the role of the student was indisputably central in their lives.

Non-traditional students' participation and involvement are sometimes described as "quantitatively and qualitatively" different from traditional age students (Donaldson, Ensher, & Grant-Vellone, 2000). The student to student involvement through clubs or organizations, and/or student to faculty engagements in which the traditional student may typically engage, does not necessarily apply to the non-traditional student. Thus, they are clearly not able to consistently participate in extracurricular activities. However, these researchers maintain that non-traditional students rely more heavily on the classroom experience and relationships as well as their family, friends, co-workers and others in their "Life-World Environment" to provide the support and insight that they need (Donaldson et al., 2000).

Gilardi and Guglielmetti (2011) maintain that awareness of problems experienced by non-traditional students is important in their be-

ing able to activate appropriate coping techniques and strategies. For instance, if these students are marginalized, the greater the chances of attrition; whereas those who remain socially engaged and connected, have adequate support, enhanced understanding, and reduced chances of attrition.

Non-traditional students are often quite motivated and goal-oriented. They appreciate the fact that they have been given a second chance to pursue their degrees when they are ready to do so. Some return to school with a sense of confidence and preparedness and others with diminished confidence and a fear that they could fail. Their success is also dependent on how long they were away from college and the types of undertakings that they had. If they were involved in academic or intellectual pursuits then their transition is easier than for those who had not been involved in academic settings. What appears to be common is that they look for a sense of belonging or affiliation (Ostrove & Long, 2007), and whether there is anyone else like them. This perceived sense of "do I fit in?" helps to determine their comfort with participation.

With these characteristics in mind, non-traditional students initiate contact with University Counseling Centers through a variety of ways. Some seek professional help on their own; others are referred by family and friends; and some are referred by faculty and staff who may have noticed their psychological distress. Outreach efforts by Counseling Center staff enhance visibility of Center services while simultaneously working to reduce the stigma that is associated with seeking professional help.

The unique characteristics of the non-traditional student population can further be understood through discussion of diversity issues, work/life balance, and social support. Each of these areas has important implications for University Counseling Centers that have a focus on wellness.

Diversity

The diversity amongst non-traditional student groups has the potential for being enriching and for opening minds, but if overlooked could contribute to isolation and attrition. Institutions of higher education, charged with the responsibility of educating future professionals and community leaders, are responding to the increasing diversity in their campus populations. There indeed is a unique and powerful opportunity for true cross-cultural learning through awareness, contact, and knowledge, leading to greater openness to diversity after graduation (Fischer, 2011). Non-residential campuses or institutions enrolling significant numbers

of non-traditional students are no exception. Multiple forms of diversity converge in such settings with students returning to school from previous work or life experiences or gaining credits in a new area of study. Thus, diversity in cultural identity, life experiences, and age are highly prevalent in student demographics and classroom presentation.

According to the United States Census Bureau 2012 statistical abstract, nearly three million college students enrolled through 2009 were 35 years of age or older, with over one-third of those students being of a minority racial identity (African-American, Asian, or Hispanic). University Counseling Center staff are well-positioned and are important contributors to the success of diverse non-traditional students of higher education, through their training and habitual working with differences.

It is necessary for psychologists and campus counselors to understand the impact of diversity on the college experience, the role of student age and ethnic identity on college adjustment, and the way in which the campus climate affects psychological health. With such an understanding, it is then relevant to discuss the role a Counseling Center can play in promoting student and community well-being on campuses with non-traditional students.

Considerable research has demonstrated the educational and developmental benefits of fostering diverse and inclusive campus environments (Fischer, 2011; Antonio et al., 2004; Gurin, Nagda, & Lopez, 2004). Cognitively, exposure to varied or novel viewpoints, those that arise with differences in life experiences and personal background, can lead to more complex thought processes. Specifically, Antonio et al. (2004) demonstrated that the inclusion of a novel viewpoint in group discussions led to more fluid, integrated thinking for all parties involved. In other words, participants were able to integrate multiple perspectives into one's own thinking rather than viewing each perspective as a separate and isolated entity. This is especially relevant when considering campuses that include a sizeable population of non-traditional students who bring with them valuable insights gleaned from various life experiences and in general, have several dimensions of diversity.

