

Perceptions about the Social & Academic Success of the Non-Traditional Student

Melanie L. Battise
Stephen F. Austin State University

Introduction & Hypotheses

Within the past couple of decades, the face of the college student has changed. The college student was traditionally between 18 and 24-years old, attended school full-time, and lived on campus (Miller & Mei-Yan Lu, 2003). However, today a new group of students is emerging, known as non-traditional or mature students. Whisnant, Sullivan, and Slayton (1992) generally define the non-traditional student as a college student who is 25 years of age and older. Aside from age, other characteristics include being an undergraduate and part-time student, employed full or part-time, and likely to have a family. According to Miller and Mei-Yan Lu (2003), a larger percentage of the total undergraduate student body is made up of non-traditional students. Back in 2001, only 27% of all students were traditional undergraduates (Mello, 2004). That number is now less than a quarter (Levine, 1993). The higher academic world does seem to be changing as non-traditional students appear to have become the norm. Entering into college can be a shock to the non-traditional student as they experience college differently than the younger, traditional student. Because they have been out of school, the non-traditional student may feel socially and academically incompetent when compared to the traditional student (Read, Archer, & Leathwood, 2003). Literature by Read, et al (2003), stated that students felt a greater sense of belonging in an environment where the other students were similar to them. Based on this literature, I hypothesized that the perceived social success for 27-year old student by student participants, would be higher than for the 34-year old. However, the perceived rate for the 27-year old student would still be less than for the 20-year old. My second hypothesis was based on literature by Whisnant, et al. (1992), who found in their study that older non-traditional students showed higher academic performance than younger traditional students. Therefore, I hypothesized that professors would rate the perceived academic success of the 27-year old and 34-year old student similarly higher than for the 20-year old.

Method

Participants

Participants consisted of students & professors from SFA. A target age range of 18-24 years old was used for the student participants, as this is the age range of the traditional student and in whose opinion I was most interested. A total of 32 student surveys (17 females & 15 males) were used for calculating the data. Professors from the English, History, Sociology, Mathematics, Physics, Geology, Business, Elementary Education, and Criminal Justice departments were given surveys. A total of 18 professor surveys (12 females & 6 males) were used to calculate the data.

Design

This study was a 2 X 3 mixed design with two independent variables, participant type & student age in scenario. Participant type had two levels, students and professors. Student age in scenario had three levels, 20-years, 27-years, & 34-years. The two dependent variables measured were perceived social success & perceived academic success.

Materials

A consent form, three-part survey, and demographics sheet was composed. Each survey began with a brief description of a student, followed by nine questions. The student descriptions contained relatively generic information, however the student's age was changed for each scenario. The first question was a manipulation check question, followed by four perceived social success and four perceived academic success questions regarding each description. Answers were measured on a three-point Likert scale.

Procedure

The majority of student surveys were given to two lower level Psychology classes, one survey was given personally to a friend. Surveys for professors were taken personally to offices and left with willing participants so that they would have sufficient time to complete the survey.

Results

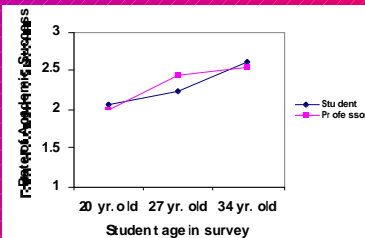
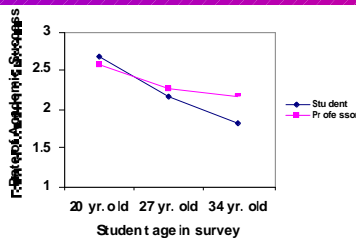
A Cronbach's Alpha showed that all four social and all four academic questions were highly related (Cronbach's alpha=0.756 for social, Cronbach's Alpha=0.847 for academic). Therefore, for each dependent variable, answers from all four questions were averaged and used in the subsequent analyses. Correlations were then performed between the two dependent variables and the two demographic questions (participant age and gender). All correlations were shown to be non-significant. Thus, no covariates were included in the ANOVAs.

References

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- Mello, R. (2004). Teaching at the border of despair and hope: Supporting the education of non-traditional working class student teachers. *Westminster studies in education*, 27(2), 263-285.
- Miller, M. T., & Mei-Yan Lu. (2003). Serving non-traditional students in E-learning environments: Building successful communities in the virtual campus. *Education Media International*, 40(1), 163-169.
- Read, B., Archer, L., & Leathwood, C. (2003). Challenging cultures? Student conceptions of belonging and isolation at a post-1992 university. *Studies in higher education*, 28(3), 261-277.

A 2 (participant type) X 3 (student age in scenario) mixed ANOVA was run for perceptions of social success. Although there was no significant main effect for participant type, professors (M=2.32) rated the perceived social success of the students slightly higher than the student participants (M=2.21). A significant main effect was shown for the age of the student in the scenario $F(2,100)=58.1, p<.01$. Students' and professors' rates of social success for the 20-year old student were similar to one another, as were their rates for the 27-year old. However, professors rated the 34-year old student as significantly more successful socially than did the students. The overall rates of social success were lower as the age of the student in the scenario increased. A significant interaction was also found for student age in scenario ($F(2,96)=6.4, p<.01$). A Tukey HSD showed that professors rated the 27-year old (M=2.25) slightly higher than the 34-year old (M=2.18), and that students rated the 27-year old (M=2.17) higher than the 34-year old (M=1.81).

A 2 (participant type) X 3 (student age in scenario) mixed ANOVA was also run for perceptions of academic success. There was no significant main effect of participant type on perceived academic success. Overall, professors (M=2.31) perceived academic success similar to students (M=2.29). The results showed a significant main effect of the student's age in the scenario, $F(2,100)=33.18, p<.01$. The interaction between perceived academic success and student age in scenario was not significant but showed a trend ($F(2,96)=2.82, p>.05$). The rates of perceived academic success for students and professors were similar for the 20-year old and for the 34-year old. However, there was a difference between the rate for the professors and the rate of the student participants for the 27-year old.



Discussion

The analysis supported my first hypothesis in that the student participants rated the perceived social success for the 27-year old student higher than that for the 34-year old. However, the 20-year old student still rated higher than for the 27-year old. Regarding academic success, my second hypothesis was partially supported in that the professors rated the perceived academic success of the 27-year old and 34-year old students higher than for the 20-year old in the scenarios. However, the 34-year old student rated higher in perceived academic success than the 27-year old and not similar as I hypothesized.

Any future research would probably benefit by having more participant data from both students and professors and could probably include other universities as well. I feel that this study was important as non-traditional students are now the majority on college campuses.