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Factors Influencing Persistence Among Nontraditional University Students

Gail Markle[1]

Abstract

One third of undergraduate students enrolled in U.S. colleges and universities are considered nontraditional as defined by the single criterion of being aged 25 years and older. Nontraditional students have significantly lower graduation rates than traditional students. Using a role theory perspective this mixed-methods study examines the factors influencing persistence among a sample of 494 nontraditional men and women undergraduates attending a large public university in the southeastern United States. In this study, persistence rates did not differ between men and women although the factors influencing persistence did. Grade point average and confidence in graduating positively influenced persistence for both men and women. Women enrolled part-time were more likely to persist than those enrolled full-time. Although interrole conflict leads many women to consider withdrawing from school, most do not. Instead they exhibit a *will to persist* that enables them to overcome obstacles and ultimately graduate.

Keywords

persistence, nontraditional students, role theory, interrole conflict

One third of American undergraduate students enrolled in 2011 were considered nontraditional students as defined by the single criterion of age being 25 years and older. The population of nontraditional students is projected to increase significantly. For the

[1]Kennesaw State University, Kennesaw, GA, USA

Corresponding Author:
Gail Markle, Department of Sociology and Criminal Justice, Kennesaw State University, 402 Bartow Avenue NW, Social Science Building Room 4071, Kennesaw, GA 30144, USA.
Email: gmarkle@kennesaw.edu

period 2008 to 2019, enrollment of students aged 25 to 34 years and 35 and older is expected to increase 28% and 22% respectively, compared to 12% for students aged 18 to 24 years (National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES], 2011b). Nontraditional students have dramatically lower graduation rates than traditional students. For example, 64% of 18-year-old students enrolled in 2003-2004 graduated within 6 years compared to 20% of those aged 24 to 29 years, and 16% of those aged 30 and older (NCES, 2011a). To meet the objective of increased college completion, the federal initiative "Pathways to Success" charges institutions of higher education with increasing educational attainment of nontraditional students and identifying best practices in serving them (Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance, 2012). Therefore it is imperative to understand what influences persistence for this academically vulnerable population.

There is a significant body of scholarship regarding the experiences of nontraditional students; however, only a few studies have specifically examined persistence (Bergman, Gross, Berry, & Shuck, 2014; Gigliotti & Huff, 1995; Metzner & Bean, 1987; Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2005). This study uses both quantitative and qualitative methods to examine the factors influencing persistence over a 3-year period among a sample of nontraditional students from a large public university in the southeastern United States. For this study, nontraditional students are defined as those who meet any one of the following characteristics: are 25 years of age or older or have a 5-year gap between enrollment in high school and college, are employed part-time or full-time, or serve in the role of spouse, domestic partner, parent, or caretaker. The quantitative part of the study examines the effects of demographic, academic, and situational variables on persistence, while the qualitative part examines participants' reasons for considering withdrawing and/or remaining enrolled, and their suggestions for institutional support. A mixed-methods approach enables an expanded analysis of the issues associated with persistence for nontraditional students, increasing our understanding of their struggles to succeed. Such an understanding is crucial for faculty members and administrators to effectively respond to federal and institutional initiatives calling for increased retention and degree completion rates. Additionally, increasing degree completion among adults has important ramifications for individuals and society in general (Bergman et al., 2014).

Theoretical Framework and Prior Research

Since nontraditional students often juggle multiple roles across the domains of family, work, and school, role theory is useful for examining the factors that influence persistence. Role strain, the difficulty experienced in meeting the demands of multiple roles (Goode, 1960), has three dimensions: (1) role conflict, (2) role overload, and (3) role contagion (Home, 1998). Role conflict occurs when meeting the demands of one role is made more difficult by the demands of the other (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985).