College campuses serve as a microcosm of the diversity of the larger society. Thus, it is imperative to consider how to integrate various backgrounds effectively. Intergroup contact, if facilitated successfully, can reduce prejudice and by extension, the propensity for discrimination (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). The meta-analytic work of Pettigrew and Tropp (2006) suggested that Contact Theory is robust beyond the present experience of the out-group (on-campus experiences), extending to the larger

out-group community (society, the work place, etc.). Though diversity is highly prevalent on non-residential campuses, with non-traditional students, there is an important difference to consider when compared to residential, primarily traditional age universities. Non-residential campuses do not have the advantage of intergroup contact through dormitory living. Such living situations reduce the possibility for racially segregated communities that are oftentimes reflected in the composition of city neighborhoods. Thus, it is paramount that non-residential campuses facilitate effective intergroup contact through classroom work, extracurricular activities, and mental health outreach services.

The mere presence of diverse populations within a student body alone is not sufficient. There must be some sharing of information regarding the other group, an affective connection to members of the group, and opportunity for self-reflection (Fischer, 2011). Each of these components of effective intergroup interactions is possible on campuses that have a large population of non-traditional students. Classes that address issues of culture can serve to provide information about minority groups. Campus cultural organizations or academic units themselves can host events or speakers that provide information about the lived experience of various cultures. Next, affective connections develop through friendships, partnerships, or romantic relationships. Fischer (2011) found that white students who formed friendships with African-American students or dated an African-American peer endorsed more cooperation, team-building, shared objectives/goals, and a greater degree of social closeness to students of the minority background (Fischer, 2011). It is in the classroom and within these organizations that students come with equal status with the expectation of similar contributions. The richness of interactions that can occur within a university setting can encourage all students to reflect on their own ethnic identity (Reid & Radhakrishnan, 2003).

Other studies have illuminated the struggles of highly diverse campus environments (Santos, Ortiz, Morales, & Rosales, 2007; Reid & Radhakrishnan, 2003). Campus diversity can influence students to question where they belong and to what extent. Non-traditional aged students taking classes with traditional aged students may wonder if they will be able to relate or identify with their classmates. They may question what they can learn from someone with less life experience. Likewise, younger students may feel that older students are out of touch with current developments or technology. Similar attitudes may manifest in regard to ethnic background. Interethnic tension has indeed been identified as a

concern of some students on a multiracial campus (Santos et al., 2007). Micro-aggressions, intentional or unintentional slights that function to devalue a minority group (Sue, 2010), serve as an instigator of cultural conflict and negatively impact the mental health of minority students (Blume, Lovato, Thyken, & Denny, 2011).

Diversity issues are core to identity and are central to positive community functioning. University communities are no different and in fact, Universities can work to build stronger communities. Non-traditional students are of great value to the educational system because of the diversity they bring. As such, consideration of how to uphold and nourish diverse identities is imperative—a conversation which can be facilitated by staff at University Counseling Centers.

Work/Life Balance

As non-traditional students return to college, they are trying to balance their work and family life with school. This poses many different challenges for them and therefore institutions of higher education will need to have a keen sense of awareness of the needs of these individuals in order to enhance retention in the college setting and the overall mental health of students. Understanding the work/life/study balance is an important factor in lifelong learning (Lowe & Gayle, 2007).

In regards to family, many non-traditional students entering college are not separating from their family of origin, but rather continuing their multifaceted lives, with the addition of being a student (Kasworm, 2008). They might have time constraints due to balancing their family, work, and school life and therefore less likely to be involved in campus life (Forbus et al., 2011). In a case study looking at the experiences of both full and part time higher education students, the majority of participants had combined roles of both work and family obligations (Lowe & Gayle, 2007), which increases the need for time management skills. This research also indicated that older students were highly motivated to succeed at college, even with the risk of compromising their duties at their place of employment and family life. Gaps in education and learning between high school and the return to college can place non-traditional students in a phase of "catching up" with learning, and can require more time needed to devote to their studies, thereby compromising the time spent with their families (Ritt, 2008).

Since non-traditional students may not have the emotional or social support of a particular group cohort within college (Fairchild, 2003),

they tend to view their family members as their social support system (Dill & Henley, 1998). Non-traditional students might also have other obligations related to work and family and do not have the time to engage with friends and peers (Dill & Henley, 1998). Not having a specific cohort might give the non-traditional student a sense of isolation. Non-traditional students are also less involved in social activities and less interested in extracurricular activities at college (Forbus et al., 2011; Newbold et al., 2010). Developmentally, non-traditional students are more dedicated to their studies, seeking an enhancement in learning to make themselves more competitive in the marketplace. Therefore, they are less concerned with the social aspects of the campus life (Forbus et al., 2011), having previously established their social network.

