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Community college and the re-entry student : addressing obstacles that affect the success of non-traditional female students

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COMMUNITY COLLEGE AND THE RE-ENTRY STUDENT:
ADDRESSING OBSTACLES THAT AFFECT THE SUCCESS OF NON-TRADITIONAL FEMALE STUDENTS

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Action Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Degree of Master of Arts in Education

California State University Monterey Bay
College of Professional Studies

May, 2005

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COMMUNITY COLLEGE AND THE RE-ENTRY STUDENT:

ADDRESSING OBSTACLES THAT AFFECT THE SUCCESS OF NON-TRADITIONAL FEMALE STUDENTS

BY

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ABSTRACT

Re-entry women students on community college campuses have become an increasingly numerous and diverse group culturally, economically, and in their educational background. The reasons these women are returning to school are as varied as the women. However, many of these non-traditional students do not achieve the academic goals they have set for themselves. This qualitative research project identifies and addresses the barriers and obstacles which prevent re-entry women students from attaining their goals. Recommendations are provided for community colleges to develop appropriate support programs or restructure existing programs, as well as discussion on the importance of implementing the experiences, needs, and perspectives of re-entry women students into academic programs.

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Introduction

I've been home for eighteen years raising seven kids. You know the problem with that – being a homemaker? The isolation. That is what drove me to severe depression. And then the only other adult you can communicate with puts you down, makes you feel like you're pointless. It is so much better here. I feel alive, energetic. I am doing new things. It is a whole new life.

—Thirty-eight year old, White female, separated

I didn't graduate high school with my class in 1984. I quit school to work to support myself. When I was 19, I went to night school to get my diploma, but I was pregnant and working two jobs. I think school provides an opportunity. This is such a great experience. I feel alive and energized after being suppressed for so long. I am finally doing what I want to do, not what I have to do.

—Thirty-seven year old, Latina, divorced and single-parent

My childhood was a confusing time, lacking role models, stability and love. By adolescence, I believed what I had been told – that I was a failure. My high school counselor deemed me “beyond help.” I went to work at 13, working a wide variety of jobs, always feeling unchallenged, unsatisfied, and unhappy. I became addicted to drugs and was arrested. Entering a state-mandated drug program, I was given the opportunity to reevaluate my life and establish my goals, so I enrolled in college. I began to see things in myself that I never had before. I began to believe in myself.

—Thirty-two year old, White female, single-parent

These are voices of re-entry women claiming their education in a community college; women who, for one reason or another, did not go to college directly out of high school. Most are older than what we think of as the traditional college student and almost all have life experiences that they bring to the classroom. These voices join and represent more than half of all lower division students in higher education who are enrolled at community colleges. There are numerous claims, supported by statistics, that a significant number of these community college students do not achieve the goals they set for themselves. For re-entry women students, the success rate of obtaining a degree, even in community college, is still lower. It is my belief that for many re-entry women students, an increasingly numerous but often semi-disenfranchised group on many campuses, community college is failing them by not addressing their specific needs to succeed in school.

Historically, women were denied access to institutions of higher education. Early feminists advocated for equal rights to education for women. They argued that the “rights of man,” or more specifically, the rights of white men, should be extended to all persons. Their efforts spawned the beginnings of women’s colleges, but access was limited to white women from wealthier families. However, many of these newly educated women continued to work on behalf of women’s rights, as well as rights for all persons. Today, most Americans wholeheartedly subscribe to the belief that education is the key to success and is the vehicle for upward mobility for all persons, no matter their race, gender, class, culture, or sexual orientation. In fact, since World War II, there has been a steady increase of both men and women attending college. Women now outnumber men, and these women are increasingly older, part-time students. However, access to institutions of higher education still eludes many re-entry women

students who still must confront gender, social, economic, and cultural barriers. For most of them, the quest for a college education begins at a community college.

As early as the mid-1980s, most community college students were recent high school graduates who attended as full-time students. Since that time, however, the profile of the community college student body has changed dramatically. Re-entry students, an older and highly diverse student population – including, but not limited to, students who have delayed their enrollment in college for several years, attend part-time, work full-time while enrolled, are single parents, or do not have a high school diploma – now make up 73% of undergraduates (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). In my local community college, 74% of the student body is over the age of 25, and 54% of these re-entry credit seeking students are women (State of California, 2004).

Re-entry women students are a very diverse group – economically, culturally, and in educational background. Also diverse are their reasons to return to school. While some of these women have been laid off from their jobs and are at school trying to create new careers through formal education, others need certain courses in order to move up in their professions. Still, a few are displaced homemakers who because of divorce or death of their spouse suddenly find themselves in need of an education to join the workforce. There are also re-entry women students who tried college at one time or another and dropped out due to a learning disability that had never been previously diagnosed, and now that it has, are trying to work with that disability to succeed in school. There are also many women who are in the welfare-to-work program (known as CalWorks in California) who are given only a minimal amount of time to educate themselves and find a career whereby they can support their children. Most are first-generation college students, from lower socio-economic levels. Many have poor academic preparation. By

entering college, all these women struggle with balancing time, energy, and financial resources among school, family and work responsibilities. They feel insecure and lack self-esteem. They have difficulties in obtaining child care and class schedules that do not clash with their work schedules. For all of these women, entering or re-entering college represents a major change in their lives. It is for these women and the many that will come after that I have chose to investigate ways in which their academic success rate can be improved.

Purpose of Community College

As an institution of higher education, primarily with a local focus, the community college has played an important role in the development of human resources to support local business and industry. In serving the educational and economic needs of the community, the typical community college curriculum has been driven by occupational programs for students seeking job entry skills, as well as academic programs which provide access to higher education for people who might not otherwise attend (Cohen & Brawer, 1996).

Ever since the early years of the twentieth century, social and economic forces have contributed to the rise of community colleges. Workers needed to be trained for the expanding industries in post-industrial America; and, there was a drive for social equality. Education was recognized as the predominant avenue for personal upward economic mobility. At this time, many re-entry women students attended their local community college for vocational courses, such as secretarial, nursing assistant, and other gender-designed classes. This traditional type of educational setting consisted of classes of mostly women with a female teacher. Women were comfortable in this type of setting. After an increasing number of subjects and programs were introduced, access increased for a wider range of the population, and women set their sites higher – they began to study in fields usually associated with men and found they now had the skills and

opportunity to transfer to a university. In California, where the community college system is the largest system of higher education in the world, composed of 109 colleges statewide and currently serving more than 2.9 million students (State of California, 2004), access to these academic and occupational programs, along with institutional support services, has become the educational lifeline for many re-entry women students. Additionally, Herideen (1998) states that the increase in divorce rates in recent years, as well as the high number of single-parent households headed by women, has led many adult women to view community colleges as an excellent avenue to further their education and achieve greater economic security, and therefore a better standard of living, for themselves and their children. As an accessible, multipurpose institution, community college has become their primary stepping stone to higher education.

The force behind the growth of community colleges was the belief that all individuals should have the opportunity to rise to their greatest potential. Arthur Cohen and Florence Brawer, leading researchers on the status of community colleges in the United States and the students they serve, claim that “All barriers to individual development should be broken down. Institutions that enhance human growth should be created and supported. Talent is potentially to be found in every social stratum and at any age. People who fail to achieve in their youth should be given successive chances” (Cohen & Brawer, 1996, p. 10). In other words, community colleges should equally enhance the opportunities of all students without regard to gender, age, and socioeconomic status, as well as race and ethnicity. It is my personal experience as a re-entry student (I took my first college class at the age of 44), and my work with re-entry women students for the past six years that has led me to believe that community colleges are failing in their mission to support re-entry women students.

Purpose, Rationale, and Overview

For re-entry women students, attending community college has become the natural choice. The geographic location, lower cost, and open-door attendance policy results in the capability of balancing family responsibilities, work responsibilities, and school. Researchers agree that specific avenues to ensure the educational success of re-entry women are not being met by community colleges (Miller, 2000; Edwards, 1993; Home, 1998; Molstad, Kher and McMillan, 2001; Fairchild, 2003; Johnson, Schwartz and Bower, 2000; Marienau, 1995; Zhai and Monzon, 2004). They have recognized that issues concerning these students differ from those in more traditional programs. They found that re-entry women have certain characteristics and needs that differ from traditional community college students; that cultural and familial barriers to education increase when "education" and "family" come into conflict; that re-entry women bring to the classroom life experiences that change the way they view traditional scholarship; and that institutional policies, pedagogies, and environment adversely affect the learning experience.

While re-entry women students in community colleges are very resilient individuals who are capable of facing a number of challenges and stressors, they are very concerned about their multiple life-roles and how these roles interact with each other. They are concerned with family and financial issues surrounding their educational experience. These concerns underline the necessity for the development of appropriate support programs or a restructuring of current programs within the institution. As the purpose of community college is to serve all students, it is imperative that community college policies, pedagogies, and environment, which are predicated on male needs and male power, move away from a male-oriented perspective that perceives women's needs as peripheral and begin to view women's needs as a central concern of

the college. Community colleges need to acknowledge the differences of re-entry women and develop ways to enhance their potential to successful completion of their educational experiences.

In 1998, California State University – Monterey Bay and the community colleges which are local to this university formed a consortium entitled Higher Educational Learning Partners (HELP). The purpose of this consortium is “to work together as faculty, staff and administrators in ways that better serve the educational needs and promote the educational success of the students in the California central coast region” (<http://csumb.edu/consortia/help/overview/index.html>). However, while programs for traditional students in these community colleges have increased, support programs which specifically address the needs of re-entry women continue to be cut back or have been eliminated altogether.

The purpose of my study into the educational experiences of re-entry women is to provide a comprehensive view of the barriers faced by these students in our local tri-county area. I have chosen a local community college as the main site for my research because of my personal experience as a re-entry student at that school and because of my employment there working with re-entry women students. Working with Re-entry Counseling Services for almost six years now provides me with the insight and access to many re-entry women students who are willing to participate in my study. The purpose of surveying and interviewing re-entry women is to strengthen my advocacy for the implementation of new support programs or restructuring of existing programs that would improve the successful completion of their academic goals. In placing a local view on my research, I will be able to detail the characteristics that set re-entry women students apart from traditional students, how these characteristics adversely affect the

learning experience, and, how they are currently being addressed by institutional policies, pedagogies, and environment.

Based on my findings, I will make recommendations that could be implemented by the community colleges which are members of the HELP consortium. It has come to my attention that some of the schools in the consortium either do not have programs specifically designed for re-entry women or have scaled back or altogether eliminated any programs that had been previously designed. In presenting my research and recommendations to HELP, not only will I be an advocate for re-entry women in the community colleges, but I will also be providing the consortium an avenue to meet its mission to better serve the educational needs and promote the educational success of all the students in the California central coast region, but specifically re-entry women, thereby improving the successful completion of academic goals by this most deserving student population.

