Devalued, Misunderstood, and Marginalized: Why Nontraditional Students' Experiences
Should Be Included in the Diversity Discourse

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Abstract

Objective: This paper presents a rationale for discussing the marginalization of nontraditional students in the diversity discourse. **Background:** There is tremendous growth in adult college student enrollment, however marginalization of the nontraditional population is perpetuated through institutional policies and practices. Although there has been improvement in educational access for these students, they are still neglected programmatically and in service provision, similar to underrepresented student populations. This neglect is apparent in the omission of their experiences in scholarly diversity literature. **Method:** A content analysis of 706 sources was conducted to determine how often and in what ways nontraditional adult student experiences are explored as diversity issues. **Results:** A huge gap in the diversity literature regarding nontraditional adult students' experiences exists. **Conclusion:** This oversight silences adult students' voices and impedes their academic and economic progress. **Application:** Increasing diversity publications about adult students' experiences as a marginalized population will provide resources to educate diversity scholars, practitioners, and college personnel.

Introduction

The adult student population seeking higher education is on the rise. The U.S. Department of Education (2012) reported that "from 2010 to 2020, NCES [National Center for Educational Statistics] projects a rise of 11 percent in enrollments of students under 25, and a rise of 20 percent in enrollments of students 25 and over" (para. 3). These figures include students considered to be *nontraditional* because their lifestyles are so different from traditional-aged college students, who enroll in college full-time directly after high school graduation and depend on their parents for financial support (Choy, 2002). This increased adult student enrollment combined with President Barack Obama's national degree completion goals that intentionally target *nontraditional* students as critical to a strong workforce (Advisor Committee on Student Financial Assistance, 2012) have set the stage for what could be an exciting time for adult students and the educational institutions in which they enroll. However, despite this trend in the increase of adult students, the glaring reality of the marginalization of these adults exists on many college campuses (Advisor Committee on Student Financial Assistance, 2012; Kasworm, 2010). Many "nontraditional students have not been fully prepped for a traditional college experience and their lives do not lend themselves to this design" (Center for Law and Social Policy, 2011, p. 4), which causes many of them to discontinue their learning or continue with dissatisfaction.

The term 'nontraditional', often used interchangeably to describe the adult student, depicts a sense of being set apart from 'traditional' student populations. The very language portrays the population as one that does not include the typical student. Programs, services, and opportunities to become engaged in college activities elude the nontraditional student when campus administration, faculty, or staff do not consider their lifestyles and needs. One could argue that this lack of consideration is not an intentional exclusion but, rather, that literature to inform these issues is lacking. This paper proposes that a contributing factor to the marginalization of nontraditional students stems from the lack of discourse to draw attention to the issues and to inform decision-making. The research presents a rationale for including the discussion of nontraditional student marginalization within the diversity genre. This positioning will expose the experiences of the diverse population to scholars and practitioners who advocate for access and equity for other marginalized groups and increase awareness of nontraditional student needs to better understand and remove the barriers faced by them.

Problem Statement and Purpose of the Study

Not only do nontraditional student experiences seem to be absent from higher education periodicals (Donaldson & Townsend, 2007), they are not present in the diversity literature either. Since the diverse population of nontraditional students experience marginalization in ways similar to that of other minority groups (Sissel, Hansman, & Kasworm, 2001; Tinto, 2012), lack of representation in sources that promote equal opportunity and access further contribute to the problem. In order to bring awareness to the needs of these students and their essential role on college campuses, broadening the readership of their issues to include diversity and inclusion scholars and practitioners is key. The purpose of this study, therefore, is to explore the diversity literature and to determine the need for increasing diversity literature that focuses on adult students' experiences. The research question that drives the study is: How often

and in what ways are nontraditional student issues explored in diversity literature to broaden understanding and raise awareness of the population's needs and marginalization as a diversity issue?

