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Defining College Readiness from the Inside Out:
First-Generation College Student Perspectives

Kathleen Byrd, M. Ed.

Developmental Education Reading and English Instructor

South Puget Sound Community College

132 Plymouth St. N.W., Olympia, WA 98502

kathb@u.washington.edu. (360) 754-2889

Ginger MacDonald, Ph.D.

Director and Professor of Education

University of Washington, Tacoma

1900 Commerce Street, WCG – 324, Tacoma, WA 98402

gmac@u.washington.edu. (253) 692-5690

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Abstract

This study provides understanding of college readiness from the perspectives of older first-generation college students, transferred from community college. Results indicate life experiences contribute to academic skills, time management, goal focus, and self-advocacy. Research is recommended to improve nontraditional student advising and placement, community college-to-university transfer, and college reading instruction.

Defining College Readiness from the Inside Out:

First-Generation College Student Perspectives

College readiness is one of seven national education priorities (U. S. Department of Education, 2000). Meanwhile, according to McCabe (2000) in a national study of community college education, 41% percent of entering community college students and 29% of all entering college students are underprepared in at least one of the basic skills of reading, writing, and math. Since the 1980s, colleges have increasingly required placement testing to determine college readiness and offered or required developmental or remedial education for students placing below college level (Amey & Long, 1998; King, Rasool, & Judge, 1994). While the rise in developmental programs and courses at community colleges might indicate that the problem of underpreparedness is growing, underpreparedness for college-level work is not a new phenomenon; rather it is a historical problem (Maxwell, as cited in Platt, 1986).

Even as a college education becomes increasingly imperative for social and economic success (Day & McCabe, 1997; Lavin, 2000; Ntiri, 2001), access to college is problematic for nontraditional or high-risk students. This situation is due to issues of academic, social, and economic readiness (Hoyt, 1999; Valadez, 1993). Increasingly, decisions about college readiness are made by standardized assessments. In the recent past, some colleges maintained open enrollment policies that allowed nontraditional students to enter the system, but that is changing. Standardized-test-based admissions may overlook nontraditional students' historical and cultural background that might include strengths as well as deficits related to readiness for college.

This study explored the nature of college readiness from the perspectives of first-generation college students. The participants of this study had transferred to a university from a community college, were older than 25, and were of a first generation in their families to attend

college. From the standpoint of successful degree-seeking students who fit this definition of nontraditional, the researchers explored these four general questions: (a) What does it mean to be ready for college? (b) What do successful nontraditional students bring to their college experiences that contribute to their success? (c) How can nontraditional learners be seen to have strengths and not just deficits? and, (d) How are students prepared or not prepared for college in ways not measured by standardized tests?

Prediction and College Readiness

College readiness involves prediction. Placement tests and other standardized measures are often used to predict students' readiness for college. Armstrong (1999) and King et al (1994) concluded that the predictive value of standardized placement tests is questionable. In addition, Armstrong's (1999) study showed "little or no relationship between [placement] test scores and student performance in class" (p. 36). This current study attempts to explore the challenge set forth by King et al. (1994): "If scores do not predict success, then we must consider alternative explanations for student success" (p. 7).

Developmental Education Programs

Developmental education courses at community colleges help to provide underprepared students with math, reading and English and study skills to succeed in college. Research findings from studies conducted to evaluate the effectiveness of such programs are predominately positive (Amey & Long, 1998; Hennessey, 1990; Hoyt, 1999; Kraska, Nadelman, Maner, & McCormick, 1990; Napoli & Hiltner, 1993). However, questions of college-readiness, even as students enter and exit developmental education courses, remain (Hoyt, 1999). Boylan, Bliss, and Bonham, (1997) conducted a meta-analysis of developmental programs that included consideration of mandatory assessment and placement on the success and retention of college students. They

found that while mandatory assessment and placement were not found to impact overall retention rates or grade point average, these factors did affect student success within developmental courses.