Sixty-two percent of women in a study comparing couples whose wives returned to school and those who did not indicated that returning to school had a negative impact on their marriage and they attributed declines in marital satisfaction to spending less time with their husbands. Qualitative interviews indicated lower marital satisfaction stems from divisions of labor at home and standards not being able to accommodate the women enrolling back into college. Divisions of labor, such as who cooks, cleans, shops, etc. now have to be shifted, along with the standards of the household, which include cleanliness, contact time, etc. In most cases men were supportive of their wives returning to school, but were not interested in assuming any additional roles in the household (Sweet & Moen, 2007). This places an even heavier burden on the female non-traditional student with their added school work.

Financial stress, including tuition, rent, vehicle, and family expenses are usually higher among non-traditional students (Forbus et al., 2011). These students might not be able to receive financial aid and have the burden of paying through self-support, which adds to their financial responsibilities (Ritt, 2008). In a study looking at experiences of higher education students, one third of participants received no financial help (Lowe & Gayle, 2007). They also experienced stress related to the work place, involving co-workers, bosses, commuting, and scheduling (Forbus et al., 2011). The non-traditional student might not be able to obtain time off from work to attend school at specific days and times (Ritt, 2008). Faculty office hours and class schedules can also interfere with the student's family obligations (Fairchild, 2003). Lowe & Gayle (2007), noted that a student's success in being able to balance school with their employment and domestic life is influenced by their coping strategies

and by the support, both the nature and quality, they receive from their families and employers.

Many non-traditional students often return to college after a major life event, such as loss of a job, divorce, separation, etc., demanding added energy and time to deal with these unresolved life issues. This increases the anxiety level of the non-traditional student trying to balance their stress outside of school with college life. The support network of non-traditional students, such as their family, friends, and coworkers, sometimes lacks appreciation for the students' return to college and they may not understand the time and effort needed to devote to school (Kasworm, 2008). In order for retention of students to occur, the basic needs of the non-traditional student will have to be met, which includes other financial and personal needs taking precedence over educational endeavors (Fairchild, 2003).

Social Support

Myriad studies have repeatedly shown that social support is important for college students to manage stress and, further, that it is important for retention and success (Clark, 2006; Hertel, 2002; Mattanah, Brooks, Brand, Quimby, & Ayers, 2012; Tinto, 1993). For colleges with traditional students who mainly live on or near campus with other students, this may be readily available and promoted. However, the current literature lacks adequate information about how social support is promoted and maintained for non-traditional students. Researchers have pointed out that current models of student well-being may not completely capture the experience of non-traditional students as well as they do traditional students (Deil-Amen, 2011; Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011; Karp, Hughes, & O'Gara, 2008). There may be clearly marked differences between the experiences of traditional and non-traditional students that deserve the attention and programming from higher education institutions and Counseling Centers.

As mentioned earlier, non-traditional students are often juggling many different undertakings along with school that may impact their ability to seek out social support in the same ways that traditional students do. However, social support is still a crucial aspect of their experience as a student, especially because they have the additional stressors of managing family, work, and personal obligations on top of academic stress (Chao & Good, 2004; Deil-Amen, 2011; Lundberg, McIntire, &

Creasman, 2008; Quimby & O'Brien, 2006). Navigating these challenges and negotiating time for various responsibilities are greatly aided by receiving support from the many different important people in non-traditional students' lives (Chao & Good, 2004; Quimby & O'Brien, 2006). In a study of female students over the age of 25 and with children, Quimby and O'Brien (2006) found that perceiving safe and supportive relationships was correlated with lower levels of distress, higher self-esteem, and increased life satisfaction. It seems that, wherever support comes from for non-traditional students, it can be useful in promoting their success.

In a study of ethnically diverse commuter students, Barbatis (2010) found that three of the four major themes of factors contributing to persistence in school involved support of some kind. The first of these support themes is external and community influences, as many participants reported that their success relied on supportive families, friends, and past teachers. Another support theme of this study concerned social support outside of the classroom and, in particular, through a first year experience program that connected students with others beginning that same year. One participant described the people he met through this program as a family. In addition, participants commented on the importance of academic integration, which involved positive interaction with faculty. Barbatis (2010) found that persistent students were more likely to be involved in campus life. This researcher reported that commuter and ethnically diverse students may benefit greatly from relying on their cultural affiliations.