Analysis of Professional Literature

Community colleges provide access to higher education to a broader range of students than would be found at most four-year institutions. For re-entry women students, attending community college is the ideal choice. Beside the lower cost of community colleges, the geographic location and open-door attendance policy results in the capability of balancing family responsibilities, work responsibilities, and school. Researchers familiar with the community college institution and experienced working with re-entry women students, have discovered that their questions and concerns on the educational success of re-entry women are not being addressed by the institution (Carney-Compton & Tan, 2002; Fairchild, 2003; Garcia, 1995; Herideen, 1998; Johnson, Schwartz & Bower, 2000; LaPaglia, 1995; Miller, 2000; Townsend, 1995; Walden, 1995; Zhai & Monzon, 2004; Edwards, 1993; Home, 1998; Molstad, Kher and McMillan, 2001; Marienau, 1995). The issues they were concerned with regarding re-entry women students differ from those in more traditional programs. They found that:

- Re-entry women have distinctive characteristics which set them apart from traditional community college students;
- Cultural and familial barriers to education are amplified by revealing underlying tensions which exist when "education" and "family" come into conflict;
- Re-entry women bring to the classroom life experiences that change the way they view traditional scholarship; and
- Institutional policies, pedagogies, and environment adversely affect their learning experiences.

Although I will examine each of these issues on an individual basis, it is imperative to remember that most re-entry women have multiple issues which keep them from attaining their educational

goals. It is the focus of this study to analyze how the interweaving of these multiple issues adversely affects the academic success of re-entry women in community colleges.

Identifying General Characteristics of Re-entry Women

Research has shown that the population of women in community college programs has grown and diversified with an increasing number of older re-entry women. These women are considered non-traditional students. While many studies have investigated aspects of non-traditional students, throughout the studies there is not a consistent conceptualization of exactly who comprises the non-traditional student population, and therefore, exactly who is a re-entry woman (Fairchild, 2003; Kim, 2002; Herideen, 1998; Rendón, 1993; Edwards, 1993; Home, 1998; Valadez, 1993; Zhai & Monzon, 2004). A study of non-traditional students by the U.S. Department of Education (1996) developed three sets of criteria to identify student characteristics: enrollment patterns, financial and family status, and high school graduation status (p. 3). The results of their study determined seven characteristics of non-traditional students: 1) not enrolling directly after high school; 2) attending part-time; 3) working full-time; 4) being financially independent from parents; 5) having dependents other than spouse; 6) being a single parent; and, 7) not having a high school diploma. This study concluded that students with two or three non-traditional characteristics were considered to be moderately non-traditional; students having four or more non-traditional characteristics distinguished themselves as highly non-traditional (p. 9). Since re-entry women students are usually over the age of 25, independent of parental support, and work at least a part-time job, while attending school full-time, or attend school part-time, while working full-time, they easily are included in the overall term of “highly non-traditional.” Additionally, many have dependents, whether they are married or not.

Kim's (2002) case study of literature and research projects on non-traditional students shows that using the term "non-traditional" limits research on unique populations of community college students. If only one of the seven characteristics named by the U.S. Department of Education is used to label a student as non-traditional, the results would encompass almost all community college students. If community colleges are interested in increasing retention rates, research needs to be more specific to provide these institutions an in-depth view of the complex and diverse population that they serve. By limiting my research to re-entry women students in community colleges, I am addressing the differences of this particular sub-group of non-traditional students, thereby highlighting institutional approaches needed for student success.

Conflict of Multiple Life Roles

At a time when more women are being encouraged to enter higher education as re-entry students, researchers are investigating the effects that being a student have on women's family and social relationships (Edwards, 1993; Fairchild, 2003; Home, 1998; Valadez, 1993; Molstad, Kher & McMillan, 2001; Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002). Edwards' (1993) ethnographic study of diverse re-entry women, with children and in long-term relationships, revealed the underlying tensions that occur when women succeed in school. She found that the stresses associated with relationships of power within the household add to the reasons some re-entry women drop out of school. Studies by Home (1998) and Molstad, Kher, and McMillan (2001) while limited to re-entry women in a university setting concur Edwards' findings. The obstacles these re-entry women students face in obtaining proper child care, balancing responsibilities at home, work, and school, and the lack of support from family members, whether at the community college or university level, result in health concerns not being addressed and additional stresses which strongly contribute to reasons for these women to not succeed in their educational pursuits.

Edwards' findings are also comparable to other studies. Fairchild (2003) discusses the implications of multiple life-roles of re-entry women students on their successful completion of college. She discusses the situational, dispositional, and institutional barriers which plague adult students, and offers insight into the psyche and life experiences of adult students. Situational barriers, such as financial cost of attending school, child care, time spent away from children, and conflict with employment responsibilities may easily interrupt a woman's pursuit for an education. For many re-entry women, the increase in roles, demands, and time conflicts known as dispositional barriers or multiple-life roles are associated with high stress, anxiety, and depression. Support from family and friends is necessary for these women to remain in school. Additionally, institutional barriers exist because community colleges do not usually invest costly resources for this particular sub-group of non-traditional students.

For re-entry women to succeed in school, thereby raising retention rates, it is essential to understand the enormous demands re-entry women students face from family, career, and financial responsibilities. Johnson, Schwartz, and Bower (2000) provide an extensive campus-based study on stress management for re-entry women students in community college. They claim, "Despite their abilities, determination, and commitment, adult women students often underestimate the personal resources necessary for success" (p. 3). Many re-entry women are often at risk of dropping out of school because they cannot contend with the additional demands of family, childcare responsibilities, and employment requirements, while at school. They conclude that community colleges – administration, faculty, and staff – must help re-entry women identify their major sources of stress as well as provide strategies to alleviate those stressors if they are to remain in school and succeed in their educational goals.

In investigating the relationship among various aspects of social support systems with academic performance and psychological functioning (depression and anxiety), between traditional and non-traditional female students, Carney-Crompton and Tan (2002) found that higher levels of support, both in quantity and quality, results in lower levels of depression and anxiety and better academic performance. In studying the relationship between psychological functioning and role multiplicity, it becomes apparent that the quality and quantity of emotional support (acceptance, encouragement, and praise) and instrumental support (child care, household, financial) affects the academic success of re-entry women students.

Re-entry Women bring Life Experiences into the Classroom

When re-entry women students enter the educational setting they should be able to bring in and connect their life experiences from their multiple life roles into the classroom setting. Some researchers have pursued questions on how re-entry women students learn, and they have determined that how women learn is a process which automatically includes their life experiences. The research by Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger and Tarule (1997) reveals that re-entry women draw conclusions about truth and knowledge in the classroom learning experience from their unique perspectives. Starting with the awareness that much of the way education (both formal and informal) is carried out in society is very male-dominated and the voice and experience of women is largely absent, their research makes a case for examining ways of knowing and learning that is unique to women. After exploring different aspects of knowledge and how women come to acquire, use, produce, and disseminate this knowledge, these researchers worked together to put these insights into a single context. For re-entry women students, their informal ways of knowing allow them to construct meaning for themselves, and find their own voices in the learning process. When considering the dimensions of epistemology

for their research, I assumed that I would find a strong feminist standpoint; but in reality, these researchers, who were, at first, all studying different aspects of student development, came together to research a topic that perplexed and concerned them – many of their female students were complaining about their educational experiences. However, their pursuit of truth came out of different beliefs. In fashioning a single project out of diverse pursuits, Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger and Tarule decided to use a phenomenological approach to illuminate the women students themselves. Multiple research methods were used to compare results. Differences were investigated. One of the most important outcomes of their study was the validity of feminist standpoint and epistemology.

The research of Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger and Tarule (1997) has been used by many researchers for additional studies (Brewer, Klein, & Mann, 2003; Marienau, 1995; Walden, 1995; Herideen, 1998; Taylor, 1995; Miller, 2000) directly related to the retention rates of re-entry women students including studies on: the positive effects of small-group learning; the importance of journal writing as a teaching tool; and, identifying stressors and learning how to manage them, among others. While researchers have approached these topics from multiple perspectives, the results complement each other, showing that various learning strategies have a more positive effect for re-entry women that would result in increased retention rates.

Attempting to extend previous research on the effects of small group learning on achievement, attitude, and student interaction from children to adult re-entry students, a study by Brewer, Klein, and Mann (2003) showed that adult students who work in small groups express more confidence and continuing motivation than those who work individually. In an experimental study of business majors (53% male, 47% female), the study found that while students preferred to work in small groups rather than individually, cooperative interaction

among the students increased, although there was no difference in achievement rates. However, while small group learning does not increase achievement rates, the continued motivation, confidence, enjoyment, and belief about the ability to learn that is a result of cooperative interaction among students supports re-entry women students throughout their academic and social experience of school.

Also based on theories developed by Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger and Tarule (1997), Marienau's (1995) study confirms that integrating re-entry women's personal experiences into course content supports their educational goals. Using a feminist epistemology and teaching techniques, such as "meeting the women within" and "developing through learning," re-entry women learn structure and language that they can use to make sense of the varied and complex experiences they bring with them into the classroom. By writing their experiences in a journal, re-entry women recognize and relate their experiences in historic and social contexts, thereby understanding why they know what they know, and how they know it.

Walden (1995) claims that a journal is a powerful teaching and learning tool for helping reentry women develop as knowers. Through guided writing assignments, women learners discover and construct larger meanings through journal writing, by exploring ways of knowing as they examine their lives. They come to understand that knowledge is constructed by the self and others and that truth is contextual. Walden's research concludes that with a basic concept of women's development theory, coupled with techniques for journal writing, reentry women students learn to understand their lives more fully and deeply. They also learn skills that are applicable in other academic work. They learn that they can generate words readily and easily, enabling them to face more formal writing assignments with confidence, resulting in increased success in school.

Complementing Walden, Herideen's (1998) long-term study required all students in her classes to write journals, which contained students' insights about their everyday lives and community college experiences. A major strength of this project is that throughout her work, Herideen compared her data with those of national organizations and those collected by program coordinators of re-entry programs at other community colleges. She found common themes between her work and work at other sites. These themes - recognition of second chance opportunities; excitement of learning; economic needs; low self-esteem and expectations; lack of time to juggle work, school, and home; and fear of failure - led her to the conclusion that in the process of journal writing, students find their voice, especially when their ideas are validated by the instructor. The self-confidence that these students acquire allows them to undertake tasks that they would have previously considered beyond their abilities. Herideen concludes her research with the observation that educating for critical consciousness and upward mobility are not mutually exclusive. The insights of critical pedagogy and the everyday realities of community college students can be bridged through the theoretical perspective labeled by Herideen as critical mainstreaming, a theory that considers not only critical consciousness, but also provides a path to improve students' material conditions. By journal writing, re-entry women students learn that transitions in life encompass first an ending, then a neutral zone characterized by uncertainty and confusion, and finally a beginning. Students look at their lives from a past, present, and future perspective – useful for looking at one's past – a shift from participating in an experience to observing it.

Taylor (1995) agrees that when structured journal writing is highly self-reflective and self-analytical, a re-entry woman begins to reflect on her process of learning and begins to examine, and therefore become aware of, her perceptions and process for making meaning.

Using a feminist epistemology, Taylor explores how cultivating an awareness of one's meaning making methodology – a self-assessment – helps one make more complex meaning and leads to greater self-awareness. This process of self-assessment includes developing voice, tracking development, and mirroring growth which enhances self-responsibility, self-direction, perceptual shift, and self-questioning. The significance of self-assessment in developing a woman's sense of self provides her first tentative affirmations of her current position. As she grows stronger with each affirmation, so does her voice.

Miller's (2000) long-term study validates the growth that re-entry women experience when they remain in school and succeed at their educational goals. Using a narrative approach, Miller interviewed students in their first semester, the midpoint of progress toward graduation, and in their final semester. During these interviews, Miller allowed students to elaborate on their feelings and helped them "find their voice" in the description of academic, social, and family issues. Her research confirmed that the presence of a strong support network for re-entry women is vital to their academic success.

