John S. Levin, Virginia Montero Hernandez, and Christine Cerven

Succeeding in Community College: Advancing the Educational Progress of Working Students

Community colleges in the United States have been an important component of higher education since the early 20th century. They tend to serve the most disadvantaged and academically-unprepared student population of postsecondary education. Although community colleges are among the most affordable options, most students still have to work in order to make ends meet.

This study analyzes the institutional and personal factors that help nontraditional students to succeed academically in community college while fulfilling their obligations to full-time or part-time work. First, we present national statistical data to provide the general landscape of community college students and demonstrate that working full-time is detrimental to educational progress. Next, in order to understand the circumstances that help working students to successfully complete their studies, we draw upon qualitative data from 35 interview transcripts from students, faculty, and administrators in two community colleges, one in New York and one in California.

We find that nontraditional students persist in community colleges for two reasons. First, community colleges created support structures (i.e., counseling, peer mentoring, flexible scheduling, and tutoring programs) that encourage interaction and dialogue between students and college personnel. Second, students persist in college because they develop self-confidence and self-authorship, factors that allow students to commit to college requirements and formulate future educational plans.

Our study, as well as others, indicate that solutions to improve the educational progress of working students have to take into account changes both within academic institutions as well as to social policy and legislation. Institutional changes include redesigning support services in ways that meet the needs of students who work during the day, and building networks across community colleges and between academic institutions, governments, and businesses. These changes, however, also need to be met with changes in social policy such as increased funding for community colleges, especially for support programs that are crucial to ensuring student success. Thus, conversations about improving student outcomes need to extend well beyond community colleges, to state and federal policymakers.

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Introduction

Community colleges in the United States have been an important component of higher education since the early 20th century. They remain important today, with over 6 million students enrolled in credit-bearing courses and an estimated 3 to 5 million in non-credit bearing courses such as English as a second language, adult education, and skills upgrading and community education programs (Levin, 2007). While the goals and needs of students at community colleges are varied, these institutions offer an affordable and flexible way for students to further their education in adulthood. Past research has shown, for example, that a large proportion of the student body at community colleges consists of nontraditional learners characterized by disadvantaged social class and ethnic backgrounds, academic deficiencies, and multiple roles (Cohen & Brawer, 1996; Hoachlander, Sikora, & Horn, 2003; Levin, 2007).

Figure 1. National working student statistics by type of institution
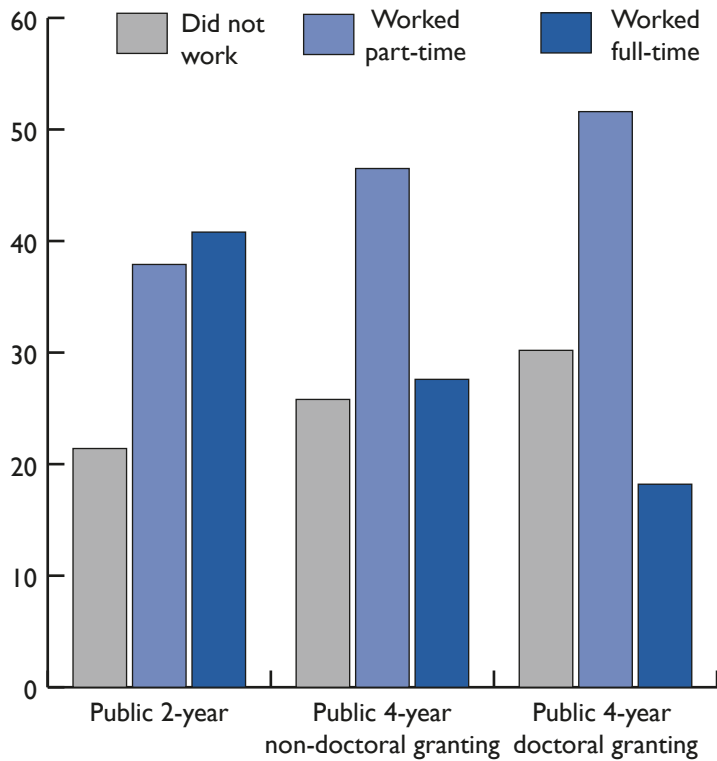
Source: 2003-04 National Profile of Undergraduates in U.S. Postsecondary Education Institutions (NPSAS: 2004 UG)