Literature Review

Characteristics of a nontraditional student, although not all-encompassing, include delayed enrollment (one who does not enroll in college directly out of high school); part-time enrollment status; full-time employment; financial independence as defined by financial aid eligibility criteria; or family responsibilities such as a spouse or dependents (Choy, 2002). The Center for Law and Social Policy (2011) reports that, due to institutional programs and processes designed to serve traditional students, nontraditional students experience difficulty in finding the resources and direction needed to choose the best fit in academic programs and to secure financial resources needed to cover college expenses. Kasworm (2008) further purports:

> They face unique challenges to their identity through the varied supportive and negative sociocultural contexts of higher education. Whether within the classroom or experiencing the broader social world of the college, they experience environmental and relational cues, messages, and supports (or lack thereof). (p. 33)

Even the term *nontraditional* depicts a sense of otherness that can disengage adult students. The poet, Adrienne Rich (1986), describes this potential for an oppressive existence and silenced voices in an excerpt from her essay entitled *Invisibility in Academe*:

> When those who have the power to name and to socially construct reality choose not to see you or hear you... when someone with the authority of a teacher, say, describes the world and you are not in it, there is a moment of psychic disequilibrium, as if you looked in a mirror and saw nothing. It takes some strength of soul—and not just individual strength, but collective understanding—to resist this void, this non-being, into which you are thrust, and to stand up, demanding to be seen and heard. (p. 199)

It could be argued that this statement describes what nontraditional students in higher education are experiencing. They are in a world that was never designed for them. As Sissel and Sheared (2001) pointed out, "Hegemonic practices and structures normalize and, indeed, reify the experiences of some members of society [and institutions of higher education], while negating the realities of others" (p. 4). This negation further supports Rich's (1986) musings related to those in the academic world who feel as though they are not being seen or heard, and the "mirror" that the institution is holding up does not reflect them or their needs.

The plight of nontraditional student populations is similar to that of other underserved and marginalized groups, particularly racial minorities as well as lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender/queer (LGBTQ) students, low-income students, and first-generation students. Tinto (2012) stated, "In some respects, the experience of adult students is not unlike that of minority students. They too can feel marginal to the mainstream of institutional life" (p. 76). Without a targeted effort to recognize and meet the needs unique to this student population, nontraditional students will continue to

experience marginalization and othering. Nontraditional students' experiences are also rarely in literature regarding educational access and equity. Research published in diversity literature, presented at diversity and inclusion conferences, and detailed in books about cultural competence usually include underserved populations' experiences but rarely focus on the nontraditional student group as a separate population. If nontraditional student experiences are similar to other underserved groups and terminology used to explain their existence and encounters on college campuses is similar, should their experiences be considered in the diversity literature and discourse?

Kasworm (2010) referenced the need for recognizing the nontraditional or adult student population, particularly among research universities, by pointing out that adult students have been met with uneven interest as institutions have not placed a priority on developing programs and support for the adult student as they have for the full-time residential student. This uneven interest has left adult students paying the same tuition rates but with unequal access to the support that might make a difference in their success. "Adult students do live on the borderlands. They are not viewed as having a key position within higher education; rather, they are believed to be apart from this collegiate world of young adult development" (Sissel, Hansman, & Kasworm, 2001, p. 25). More recent research confirms this statement of positionality by describing adult students as a square peg trying to fit into a round hole (Hagedorn, 2005) and forced to operate within an environment not designed for them (Meyer, 2014).

A recent study of adult students at research universities revealed that many adults describe themselves as the clear minority in the university culture (Kasworm, 2010). Students described a sense of otherness, having to prove themselves and their value each time they entered a new classroom environment. One student commented, "This university still doesn't recognize our presence as a plus" (Kasworm, 2010, p. 153). Many experienced challenges with institutional acceptance as they felt isolated by the dispersion of the adult population across a youth-oriented campus which did not easily allow for connection with other students who were similar in age and life experience. It was as though these students felt like a lost puzzle piece because despite looking for a place to connect, adult learners were consistently looking at a puzzle without a carved out spot for them.

The landscape of higher education is continuing to become more diverse as institutions have made intentional efforts to serve minority populations, low-income families, and first-generation students. However, as Donaldson and Townsend (2007) noted, "Despite these shifts in higher education practice, scholars have paid little attention to adult students' presence and their impact upon nonprofit higher education" (p. 28). Concern that discourse related to adult students was not reaching the general higher education audience, Donaldson and Townsend (2007) conducted a content analysis of over a decade of articles (1990-2003) published by seven refereed journals (*Journal of Higher Education; Research in Higher Education; The Review of Higher Education; NASPA Journal; Journal of College Student Development; Community College Journal of Research and Practice; Community College Review*). The study revealed that, of a total of 3219 articles published, only 41 (1.27%) focused on adult undergraduate students. Since these journals inform conversations, policy, and practices on higher education campuses, the omission of the adult student from the core literature further marginalizes this population by excluding them from the scholarly dialogue. The adult student population is not a homogenous group and, because of the many differences

within the category of adult students, institutions of higher education must develop inclusivity for diverse adult students as they transition into the educational environment (O'Donnell & Tobbell, 2007). In addition, the Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance (2012) stated that:

> Nontraditional students are typically left out of national longitudinal data sets, preventing researchers from conducting useful analyses on this large and diverse student population. The lack of recognition and data on the nontraditional student population presents a serious obstacle to understanding this group in the present day. (p. 2)

The scarcity of information about nontraditional students further perpetuates their marginalization. More research is needed to understand this population to ensure their academic and career success.