Coser (1974) describes work and family as "greedy institutions," referring to a type of social organization that demands total commitment from its members. Work is one of the most defining parts of an individual's social identity and a significant source of self-worth. Post–industrial market work, at least for managerial and professional jobs,

a significant difference in considering withdrawing between men ($M = 0.335$, $SD = 0.4774$) and women, $M = 0.357$, $SD = 0.4799$; $t(433) = .241$, $p = .809$. About one third of the nontraditional students in this sample experienced moderate levels of interrole conflict, while 43% experienced high to very high levels. There was a significant difference among the types of interrole conflict experienced, $F(1, 443) = 78.562$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.347$. The most frequently experienced type was work–school conflict ($M = 10.29$, $SD = 3.201$), followed by school–family conflict ($M = 9.87$, $SD = 3.073$).

Persistence

Table 2 presents the results from the regression analyses predicting persistence. The likelihood ratio test indicates both models have adequate fit: $\chi^2 = 27.371(14)$, $p < .05$, for men, and $\chi^2 = 80.746(14)$, $p < .001$, for women. The Nagelkerke R^2 statistic was .316 for men and .341 for women, indicating the models explain 31.6% of the variance in persistence for men, and 34.1% for women. GPA and confidence in graduating were the only significant predictors of persistence for men. The odds ratio for GPA (2.708*) indicates that each 1-point increase in GPA was associated with a 170.8% increase in persistence for men. The odds ratio for confidence in graduating (2.417**) indicates that each unit increase in the variable (on a scale of 1-5) was associated with a 141.7% increase in persistence. In other words, men with higher GPAs and higher levels of confidence in graduating were more likely to persist.

GPA, confidence in graduating, and full-/part-time enrollment were the only significant predictors of persistence for women. The odds ratio for GPA (5.093***) indicates that each 1-point increase in GPA was associated with a 409.3% increase in persistence for women. The odds ratio for confidence in graduating (1.709*) indicates that each unit increase in the variable (on a scale of 1-5) was associated with a 70.9% increase in persistence. The odds ratio for full-/part-time enrollment (0.418**) indicates that women attending school full-time were 58.2% less likely to persist than women attending part-time. In other words, women with higher GPAs, with higher levels of confidence, and attending school part-time were more likely to persist.

Table 3 presents the results from the regression analyses predicting considering withdrawing. The likelihood ratio test indicates both models have adequate fit: $\chi^2 = 31.369(13)$, $p < .01$, for men, and $\chi^2 = 76.647(13)$, $p < .001$, for women. The Nagelkerke R^2 statistic was .348 for men and .312 for women, indicating that the models explain 34.8% of the variance in persistence for men and 31.2% for women. Confidence in graduating was the only significant predictor of considering withdrawing for men. The odds ratio for confidence in graduating (0.365**) indicates that each unit increase in the variable (on a scale of 1-5) was associated with a 63.5% decrease in considering withdrawing for men. In other words, men with higher levels of confidence in graduating were less likely to consider withdrawing.

Academic classification, university satisfaction, confidence in graduating, work–school conflict, and school–family conflict were significant predictors of considering

worried about incurring debt. Age intensified this concern. As one man stated, "Because of my age I felt it might be better just to give up and stick with my 40 hour a week job, so I can start a family." Most men viewed their education from a cost–benefit perspective. They felt they were taking a risk by pursuing an education with no guarantee of a future payoff.

Women were more likely to consider withdrawing due to interrole conflict. This finding corresponds to the quantitative analyses. Women held high performance expectations for family and work roles making it difficult for them to be the kind of student they aspired to be. As one woman explained,

> I feel that I am an A student but I do not feel that I am able to spend the time needed to do my very best. I feel I am not giving anything—children, marriage, school, work—my best.

Women were oppressed by time. Success in each of their roles was directly related to the amount of time spent performing role-related behavior. Women had insufficient time to devote to any of their roles, which caused them immense stress. This time pressure made them anxious about their ability to perform the student role and led them to consider withdrawing.