Not only does being connected aid students in happiness and satisfaction, but the perception of being isolated or alone can be detrimental to a college student's mental and academic health. Clark (2006) reported that feeling lonely and isolated is one of the main reasons that urban commuter students do not continue in their studies. This isolation may be more prominent with non-traditional students than their traditional counterparts because they may not feel fully integrated on the college campus and may be separated slightly from their existing support systems (Clark, 2006; Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011). Lundberg, McIntire, and Creasman (2008) explain that the support systems that non-traditional students already have in place may not understand or even tolerate the experiences of a college student, especially for older undergraduates. Their support systems outside of school may understand non-traditional students in terms of their roles and commitments outside of college and may not be able to relate. Some seem to go as far as judging the student's new

role (Deil-Amen, 2011). It may be very difficult for students to maintain their identity with current support systems while creating or maintaining a new identity as a student. However, the support in place for students outside of the college environment or outside of a simply social sphere is also important to keep intact. Chao and Good (2004) reported that, "… non-traditional students were found to actively incorporate their diverse resources from family, friends, teachers, and themselves to solve their difficulties in pursuing college education," all of which improved the experience as a student.

It is important to consider where and how non-traditional students are able to seek out support throughout their college experience. For traditional students on mainly residential campuses, orientation and college organizations may emphasize being involved with peers on campus. However, non-traditional students may not get this same orientation or be able to seek out the same supports and, thereby, gain a sense of belonging on campus. This could be due to time, distance, age, or many other restraints (Deil-Amen, 2011; Karp et al., 2008; Lundberg et al., 2008). Clark (2006), for instance, reports that, "Because commuter students and their friends lacked a common ongoing experience, such as might be found on a residential campus, they found it difficult to sustain classroom-based friendships from one semester to the next" (p. 5). In general, a sense of belonging and acceptance is important in the college experience of any student. This is also vital for non-traditional students.

Research has consistently demonstrated that students' connection to social and interpersonal environments is critical for their persistence and success (Swenson, Nordstrom, & Heister, 2008; Tillman & Jackson, 2005; Astin, 1993; Gardner, Upcraft, & Barefoot, 1985; Pascarell et al., 1978). Many institutions have been requiring freshmen students to reside on campus as there is evidence that students are at greatest risk for attrition during their first year in college (Gasser, 2008). This practice is clearly not transferable to many non-traditional students who have families and certainly not transferable to commuter institutions. Hence it is critical that these students find alternate and sufficiently adequate ways of staying meaningfully connected. Over the last two decades, the introduction of living-learning communities, in which students take classes together in cohorts, has shown highly desirable outcomes for student persistence and success (Inkelas et al., 2006; Chang, Witt, Jones, & Hakuta, 2003). What does this mean for institutions with a significant population of non-traditional students? Does it mean that not having the option to intentionally house students together automatically means that

they would not succeed? The answer is no. As Donaldson, Graham, Martindill, and Bradley (2011) remind us, non-traditional students tend to be more focused, tend to engage studying at deeper levels, look more often for ways in which their studies could be applied to their lives, and tend to rely on external support systems to reinforce their efforts and keep them motivated.

Faculty are increasingly introducing group projects in their class requirements to help foster connections and provide the opportunity for students to learn how to collaborate in teams. This is done in both campus and on-line classes so that students in essence are not passive learners. Additionally with the rapid development of technological communications, non-traditional students have increasing access to alternate modes for deriving information and for making connections through the I-Pad, I-Phone, Skype, Facebook, Face Time, the use of blogs, Blackboard for online classes, and Instant Messaging, to name a few. Thus, there appears to be a paradigmatic shift in looking at traditional ways of connecting versus the new and emerging technologies that facilitate cyber connections with all students. Counseling Centers have already been offering a variety of online support services through self-help literature, Facebook and Twitter connections.

Donaldson and Graham (1997) maintain that non-traditional students, despite the reduced time that they spend in the actual learning environment, attempt to achieve "an authentic involvement" by creating meaningful learning. That is they tend to look for ways in which new learning helps with problem-solving or enhances previous understandings and past experiences. Gilardi and Guglielmetti (2011) suggest a dual socialization that is inclusive of the non-traditional student's external reference group along with their mores, values, and beliefs, as well as the beliefs and values of the academic culture. So given that these students are multiply-focused, they come to expect that they would blend their "pluralism of affiliations and commitments" (p.36). Thus, they are in constant analysis of how "different facets of the institutional environment facilitate and support their learning" (p.36). Counseling Centers can continue to provide meaningful ways in which these students can participate in services that enhance their academic skills such as the provision of academic enrichment workshops and understanding learning styles.