Institutional Policies, Pedagogies, and Environment

While distinctive characteristics of re-entry women students affect retention, institutional policies, pedagogies, and social climate add additional barriers that affect the psyche and life experiences of re-entry women. In analyzing each of the functions of the community college, many researchers (Garcia, 1995; Taylor & Marienau, 1995; Townsend, 1995; Valadez, 1993; Herideen, 1998; Zhai & Monzon, 2004; Rendón, 1993) are concerned that these barriers, such as a Eurocentric curriculum, lack of faculty involvement and institutional support, pedagogy that promotes passive learning or competition, or cultural insensitivity, add additional stresses for re-entry women students.

Garcia's study (1995) describes current literature on community college student services to determine the extent that the needs of re-entry women are being addressed. While Garcia acknowledges that professional literature on student services in community colleges is sparse, what literature there is on how student services are offered is predicated on male needs and male power. Garcia advocates that student services must move away from a male-oriented perspective that perceives women's needs as peripheral and begin to view women's needs as a central concern of the college. After giving an overview of the structural power in student affairs, Garcia uses a feminist approach and theories of empowerment to show how student services can change. She provides recommendations for practice and research to address the issues of gender and power in the community college, so that organizational structures, policies, and practices are transformed, enabling the success of all the students they serve.

In acquiring an education, re-entry women students demonstrate the significance of self, change, and empowerment. Gender socialization results in stereotypes which usually operate to women's disadvantage, socially, politically, and economically, because certain characteristics seen as feminine are viewed as less desirable than characteristics commonly viewed as masculine. Townsend (1995) and Taylor and Marienau (1995) believe that community colleges need to be responsive to changes in American society and thus responsive to the actual, not stereotypically conceived, needs of female and male students, faculty, and administrators. Being sensitive to the relationship between gender and power provides institutional leaders with an opportunity to be pathfinders in higher education. By understanding the relationship between gender and power, many institutions would see the need for developmental models for these students, and of the crucial role that education plays in the development of consciousness. Townsend (1995) and Taylor and Marienau (1995) state that by combining three strands of

practice and inquiry - adult learning, women's development, and feminist pedagogy - in the context of alternative higher education for adults, those learning environments that intentionally support and acknowledge development of self are bridges toward change which would benefit both re-entry students and the education process itself.

In addition to the fact that community colleges must change to meet the needs of their diverse student population, Valadez (1993) and Rendón (1993) show that cultural capital is of prime importance in the aims and aspirations of re-entry women students in community college. Although these studies are not solely specific to re-entry women, they explain how lack of cultural capital leads to low academic achievement by non-traditional community college students, resulting in low retention rates. The need of these students to have their cultural beliefs and life experiences accepted and validated is of prime importance.

Herideen (1998) touches on many of the social and educational issues that manifest inherent contradictions between democracy and capitalism in community colleges. Her purpose was to understand community college culture and to document community college students' life circumstances so that educational reforms, both structural and instructional changes, can be crafted to better serve their needs. With a perspective that the educational mission of community college is "to provide educational opportunity to those who have been historically denied schooling, thereby creating the conditions for citizens to secure a better quality of life for themselves and their families," it is the responsibility of the institution to change and meet the needs of re-entry women students in claiming their education.

Conclusion

The studies reviewed herein reflect the variety of questions that many researchers have pursued regarding re-entry women students, and the evidence they have counted as truth, appear

to be informative, accurate, and valid. However, I have not found many studies that use comparable groups of students, under like circumstances, which validate each other. So I must question what assumptions are being made prior to the research that formed the impetus for the research itself. I agree with many of the results that I have cited in this paper because of my personal experiences as a re-entry student and my observations and interactions with the re-entry women students I have worked with for the past several years.

The research, however, is clear on several points. Re-entry women students in community colleges do have certain characteristics and needs that are different from traditional students. While they are very resilient individuals who are capable of facing a number of challenges and stressors, re-entry women students are very concerned about their multiple life-roles and how these roles interact with each other. They are concerned with the financial issues surrounding their educational experience, as well as their need for the personal development their education provides. These concerns underline the necessity for the development of appropriate support programs within the institution. Community colleges need to acknowledge the differences of re-entry women and develop ways to enhance their potential to successful completion of their educational experiences. Additionally, perspectives on re-entry women students need to be altered to consider the strength and uniqueness of this specific sub-group of students. By instituting initiatives to benefit re-entry women, such as psychological counseling, conflict resolution services, and time management classes, community colleges would reaffirm their commitment to serve underrepresented students.

Methodology

To investigate ways in which the academic success rate of re-entry women students in community colleges can be improved, I have chosen to use a phenomenological approach to my research. Creswell (1998) states that, “the phenomenological approach is primarily an attempt to understand empirical matters from the perspective of those being studied” (p. 275). Since re-entry women students are a diverse group – racially, economically, culturally, and in educational background, and have certain characteristics and needs that differ from traditional community college students, this method has allowed me to extrapolate the understandings and meanings of their lived experiences in their multiple life-roles, including that as a community college student.

In researching which design would better suit my needs, I became aware that both Creswell (1998) and Shank (2002) consider Moustakas to be one of the primary authorities on phenomenological research design. After reviewing Moustakas’ seven key principles which ground phenomenological research (qtd. in Shank, 2002, p. 81), I concurred that this was the best method for investigating the lived experiences of re-entry women students. Moustakas’ key principles are:

1. a commitment to the use of qualitative methods;
2. a primary focus on the whole experience, rather than on its parts;
3. a search for meaning over a search for rules;
4. primary use of first person accounts as main data sources;
5. insisting that accounts of experiences are a necessary part of any scientific understanding of any social phenomenon;
6. performing research that is guided by the personal interests and commitments of the research; and

7. the necessity of treating experiences and behavior as integrated parts of a single whole.

In having re-entry women students articulate their conscious experiences as they weave through their roles as student, parent, and employee, among others, and how these roles interact, I am in a position to better comprehend the ways that they understand and function in their everyday lives.

Setting

In using a phenomenological approach to investigate ways in which the academic success rate of re-entry women students in community colleges can be improved, I have gathered data through both surveys and in-depth interviews. According to Creswell (1998), when using a phenomenological approach, I should locate multiple participants from a single site who have experienced the phenomenon being studied (p. 111). Therefore, I have surveyed and interviewed re-entry women students at Monterey Peninsula College (MPC). I have chosen MPC as the setting for my study because of my personal experience with the school and its students. Not only did I begin my own college experience as a re-entry student at Monterey Peninsula College, but for the last six years I have had the extraordinary opportunity to work there with many re-entry women as a Re-entry Counseling Specialist. Additionally, of the four local community colleges, MPC has the largest amount of re-entry women students. For the Fall, 2004 semester, fifty-five percent of the 14,385 students were women, and of that fifty-five percent, seventy-two percent, or 5,667 women, are over the age of twenty-five, one of the major defining characteristics of re-entry women students (State of California, 2004). While I do not consider age to be the only factor to define re-entry women students, enrollment data submitted by the schools to the California Community College Chancellor's Office, for my purposes, is limited in scope.

Research Participants

Surveys

The primary focus of this survey was to determine broad patterns in the experiences of re-entry women students. To find volunteers that represent the diversity of re-entry women at MPC, I visited both daytime and evening classes, explained my research, and passed out survey forms. I also left blank survey forms on the student tables in the Re-Entry & Multicultural Resource Center. Due to the fact that not all students make their way to my office or take classes within my department, and to obtain a broader range of experiences, I contacted several instructors in departments other than my own, such as Humanities and Life Sciences, and requested time to address their classes. The purpose of the survey was to obtain data pertinent to the re-entry women at Monterey Peninsula College as a representation of re-entry women in the tri-county area.

After handing out one-hundred-twenty survey forms, I received back thirty-five completed surveys. Of the thirty-five surveys collected, twenty-seven surveys were determined to be completed by re-entry women students.¹ In deciding exactly what characteristics comprised a re-entry woman, I used criteria for non-traditional students as determined by the U.S. Department of Education (1996) previously discussed in Chapter Two: 1) not enrolling directly after high school; 2) attending part-time; 3) working full-time; 4) being financially independent from parents; 5) having dependents other than spouse; 6) being a single parent; and, 7) not having a high school diploma. Additionally, I used age and the period of time between high school and college as factors. While I will not be using data from the surveys of the eight women who would not be considered “re-entry” for my analysis, I will discuss in my

¹ See Appendix C for demographics of all participants.

recommendations to the community colleges the similarities and differences I found in their responses in comparison to the responses from the re-entry women. I have chosen this avenue because although these eight women would not be considered “re-entry,” they all have several non-traditional characteristics, such as not having a high school diploma, being financially independent from their parents, and working over thirty hours per week while attending school. These non-traditional characteristics provide another dimension to the barriers and obstacles of community college students.

The ethnic composition of the thirty-five survey participants reflects the ethnic diversity of the school: 2.9% African-American; 8.6% Asian; 8.6% Hispanic; 8.6% Other Non-White; 5.7% Pacific Islander; 2.9% Unknown; 62.7% White Non-Hispanic.

Interviews

Since Creswell states that “a phenomenological study describes the meaning of the lived experiences for several individuals” (p. 51), I believed it was imperative to seek volunteers to participate in in-depth interviews. The purpose of these interviews was to obtain a broader view of each student’s life circumstances and how their individual characteristics affect their academic pursuits. The focus here was to obtain the essence of each woman’s whole experience as a student. During my classroom presentations seeking volunteers to complete the survey, I also mentioned that I was seeking volunteers to interview. If students wished to participate, they contacted me at the Re-Entry & Multicultural Resource Center.

I selected five women (Alicia, Belinda, Carole, Diane and Evelyn) between the ages of thirty-eight and forty-six² to participate in this interview portion of my research. In choosing participants, again I tried to represent the ethnic diversity of the school. Of the five participants,

² Names have been changed to protect privacy.

one is African-American, one is Pacific Islander, one is biracial (African-American/Asian), and two are White Non-Hispanic.

Data Collection

Surveys

To provide a more comprehensive view of the experiences of and the barriers faced by re-entry women students in our local tri-county area, I divided the survey into three specific sections (see Appendix A). The first section, Demographics, is used to compile data that represent the diverse voices within our campus community: age, ethnicity, marital status, disability, implications of parents' educational history, and responsibilities as a parent and/or employee. The short-answered open-end questions in the second section of this instrument, Educational Experience, were designed to elicit from the respondent information regarding their high school experience, such as if they had college or career goals while in high school and why they did not go to college directly after high school, as well as their reason for now attending Monterey Peninsula College along with a self-report of their GPA (grade-point-average). Questions were also included for students to report what they believe are barriers they must overcome to succeed in their educational pursuit and their preference for testing methods. And since Women's Studies classes use teaching and testing methods not commonly used in other courses, questions were included to see if the student had ever taken a Women's Studies class and if that class has helped them personally or academically. Students' statements were coded and classified so that I could review them later for clarification or to examine the context in which they were written: BO (barriers and/or obstacles); S or I (surveys or interviews); and, the numbers correspond to the surveys which were numbered as they were written anonymously. The third and final section of the survey, Support Services, was designed similar to a Likert-

survey scale, with participants self-reporting data through a range of four choices: *very helpful*, *somewhat helpful*, *not helpful*, and *never access*. While some of these support services are directly related to particular coursework, such as the Math Lab and the Language Lab, other services, such as Women's Programs, the Health Center, and Financial Aid are available to all college students every semester. Although no comments were requested in this section, some students chose to write remarks in the margins.