Many participants considered withdrawing because they felt "out of place." As nontraditional students, they felt "different." They were unlike traditional students whom they perceived as carefree and unencumbered and having a much easier time of school. In this context, age was more of an issue for women, as many described being excluded from group work by younger students. Women also frequently described being "put down" or patronized by professors, especially regarding family issues, as one woman described,

> The majority of professors do not treat nontraditional students as adults. It disturbs me that so many professors tell nontraditional students that they need to put their kids and family life on the back burner. Professors have criticized me for having children and given me a rough time when I miss class because of my child being sick.

This quote reflects an expectation from professors that the student role supersedes other life roles. Women were frequently called to account for allowing their family role to intrude on their student role, while men did not report such occurrences.

Both men and women felt marginalized by institutional policies they believed favored traditional students. They expressed a sense of not belonging, of being relegated to the periphery of the university. The following response illustrates one participant's sense of alienation:

> Class schedules, advisor schedules, and professor schedules are all geared toward traditional students. As an older student I often feel out of place.

Again, age is an important distinction, but these students believed their work and family responsibilities placed them at a disadvantage compared to traditional students.

The barriers to persistence experienced by these nontraditional students differed by gender. Men seemed more concerned about finances and grappled with the question "Is it worth it?" Women were more likely to experience difficulty managing the day-to-day demands of their multiple roles. Both men and women felt stigmatized by age, but women felt additionally stigmatized as parents; as mothers they were seen as less committed students. For women, the dilemma was how to meet their own expectations for role performance, which was made more difficult by the expectations of others.

Overcoming Barriers

Almost two thirds (63.2%) of those who considered withdrawing ultimately did not. In response to the open-ended survey question, "What has prevented you from withdrawing?" participants described overcoming barriers to persistence. Women were more likely to reduce their course load or work hours to remain in school, while men were more likely to be given financial support (tuition reimbursement) and flexibility (leaving early) from their place of employment. Many continued because they felt they had already invested or sacrificed too much to give up. Some persevered because they wanted a better life for their children. The most important factor in sustaining students was the meaning that degree completion held for them, and this differed by gender.

For most men, obtaining a degree was a means to an end: of career advancement and increased earning potential. One stated that he did not withdraw because completing his degree would bring "financial stability for my family, a marketable skill set that has demand in the workplace, and an honorable career." For another, "the thought of the big bucks at the end of the rainbow" kept him going.

For most women, though, obtaining a degree was more than a means to an end; it was transformative. It would signify that they were productive, capable of achievement, and deserving of respect. One woman explained, "I'm tired of feeling stupid for not having a degree."

Many women returned to school to reclaim their "dream" of attaining a degree or a career that had been interrupted or "denied" them. Several stated defiantly they would not withdraw no matter how difficult because it was finally "their turn," their chance, as one woman put it, "to do one thing that is just about me, not my kids or my husband"; they were finally putting themselves first. Many women who considered withdrawing but did not, cited sheer determination as their reason. Their responses read like mantras: "Gotta keep going"; "No excuses just do it." These women demonstrated what can be referred to as a *will to persist* as these responses illustrate:

> I am under so much stress, but I decide to push on for this one thing I so desire.

> I am setting an example for my children and others that despite the hardships, the tears, the lack of sleep and the lack of free time, I can achieve what I have set out to do and hopefully go on to make a huge impact in this world.

Most men were pursuing their degree for instrumental reasons associated with work; perhaps this explains why they were more likely to receive workplace support.

For women, degree attainment was more than instrumental; it had symbolic meaning. Completing their degree would be such a transformative achievement that it imbued them with a sense of indomitableness that sustained them, enabling them to overcome considerable barriers in order to persist.