Counseling Centers' Proposed Responsivity to
Non-Traditional Students

As non-traditional students return to higher education in greater numbers, the dynamics of the student body transform, embodying non-traditional students who are most likely married or partnered with children (Lowe & Gayle, 2007). Due to the new composition, Counseling Centers should adapt to the growing needs of the non-traditional student. There is a lot more to understand when it comes to the school/work/life balance among non-traditional students before implementing different programs and activities on campus. All departments need to be aware of the programs that are offered on campus that could alleviate stress. Counseling Centers can provide outreach to classes and faculty departmental meetings to educate on services offered.

If their needs are not recognized, non-traditional students will be put at a disadvantage for resources on campuses (Newbold et al., 2010).

It has been noted that there is an increase in the severity of mental health needs for students on college campuses across the United States (Watkins, Hunt, & Eisenberg, 2011; Cook, 2007). The developmental challenges of anxiety and stress are still common presenting concerns, while Counseling Centers are also seeing more severe psychopathology, including DSM diagnoses, where longer term treatment would be beneficial (Watkins et al., 2011). The notion of continuing the short term model of college Counseling Centers, but also including the option of longer term treatment for students with severe psychopathology might provide a benefit for non-traditional students and help with their retention.

Due to the lack of support that some non-traditional students face when entering college (Kasworm, 2008), counselors should link non-traditional students to support within and outside the college setting. Counselors can do so by providing resources through outreach efforts and through direct contact. However, the stigma of students attending outreach events and making appointments at the Counseling Center can limit this added support. Possibly allowing Counselors outreaching to professors to post information regarding Counseling Center services and how to obtain services can be utilized on Blackboard. Helping the student build networks within the college setting will help decrease the initial anxiety that some non-traditional students might experience. Enhancing and strengthening their current relationships will prove beneficial in the long run for continued support and retention of the student. In a study looking at aspects of non-traditional students' lives on their college

experience, students indicated that collaborating with faculty and staff helped reduce stress (Newbold et al., 2010). Having adequate available support from families, employers, peers, and the university was a strong determinant for obtaining the work/life/study balance (Lowe & Gayle, 2007). Specifically, Counseling Centers can also offer that support, along with increasing linkages to resources on campus, as noted above. In addition, working with non-traditional students to understand the concept of boundaries between work/life/study is important to develop pertinent strategies to negotiate relationships within these domains, while including the role of being a student (Lowe & Gayle, 2007). Factors having a major influence over achieving the work/life/study balance were coping strategies and resilience (Lowe & Gayle, 2007), which Counseling Centers can help enhance with students. Professors, advisors, and other University staff that have consistent interaction with students can be adequately trained to identify distressed students and refer to counseling services. These same people can advocate, provide resources, and problem-solve with students as an initial means of breaking down institutional barriers to counseling services (Mier, Boone, & Shropshire, 2009).

Counseling Centers can coordinate forums and panel discussions with successful community leaders and mentors who can help to enhance collaboration and motivation for these students. It means that professors will have to be attuned to the meanings of their withdrawal behavior quite early and make determined efforts to facilitate their empowerment. Non-engagement and non-participatory styles could be intimidating in the classroom but if appropriately addressed by faculty, interventions could lead to bridges in communication. Counseling Center staff can also partner with faculty in providing guest lectures that strategically focus on a variety of self-empowerment and survival skills.

Constructing dialogues that reflect their experiences in a way that they feel validated is very important. Feeling misunderstood and invalidated could lead to alienation and distancing, even if it is unintentional. Hence, it is important to find common ground so that these students could relate in meaningfully significant ways, or they stand a chance of being ostracized. The unique characteristics of the non-traditional student population can further be understood through discussion of diversity issues, work/life balance, and social support. Each of these areas has important implications for wellness-focused University Counseling Centers.