Interviews

The second part of my data collection consisted of five in-depth interviews. The purpose behind my questions (see Appendix B) was to obtain a broader view of the students' life circumstances and how these characteristics affect their academic pursuits. Comparable to the survey questions, the interview questions included discussion of the woman's educational history while in high school, how her high school experiences shaped her future educational endeavors, and why she did not go to college directly after high school. Questions were also asked regarding their current community college experience, such as how they came to be in school at this stage in their life, how they are managing to balance their time among their various responsibilities, and their personal opinion of courses, instructors, and support services that they believe have either helped them to succeed or have been detrimental to their endeavors.

All of the interviews were digitally recorded and then transcribed. While three interviews were approximately one hour in length, one interview was one-and-three-quarter hours due to the interviewee's emotional recollection of her past life, and another interview was only twenty-two minutes in length as it was with a new re-entry student who was only in the second week of her first semester.

Data Analysis

To prepare my data for analysis, I have used three different methods to coincide with the three different forms of data collection: demographics, interviews and open-ended questions, and the Likert Survey.

To input the demographic information for analysis, I designed a template for Microsoft Access. Due to the nature of this computer program, specific data, such as the respondent's age, marital status, or employment status could easily be accessed, both to compare and analyze demographic information among all the respondents, and more importantly, to see how an individual's demographic information relates to her personal barriers and educational experiences she later writes about. It was in this way that I chose to eliminate the seven surveys completed by women who I did not consider "re-entry students." These women were single, without children, and younger (19 to 22 years of age) than my other respondents.

To analyze the data I collected through the surveys and interviews, Creswell details several methods. However, for my purpose in using the voices of re-entry women to make recommendations to the community colleges that service our tri-county area, I chose to use Moustakas' approach as detailed by Creswell (1998, pp. 147-150). This process began with reading through the surveys and interview transcripts, making margin notes, and forming an initial coding system of the barriers, obstacles, opinions, and recommendations as provided by the participants. Then, taking these relevant statements, I interpreted and classified like statements into categories. These categories became my "meaning units," a process described by Creswell as isolating narrative segments about what was experienced to determine like *patterns* and *meanings*. I then reduced the meanings of experiences of all of the participants – the meaning units – to develop an interpretation of how the students' statements were experienced –

to obtain the “essence.” These then became the themes that not only prevent re-entry women students from achieving their academic goals, but also the suggestions on how the institution can improve conditions for academic success. The benefit of using this analysis approach is to validate the voices of re-entry women students in how they experience their educational journeys.

My third form of data analysis is for the results of the Likert-survey scale. Student responses have been accumulated to see how many students have accessed the support services available on campus, and if they have, what was their personal opinion of the services received.

Conclusion

I consider phenomenology to have been the best method for my research as it is a form of interpretation. In being aware of the various life experiences of re-entry women students, I am able to pursue the meanings that re-entry women hold and form about their educational experience and their place in the community college setting. With data from the survey and the interviews, I have developed the various themes that prevent re-entry women students from achieving their academic goals. I have explored their characteristics which have set them apart from traditional students, how these characteristics have adversely affected the learning experience, and, how they have been addressed by institutional policy. My final analysis of these themes have been used to develop my presentation for the Higher Educational Learning Partnership so that they are in a better position to develop appropriate programs or reevaluate existing programs that will more directly benefit the academic success of re-entry women students.

Data Analysis and Results

After deciding to investigate ways in which the academic success rate of re-entry women students in community colleges can be improved, I chose to collect data by way of two distinct methods: surveys and in-depth interviews. This chapter is divided into four sections: the first three sections, Characteristics of the Re-entry Woman, Multiple Life Roles, and Institutional Policies, Pedagogies and Curriculum Design, report and analyze the surveys and interviews for barriers and obstacles that prevent re-entry women from attaining their educational goals; the fourth section, Support Services, provides students' experiences of the programs and services that help re-entry women students succeed.

While many barriers and obstacles that have prevented these students from attaining their educational goals emerged during the study, as well as the students' opinions on the support services available, students also provided data on what kinds of programs, pedagogy, and curriculum help them succeed. Discussion on the implications of these responses will appear in Chapter Five.

Characteristics of the Re-entry Woman

Many women reported that attending college later in life with the added responsibilities of being a parent and an employee is a primary barrier to their current situation as a college student. While some may argue that this barrier is what identifies a student as "re-entry," it is extremely important because it places the student in a disadvantaged status once the student has the opportunity to attend school. After all, lack of preparation for the higher educational setting, immaturity, family responsibilities, lack of family support to further their education and the financial cost of attending school in a traditional manner were major themes among the participants. In fact, all of the interviewees and twenty-three of the twenty-seven survey

respondents mentioned barriers that began in their teenage years, extending the time to when they would become community college students.

Lack of family support

Three interviewees and fourteen survey respondents spoke or wrote of family situations that adversely affected their opportunities to go to college. As an example, Diane was an excellent student in high school and had obtained a number of scholarships to attend college. However, the atmosphere within her household and the lack of understanding of her cultural background caused her to give up the idea of attending a school that was close to the home of her father and step-mother. She states:

My home life at that time was very bad – very stressful. My parents had divorced when I was about eight or nine, and – through a long story – I ended up with my dad in Mississippi. We were seven children and we were split. He remarried an African American woman.... Predominately and culturally I was raised a Korean. So, not only was it a shock culturally going to Mississippi, it was also hard being that young. I was very naïve to the fact of people looking at me based on the color of my skin and race.... I think the problem is that no one understood how culturally different we were.

An older brother came to my graduation and ...for a graduation present he took me to Canada. And I think underneath it all, it was a way to get me away from the place. I had decided, for whatever reason – victimization, child abuse – my mentality was that once I graduated high school I could be free from it all. So I graduated one day and we left the next day, as I had predicted for myself. And I never went back.

Not all re-entry women were good students in high school with the intention of going on to college. As a forty-two-year-old married mother of four, who works 36 hours/week stated:

I wanted to get a bachelor's degree but my parents didn't think school was important so I went to work fulltime, then got married, then had children. Now I'm struggling to finish school. My parents didn't consider college important and no financial aid was available to me either (BOSLSP23).

For women entering the educational setting later in life, even spousal support is very important if a woman wishes to succeed. Belinda, a thirty-eight-year-old woman and mother of seven, is currently separated from her husband. While the three oldest children live with their father, she has the four youngest. Regarding her high school experience, she stated:

I just wanted to get out of school at that time. I was sick of it, and my parents did not encourage me at all in that direction.... The only reason I stayed in high school – otherwise I would have dropped out – was band. That is what kept me there....

[My home life was] not pretty - definitely not a pretty situation! We were three kids. My dad was an alcoholic and my mom was a basket-case.... When my 15-year-old was three, I came here and took some night classes. [My husband] was not supportive.

He would say, "Why are you going? You're only going to drop out anyway."

Some students reported that they had no motivation to seek higher education as they had "no 'educational' guidance/mentor" or their families did not expect them to go. As one woman stated, "Therefore, I never really gave it a whole lot of thought. I felt that I fell through the cracks in my own family with no strong foundation to pursue college" (BOSLSP26).

While the support of family is crucial to young women who wish to pursue higher education after high school, it is not the only barrier that has kept them away from a college classroom.

Lack of preparation

Six of the survey respondents and two interviewees did not graduate high school in the traditional manner. While several dropped out of high school for unknown reasons, others dropped out due to family conflict or pregnancy. For instance, a twenty-seven year old woman, who works thirty-five hours per week, and whose mother has a high school diploma, but whose father only finished 8th grade, stated:

During the summer of my fourteenth year, my mother was given a note in which she thought described me smoking marijuana with friends from school. She dropped me from high school at the very beginning of my sophomore year. My mother kept me home, away from friends and school until I was 16. I got a job, full time, at 16 and moved out on my own at 17. I had to work full time in order to support myself (BOSLAP3).

Another re-entry woman, a thirty-five year old, divorced mother of three, stated “I was unable to graduate. I was pregnant when I was 16 years old. I had to watch my baby. I received my GED at 34” (BOSLAP4). However, the lack of a high school diploma is not the only reason some students are not prepared to go on to college.

Alicia went to college right after high school and was the first in her family to go on to higher education. She claims that although she had a tremendous amount of support from her family, she was too immature to understand the importance of her new role as a college student. As she stated, “I was drinking too much and my grades were really bad. (Laughing) How is that for honesty? I was there for two years, and then I met the man I was going to marry and we moved to Arizona. School got put on hold and we got married.” Over the next several years she had three children and sporadically attended a class here and there until she received a certificate

allowing her to work as a child care provider. She and her husband then divorced. When asked why she was at school now, she stated:

Honestly, the push to do it right now is economic. Living here is very expensive and I realized that my oldest would be starting high school – I was teaching pre-school for the school district which pays pre-school teachers a lot better than most pre-schools – and we could get by, we were doing fine, but I realized we could not get ahead. I would not be able to help him even with books for college. So, I realized that if I did not get through school and find a new career, things would not get better – I would not be able to help him.

Alicia speaks of the economic side of supporting herself and her children. She realizes that she has been fortunate to get as far as she has with her education. Currently in her last semester at MPC, she is transferring in the fall. Unfortunately, it is economics or the financial cost of an education that kept some of the women from attending school in the traditional time frame.

Expected family contribution

When a high school student applies for financial aid to attend college, the primary basis which determines how much help they will receive is based on their EFT (Expected Family Contribution), which is based on the parents' income and assets without taking into consideration any other factors. Two of the interviewees and nine of the survey respondents considered the financial position of their families when they were in high school as a major obstacle in obtaining their education. Three respondents specifically spoke about how the death of one of their parents affected their college goals. A thirty-two-year-old woman wrote, "My father died when I was 17. My mother couldn't afford the financial burden of having me in college. I am at MPC to finish my pre-requisites to enter CSUMB and achieve a four-year degree. My three

aunts helped me to get started again in school. They help me financially and emotionally” (BOSFIN1).

Financial problems do not only matter to those students who have lost a parent at a young age. Some families are just not in the economic bracket that can help support a student through college, even if the desire and emotional support is apparent. One younger woman who is a full-time student and works forty hours/week stated that, “While in high school, college was a future goal because I needed to help out with the family, and it is expensive to go to school.... I had to help the family; expenses were limited. Income is a barrier. Income is important and is the only way you can get an education” (BOSFIN5). This young woman continued on that even though she must work while she is in school, now that she is married her husband helps around the house and provides the encouragement that allows her to continue.

However, some students are completely on their own in trying to finance their education. The twenty-seven-year-old woman whose mother had pulled her out of high school because of a marijuana incident, and who has supported herself since she was seventeen, stated:

I enrolled at MPC several different times in the past. It has only been recently (2004) that I have been able to declare a major and attend full time. This is due in part to loans through MPC... In the past I have had to drop classes because I had to work 40+ hours. Now I make more money at work and have loans through MPC. When I was younger (20-23) I could not apply for financial aid unless I had information about my parents’ financial history. My parents were not willing to cooperate, so I had to wait until I was 24 (BOSFIN3).