Another characteristic that is important to consider with community colleges is the proportion of students who work. According to the American Association of Community Colleges, a higher percentage of students in community colleges work while enrolled in courses when compared to students in public four-year universities

(Phillippe & Gonzalez Sullivan, 2005). Not only are community-college students more likely to work, but as Figure 1 indicates, they are also much more likely to be employed full-time than part-time.

In addition to differences between community college students and those in four-year institutions, there are also important differences in employment status *within* the community college population on factors such as race, age, and income. As Table 1 indicates, the biggest differences in employment status are based on age, as working part-time is higher among younger students and those who can be claimed as dependents, while gender differences are suprisingly small. Latinos and Pacific Islanders/Hawaiians are the groups most likely to work when attending community college (80% and 83%, respectively), while Asian Americans are the group least likely to do so (69%). Finally, among those who work while attending community college, African Americans and Native Americans are the much more likely to work full-time than part-time, Whites and Latinos are about as likely to do either, while Asian Americans are more likely to work part-time than full-time.

Table 1. National working community college student statistics by gender, race, age, and dependency status

	Did not work	*Worked part-time*	*Worked full-time*
Male	21.0	37.8	41.2
Female	21.6	37.9	40.5
White, Non-Hispanic	20.6	39.1	40.3
Black, Non-Hispanic	22.7	33.5	43.9
Hispanic	19.7	38.2	42.1
Asian	30.7	36.9	32.4
Am. Indian/Alaskan	18.6	32.0	49.4
Pac.Islander/Hawaiian	17.3	47.4	35.3
Other	24.8	35.5	39.7
More than one race	22.4	36.6	41.0
18 and under	26.3	56.7	17.0
19-23	18.5	50.3	31.2
24-29	19.5	31.6	48.9
30-39	24.1	24.3	51.5
40 and over	24.1	21.2	54.7
Dependent	19.9	54.4	25.7
Not a dependent	22.3	27.4	50.3

Source: 2003-04 National Profile of Undergraduates in U.S. Postsecondary Education Institutions (NPSAS: 2004 UG)

Community college students who work while studying are identified and defined in the literature in a variety of ways. They are defined in terms of their self-perception of whether work or college constitutes their "primary role" in their lives and are also identified as "students who work" or "employees who study" (Horn & Neville, 2006). They are also characterized more specifically by the context of the specific programs in which they are enrolled at the community college and identified as "worker retrainees" (Simmons 1995) or "welfare-to-work" students (Brock, Matus-Grossman, & Hamilton, 2001; Pagenette & Kozell, 2001).

The scholarly literature is far from conclusive on working students and persistence in college. Several studies have found that community college programs that allow work and academic activities to be combined easily (i.e., on-campus jobs) serve to aid students' management of their work and college schedules (Brock et al., 2001; Pagenette & Kozell, 2001). Other investigations report that flexible scheduling, understanding instructors, and counseling and guidance courses are structural components that help working students persist in the community college (Woodlief, Thomas, & Orozco, 2003). Although these studies explore some factors that can help students to overcome the work-study conflict, scholars provide only a cursory account of the processes or factors that facilitate working students' persistence at college.

This present study addresses the work-study conflict and persistence among nontraditional students in community colleges. We analyze institutional and personal factors that enabled this student population to persist in college and work either full-time or part-time. We understand a student who persists in college as someone who can understand, utilize, and participate in an academic culture that promotes degree attainment and greater levels of personal, professional, and occupational development.