Counseling Centers and Their Potential Impact on Enhancing Diversity

In consideration of the myriad of diversity issues encountered with non-traditional students, what can college Counseling Centers do to promote an integrated campus community and a healthy diverse student body? Counseling Centers' mental health professionals are well-positioned to facilitate intergroup dialogues, multicultural therapy groups, and diversity outreach programming to both students and faculty/staff. This may manifest in a variety of ways. Gurin et al. (2004) outlined an Intergroup Relations Program used at the University of Michigan aimed at maximizing the educational, personal, and citizenship benefits of nurturing a culture of diversity. A fundamental part of this programming consists of intergroup dialogues. These are facilitated interactions that bring together individuals from various backgrounds (students of color and white students, sexual minority students and heterosexual students, and students from various religious backgrounds) for weekly discussion meetings. Within this setting, it appeared that students began to discover both cultural commonalities and differences. Such programs have the potential to increase the motivation of students to take the perspective of another, express opinions openly, be more open to reflecting on their own identity, and were more understanding of how the identities of other groups contributed to society (Gurin et al., 2004). A campus community with non-traditional students' needs an agency for such programming. The mental health professional's skill in facilitating challenging conversations, negotiating conflict, and attending to issues of culture and oppression may well support such a program. Practically, this may look like a multi-week closed workshop with screened participants. This may connect diverse students to the service offerings of the Counseling Center.

Counseling Centers on campuses with a significant population of non-traditional students may be additionally helpful in establishing therapy groups with a diversity focus. Structured or unstructured groups can have a central theme of making social connections, overcoming oppression, and sharing the minority experience. It is in these groups that micro-aggressions and minority stress can be explored. As noted previously, the diversity of non-residential campuses exists among multiple, sometimes intersecting dimensions, and therefore, may need to be reflected in the composition of the group. If the need exists, groups for students with disabilities, ethnic minorities, sexual orientation minorities, amongst others may be appropriate. Since micro-aggressions serve to

uphold oppressive societal structures and lead to an unhealthy community (Sue, 2010), it is important that this stress has a place to be released and discussed with others who may have similar experiences.

Finally, outreach programming must reflect campus diversity concerns. "Understanding Power and Privilege," "The Bystander Effect," "College Life and Disability," and "First Generation Student Challenges, Successes, and Coping," are example titles of diversity programming that a Counseling Center can be instrumental in facilitating on a non-residential campus with non-traditional students. These workshops can serve to connect isolated students to a greater community to discuss and explore diversity issues.

Counseling Centers and Their Potential Impact on Enhancing a Better Work/Life Balance

Balancing roles in college life for non-traditional students is by no means an easy task. Changes within the topics of therapy and/or therapeutic domains at Counseling Centers can prove to add a beneficial component for students with various life roles. For example, group therapy dynamics will change with the combination of traditional and non-traditional students being seen at Counseling Centers. Counseling Centers might need to provide separate groups geared toward the experiences of more non-traditional students. In addition, groups will have to focus on different topics, such as co-parenting, communicating with a spouse, single parenting, recovering from a divorce, etc., and Counseling Centers have to be willing to serve all populations rather than the standard non-traditional student. Clinicians within Counseling Centers need to have enhanced training skills with older adults and family issues. Overall, since the severity of mental health concerns are increasing (Watkins et al., 2011; Cook, 2007), more training will be required for staff to enhance their skills with these complex cases (Watkins et al., 2011).

Some typical barriers to accomplishing these additional outreach efforts often include inadequate Counseling Center staff resources for undertaking new initiatives and resistance on the part of some non-traditional students to seek professional help. Another potential barrier would be the institutional funds that would support this additional training might not be readily available. Increased outreach also involves increased and consistent marketing so that there is adequate and timely communication about programs. A failure to market adequately could impact attendance and participation by non-traditional students.

Family therapy is a possible option that Counseling Centers should more often consider in providing support to the non-traditional learner. Family therapy can increase the retention rate by reducing the stress levels from the home. Families are an extension of some non-traditional students. Some Counseling Centers allow for couples' counseling when one partner might not be a student. Due to the decrease in marital satisfaction among non-traditional students (Sweet & Moen, 2007), couples' counseling options might need to be increased with full time staff members having additional expertise in couples' counseling. Since non-traditional students will have a variety of presenting concerns, there should be an increase in campus consultation, along with outreach geared to non-traditional students. Workshops should also be geared to non-traditional students. For example, a workshop dealing with children who misbehave could be beneficial to the non-traditional student who has children.