Institutional Support

In response to the open-ended survey question, "What services could the university provide to help reduce your school-related stress?" participants offered numerous suggestions: expand course offerings, improve student advising, and increase access to faculty members. Women wanted affordable on-campus child care, and men wanted more night courses. Many felt disadvantaged compared to traditional students and believed accommodations should be made. They proposed exemptions from attendance policies, course credit for work experience, specialized degree programs, and opportunities to "complete courses in their own time." Women in particular felt professors should be more receptive to their family-related needs. Men were more likely to request financial assistance such as reduced tuition, scholarships, or work–study programs. Several students expressed resentment over their perceived second-class treatment, and one recommended sensitivity training for professors, explaining,

> Nontraditional students have children, jobs, husbands, and life obligations. College is not a party for us. We are here to learn and we are going into debt to be here. Show us some respect for the decision we made to better ourselves and teach your professors how to treat adult students.

This quote shows that nontraditional students perceive that attending college is more difficult for them compared to traditional students. As this woman describes, her student role is just one of many demanding roles. Attending college is costly, in terms of time and money she does not have. Completing her degree also has a symbolic meaning for her—she will become a better person. This student wants to be acknowledged for the extraordinary effort she is making.

Summary

Figures 1 and 2 present a heuristic model integrating the quantitative and qualitative results of the study illustrating how these results differ by gender. For both men and women, GPA and confidence in graduating (or will to persist) positively influence persistence. Part-time enrollment is related to persistence for women but not for men. Academic classification, university satisfaction, work–school conflict, and school–family conflict influence consideration of withdrawing for women but not for men. For both men and women, confidence in graduating (or will to persist) mediates the effect of considering withdrawing, reducing its influence on persistence to insignificance.

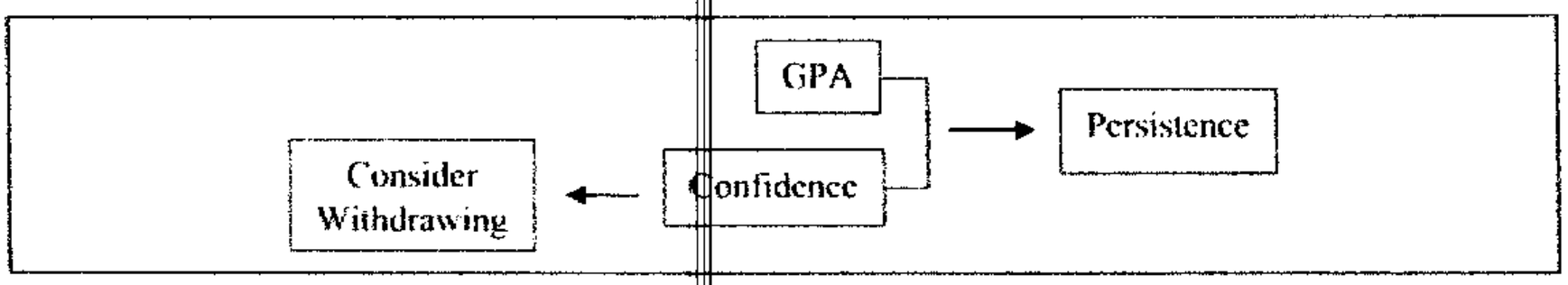

Figure 1. Heuristic model: Men.