The work-study conflict among nontraditional students

For students in higher education, work has been identified as a "situational constraint" that results in competing demands for time and attention (Keith, 2007). As such, students who work must make decisions continually about what role to play in their daily lives (Smith, 2006). Because of the competing demands of work, school, and family, working full-time while enrolled in college is identified in the literature to be a "risk factor" that reduces the likelihood that an individual will complete an Associate's degree (Phillippe & Sullivan, 2005). Of community college students who work full-time, only 44.1% persist, thus demonstrating the negative effects work activities

have on students who characteristically have multiple demands in their daily lives.

Additionally, full-time work aggravates the instability already present in a community college student's life. Past studies have shown that nontraditional students tend to have unsettled lives that hinder their ability to identify paths that lead to new ways to understand oneself, one's context, educational goals, and professional identities (Kim, 2002; Lange, 2004; Levin, 2007). Working negatively affects nontraditional students' development as job activities intensify the disorientation in their lives and become a source of anxiety, stress, isolation, and unhealthy behaviors (Ashton & Elliott, 2007; Miller, Danner, & Staten, 2008; Smith, 2006).

Figure 2. Rates of persistence* among working students
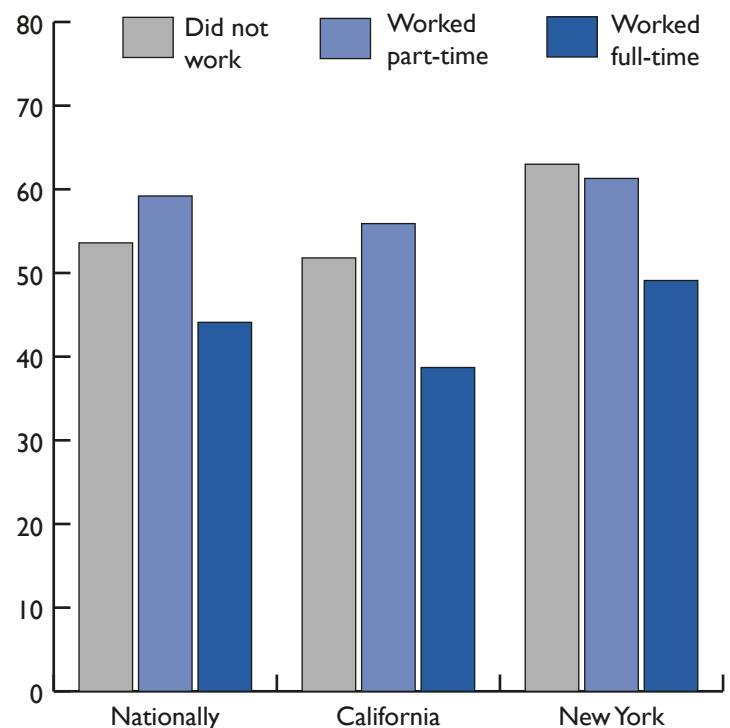
Source: 2003-04 National Profile of Undergraduates in U.S. Postsecondary Education Institutions (NPSAS: 2004 UG)
* Note: The NPSAS survey defines persistence as "attending college 9 or more months and/or attaining a credential." While this measure may appear to reflect a minor accomplishment, attending college for more than 9 months and/or attaining a credential for community college students is a considerable task given the multiple life circumstances facing these students.

However, working part-time does not appear to have the same detrimental effects as full-time work on the persistence of community college students. Part-time work is defined by the Nation Center of Education Statistics (NCES) as any amount of hours worked under 35 hours per week (NPSAS: 2003 UG). Indeed, as Figure 2 indicates, community college students who work part-time actually

have greater persistence rates (59%) than those who do not work at all (54%) (NPSAS: 2004 UG) . Given the focus of our study on two colleges in California and New York, we also provide information on employment status and community college persistence rates in these two states. As the figures indicate, the same basic pattern holds true, with the biggest difference in persistence rates between those who work full-time versus part-time. The data from California also indicate that those who work part-time are actually more likely to finish community college (56%) than those who do not (52%).