For all of these re-entry women students who are overcoming barriers left over from their high school years, there is a strong desire to complete their educational goals at the community

college. Unfortunately, finally making it to MPC is not the end of their struggles. They still must hurdle barriers constructed by their multiple life roles and those built by the educational institution which develops policies, curriculum and environment based on traditional students.

Multiple Life Roles

Increase in the roles and demands of students adversely affect re-entry women students attending classes in the community college. The multiple-life roles of re-entry women students which include family responsibilities, financial pressure, and time needed to attend class, do homework, be employed, and take care of their families, all weigh heavy on their shoulders. The more roles a student takes on results in high stress, anxiety, and depression from feelings of “having to do it all.” The five interviewees and twenty-five of the twenty-seven survey respondents acknowledged the existence of barriers erected by their multiple-life roles affecting their pursuits in seeking their educations. To understand how multiple-life roles are integrated, I asked Belinda to describe what a typical school day was like for her. She said:

I usually get up around six and get the kids up and take my shower. Usually I have to wake them up several times – the boys are hard to wake up. Then I have to get their school clothes, because I usually don’t have the laundry finished. While they are getting dressed, I make breakfast and then I have to find their coats and their shoes and try to get out of the house so I can drop them off. It doesn’t always go smoothly. They are not always cooperative. They fight. One may not want to get out of bed; another does not like what I made for breakfast. Sometimes, it is really rough. Then I drop them off at their schools and I come here and go to my classes. I stay here until about two o’clock and then I go and pick up the kids to take them home. Between the four kids, there are three schools. When we get home, I make them a snack, and then, usually

unsuccessfully, try and get them to do their homework. I wash the dishes left over from breakfast, try to do some laundry, and then make dinner. There is a lot of chaos – typical children behavior. Sometimes, I feel like I am going insane.... The children then go to bed around 8 o'clock. Most times that is difficult because someone is always getting up for some reason – especially the girls. Then I try and straighten up a bit and if I can, I sit and relax a little while – watch some TV maybe – a chance to calm down. Then it is quiet.

All five interviewees and eighteen of the survey respondents wrote about how difficult the responsibilities of their multiple life-roles affected their lives. The need to support themselves and their families, and the time needed to accomplish their goals take a tremendous amount of energy.

Students supporting themselves and families

Three interviewees and eighteen survey respondents stated that their finances were a major obstacle in claiming their education. Although several students did attend college after high school, their financial position at the time did not allow them to continue. As one student who is now working 25 hours/week and attending school full-time stated:

I went to college for a semester after high school, but I dropped out during my second semester. My father was a single parent and could not afford to support his three children through college. I was working full-time at a late-night restaurant and taking a full load of courses. I burnt out.... [Now], my husband is helping me get my education. Without his financial support, I wouldn't be able to afford the cost of school or the cost of living while I am in school. Definitely income is a barrier to my education. School would be a lot easier if I didn't work (BOSFIN9).

Another student, a married mother of two pre-school children who attend MPC's Child Development Center, stated that she also attended college right after high school. However, she...

...dropped out a few times. I was not ready – too hard and overwhelming, plus it was too expensive.... I have found a lot of support at MPC for re-entering students – much more than when I was single and had no children. It's easier to be poor and have supportive services such as welfare and CalWorks than to be single, working, and paying rent in California. I take school much more seriously now than I ever did before (BOSFIN18).

In fact, four of the survey respondents specifically talked about how they believed their poor financial position has actually helped them in obtaining their educations. These students are in the welfare-to-work program, known as CalWorks in California. One single mother of three who dropped out of high school in her senior year summed it up perfectly: "Because I have CalWorks it's now or never if I want childcare and financial help" (BOSFIN19).

Unfortunately, it is for many of these same students that the rules governing CalWorks eventually become more of an obstacle than a benefit. Carole, who is now in her last semester at MPC and is planning on transferring to a California State University campus in the fall, began her college experience when all four of her children lived with her. Since that time, her two oldest children aged out of the system, and due to many family problems, including the illness and death of her sister, she sent her two youngest children to live with their father. However, even trying to overcome these external barriers, financial pressure still mounts. As she states:

It seems like every semester there's always a challenge or obstacle for me to deal with outside of classes – like issues with CalWorks or Section 8 requirements. Since I transitioned out of welfare (cash aid) due to no dependent children last August, I've had

to ignore my English 2 class in order to hunt for a job by a certain time frame in order to keep both my Section 8 voucher and Supportive Services via One-Stop.

So, although Carole had the extra benefits at the beginning of her college experience, circumstances in her life have drastically changed her income, presenting other barriers that she must overcome. Likewise, students who had other opportunities in the past to claim their educations still find their financial balancing act as an obstacle, albeit one worth struggling with.

One survey respondent summed it up perfectly:

I went to college after high school, but quit to start a family. Now I am returning to finish my AA and changing careers for economic reasons.... My barrier is financial stress! I have the full support of my children.... Raising three kids, going to school, and working to pay bills is so challenging, but I find my success (especially at my age) to be so very rewarding. My children have said they want to get grades like me and have improved in their own studies.... If I didn't have to worry about next month's rent I could do this so much better (BOSFIN20).

Finding the time to be student, employee, and Mom

Although financial obstacles are a major problem for most of the re-entry women students in this study, time for family, employment, and school is a major theme. All five of the interviewees and fourteen of the survey respondents spoke about time being a primary barrier, and time is the one factor that cannot be changed. We cannot borrow it or loan it out. We cannot purchase more. As Belinda states:

I feel like I don't have enough time to complete school compared to those who just got out of high school. But, at the same time, I can't take too many units because of the kids. But I know I have to get on with it. I feel there is no time to waste.... I try to not let my

children become an obstacle for me because of my desperation to become educated....

Last semester I was taking 14 units and I had to drop a couple of classes because I was going through the divorce thing and I was having anxiety attacks. I figured it was better if I did well in a couple of classes than just got by in all. Quality is really important to me. You know, I was doing really well in the classes I was taking, but I knew I was pushing myself too far, that I had limits, that there was no way that I could keep doing that.

When asked how she manages to do her homework, she said:

At school, after my classes. I have no time to do it at home. It's just not going to happen. If I don't do it here, then I know I am taking too many units. It does not get done. That is why I am now taking fewer units. Last semester was too much and I had to drop classes, because I could not keep up with all the work.

Belinda's days are exhausting. Many times she does not have enough time to accomplish her household chores. However, she does consider herself fortunate. At this point she is receiving enough spousal support that she does not need to worry about finances and she does not need to work. Actually, in the subject of finances, Belinda is almost an anomaly among re-entry students. For instance, one thirty-year-old divorced mother of two works 32 hours/week. In addition to the responsibility of caring for her children, the "Barriers I have are time for homework vs. working to pay the bills. All my extra time out of class I need to spend at work" (BOSTIM15). This woman represents most of the women who claimed time as their major barrier. With time being of prime importance, "It is hard to be motivated to go to class when you are so exhausted from working fulltime and then add the children's needs and household chores. School has to be a lower priority than my family" (BOSFAM23).

For most students who multi-task their lives and divide their time among the roles of student, employee, and parent, support is necessary. Fortunately, Alicia has support both at home and at school:

I have been fortunate to find other students who are in similar situations as I am – as far as being older and going back to school with a strong determination, not wanting to mess around – that this is serious and we have to do the best we can and we have to do it now, because we don't have the luxury to take it over. So it has been very good.... And, my kids have been wonderful and an extreme amount of support for me. We talked it over before I decided to do this. I had made up my mind that it was something worth the risk before talking to them about it, but then sat down with them and we talked a lot about it and I explained to them what I anticipated as far as needing some help from the boys, picking up my daughter, help around the apartment. They do have chores and they help a lot anyway, but that there may be some weeks where maybe a little extra beyond what the normal chores are and they have been really good about that. They decided to let Mom do it. They knew that if I could get through this that things won't be so tight and that maybe they would benefit from it too. They are wonderful. They will ask me, "Do you have a test coming up? Do you have flash cards? Let me test you."

Alicia does represent most re-entry women students who struggle to overcome barriers to claim their educations. These women understand the importance of what their education will mean not only to them, but also to their families – how their situations can be improved, how they will benefit emotionally and financially.

Institutional Policies, Pedagogies, and Curriculum Design

Although re-entry women students are aware of the many barriers they face as a result of their multiple-life roles, they are usually unaware that institutional policies, pedagogies, and curriculum design add to their stress. The way financial aid is determined and testing methods used by instructors were discussed, as well as opinion on Women's Studies courses which are developed with a pedagogy that is not in use by most other instructors. While many of the barriers previously discussed can be classified in more than one category, these particular themes can only be changed by the institution itself.

The financial aid dilemma

Although the financial stress that most of the students are under has already become apparent, five students specifically remarked about how financial aid is determined. Two students who stated that their parents would not help them financially when they were younger also stated that their parents would not provide parental financial information which is required for students under the age of twenty-four. Therefore, without the help of financial aid they were unable to attend school at a more traditional age. These students stated that they believe the age requirements should be adjusted if students can prove that they are independent of their parents.

Another obstacle that appeared in the survey responses of five students regarded the low income guidelines which determine how much financial aid a student receives. As an example, in answer to Question #15 on the survey, *Do you have any problems completing any of your classes*, one twenty-eight-year-old responded, "Certain semesters I did because exhaustion took over because of the two full-time jobs. Schools should raise the financial aid income to meet the expensive standard way of living on this Monterey Peninsula. One set income is not fair. They

should delegate each city and then apply” (BOSFIN14). This remark captures the sentiment of all five students.

Testing methods

The most prevalent theme in this category, with a response from three interviewees and all twenty-seven survey respondents, regarded their preference on testing methods, and the time students feel that they need to be tested. Although one student specifically stated that she does not like to write at-home essays, her reason was that she does not own a computer and due to her class and work schedules, she finds it difficult to go to the English Center where computers are available. Aside from this one student, twelve students preferred essays written at home. As one mother of four who works thirty-six hours per week stated:

Essays written at home are the most convenient because I can research them on my home computer. Multiple choice, fill-in-the-blank, in class essays require rote memorization and regurgitation of ideas – not critical thinking or original ideas. Those forms of grading are insulting to adult learners. I always avoid short-answer tests (BOSLEX23).

Besides the “regurgitation of ideas,” many of the respondents stated that they need more time to complete assignments and to be tested, although most have not made the connection between their desire for more time and their overworked and overstressed lives. These respondents only feel they have completed their work if they have done their best. As one woman wrote, “I don’t like on-demand in-class essays because I don’t have enough time to formulate my ideas. I feel like I just spit out the information without developing my thoughts. It’s sloppy” (BOSTIM6). In conjunction with this woman, another full-time student, who works thirty hours per week, stated, “I prefer essays we write at home so I have time to think about and construct my answers carefully. I try to avoid multiple-choice and fill-in-the-blank because tests like that are based on

memory and not really knowing the information and understanding it” (BOSTIM27). The overall essence of the responses in this category is that re-entry women are concerned with having the time to be tested in a manner that would acknowledge her understanding of the course material.