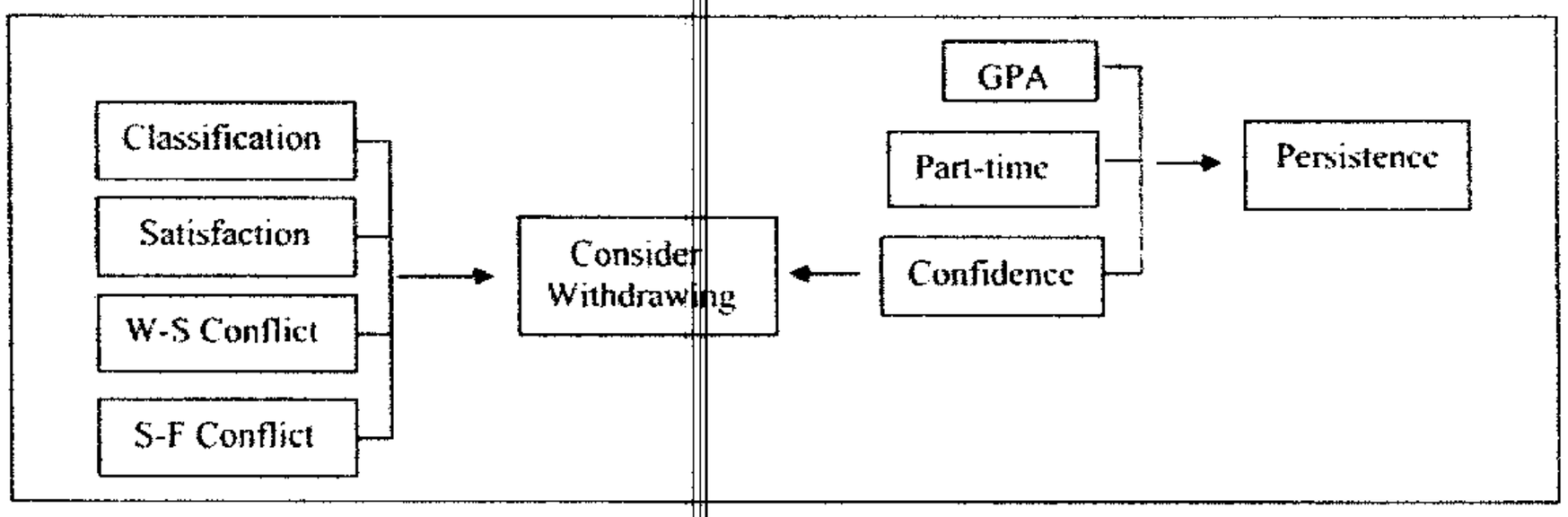

Figure 2. Heuristic model: Women.
Note. W-S = work–school; S-F = school–family.

Discussion and Conclusion

The finding that students with higher GPAs were more likely to persist is consistent with prior research (Gigliotti & Huff, 1995; Metzner & Bean, 1987) as is the finding that social integration does not influence persistence. In this study, there was no significant difference in persistence between men and women, but there were gender differences among the factors that influence persistence. Among women, those who attended part-time were more likely to persist. The closer women got to degree completion the more likely they were to consider withdrawing, perhaps because their courses became more difficult (Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2005). Women participants with higher levels of work–school and school–family conflict were more likely to consider withdrawing, while those more satisfied with the university were less likely to consider doing so. These factors were not significant for men.

The interrole conflict these women experienced led them to consider withdrawing because they feared they could not successfully perform all of their roles. They were concerned about the impact their student role had on their ability to perform their parent role and felt guilty about shortchanging their families by pursuing their own goals (Christie et al., 2008; Deutsch & Schmertz, 2011; Reay et al., 2002). While the men expressed regret about spending less time with their families, they never mentioned guilt (Widoff, 1999). They had more discretion in apportioning their time among roles (Pedersen, 2012; Stone & O'Shea, 2013). The women were more apprehensive about their ability to perform their student role (Christie et al., 2008; Stone & O'Shea, 2013)

as well as their ability to integrate an additional demanding role into their already busy lives.

For the women in this study, the performance of the student role was affected by their perception of difference as nontraditional students (Marandet & Wainwright, 2010). They felt excluded by traditional students (Kasworm, 2005) and patronized or dismissed by faculty. Age had a double-edged impact on this sense of difference: These women did not want their age to affect how other students treated them, but they did want it to affect how professors treated them. They wanted professors to treat them as adults.