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When looking at persistence rates among community college students, it is also important to examine differences by factors such as gender and race. When examining college persistence rates by gender, the relationship between working and persistence for community college students indicates that approximately 2-3% more women persist in the community college than men regardless of work status. In the examination of the persistence rates for community college students of different racial/ethnic backgrounds, national data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) indicates that full-time work is associated with lower rates of persistence for all racial/ethnic categories with the exception of African American and Asian American community college students. For these latter two groups, both part-and full-time work are associated with lower persistence even if their persistence decreases only about 1.5% when the category changes from not working to working part-time. For all other racial groups (Whites, Latinos, Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, and American Indian/Alaskan), part-time work is associated with greater persistence.

In sum, national trends suggest that working full-time is detrimental for the persistence of both men and women of all racial and ethnic backgrounds in the community college. In this way, community college students suffer the same negative consequences of full-time work while studying. However, persistence rates are higher for community college students who work part-time than for those who do not work and those who work full-time, regardless of gender. With regards to racial and ethnic background, the pattern for persistence is not as clear. Part-time work is associated with greater persistence of community college students with the exception of African American and Asian American community college students who experience a modest decrease(1.5%) in college persistence (NPSAS UG: 2004).

The nature of the quantitative data available in major databases limits a precise understanding of part-time work and its relation to persistence. Thus, these data serve primarily as a component of a descriptive landscape of working community college students and their levels of persistence. It cannot capture the complexity entailed in juggling multiple roles in a student's life and other important intervening factors such as where students work (i.e., on or off campus), what kinds of work they do, and for what reasons students work. Such factors need to be considered in order to gain a more nuanced understanding of the nature of work (particularly part-time work) in community college students' lives. Therefore, given the limited nature of what may be gathered from the statistical data made available, we address the work-study relationship for students through a qualitative approach to explain what helps working community college students persist and achieve educational goals.

Goals and Design of Our Research

Although we know the detrimental effects of full-time work upon persistence, we know little about those cases in which community college students are able to achieve their educational goals in spite of the demands of the multiple roles they fulfill in their daily lives. There is a lack of research on working students' educational experiences, their sources of support, and their coping strategies (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1998). To address this gap, we explore the ways in which community college students manage the work-study conflict and, in turn, persist in their educational endeavors. Two research questions guide this investigation.

1) What are the institutional factors that facilitate community college students' ability to successfully manage the work-study conflict?

2) What personal resources do students develop and utilize to facilitate their persistence in college while maintaining a job?

We employed a case study approach to answer each of these questions (Eisenhardt, 1989; Merriam, 1988; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Patton & Appelbaum, 2003; Stake, 1978). In this approach, we focused on students' real-life situations, the multiple components that shape those situations, and the dynamics that contribute to the particular uniqueness of each student's case (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Ruddin, 2006).

Techniques of data collection included observation, document analysis, and semi-structured interviews. Documents included college information from websites, catalogs, program brochures, and local county demographics. Observations included informal interactions with college members, including conversations with faculty and administrators. A journal served as a record of one of the researcher's observations as well as a memoing device (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Interviewees were selected through a purposive sampling technique (Teddlie & Yu, 2007). A total of 35 semi-structured interviews with students (n= 11), faculty (n=8), and administrators (n=18) at two colleges were conducted in 2004. To select our student sample, we asked college personnel to identify a representative group of students that exhibited long-term positive academic outcomes as well as characteristics commonly found in the broader student population at each college. Each interview lasted from 1 to 2 hours. Informants signed consent forms that allowed the researcher to use the actual names of participants and their institution.

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The interview guide consisted of both nondirective and clarifying questions (Burgess, 1984; Christman, 2000). Interviews were tape recorded with each respondent's approval. Categories explored during each interview with students included participants' background (e.g., marital status, socio-economic condition, family history, and immigrant status), their patterns of interaction and participation in college life, their goals and expectations, life perspectives and values that guided their behavior, skills developed through their educational experiences in college, services and programs that were used as part of their college experience, and problematic and satisfying college experiences. Interviews with administrators and faculty members were concerned with collecting information about the characteristics of the institutional context that related to students' educational experiences. Categories explored included institutional mission and vision, services and resources provided to students, forms of interaction and communication with students, tendencies of students' academic performance, conflicts and achievements of students, institutional policies that encouraged student development, curricular structures, and the college's networks with other higher education institutions.