Women’s Studies

Three of the interviewees and eighteen of the survey respondents stated that they have taken or are currently taking a Women’s Studies class. Asked if the respondent believed the class helped them personally or academically, one interviewee and seven survey respondents stated that it was too early to tell as this was their first Women’s Studies class and it was the beginning of the semester. However, for the two interviewees and the eleven survey respondents who have taken Women’s Studies classes in the past, all considered the classes to be a positive experience. As one student stated, “I have taken two WS classes. They have both helped me tremendously. Women’s Studies class format and way of learning really suits my learning style” (SWS35). Another student, who works fifty hours per week, wrote, “Women’s Studies made me feel like I’m not alone and that women have been doing what I’m doing for years. I’m grateful, because the women of our past had it a lot harder than the women of the present” (SWS14).

Three women specifically wrote how the essay writing requirements of Women’s Studies classes, instead of other testing methods, challenged them academically, but helped them out overall. This format helped them to formulate new ideas while improving their writing styles. Almost all of the women stated this made them feel empowered.

Support Services

Monterey Peninsula College has a number of support services available to students to help them succeed in their academic pursuits. This section of the survey was designed like a

Likert Survey with choices of *very helpful*, *somewhat helpful*, *not helpful*, and *never access*. My intention here was to see how many students were aware of what services were available to them, and if they had accessed them, what was their experience with the survey. The results are:

Service	Very helpful	Somewhat helpful	Not helpful	Never access
Tutoring Center	8	5		8
English Center	10	4		7
Math Lab	6	7		7
Language Lab	6	1		12
EOPS	8	1		11
Women's Programs	16	1	2	4
Personal Counseling	8	3		9
Academic Counseling	8	8	2	3
Career Center	4	5	1	8
Supportive Services	15		1	4
Transfer Center	5	3		11
Health Center	8	2		9
Children's Center	5			12
CalWorks	5		1	13
Financial Aid	10	3	4	5

While most of the services listed seem inline for their purpose and the students who access them, responses to Women's Programs, Academic Counseling, Career Center, and Financial Aid seem somewhat imbalanced. Although no comments section was attached to this survey, some students chose to write remarks in the margins. These comments help interpret some of these results. For instance, Women's Programs has a very high access rate, with a mostly favorable rating. This coincides with the open access to the Re-Entry and Multicultural Resource Center, also known as Women's Programs. The less than favorable rating for Financial Aid coincides with margin remarks about the difficulty some students have with working with Financial Aid personnel. Additionally, I am surprised at how many students have accessed Supportive Services, a department that helps students with learning and physical disabilities. In the demographic portion of the survey, only eight students reported having a disability.

Conclusion

The participants in this research shared with me their personal struggles, their backgrounds and their educational experiences, challenges, and dreams of the future for the purpose of helping the future experiences of re-entry women students in community colleges. They spoke about their hardships before arriving on campus, their previous college experiences, and the difficulties of balancing the responsibilities of their multiple-life roles. While all of the participants wanted to impart their experiences so that they may benefit future re-entry women students, some also provided suggestions on how to do so.

Being such a diverse group, re-entry women students are very aware of the opportunities that an education can provide. Not only are they concerned with the barriers and obstacles they must overcome to obtain their educations, they are also concerned with what they learn and how they learn it. They repeatedly state that their families are their first priority; however, many have managed to include their families in their college experiences. They all seemed to have an uncanny way of balancing time and money to achieve their goals. Through their expressive answers these women have learned what it means to have barriers and obstacles in their lives and what it means to overcome them and be successful.

Discussion and Recommendations

In the Fall of 1996 I took my first college class at Monterey Peninsula College. I was forty-four years old. I was terrified, unsure if I was capable of keeping up a strenuous schedule, balancing time between schooling and family responsibilities. I was afraid of not fitting in and if I would be accepted by my classmates, many of whom were younger than my sons. However, I was one of the fortunate ones. I had an excellent high school education, and I had support – emotionally and financially – from my family and from the Re-entry and Multicultural Resource Center at Monterey Peninsula College. I also had many understanding instructors who helped me by connecting my life experiences to the subject matter. It has been from my personal experience as a re-entry student and my work with other older women students that I have chosen for this thesis to investigate the barriers and obstacles faced by re-entry women students in community colleges and what our local community colleges are doing or can do to ensure the academic success of these students, thereby increasing the overall successful completion rates of the institution itself.

Why is this study of re-entry women students important? Research has shown that the

Female student population	56%	59%	50%	55%
Females over 25 years of age	52%	52%	51%	72%
Data reported to California Community College Chancellor's Office for Fall, 2004 (State of California, 2004)				

profile of the community college student body has changed since the 1980s. Instead of an influx of the traditional recent high school graduates beginning their college experience at a local community college, an older highly diverse group of students are registering for classes. A large percentage of these older students are women. In our surrounding community there are four

community colleges. According to institutional data reported to the California Community College Chancellor's Office for the Fall, 2004 semester, fifty to fifty-nine percent of the student population is female. Of the female population, fifty-one to seventy-two percent are older than twenty-five years of age. It is important here to state that while some of these older women students are attending classes specifically for personal enrichment, there are also many women under the age of twenty-five who are single parents, possibly without high school diplomas.

The reasons many of these women are entering community colleges at such a high rate are as diverse as the women themselves. Besides the fact that the geographic location, lower cost, and open-door attendance policy provides them the opportunity for an education while they balance time for family and employment responsibilities at the same time they are in school, most see their community college experience as a first, unexpected or second-chance opportunity to create a career through a formal education plan. Of the thirty-two re-entry women who participated in my research, twenty-six plan to continue their studies after community college. Although their future plans include degrees in Business, Veterinary Science, and Architecture, six women are planning to become nurses; three hope to major in psychology; and two would like to become social workers. In fact, one woman specifically stated she would like to work with domestic violence victims. While some analysts may interpret this as women being educated for "women's proper sphere," I see their educational plans as an extension of their lived experiences as wife, mother, or caretaker. However, while the desire for an education and a future career is very strong, a significant number of these women will not complete their educational goals (U.S. Department of Education, 2003). Not only has entering or re-entering college presented a major change in their daily lives and those of their families, most re-entry women arrive on campus feeling insecure and lacking self-esteem.

The results of my research indicate that the re-entry women at Monterey Peninsula College have enormous demands on their time and their financial resources; that when their family, school, and employment responsibilities come into conflict, they usually drop out of school, hoping that one day they will return. It is my belief, supported by my research, that community colleges can increase the academic success rate not only of re-entry women students, but of all their students, by understanding the unique circumstances of re-entry women students and by reevaluating current institutional policies, environment, pedagogy, and curriculum which adversely affect the learning experience.

Personal Barriers

For the re-entry women at Monterey Peninsula College, personal barriers, such as the financial cost of attending school, childcare, time spent away from their children, and time needed for employment easily interrupt their pursuit for an education. The high cost of living on the central coast, the lack of affordable housing, and the difficulties many students face in collecting adequate financial aid result in the need for students to also be employed.

Of the thirty-two women who participated in my study, nineteen work. Of these nineteen women, ten have school-age children at home, and sixteen consider themselves to be students working to meet expenses (see Demographics, Appendix C). According to White (2002), undergraduates who worked but identified themselves primarily as students were more likely to report that working negatively affected their academic performance as the number of hours worked per week increased. If students decide to attend school on a part-time basis so they have the extra time for family responsibilities as Belinda is doing, she is disqualified from certain support programs. For instance, EOPS (Extended Opportunities, Programs, and Services) provides counseling and financial help, by purchasing textbooks, but only for full-time students.

Part-time status as a student also adversely affects those re-entry women who work during the day and attend evening classes. Attending classes in the evening removes them from most institutional support systems, such as tutoring, Women's Programs, Supportive Services, and Re-Entry Centers; these programs have been scaled back and are closed by the time evening classes begin.

Another barrier for the many re-entry women students who have school-age children at home is the difficulty in finding childcare when their children are home from school for illness, holidays, or school vacations. As a local institution would be expected to do, community colleges often do not align their academic calendar with that of the local school districts. At Monterey Peninsula College, the academic calendar follows that of schools in Carmel and Pacific Grove instead of the Monterey Peninsula Unified School District which is where most of the MPC students' children attend. Besides the differences in schools' academic calendars, many instructors have inflexible attendance requirements. Because of this misalignment between academic calendars, parents are not on break at the same time as their young school-age children. As a result, the classroom attendance rates for re-entry women students are affected when re-entry women students must remain home from class to care for their children. Alleviating some of these childcare concerns could provide additional encouragement for re-entry women students to persist in their academic pursuits.

Many re-entry women are often at risk of dropping out of school because they cannot contend with the additional demands of family, childcare responsibilities, and employment requirements while at school. Guilt over not spending enough time with their children or even lagging in their household chores challenges their socially constructed beliefs of their responsibilities as a mother, homemaker, or employee. These negative attitudes cause high

stress, anxiety, and depression. As a result, support from family and friends is necessary for these women to remain in school. According to Carney-Crompton and Tan (2002), depression and anxiety attacks diminish as a student receives more support. The more support one receives, the better the academic performance. Carole, a re-entry student preparing to graduate and transfer to a university stated the importance of a support network so well:

Support, encouragement, and understanding of my feelings as a re-entry student have made all the difference for my in obtaining my education. Most important, I think, has been the understanding found in the support groups offered through Women's Programs. At times when I felt I could do no more, did not belong with all these "kids," or felt overwhelmed or confused, Women's Programs' Re-Entry Center has always been at the core center for my survival.

So, as Carney-Crompton and Tan (2002) and Miller (2000) determined in their studies, the quality of emotional and instrumental support for the many re-entry women students who struggle with multiple life-roles definitely affects their academic success.

Institutional Barriers

While the distinctive characteristics of re-entry women students affect their ability to succeed in their educational goals, institutional policies, pedagogies, and social climate create additional barriers that also affect the educational experiences of re-entry women. With so many re-entry women students beginning their educational journeys at the community college level, the culture, structure and instructional goals of the institution itself must be investigated. Penelope Herideen (1998) states that critical scholars like Giroux, McLaren, and Freire:

view education as a political arena and schools as sites of ideological struggle.... Critical educational theorists respond to liberal theories of education that praise education as the

‘great equalizer,’ by arguing that education is not about equality, but about reproducing inequality. They focus on the ways that education serves to perpetuate an unfair status quo. (p. 25)

These theorists examine not only what students should learn, but how they should learn. They debate the effectiveness of traditional teaching which they state “reinforces passivity and reproduces the unequal power relation embedded in a class, race, and gendered society” (Herideen, 1998, p.25). Re-entry women students face barriers which impede their educational experience, such as a Eurocentric and male-centered curriculum, lack of institutional support, and a pedagogy that promotes passive learning or competition, and cultural insensitivity. This socially constructed secondary status felt by many re-entry women students discourages them from participating in classroom discussion and may even keep them away from taking particular courses or majoring in more male-dominated academic programs. Also, professors who fill their classes with sexist remarks can fill re-entry women students with such anger that it is impossible to learn in that environment. Even male students are affected by a sexist environment, hampering their ability to see the older female student as an equal in the classroom, the home, or at work. The failure of community colleges to address the problems associated with gender socialization on campus results in stereotypes which usually operate to re-entry women's disadvantage, socially, politically, and economically, because certain characteristics seen as feminine are viewed as less desirable than characteristics commonly viewed as masculine.