Hoyt (1999) conducted a study to examine the influence of student need for remediation on retention rates at a community college. Based on that study, Hoyt concluded that predicting retention for under-prepared students is difficult because of the many factors involved. However, the study indicated that first-term academic performance had the strongest relationship to retention, followed by student receipt of financial aid. As a result of that study, Hoyt (1999) emphasized the need for interventions that focus on the academic needs of students and for strengthening financial aid programs, particularly for high-risk students.

Hennessy (1990) found that students who successfully completed a reading improvement course were more likely to be successful in college classes. Hennessy speculated two possible causes for their success. One possible factor was that participation in the reading course led to student success, or the second possibility that Hennessy (1990) raises is that those “who heeded their counselor’s advice to enroll in a reading course may have had different goals, attitudes, or motivation than students in other groups” (p. 117). In other words, individual student characteristics upon entry into college may have contributed to student success.

College Student Characteristics and Behaviors

Student behaviors and characteristics such as personality factors have been explored and attributed to the success of underprepared learners (Amey & Long, 1998; Ley & Young, 1998; Ochroch & Dugan, 1986; Smith & Commander; Valadez, 1993). Ochroch and Dugan (1986) concluded that personality factors such as self-esteem and internal locus of control were correlated with success for *high-risk* students. Amey and Long (1998) compared successful and

unsuccessful *underprepared* students and concluded that “differences in outcomes for the students in the two groups were related to actions taken by the students and/or the institution while the student was in attendance” (p. 5). Because college places responsibility for success on the student, self-regulating behavior may help indicate student readiness for college. Smith and Commander (1999) observed student behavior in the classroom and concluded that many students in regular classes, as well as in developmental education classes, failed to understand college culture. They also found that students often lacked the tacit intelligence required for success in college; this knowledge includes things such as attending class, being prepared, using course materials, and collaborating with classmates. These authors recommend explicit teaching of the practical skills needed for college.

College Culture

College readiness involves understanding student characteristics and skills within the context of college. A student’s ability to navigate the culture has been shown to contribute to success. For example, Napoli and Wortman’s (1996) meta-analysis determined that student academic and social integration was positively correlated with student success. Valadez (1993) conducted ethnographic interviews to understand the role of cultural capital on the aspirations of nontraditional students, finding strengths in what they contribute to the culture of college.

Method

The qualitative methods of this study followed an in-depth phenomenological interview methodology (Cresswell, 2002; McMillan, 2000). Specifically, interview protocols as pioneered by Perry (1968), conducted by Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1986) and, more recently Light (2001), were followed. These studies share the quest for student voices in order to

deepen an understanding of adult development that might improve the practice of higher education.

Participants

Eight participants volunteered from an upper division, undergraduate liberal arts program of a small urban university located in the Pacific Northwest. The participants (a) were of junior or senior status, (b) had earned an Associate of Arts degree from a community college, (c) were older than 25, and (d) were first-generation college students.

Procedures

Partially structured, 30 to 60 minute interviews were conducted with individual participants to gather data about their backgrounds and experiences as college students. Protocol questions were designed to encourage student perspectives of college readiness. To increase reliability, each interview followed the same structured protocol, but clarifying questions were sometimes asked. Immediately following each interview, the interviewer wrote a reflexive journal entry (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993), noting emerging themes and highlights of each interview. Consistency and accuracy of interpretation was increased by adhering to the structured protocol and by triangulation of data, which was achieved by comparing researcher field notes with audiotapes of the interviews. Finally, participants were invited to review and critique field notes and tape recordings. Credibility of data analysis was strengthened with peer debriefing as the researchers worked together to discover and refine themes.

While the interview protocol was carefully followed, qualitative design allows for modification of the process as themes emerge. Rennie, Phillips, and Quartaro (1988) provide validity for this “constant comparative” approach. After the first two participants were

interviewed, a question that asked about previous community college experience was added because, during the first two interviews, participants focused on previous community college experience.