Data analysis consisted of a set of systematic strategies to reduce, classify, and interpret empirical data to answer the research questions (Agar, 1996; Crabtree & Miller, 1992; Creswell, 1998). Analytical induction (Erickson, 1986) was the approach utilized to identify patterns and linkages across the data and create a coherent explanation of the educational experiences of adult community college students. We took community college students' educational experiences as the unit of analysis (Levin & Montero-Hernandez, 2009). Our analysis involved the examination of the individuals acting within the community college setting, the cultural resources students used to organize their actions, and the forms of interaction between the actors (i.e., students, faculty, and staff). These forms of interaction comprised the everyday practices of the college.

Empirical data were collected from two research sites: Bakersfield College (Bakersfield) and Borough of Manhattan Community College (BMCC). Bakersfield College is a rural community college located in the south end of California's Central Valley, where agriculture is the predominant industry. The communities Bakersfield serves contain large numbers of Latinos. In 2003, when data were collected, the two largest ethnic groups were Hispanic (38.7 percent) and White (43.4 percent). The majority student population at Bakersfield consisted of young adults: 60.4 percent of the students were between ages of nineteen and twenty-four. The college has been in existence since 1913, and has traditionally served as a university transfer institution. Its programming addresses career-technical education (e.g., nursing) and university transfer, with large numbers of students enrolled in basic education courses. Its Delano campus located in the agricultural community of Delano serves a student population composed almost entirely of students of color and the majority of these are adult students.

Borough of Manhattan Community College (BMCC) was founded in 1963 as part of the City University of New York (CUNY). It was formed as a response to the business community, with programs in Business and University Transfer. Of its 19,000 credit degree program students, 64 percent are full-time and the average student age is close to 24 years. Both of these figures are atypical of community colleges where part-time and older students are the norm. Of these credit students, students of color comprise 80 percent of the population. African-American and Hispanic students make up 68 percent of the student body. Women constitute 63 percent of the students. Its Continuing Education population is at the 10,000 level and the program there provides certificate programming in numerous vocational areas, English as a Second Language (ESL),

and General Education Development (GED). BMCC is acknowledged as an international college that receives students from over 100 countries.

Research Findings

Persistent working students and their support structures

In Bakersfield and BMCC, college personnel noted that, in order to facilitate persistence among working students, they needed to implement forms of interaction and instructional techniques that acknowledged the multiple roles of working students and helped them manage their myriad daily obligations. We found that working students' ability to overcome conflicting work and college demands was directly associated with the support that college personnel provided to this population. A faculty member at Bakersfield described the ways in which she approached working students in her program to help them overcome the work-study conflict.

> In my class [in the nursing program] we talk about time management, test taking, the pressure…[I]t's difficult to work and go to school with what is demanded. So how do you prepare? …[I]t's something that we recognized as an issue and it directly impacts their ability to be successful. How do you handle the stress, the anxiety, all those things? *(Jennifer, faculty, Nursing, Bakersfield)*

We use the concept of *support structures* to refer to the student programs, services, and instructional techniques that enabled students to learn about the college's academic culture, improve their academic performance, identify future goals and pursue further education, obtain a credential, transfer to a university, develop self-confidence, and/or acquire a better job. Examples of support structures include counseling, peer mentoring, flexible scheduling, and tutoring programs. An administrator from BMCC explained the characteristics and purpose of the support structures implemented in his college.

> We provide three areas of support [counseling, academic advising, and tutoring] to help students become mainstream, because the notion has been that a number of these inner city students were not initially able to go to college… They [students] do have the distractions outside of the school… [O]nce they buy into the [Discovery] program they [have to] come in and talk and try to get whatever distractions are that might be affecting them, talk to their counselors or their advisors. *(Director, Discovery Program, BMCC)*

Administrators emphasized that when social support and guidance were offered to nontraditional working students–in spite of their challenging conditions–they achieved personal and social development such as confidence, skills, knowledge, and socio-cultural awareness. Students were better able to transition into higher education when academic practices were designed to promote student engagement and a sense of belonging. The Dean of Student Learning in Bakersfield explained the ways in which college personnel endeavored to help students engage in college.