These gender-related institutional barriers exist because community colleges do not usually invest in sufficient resources for this particular group of students. Many re-entry women students are going through powerful changes, feelings of doubt, fear, and frustration with the college experience, creating feelings of standing out, not being able to identify with their

traditional college classmates and curriculum. They believe themselves to be voiceless, invisible, and thereby, powerless to effect any change.

Learning Styles and Life Experience

Today there are numerous claims that women have unique ways of learning that may differ from dominant, more male-centered approaches to learning and teaching. Research projects, such as those by Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger and Tarule (1997), Marienau (1995) and Walden (1995), have specifically studied how women learn. They found that the learning environment of re-entry women, whose reality encompasses multiple life-roles, is often difficult, as curriculum is still mostly male-centric in perspective, and that masculinity distorts conceptualization. Re-entry women students bring to the classroom a set of characteristics historically ascribed to them by society: sensitivity, compassion, and compromise; characteristics not highly prized in formal education. However, one of the most important ways re-entry women students find their voice, and therefore their place, in the learning process is when they are able to identify with the curriculum.

Curriculum which uses an inclusive, multicultural approach at MPC that addresses the learning styles of re-entry women and includes students' life experiences as part of the curriculum is the interdisciplinary Women's Studies courses. "Cross-referenced with the Humanities, History, Political Science, Art, Sociology, Psychology, Philosophy, English, Anthropology, Ethnic Studies, Personal Development, and Health departments to provide content about women and under-represented people" (Monterey), these courses were designed to include and make visible the lives and experiences of women that have previously been excluded from traditional scholarship. Women's Studies courses embrace a paradigm of knowledge that focuses on groups that have been historically marginalized or ignored both in academic literature

and in life experience. When re-entry women participate in this paradigmatic learning process, most gain ownership from their patriarchal controlled lives and see their circumstances in a new perspective. These re-entry women find this to be a liberating experience, empowering them as they actively identify with and participate in the learning experience. For instance, Belinda, recently separated from her husband and who has seven children with the four youngest living with her while the three eldest live with their father, took a Women's Studies course, titled Psychology of Women. When asked if she felt the class had helped her personally or academically, she replied:

That was really empowering, learning about myself and my past, and why I am the way I am, and about the experiences I have had.... The Women's Studies class helped me a lot to deal with [my husband]. It helped me to see a lot of stuff in my marriage that was tearing down what very little self-esteem that I had. I got really angry and it made it easier for me to go through with the divorce. You know, being here has helped me in so many ways, so much more than academically. It has changed my life completely. I feel 100% different than when I first started here.... I dumped a lot of that crap that I thought was me; that other people thought I should be. Here I am.

Recommendations for Community College Support Services and Policies

The re-entry women students at Monterey Peninsula College do have a number of characteristics and needs that are different from the traditional students on campus. They are very concerned about their multiple life-roles and how those roles interact with each other. They are also concerned with the financial issues surrounding their educational experience, as well as their need for the personal development an education will provide. These concerns underline the

necessity for a critical look at what support programs are available in the community college, how curriculum is developed, and how the overall campus environment either benefits or does not benefit the re-entry woman student.

Current literature on community college student services has determined the extent to which the needs of re-entry women are being addressed. Researchers familiar with the circumstances surrounding re-entry women claiming their education have recommended and described a number of supportive services and institutional policies that would incorporate the needs of re-entry women students and tailor services to meet their unique needs in the community college. According to Miller (2000), community colleges who have programs designed specifically with the re-entry woman student in mind benefit by achieving greater retention rates, thereby attaining a higher percentage of graduating students. Miller states that these programs must include the acknowledgment that re-entry women do require a support network including academic counseling, personal counseling, and social support.

Counseling

One of the first people that re-entry women meet once they decide to enroll in community college is an academic counselor. However, community college counselors have not always been knowledgeable of the diverse needs of this particular group of students. Academic counselors must make a concerted effort to see each re-entry woman student as a unique individual with many characteristics which are unlike the traditional student. In understanding each student's situation, counselors would be in a better position to provide all students with a broad range of tools, such as recommendations for transitional courses and referral to other campus support programs, which can be accessed to address their unique, complex circumstances.

For re-entry women, transitional courses play a critical role. In helping re-entry women negotiate the fundamental dilemmas they face when first entering college, community college counselors should strongly suggest successful introductory courses that introduce re-entry women students to the college experience. These introduction-to-the-college-experience-courses would provide women the encouragement and skills they would need to help them manage the stresses that hinder their educational goals and to increase their chances for successful completion of their academic programs.

In addition to transitional courses, referrals to campus support programs, such as re-entry centers or academic support centers should be consistently made. These support programs provide social and personal support, as well as an avenue to meet other individuals who are struggling with coursework. This particular recommendation complements a study by Carney-Crompton and Tan (2002) who found that higher levels of support results in better academic performance.

Restructuring the campus environment

Many re-entry women students in community colleges are first-generation students. In fact, all five of the interviewees and nineteen of the survey respondents are first-generation students. Most are from a lower economic class and more likely to be unfamiliar with the college environment. Perceived as different, and feeling as they are living between two worlds, they must address issues such as what to do when their child must remain home due to sickness or school holiday, and how to manage school with their family and work schedules. In order to help re-entry women overcome these barriers, community colleges must address the social, economic, and institutional issues which keep re-entry women students from attaining their educational goals and commit to creating conditions for optimal learning. These small policy

changes, such as adjusting academic calendars to coincide with the local K-12 school districts, and extending the hours of the campus daycare center, bookstore, counseling services, and other applicable offices, would provide better access for both re-entry women students and all community college students. By restructuring the access to these much needed programs, community colleges confirm their mission to provide support services that help students to succeed.

Women's programs / Re-entry centers

Re-entry women find strength in the positive relationships formed through support systems available in groups. As they transition to college, the perspectives of re-entry women students by community college administrators and staff need to be altered to consider the strength and uniqueness of this specific sub-group of students. "Increased awareness of the stresses, challenges, and additional responsibilities faced by adult re-entry women can be helpful to administrators and student services personnel interested in providing a supportive environment" (White, 2002, p.2). Considering the circumstances surrounding the re-entry woman's decision to return to school, providing a support network is essential to ease the transition and encourage the student to continue in her studies. As Carole stated:

My barriers to education have been both financial and emotional. CalWorks has provided book vouchers and counseling, and Supportive Services has helped me with accommodations for my learning disability and teaching me how to overcome it. They assisted me with the extra time I needed to take tests – it has really saved me! And Women's Programs has assisted me with everything! Just to be there, even just passing by and looking in makes me feel good because I know I have a place to come to.

By providing a re-entry center or a specific space for re-entry women students to gather, community colleges provide opportunities for the development of new sources for social support for re-entry women returning to school during these transitional or vulnerable stages in their lives. As with any group involved in a transformation of identity, re-entry women need help and direction in accepting their new role of student. Many feel dislocated because they are now required to function in an unfamiliar environment. With a positive support system available to benefit re-entry women, such as psychological counseling and time management workshops, the inclusion of re-entry centers in community colleges reaffirms the institution's commitment to serve underrepresented students.

At Monterey Peninsula College, the Re-entry and Multicultural Resource Center provides a location where students are offered encouragement, inspiration, and friendly support from other re-entry women students in a relaxed social atmosphere. The relationships formed between and among the students who come to the center guide a re-entry woman in a positive direction and stimulates the learning experience.

Providing a multicultural curriculum

One of the greatest contributions that community colleges can make to society is to realize its potential as the most important institution serving nontraditional education and, specifically, re-entry women. Although the content and pedagogy of college curriculum projects the illusion that it speaks to everyone, it often ignores the experiences, perspectives, and needs of the majority of the students, namely women. Historically, curriculum said different things to female and male students, because it was structured out of a sexist society. Teachers, textbook authors, and researchers who grew out of this sexist environment, naturally redeveloped their sexist beliefs and perspectives in their teaching, writing, and research interpretation. Even today,

in many classrooms, subliminal statements regarding “women’s proper sphere” still exist, reinforcing the powerlessness that many re-entry women feel in their return to school. Research on curriculum development designed to assist re-entry women students succeed in their educational goals offers suggestions for academic approaches which specifically support their unique and diverse needs. Community colleges should take a political stance in the way curriculum is developed by including a feminist epistemology. This theory of knowledge would construct effective curriculum that would include the insights of women’s experiences, thereby providing a critical perspective on society which would inform effective strategies for change (McCann & Kim, 2003). This political stance in curriculum development would differentiate the perspectives among social groups which are shaped by power relations between those groups, bringing a deeper understanding of the inequalities in education to all students. While some may consider this stance too political to implement, it is necessary. Many re-entry women students attending community college typically live in the margins rather than at the centre of society. At school they also continue to be marginalized and are required to understand the dominant (or patriarchal) perspective as well as their own in order to survive. Community college teachers and administrators must be responsible in helping re-entry women students make a strong connection to the learning environment and assist them to become powerful learners by transforming curriculum to include and validate the diverse life experiences of their multicultural student population. After all, the educational mission of community colleges is to provide educational opportunity to those who have been historically denied schooling, thereby creating the conditions to secure a better quality of life for themselves and their families. Therefore, it is the responsibility of the institution to change and meet the needs of re-entry women students in

claiming their educations by providing curriculum and a pedagogy that take into account the life experiences re-entry women students bring into the classroom.

Conclusion

Although community college now serves as the principal gateway to higher education for many re-entry women, it appears that the community college may also be their point of exit. What little hope there is for upward social mobility for re-entry women students does lie in the hands of the institution itself. For community colleges to meet the needs and insure their academic success, administrators must be responsive to changes in American society and thus responsive to their actual, not stereotypically conceived, needs. Many re-entry women experience social and political transformations after their return to school. Navigating through a process highly affected by environmental, social, and historical factors that have contributed to women's experiences of oppression, these re-entry women confront the sexism in our society and make personal meaning of this sexism which they encounter in the institutional setting, the classroom, and in their own lives. Being sensitive to the relationship between gender and power provides institutional leaders with an opportunity to be pathfinders in higher education. To help re-entry women students succeed in their educational goals, it is imperative that community colleges understand how their power and oppressive practices influence the social, pedagogical, and institutional structures of their schools and how these practices are experienced by re-entry women students.

By re-evaluating or instituting new programs and services that would benefit re-entry women students in overcoming their personal and institutional barriers; and, by understanding the relationship between gender and power in course content and pedagogy, community college administrators would see the need for developmental models for re-entry women students, and of

the crucial role that education plays in the development of consciousness. By intentionally implementing and supporting inclusive and multicultural practice and learning environments for re-entry women students, community colleges can become a catalyst for change in higher educational settings which would benefit both re-entry women students and the education process itself.

Appendix A: Survey of Re-Entry Women at Monterey Peninsula College

Survey of Re-Entry Women at Monterey Peninsula College

Please remember
This survey is anonymous.

Demographics:

1. What is your age? _____
2. Which ethnic group(s) do you identify as? _____
3. Your marital status? _____
4. List gender(s) and age(s) of your children: _____
5. If applicable, who cares for your children when you are in school and they are home due to age, school vacations, illness, etc?