Interrole conflict and a perception of difference led the nontraditional women students in this study to consider withdrawing from school; however, most did not. Instead, they exhibited a *will to persist* that enabled them to overcome obstacles and ultimately graduate. This will to persist was grounded in several factors. Many of these women returned to school to fulfill a dream they deferred in order to care for others, finally taking "their turn" to pursue their goals (Kasworm, 2005; Reay et al., 2002; Vaccaro & Lovell, 2010). As these women illustrate, completing the degree as a mature woman student has multiple meanings beyond the credential—it signifies an investment in themselves (Vaccaro & Lovell, 2010), represents a hard-won achievement made all the more difficult due to their multiple roles (Marandet & Wainwright, 2010), signifies a deeper commitment to the parenting role by enabling them to better provide for their children or serve as a role model (Deutsch & Schmertz, 2011), and symbolizes the sacrifices made by their family on their behalf. For the women in this study, completing the degree was transformative (O'Shea & Stone, 2011), empowering them to either reclaim their past selves or create new ones (Babineau & Packard, 2006) in order to take up professions that for many involve care work in fields such as health, education, and social work. Given this context, the completion of their degree represents a heroic quest (Campbell, 1949/2004), evoking a similarly heroic will to persist. It appears that for nontraditional women students to put themselves first, the reason for their doing so must be of epic importance.

For men, the student role corresponds with their parenting role, as it supports the behavioral expectation of fathers as good providers (Pedersen, 2012; Widoff, 1999). Time men spend performing the student role is viewed as an investment in the family. For women, the student role conflicts with their parenting role, as behavioral expectations of mothers are met through spending time with their family or by performing family-related domestic work (Pedersen, 2012; Stone & O'Shea, 2013). Time women spend performing the student role is more likely to be viewed as an investment in personal achievement. These gendered role expectations seem anachronistic, but they are supported by research spanning the past 40 years.

An important finding from this study is that for the women, despite the significant increase in responsibilities and obligations associated with the student role, there was no corresponding decrease in performance expectations for their other roles. These women students continued to bear the main responsibility for raising children and

maintaining the household. Gendered role expectations mean that men's time is more valuable than women's time, making it less likely that women will have the dedicated, uninterrupted time needed to successfully perform as students (Stone & O'Shea, 2013). Their student role renders them different from other mothers and their parenting role renders them different from other students, leaving them to struggle with the pressures of being a mature student in isolation (Edwards, 1993). Their intense dedication, or will to persist, enables nontraditional women students to overcome countless obstacles associated with their multiple roles in order to persist, yet ironically, they are seen as less committed than their male counterparts and traditional students (Gouthro, 2002).

Feminist researchers argue that the process of attaining an education is more difficult for mature women than men due to structural and institutional inequalities (Edwards, 1993; Gouthro, 2002), yet these difficulties tend to be framed as individual personal deficits (Stalker, 2001). The enduring nature of this issue calls for a new approach. A feminist perspective requires that social and political issues be included in the analysis, making it possible for effective solutions to emerge at the macro level (Stalker, 2001). A feminist perspective also encourages educators to develop an awareness of the powerful impact social structures have on adult students' educational experiences (Gouthro, 2002).

There are limitations to this study. Participants were from a single university in the United States, limiting the generalizability of the findings. The response rate was low (12.2%) but not unexpected for a survey delivered online to undergraduate students (Sax, Gilmartin, & Bryant, 2003). The nonrandom sample increases the possibility of sample bias. The qualitative data were limited to participant responses to open-ended survey questions; it was not possible to ask participants to expand on their responses, as is possible in other methods of qualitative data collection, such as interviews. Further research should focus more closely on the social context within which nontraditional students pursue their degrees. The ways in which systemic structures support barriers to degree completion should be made visible. The perception of being different was so widely held by the women in this study that it merits further research.

This study used both quantitative and qualitative methods to examine the factors influencing persistence among nontraditional students and found that interrole conflict and a perception of difference make it especially difficult for women to complete their education. This study is important because it increases our understanding of the barriers to success experienced by nontraditional students. The findings of this study have implications for faculty members who want to improve their performance vis-à-vis nontraditional students and for administrators tasked with developing strategies for improving retention and graduation rates.

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Author Biography

Gail Markle is an assistant professor of sociology at Kennesaw State University. Her research interests include pro-environmental behavior and issues in higher education.