Methodology

The terms *marginalization, marginalized*, and *oppressed* are often used in diversity periodicals and books when describing the experiences of minorities, women, the LGBTQ community, and students with disabilities. Although nontraditional students experience marginalization, this population is not typically recognized as part of the diversity conversation. Consequently, higher education periodicals have historically excluded their experiences (Donaldson & Townsend, 2007). The method in this study, a content analysis, was used to explore diversity periodicals and books to determine how often and in what ways nontraditional student experiences are presented as part of the diversity discourse.

A content analysis is a strategy used to examine written documents and other verbal or visual communications to infer meaning (Krippendorff, 1989). Typically, a content analysis explores the presence of key words, categories, messages, or themes in communication to particular audiences. Frequency of messages can provide insight into value placed on a particular communication, agenda, or, in this case, population and the message imbalances that might exist. The content analysis in this research was designed to identify the frequency of the inclusion of the nontraditional student experience, or the lack thereof, in the diversity literature. In addition to frequency data, any inclusions of nontraditional student experiences were further explored to summarize the content discussed and its contribution to the literature.

Consistent with content analysis methodology, the authors utilized key steps to collect information and organize it in a way that revealed specific patterns or areas of omission. Steps included defining the context, identifying units of analysis, sampling, coding, drawing inferences, and validation (Krippendorff, 1989). First, the objectives were identified: (1) to examine the presence of adult and nontraditional student experiences in the context of diversity literature, and (2) to select materials to be analyzed, including diversity periodicals and diversity-focused books accessible through online database searches. The unit of analysis included specific terms typically used to describe the adult student population and other marginalized populations. Inferences were drawn based on the inclusion or omission of the nontraditional student population in scholarly diversity communications and were validated by comparing and contrasting results of both researchers.

The authors completed searches for resources to allow for analysis of multiple publications. The searches were performed utilizing the Southern Illinois University Morris Library's online databases, DePaul University's Library's online databases, I- Share (an Illinois online public catalog for 80 Consortium of Academic and Research Libraries in Illinois), and WorldCat (the world's largest network of library resources, with access to thousands of libraries). The databases included Academic Search Premier, OmniFile Full Text Select (formerly Wilson Select Full Text), and SocINDEX with Full Text. Searches of identified units of analysis were conducted by both researchers and results compared for consistency and reliability. Key terms searched as single terms and as terms together were: *diversity*, *adult*, *nontraditional, adult learner, adult student(s), oppressed adult, marginalized, marginalized student,* and *college*. The searches resulted in 706 sources that were analyzed for the inclusion and exclusion of adult students' experiences in diversity literature and were delimited to literature specific to experiences at higher education institutions.

Findings

When searching for articles using *adult* as the subject term and *diversity* in the publication title, only one article regarding adult students was found in the *Journal of Cultural Diversity* (see Table 1). This article, however, was not specific to the current research topic as it related to increasing diversity in nursing programs. A search using *nontraditional* as the subject term and *diversity* in the publication title yielded zero results. When the terms *adult learner* and *adult student* were used as subject terms with *diversity* in the publication title, there were also zero results.

Table 1
Limited Subject and Publication Title Search Results

Article Subject Term	Publication Title Term	Results	Publication
Adult	Diversity	1	*Journal of Cultural Diversity*
Nontraditional	Diversity	0	No Publications
Adult Learner	Diversity	0	No Publications
Adult Student	Diversity	0	No Publications

When *adult* was searched as a term in the article title and *diversity* in the publication title, only two articles regarding adult students were found, both in *The International Journal of Diversity in Organisations, Communities, and Nations*. However, only one article was relevant to nontraditional student experiences. The study (Stone, 2008) explored the experiences of 20 'mature learners', defined as age 21 and over, who were enrolled in an Australian undergraduate study program designed to provide equitable access to education. Although the experiences were not at a U.S. institution, the study provides evidence of the need to develop equitable programs and pathways to increase nontraditional student success.