Data Analysis. The interviews were transcribed verbatim for data analysis. All of the transcripts were coded in their entirety. Records of the transcriptions and the coding process constitute an audit trail of the data analysis procedure. Eventually, 10 themes were chosen to code all of the data with a separate code for irrelevant information.

Results

Ten themes emerged and were organized into the following categories: (a) skills and abilities perceived as important for college readiness, (b) background factors and life experiences that contribute to college readiness, and (c) nontraditional student self-concept. The 11th code “irrelevant information” was used for information not related to the research questions. The next three sections describe codes and definitions that emerged in the qualitative analysis of transcripts.

College Readiness: Skills and Abilities

This first category identifies participant ideas about skills and abilities that are important for college readiness.

Code 1. Academic skills: Participants discussed essential academic skills that included (a) reading, (b) writing, (c) math, (d) technology, (e) communication, and (f) study skills.

Code 2. Time management: Participants discussed the importance of time management for college readiness

Code 3. Goal focus: Participants expressed the importance of having a goal and applying oneself for college readiness.

Code 4. Self-advocacy: Participants shared advice or stories about being able to speak up for one's needs and to seek help when necessary.

Background Factors

This second broad category identifies factors discussed by participants as influential to a decision to enroll or prepare for college.

Code 5. Family factors: Participants shared family experiences or expectations about college that influenced their decision or readiness for college.

Code 6. Career influences: Participants discussed work experience related to college readiness or career motivations that influenced the decision to go to college.

Code 7. Financial concerns: Participants shared experiences and issues about finances and attending college.

Code 8. College preparation: Participants discussed previous high school and community college educational experiences in relation to their readiness for university studies.

Nontraditional Student Self-concept

This third category identifies participants' sense of identity as a college student and ideas related to navigating the culture of college.

Code 9. Self-concept: Participants shared ideas about their identity as a college student and/or changes to self-concept as a result of college experiences.

Code 10. College system: Participants shared a response that pertained to understanding the college system, college standards, and the culture of college.

Code 11. Irrelevant information: Participants shared information that was irrelevant to understanding college readiness.

Table 1 shows data analysis according to the final 11 codes. The number of distinct instances a response was mentioned for each code out of a total of 300 responses is indicated by *responses*.. The number of participants out of eight who included a response for each code is indicated by *participants*..

Table 1

*Codes**Category 1: College readiness skills and abilities*

Code	<i>Responses out of 300</i>	<i>Participants out of 8</i>
1. Academic skills	18	8
2. Time management	19	8
3. Goal focus	24	7
4. Self-advocacy	16	5

Category 2: Background factors

Code	<i>Responses out of 300</i>	<i>Participants out of 8</i>
5. Family factors	40	8
6. Career influences	22	8
7. Financial concerns	22	7
8. College preparation	20	8

Category 3: Nontraditional student self-concept

Code	<i>Responses out of 300</i>	<i>Participants out of 8</i>
9. Self-concept	53	8
10. College system	39	8

Category 4: Irrelevant Information

Code	<i>Responses out of 300</i>	<i>Participants out of 8</i>
11. Irrelevant information	27	8

*Qualitative Findings**College Readiness Skills and Abilities*

In addition to recognized academic skills, participants of this study indicated that (a) skills in time-management, (b) the ability to apply oneself and focus on a goal, and (c) skills for advocating for oneself as a learner are essential for college readiness. Participants emphasized these skills and abilities more than academic skills during the interviews. For example, the total combined incidents where students mentioned any academic skills was 18; however, time management alone generated 19 distinct responses, mentioned by all participants.

All participants discussed academic skills required for college readiness, recommending that students preparing for college should strengthen skills in reading, writing, and math. Reading and writing skills were discussed more often than other academic skills, with six participants mentioning them. Four participants stressed reading as an area where they felt underprepared academically, and this skill was often related to time management and high university standards compared to community college and high school. Writing, on the other hand, was often stressed as important, but only one participant mentioned feeling underprepared in this area. Participants often reflected that students need strong writing skills for college, and four participants claimed strong writing skills, using phrases such as: “I am a writer,” or a “I am a strong writer...” as a way to emphasize this as contributing to their readiness.