6. Do you consider yourself disabled? YES NO
If yes, what is your disability? _____
7. Are you employed? YES NO
If yes, how many hours/week do you work? _____
What is your primary role if working while enrolled in school?
Student working to meet expenses? OR Employee enrolled in school?
8. What is the highest level of education that your parents have completed?
Mother _____ Father _____

Educational experience:

9. When did you graduate from high school? If you did not graduate, please explain why.

10. While in high school did you have any college or career goals? What were they?

11. Please explain why you did not go to college directly after high school.

12. For what reason are you now at MPC and what are your future plans?

13. Did anyone in particular help you to claim your education? Who? How?

14. What is your GPA?

15. Do you have problems in completing any of your classes? Please explain.

16. Instructors use various methods for testing, such as multiple-choice, fill-in-the-blank, on-demand-in-class essays, or essays which you write at home. Which do you prefer? Which do you try to avoid? Please explain.

17. Describe what you feel are barriers to your education. Barriers can include age, income, child care, family support, time for homework, learning disabilities, etc.

18. What do you believe the school might do to help you overcome these barriers?

19. Have you ever taken a Women's Studies class? _____

20. If so, do you feel this class helped you personally or academically? Please explain.

21. What else would you like me to know about your experience in claiming your education?

Support Services:

22. This college campus has a number of support services available to you. Please circle your experience with each, if any.

Tutoring Center	Very helpful	Somewhat helpful	Not helpful	Never access
English Center	Very helpful	Somewhat helpful	Not helpful	Never access
Math Lab	Very helpful	Somewhat helpful	Not helpful	Never access
Language Lab	Very helpful	Somewhat helpful	Not helpful	Never access
EOPS	Very helpful	Somewhat helpful	Not helpful	Never access
Women's Programs	Very helpful	Somewhat helpful	Not helpful	Never access
Personal Counseling	Very helpful	Somewhat helpful	Not helpful	Never access
Academic Counseling	Very helpful	Somewhat helpful	Not helpful	Never access
Career Center	Very helpful	Somewhat helpful	Not helpful	Never access
Supportive Services	Very helpful	Somewhat helpful	Not helpful	Never access
Transfer Center	Very helpful	Somewhat helpful	Not helpful	Never access
Health Center	Very helpful	Somewhat helpful	Not helpful	Never access
Children's Center	Very helpful	Somewhat helpful	Not helpful	Never access
CalWorks	Very helpful	Somewhat helpful	Not helpful	Never access
Financial Aid	Very helpful	Somewhat helpful	Not helpful	Never access

Thank you for participating!

Please return to Social Science 204
in the enclosed envelope.

Appendix B: Interview Questions

High School Experience:

1. What are all the ways that you would describe your high school experiences?
2. What are all the ways that you would describe your home life during your high school years?
3. What are all of the ways, positively or negatively, that your high school experiences shaped your future goals?
4. How would you describe the obstacles that prevented you from going to college right after high school?

Community College Experience:

1. How did you come to be a student at Monterey Peninsula College?
2. Can you give an example of someone who helped you to become a student at MPC?
3. Can you describe a typical school day from the time you and your children wake up?
4. Can you describe how your day changes when one of your children must stay home (due to illness or school closure)?
5. What has your academic experience been like here?
6. What are all the barriers or obstacles that you have experienced as a student?
7. Can you give me an example of a class that has been meaningful to you?
8. What are all of the things that instructors do in meaningful classes?
9. Can you give me an example of an instructor that has not been helpful to you?
10. What are all the types of support that you have received here at MPC?
11. How would you describe support that has helped you to be successful?
12. Describe a typical interaction with a support service that has been helpful.
13. Describe a typical interaction with a support service that has not been helpful.
14. What has been your overall experience with support services?
15. If you were going to create the ideal program for re-entry students, what would that look like?

Appendix C: Participant Demographics

Survey Participants

Thirty-five women completed the survey. Eight women are not considered re-entry students. The twenty-seven re-entry women who participated are between the ages of 20 and 54.

Race/ethnicity: Which ethnic group do you identify as?

- 1 Asian – Taiwanese
- 1 African American
- 18 Caucasian
- 1 Guamanian
- 1 Latina
- 1 Mexican
- 1 Puerto Rican
- 1 French immigrant (Caucasian)
- 1 German immigrant (Caucasian)
- 1 Polish immigrant (Caucasian)

Marital status:

- 6 Divorced (5 have children)
- 11 Married (4 have children)
- 2 Separated (1 has children)
- 8 Single (1 has three children)

Disability:

8 students claim they have a disability:

- 2 have learning disabilities
- 2 are physically disabled
- 4 have psychological disabilities (bipolar/manic/depressive/disorder, neuropathy, depression/anxiety)

Employment:

17 of the 27 re-entry students surveyed work outside the home in addition to attending classes.

- 3 @ 10 hrs/wk
- 1 @ 15 hrs/wk
- 1 @ 20 hrs/wk
- 1 @ 23 hrs/wk
- 2 @ 24 hrs/wk
- 2 @ 25 hrs/wk

1 @ 30 hrs/wk
1 @ 32 hrs/wk
1 @ 35 hrs/wk
1 @ 36 hrs/wk
2 @ 40 hrs/wk
1 @ 50 hrs/wk

The Women Interviewed

Alicia: age 39; white, divorced.
Three children aged 9, 14, and 16.
Works three part-time jobs for a total of 24 hours per week.
Currently taking 9 units.
Both parents have 8th grade educations.

Belinda: age 38; white, separated.
Seven children aged 3, 5, 8, 10, 15, 17, and 19.
Does not work outside her home.
Currently taking 10 units.
Her mother has some college; her father did not graduate high school.

Carole: age 41; Guamanian, divorced.
Four children aged 9, 12, 19, and 20.
Works 10 hours per week.
Currently taking 13 units.
Her parents have high school educations.

Diane: age 43; African-American / Korean, married.
Four children aged 13, 14, 15, and 17.
Does not work outside of her home.
Currently taking 13 units.
Her mother has some grade school; her father has a high school education.

Evelyn: age 46; African-American, separated for a long period.
Three grown children, 29, 26, and 23.
Cares for mother and grandson.
Currently taking 12 units.

Appendix D: Consent Forms

Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects, CSUMB CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

Title of Project: Community College and the Re-Entry Student: Addressing Obstacles that Affect the Success of Non-traditional Female Students

We would like you to participate in a research study conducted by Mary Porter to be used for her thesis in the Master of Arts in Education program at California State University, Monterey Bay.

The purpose of this research is to investigate ways in which the academic success rates of re-entry women students in community colleges can be improved. This research will provide a more comprehensive view of the barriers faced by re-entry women students in our local tri-county area, and make recommendations that could be implemented by community colleges to improve the successful completion of academic goals by this most deserving student population. It will explore the characteristics of re-entry women students that set them apart from traditional students, examine how these characteristics impact the learning experience, and discover how they are being addressed by institutional policy. On the basis of this research, recommendations will be made regarding programming that makes community colleges inclusive of re-entry women students.

You were selected as a participant in this study because, as a re-entry women student at Monterey Peninsula College, you have the personal knowledge of the challenges and stressors that many re-entry women students face in claiming their educations.

The benefits of participating in this project include having your experience as a re-entry woman student at Monterey Peninsula College validated and heard in a research project whose recommendations will be presented to the community colleges that service our tri-county area.

There are two ways to participate in this study. The first is an anonymous survey. This survey is four pages in length and will take you approximately 30 to 45 minutes to complete. The second is to volunteer to be interviewed. The purpose of the in-depth interview is to obtain a broad view of your life circumstances and how they affect your academic pursuits. The interview should last between one and two hours. We will use a pseudonym for the interview to protect your confidentiality. The interview will include discussion of: your educational history and the barriers that you have faced; if and how your culture has played a part in your education; what type of family support you receive; what support programs you have accessed at Monterey Peninsula College; and your opinion of your classroom experiences, including testing. During the interview you have the option to not answer any of the questions. If at any time you feel uncomfortable, you have the option to end the interview.

As a result of participation in the in-depth interviews, you may have an emotional reaction in bringing up the past and describing for me the more difficult times of your life that have resulted in you not receiving your education in a more "traditional" manner. Should this occur, we have available a licensed therapist to whom you can be referred.

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will only be disclosed with your written or witnessed verbal permission or as required by law. Your name will never be disclosed unless you want your name to be disclosed. Throughout my research, survey responses will only be identified by number, and interviewees will only be identified by a pseudonym. Our interviews will be recorded with a digital machine for transcription

purposes only. There will be no tape. For confidentiality, I will be the only one with access to the digital recorder. Once I have transcribed the recording, I will erase it for further confidentiality.

Taking part in this project is entirely up to you. You can choose whether or not to be in the study. If you volunteer to be in this study, you may withdraw at any time without consequences of any kind. You may also refuse to answer any questions you do not want to answer and still remain in the study. The investigator may withdraw you from this research if circumstances arise which warrant doing so.

If you want to know more about this research project or have questions or concerns, please call me at (831) 595-6631 or by email at mary_porter@csumb.edu. If you have any further questions and would like to contact my advisor, Dr. Christine Sleeter, you may reach her by email at christine_sleeter@csumb.edu, or if you do not have access to email, at (831) 656-9759.

The project has been approved by California State University, Monterey Bay. You may withdraw your consent at any time and discontinue participation without penalty. You are not waiving any legal claims, rights or remedies because of your participation in this research study.

If you have questions about CSUMB's rules for research, please call the Committee for Human Subjects Chair, Linda Rogers, CSUMB School of Education, 100 Campus Center, Building. 15, Seaside CA 93966, 831.582.5080.

You will get a copy of this consent form. Thank you for your participation.

Sincerely,

Mary Porter
Student, MAE Program
College of Professional Studies

Consent Statement

I understand the procedures described. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction and I freely agree to participate in this study. I know what I will have to do and that I can stop at any time.

I have been given a copy of this Consent Form.

Signature

Date

Signature of Researcher

In my judgment, the participant is voluntarily and knowingly giving informed consent and possesses the legal capacity to give informed consent to participate in this research study.

Signature of Researcher

Date

Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects, CSUMB

AUDIO/VIDEO CONSENT FORM

Title of Project: Community College and the Re-Entry Student: Addressing Obstacles that Affect the Success of Non-traditional Female Students

As part of this project, I will be making an audiotape recording of your interview during the research. Please indicate what uses of these tapes you are willing to permit by putting your initials next to the uses you agree to and sign the form at the end.

This choice is completely up to you. I will only use the tapes in ways you agree. In any use of the tapes, you will not be identified by name.

Initials

- | | |
|---|-----------|
| 1. The tapes can be studied by the research team for use in the research project. | _____ |
| 2. The tapes can be used for educational purposes. | _____ |
| 3. The tapes can be used for scientific publications. | _____ N/A |
| 4. The tapes can be shown at scientific conferences or meetings. | _____ N/A |
| 5. The tapes can be shown in the classrooms to students. | _____ N/A |
| 6. The tapes can be used on television or radio. | _____ N/A |
| 7. The tapes can be shown in public presentations to non-scientific groups. | _____ N/A |
| 8. The tapes can be posted to a website. | _____ N/A |
-

Consent Statement

I have read the above descriptions and give my consent for the use of the tapes as indicated by my initials above. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction and I freely agree to participate in this study. I know that I can stop taping at any time.

I have been given a copy of this Consent Form.

Signature

Date

Signature of Researcher

In my judgment, the participant is voluntarily and knowingly giving informed consent and possesses the legal capacity to give informed consent to participate in this research study.

Signature of Researcher

Date

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