Research focusing on the work/life/school balance will help universities understand non-traditional students better, which will help develop programs more apt at serving diverse campuses (Newbold et al., 2010). More research regarding personal and psychological impact of the experiences of non-traditional students is necessary (Baptista, 2011) and should be conducted. Needs assessments should be completed in Counseling Centers to see if they are meeting the needs of the diverse students (Cook, 2007). Once Counseling Centers are aware of the needs of students, programs and different initiatives are more likely to be started, which will hopefully help non-traditional students balance their work, life, and school to increase retention rates. However, with that said, inability to obtain funding, along with lack of available staff, might hinder new programs and initiatives from developing. Senior administrators need to understand the increased number of non-traditional students in higher education and seek out the necessary funds that will allow for the increase in supportive services for these students.

Counseling Centers and Their Potential Impact
on Aiding in Social Support

It may be difficult for non-traditional students to feel and maintain connection with their more traditional classmates. That being said, non-traditional modes of social support need to be considered for non-traditional students. For instance, several researchers suggest promoting and building faculty-student interaction and support for a better college experience for non-traditional students (Barbatis, 2010; Clark, 2006; De-

il-Amen, 2011; Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011; Karp et al, 2008). Many times, students on a largely non-traditional campus may seek out psychological services because of a lack of connection. Several researchers also suggest promoting a more active online community for non-traditional students and their support systems in order to remedy this issue (Clark, 2006; Giardi & Gugielmetti, 2011).

Gilardi and Guglielmetti (2011) suggest that parents, spouses, and children of non-traditional students be more involved with and informed of the student's college life in order to provide more support. This sentiment is a reiteration of research results by Chao and Good (2004), Quimby and O'Brien (2006), Kember and Leung (2010), and Barbatis (2010), all of whom insist that counselors incorporate the external support and resources of non-traditional students as much as possible, as these sources of support may be the most salient and important in the lives of non-traditional students. While traditional students and their parents may receive extensive orientation and information about how to support and seek support for students, non-traditional students and their support systems may not be as available or included in these types of orientation. Barbatis (2010) suggests that external support, such as family members, should be involved from the beginning of a non-traditional student's academic experience and throughout the student's enrollment. It is likely that many non-traditional students are living with family members, so the support from family cannot be overlooked (Melendez & Melendez, 2010; Quimby & O'Brien, 2006). In a study of ethnically diverse, female commuter students, Melendez and Melendez (2010) found that the quality of parental attachment was positively correlated to both academic and personal-emotional adjustment and was a significant predictor variable of personal and emotional adjustment. This finding was consistent across ethnicities of participants. These researchers state that, "…students who live at home with family members may receive support that buffers them from the stressors associated to college, including social, emotional, and academic adjustments" (Melendez & Melendez, 2010, p. 428). These researchers emphasize the importance of considering the significance of parental attachment and being aware of interdependent family value systems when working with the college student populations.

Barbatis (2010) states that, "institutions need to expand the concept of learning to include affective outcomes such as leadership, self-understanding, and citizenship" within the college community (p. 20). Working in college Counseling Centers, it is important to consider the many different areas in which non-traditional students may receive the

support and sense of belonging that are vital to their success as a student and as a person. In Counseling Centers, expanding consideration of social support to fellow students and external sources of support could be helpful in the therapeutic process, especially if these sources of support are included in the care of the student. Counselors will also need to keep in mind that being involved in campus life or college-related social groups may not be most important to the student who may receive support elsewhere. In addition, advocacy on the part of non-traditional students is essential. Reorganizing orientation, including families and children of non-traditional students in orientation, and using programs designed to connect students to their community throughout their time in college are all possible methods of being proactive about the success of non-traditional students. Many current programs focus heavily on creating a community and sense of support for first-year students, while the extension of these programs throughout their academic career is essential to maintain connection and encourage social support.

In conclusion, it is becoming increasingly important that Counseling Center professionals stay attuned to the ever changing needs of our growing population of non-traditional students. They bring a diversity that is enriching and enlightening. Institutions of higher education are continually challenged to make their environments welcoming and comfortable so that these students can develop a greater sense of connection and meaning. Having to balance multiple roles as student, employee, parent, spouse/partner, sibling, and so on, can be very demanding on the non-traditional students' time and energy. Non-participation in some planned on-campus activities may not necessarily mean a lack of interest or investment since some of them are able to obtain social support through other off-campus involvements. Recommendations for online community affiliations are seen as useful and productive. Counseling Center staff will need to continue to be aware of the changing dynamics of this population especially in planning groups, workshops, and other outreach initiatives.

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