> I've seen programs integrating more real life learning examples into their curriculum, drawing upon students, student life learning experiences to illustrate teaching points or teaching objectives. I'm seeing in some areas the schedule shifts are late afternoon, evening… [W]e have had classes on Saturday in some of the areas that I have responsibility for, with those working adults here *(Nan, Dean of Student Learning, Bakersfield)*

At BMCC, the Director of the Evening and Weekend College pointed out that implementing flexible schedules was a mechanism to facilitate the integration of working students into college and help them understand the academic culture and achieve their educational goals.

> Most of my job involves offering programs that offer students options. Many of our students work; they have families and many obligations. So what we do at BMCC is offer them courses either off site, days, evenings, weekends, distance learning courses, to meet the needs of the students…[S]tudents come on the weekends, Friday night, Saturday and Sunday …[W]e offer all the courses that they need to complete their degree.

The descriptions of The Director of the Evening and Weekend College were supported by other administrators. For example, the Dean of Academic Programs and Instruction explained the institutional effort to address the specific needs of working students.

> We offer multiple kinds of courses…[W]e're addressing the needs of all the students and all their issues and it involves many areas, not just academically but to support services and kinds of support services that we offer for free…[F] or evening weekend there's been a major effort by the college to provide students with comparable academic services. Tutoring, open access labs, transfer and advisement services: We now have weekend transfer fairs…[A]nd this

semester the college has recognized a major need of the evening weekend students and that is to have a full time counselor that really concentrates on serving these students.

Support structures created in the two colleges were characterized in three ways. First, college personnel who participated in student opportunity programs or provided services acknowledged students' needs and responded to them. Second, college personnel created learning experiences that both challenged and supported students to expand their capacities. Third, and finally, interactions between college personnel and students were based on a sense of caring and mutual commitment to specific goals.

 Working students at Bakersfield emphasized their improved capacities to define and manage themselves and their future plans when they received support from college personnel.

> I learned how to [manage] my studies better…[I] learned a lot about life that I didn't know…[Faculty] made me realize that I can get a degree; they made me believe in myself. *(James, Liberal Arts student, Bakersfield)*

> I learned how to find myself in [the speech class] actually…I discovered I'm stronger than I thought. I discovered that I don't always have to say yes to everything…[I]'m stronger in my goals. I can do this; I can just keep on, never give up, just keep going, keep going, keep going. *(Nidia, pre-Nursing student, Bakersfield)*

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Students going through a process of transition became incorporated into higher educational culture when they participated in academic practices as well as formal and informal social encounters with peers and college personnel (O'Donnell & Tobbell, 2007; Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1998). Thus, for example, students at Bakersfield noted repeatedly that most of their academic achievements resulted from the interaction and support they found among faculty and staff.

> My best experiences here would probably be the networking that went on here with the instructors, with students…[T]hey [college staff] have been extremely

helpful. Mentors are almost like an open book of knowledge…[A] lot of times when I find myself in a situation that I don't find any avenues or exits to get out of, I'll ask questions. So besides the supportive services, there's a group of individuals here at Bakersfield College that have helped me along, helped support me and kind of carry me on so that I may succeed in what I'm trying to accomplish. *(José, student, Anthropology and Forestry, Bakersfield)*

Faculty members and administrators at Bakersfield acknowledged that students' engagement in social and academic activities was central for them to adapt to and excel in community colleges.

Nontraditional students, who play both the role of worker and student, have greater opportunities to learn and achieve their goals when they are exposed to sources of support such as small group practice, personalized attention, flexible scheduling, and the integration of college and working.