The content analysis continued with *nontraditional* used as a term in the article title and *diversity* in the publication title, resulting in zero publications related to adult student experiences (see Table 2). The same was true when searching for articles using the terms *adult learner* and *adult student* within the article title field.

Table 2
Limited Article Title and Publication Title Search Results

Article Title Term	Publication Title Term	Results	Publication
Adult	Diversity	2	*The International Journal of Diversity in Organisations, Communities, and Nations*
Nontraditional	Diversity	0	No Publications
Adult Learner	Diversity	0	No Publications
Adult Student	Diversity	0	No Publications

Other searches included not limiting the publication titles (see Table 3). An article search for *adult student* as subject terms and *diversity* as a second subject term resulted in one article published in the *International Forum of Teaching and Studies* (Kumi-Yeboah & James, 2011). Indicative of the journal title, the article focused on the importance of multicultural programs in adult education and, therefore, did not meet the specific criteria sought for this current study.

Another article search for *marginalized student* as subject terms and *diversity* as a second subject term produced 58 results. However, only one article focused on adult student experiences, and it was in *Adult Education Quarterly* (see Table 3). The research (O'Donnell & Tobbell, 2007) documented experiences of 'mature adult' students enrolled in a higher education entry course in the U.K. The article addressed transition issues, barriers to participation, and the need for programs to fully empower adult students to move from peripheral to full participation in the university.

Table 3
Limited Two-Subject Search Results

Article Subject Term	Article Subject Term	Results	Publication
Adult Student	Diversity	1	*International Forum of Teaching and Studies*
Marginalized Student	Diversity	1	*Adult Education Quarterly*
Oppressed Student	Diversity	0	No Publications
Adult Learner	Diversity	0	No Publications

When searching for *oppressed student* as a subject term and *diversity* as

a second subject term, 13 articles were found. None of these focused on adult learners on a college campus. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* was a book that surfaced during this search, but although it is written primarily to empower adult learners and their educators, it is not written specifically about higher education's lack of consideration of adult students. A search for articles with the terms *adult learner* and *diversity* as two separate subjects produced zero results (see Table 3).

Similar results were found when book searches were included (see Table 4). When searching for books, journals, and government documents in I-Share (consortium of Illinois libraries) using *adult student* and *diversity* as terms, 359 results were found. However, although there were sources that discussed adults as students, only one could be considered diversity-related. The book is titled *Handbook of Multicultural Counseling* (2010), and the chapter *Career Counseling with Diverse Adults* has some concerns about the education of adults, though not necessarily the adult's experience as a college student. Another book, *Marginalized Students* (2011), includes a discussion about the needs of adult ESL students which, again, is not about the adult experience but the first language as a dimension of diversity.

Table 4
I-Share Two-Subject Search Results

Subject Term	Subject Term	Results	Publication
Adult Student	Diversity	1	*Handbook of Multicultural Counseling*
Adult Student	Marginalized and College	1	*Special Populations in College Counseling: A Handbook for Mental Health Professionals*

Another search in I-Share using *adult student, marginalized,* and *college* yielded 19 results (see Table 4). The only book that focused on the marginalization of adult students on college campuses was *Special Populations in College Counseling: A Handbook for Mental Health Professionals* (2007) which included a chapter titled *Counseling Adult Learners: Individual Interventions, Group Interventions, and Campus Resources* that discusses the needs of adult students. However, a case for addressing the marginalization of this population is absent.

The authors also completed searches on WorldCat that resulted in 251 books and 3 articles via a subject search using *adult student* and *diversity* as terms (see Table 5). The articles were primarily about issues outside of the U.S., and their subject matter was not applicable. Only four of the books came close to focusing on adults learners as a diversity issue.

One book titled *Understanding and Supporting Adult Learners: A Guide for Colleges and Universities* (2010) addresses the needs of diverse adult students, which is essential. However, although a diversity scholar may find its contents useful, the book is not geared toward diversity professionals or

discussed as a diversity topic. The book, *Institutional Transformation to Engage a Diverse Student Body* includes the chapter *Resistance from the Periphery: A Case Study of Attempts to Widen Access to Adult Learners at a South African University*. This case study, although useful, is set in Africa. One could still, however, seek to apply some of the findings to settings in the United States. Again, adult students' diverse needs are considered, but the goal of the book is not to inform readers about the oppression and othering of adult students in the U.S.