Our analysis supports other studies which point out that social support is central for community college students to overcome the work-study conflict: As the quality and amount of support experienced by working students increases, the level of their perceived strain declines (Adebayo, 2006). College personnel both at Bakersfield and BMCC were concerned with constructing well-organized educational experiences that provided comprehensive support to their students. Nontraditional students, who play both the role of worker and student, have greater opportunities to learn and achieve their goals when they are exposed to sources of support such as small group practice, personalized attention, flexible scheduling, and the integration of college and working (Brewer, Klein, & Mann, 2003).

Personal factors that moderate the work-study conflict

To be a persistent working student depended not only on the existence of support structures in college but also on students' personal characteristics. Students who excelled in college while working exhibited self-confidence and motivation to cope with multiple role demands. Working students who persisted in college were individuals who developed personal projects or plans to gain academic knowledge, personal development, and working skills. Working students wanted to improve their lives by developing new attitudes and capacities to manage their everyday challenges and contextual demands. Ellen, a re-entry adult student at Bakersfield, recalls her decision to enroll in college and her motivation to change her life patterns.

I'm 43. I'm a single mom of 6, first generation college student. Growing up I was never encouraged to go to college. Ended up in an abusive marriage; 2 years ago got out. And knew the only way we could stand on our own two feet was for me to come back to school…[I] also work in addition to going to school and taking care of my family…[I] had to fight to get here...I fought and I got here. And I graduate in May.

Not all of the nontraditional working students were confident or had personal plans when they enrolled at Bakersfield or BMCC; however, the colleges' support structures enabled students to develop personal attributes (e.g., motivation and confidence) that moderated the negative effects of the work-study conflict. Students who worked while studying at Bakersfield were able to achieve their educational goals as a result of the personal development through their engagement in academic practices and their close interactions with college personnel.

Working students, who were academic achievers, developed coping styles that enabled them to respond to their multiple role demands. Morris, Brooks, and May (2003) suggest that a coping style is the typical manner in which an individual will confront a stressful situation. They found that nontraditional students tended to develop a "task-oriented coping style" that involved a student choosing to cope with stress by establishing plans and creating solutions. Nontraditional students' frequent use of task-oriented coping may be associated with the necessity of their having to move across multiple roles and tasks. Working students in this study's sample developed the coping style described by Morris, Brooks, and May. The Director, of Evening and Weekend College in BMCC described the task-oriented coping styled enacted by working students.

My experience with these students is that they work, they have families, they have obligations during the week. When they come to school on the weekends or they come at night, they don't want to play around…[T]hey are mothers with teenage children and they say that it's the only time they can actually leave their house, come and concentrate on their studies…So I think it's just an older population, perhaps more experienced, they have busy lives, and they want to come here and get what they need so that they can graduate.

Students who persisted at Bakersfield College explained the strategies they developed to accomplish their academic demands in the midst of everyday life.

I'm concentrating on one subject first. I want to go in and do writing classes, English classes; I want to do all my English at once. Then when I get in the science classes, I want to just do all science classes… I don't like to mix them all together, so that way I want to concentrate on one thing, know what I'm doing to get to the next step…[A]fter I had my last child…[H]e's three now, I decided I wanted to do something better than what I'm doing now and that's why I decided to come back to school…I work full-time; I'm a mom and I come part-time to school…I'm taking three courses, so mostly I study just all morning and afternoon until 3:00, from 8 to 3. *(Nidia, pre-Nursing student, Bakersfield)*

Nidia achieved her goals because of her personal characteristics and coping style. The support structures in the college enabled students such as Nidia to develop confident selves and strategies of engagement (e.g., task-oriented coping style) to navigate their college experiences.

Our findings emphasize that full-time work is detrimental for nontraditional working students because this population has to face conflicting roles in the midst of already strenuous conditions. The work-study conflict is a source of stress and a constraint that may hamper attainment for those who do not have structures of support to navigate their varied responsibilities. Students who work and especially those who work full-time have limited opportunities to engage socially and academically with other students, with college personnel, or with institutional life, generally.