   Diversity, Resiliency, Legacy: The Lives of Adult Students at Tufts University (2008) contains significant illustrations of service provision for diverse adult students. The authors explored the impact of a program designed for adult college graduates via student interviews and essays about their experiences as non-traditional students. This book allows readers to learn in detail about the experiences of adult college students while receiving support from the REAL Program (Resumed Education for Adult Learning), which serves the needs of adult students from the point of admission to graduation. The examples from this book are appropriate, but the focus is not on adult students who do not have support services in place.

   The most relevant book that the authors found is *Tertiary Teaching and Learning: Dealing with Diversity's* (2005) chapter titled *Boundary Crossing: Experiences of Working Class Women Re-Entry Students.* The chapter focuses on adult female working class students, which is very informative for those interested in serving this population. Although the focus is on the dimensions of diversity of gender, income, and education, the discussion of the intersectionality of these with age makes this chapter applicable to the experiences of other adult students from diverse backgrounds.

Table 5
WorldCat Two-Subject Search Results

Subject Term	Subject Term	Results	Publication
Adult Student	Diversity	4	*Understanding and Supporting Adult Learners: A Guide for Colleges and Universities*
			Institutional Transformation to Engage a Diverse Student Body
			Diversity, Resiliency, Legacy: The Lives of Adult Students at Tufts University
			Tertiary Teaching and Learning: Dealing With Diversity

Conclusion

The content analysis used to answer the study's research question regarding the frequency and manner in which nontraditional student issues are explored in diversity literature revealed a gross omission in the literature concerning adult students, and more specifically, nontraditional students' experiences. Very few diversity-related articles and books focus on the marginalization of nontraditional students. Minority, female, gay, military, and disabled college student experiences are widely discussed in diversity sources, yet those same students are disregarded in the literature based on their age, educational background, family status, or life experiences. All of these dimensions of diversity are not all mutually exclusive and should be discussed together. This oversight in the diversity literature, and therefore the diversity discourse, further marginalizes nontraditional students, silences their voices, and impedes their academic and economic progress.

As noted by Krippendorff (1989), the imbalance or, in this case, vast omission of messages provides insight into the value placed on a particular communication or population. This current study combined with Donaldson and Townsend's (2007) research provide strong evidence of the lack of literature informing higher education practice and policies as they relate to nontraditional student populations. This lack of literature leads to institutions that are ill-equipped with the knowledge needed to understand and meet the needs of the population. The infrequent messages related to nontraditional students in scholarly literature offer insight into the devaluing of the population. As with other diverse populations that have fought to be recognized, the misunderstanding and lack of value lead to continued marginalization unless others begin seeing them, hearing them, and adding them to the conversation.

Recommendations

Many sectors of higher education view the adult student population as a homogeneous group rather than recognizing the diverse and sometimes complex set of characteristics that make up adult learners (Sissel, Hansman, & Kasworm, 2001). This ignorance may be addressed by expanding the diversity discourse to include the nontraditional student population as a group that is not only growing but needs the attention of educators, diversity scholars, and policymakers if they are to be seen and heard. Institutions of higher education must be more deliberate in their efforts to serve all students, regardless of age or other nontraditional characteristics, to ensure equal access to higher learning. Increasing diversity publications about nontraditional students' experiences with hegemonic policies and as oppressed populations will provide sources that educate diversity scholars, practitioners, and policymakers as well as administrators, faculty, and staff. This expansion can happen via the integration of adult student experiences in the diversity literature. These future articles, books, and reports will magnify the importance of serving a valuable population of learners. Once more when advocacy exists for adult students, their needs can truly be addressed on college campuses.

As evidenced by this study, there are multiple gaps in literature related to nontraditional students. The field is wide open for inquiry. Although this study alerted readers to the omissions that exist in higher education publications and in the diversity discourse, future research should focus on the reasons behind the exclusion. Are the reasons political or related to policies or funding structures? Are they due to a lack of

awareness or understanding? What are the reasons why the marginalized experiences and inequitable access of nontraditional students are not viewed with the same importance or discussed with the same frequency as other marginalized populations?

The purpose of this current study was not to answer the many questions that still remain. The purpose was to establish the need for these questions by illuminating the absence of an entire student population from the volumes of higher education and diversity literature. The lack of research combined with the upward trend of nontraditional student enrollment create a responsibility for higher education professionals to better understand and place value on this growing population who are needed to make critical contributions as engaged citizens and as an educated workforce.

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