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Conclusions and Recommendations

Work is certainly a central characteristic of community college students; yet research is scarce on the understanding of and theorizing about students who work and attend community college. Nontraditional students who face a role conflict (i.e., student versus worker) in the midst of distressed pasts and precarious futures are not only trying to achieve a sense of stability in their lives but also endeavoring to manage the transition into an academic culture. Most working students in community colleges in their late 20s and older are unfamiliar with the academic environment and accompanying

expectations, including needed academic skills (Horn & Nevill, 2006; McSwain & Davis, 2007). For nontraditional students, attending a community college is a constant experience of adaptation in which they have to learn how to maximize their time, efforts, and learning experiences in order to become integrated into the academic and social dynamics that characterize college life (Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002; Chaves, 2006). Thus nontraditional students who work while studying struggle to assimilate an academic culture (Kasworm, 2005; O'Donnell & Tobbell, 2007). The amount of time that full-time work requires of nontraditional students may reduce opportunities for students to acknowledge and access the personal and institutional resources required to persist in college.

Our analysis of existing national databases (NPSAS: 2004 UG) suggests a positive relationship between working part-time and persistence; however, further research is essential to expand our understanding of this finding. We can speculate that having a part-time job enables students to enhance their personal circumstances that, in turn, encourage them to persist in college. First, students who work part-time can earn money to satisfy their college-related expenses (e.g., books, course fees, and transportation). Second, students who have a job related to the program area in which they are enrolled could find their working activities as sources to apply to and contrast with what they learn in college. Finally, among adult students, working may become a source of motivation because these students can identify themselves as productive people.

Overall, the community college serves the most disadvantaged and academically underprepared student population of postsecondary education. In order for these students to fulfill their financial obligations and attend college they must work (Levin, 2007). Yet, of all public educational institutions, community colleges are the least funded and are the least financially equipped to help these students (Bailey & Morest, 2006). Financial constraints and an overwhelming climate of accountability hinder the ability of community colleges to develop responsive and supportive educational programs. It is essential that the development of policy targeting community colleges focus on the core components of educational programs that enhance student experience such as student services, faculty body composition, and curricular structures. In order to develop context-sensitive policies and regulations, policy makers and state legislators need to be better informed about community college students and the overwhelming majority who work.

This study emphasizes the necessity of implementing social and instrumental support to enable community college students to navigate their educational experiences. It is important that support structures are based on institutional policies that are sensitive to the diversity and demands of nontraditional learners. College programs that endeavor to support students would be wise to adapt to the populations that they serve. In this way, college services, such as counseling, day-care, health, and the library, would be more efficacious if they adapted to the specific needs of the diverse population they serve. For example, services that are available during the evening or weekend classes would accommodate students who work in the day or during the week and attend classes only at night or on weekends.

Institutions have acted both formally and informally to offer support to ensure student persistence (Levin & Montero-Hernandez, 2009). The actions of particular individuals or groups do move beyond the norms or policies of institutions to provide appropriate service or help for students. However, the consolidation of social and instrumental support within community colleges cannot be based on the discretional actions of specific subgroups exclusively, but in the formulation of institution-wide projects and planning practices. The construction of inter-organizational networks and the improvement of the forms of communication among community colleges, industry, and state department or agencies could facilitate the development of programs that combine work-study activities and support structures for specific student groups. In addition to organizational efficiency, improved inter-organizational networks, enriched curricular structures and support structures, and financial support from the state as well as from institutions can function to limit work hours for students and certainly enable students to refrain from full-time work.

Within an external context relevant to community college students, social policy such as welfare-to-work must be adapted to meet the needs of students who are compelled to work (Levin, Montero-Hernandez, Cerven, & Shaker, 2010). It is not reasonable to expect poor students to work, attend college, cope with family responsibilities, persist in college, and attain economically gainful employment without any institutional or social policy support. In order for this to occur, information about the conditions and needs of students need to be discussed well beyond the community colleges themselves, with federal and state policy makers playing a more active role.

> *It is essential that the development of policy targeting community colleges focus on the core components of educational programs that enhance student experience such as student services, faculty body composition, and curricular structures.*

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