Time management is a skill that all of the participants noted as critical for college readiness. Participants indicated the importance of this skill when discussing time needed for studying outside class and course-load requirements while trying to manage priorities for work and family. The theme of time management elicited a range of responses. Two participants pointed to a lack of time and difficulty with time management as the biggest obstacles to doing

well in college, while other students related time management skills and multitasking abilities as a strength contributing to readiness for college-level work. Six participants spoke of having strong time management skills and related this strength to life experiences, especially work related experiences, and to being older. Another attribute that students explicitly discussed as essential for college readiness was goal focus. One participant said, “When I think of what it takes to be ready for college, I think it’s more of a mental mind set...of having a goal.” Like time management, having a goal was related to student background factors, especially to career influences and being older. Six participants explicitly compared a previous college experience where they did not have a clear goal to their current experience of having a goal and the importance of this goal for being ready for college.

Finally, the ability to advocate for oneself as a learner was articulated by five of the participants as important for college readiness. While the other two attributes were explicitly stated as essential for readiness, this theme of self-advocacy was more likely to be illustrated through stories. Participants often attributed self-advocating skills with being older. One shared how she felt more like a peer to faculty because of her age and that helped her approach the instructor. For the students who participated in this study, the ability to self-advocate was critical for an ability to navigate the college system. When participants shared stories of approaching professors and seeking out advisors and counselors, they pointed to the importance of these incidents for being successful in college and for the development of their own self-concept of being a capable college student. For example, one spoke about his experience of approaching a professor after he felt overwhelmed by the reading level on the first day: “She just looked me straight in the eye and said you’re gonna do fine here because you approached me on the first day.”

Background Factors

Family factors often contributed to the participants' readiness for college. Three participants did share that family concerns had previously prevented them from continuing or enrolling in college; however, three participants stressed that they were motivated to do better than their parents and six participants shared positive stories of parental influence. Four participants with children emphasized a desire to be a positive role model. One participant shared: "My daughter; she's my driving force. She's the reason I'm here right now, and she says she's gonna go to school too." Generally, family was highlighted as important for all participants with overlaps in themes of career influence and self-concept.

Work experiences and career motivations helped participants formulate a goal for college. All eight participants pointed to the desire to improve career opportunities as a primary motivation for enrolling in college. Two participants used the words "dead-end job" to describe one of their main reasons for coming to college. Furthermore, five participants were motivated to do better than their parents had done, noting that they saw their parents struggle in unsatisfying careers. In addition to providing the motivation to attend college, four participants discussed ways that skills and abilities learned at work transferred to college work. For instance, one commented: "I know that a lot of success in education has to deal with putting time and effort into it, and I've already put a lot of time into developing a career."

All participants gave testimony to the need for a college degree and seven discussed financial concerns; however, the pattern of response for this was that a lack of finances should not prevent someone from seeking a college degree. For example, one participant exclaimed: "People who don't have the money to pay for college themselves they shouldn't let that get in the way." While this statement illustrates a common sentiment among the participants, there was

also a pattern of responses where participants reported not being aware of financial aid resources when they began college, and some had delayed starting college for financial reasons or had paid and later discovered financial aid was available. Another illustrated this theme when she said: “It’s amazing; I mean I could have gone to college right after high school, but I really didn’t know that.”

All eight participants discussed previous high school and community college experiences, with seven reporting the feeling of being underprepared. For example, one participant noted: “Community college was like high school in a lot of ways. They didn’t challenge you intellectually. Your vocabulary could be a lot smaller. When I transferred over to the university, I remember the first text I picked up and I was reading some of those words and I had this like what does that mean.” One participant did note that advanced placement classes in high school were the only ones that helped prepare for workload requirements of university studies.

Nontraditional Student Self Concept:

Six participants emphasized that they were not ready for college when they were younger or right after high school and that being older contributed to their readiness for college. While two participants reported being older as an obstacle, for the most part it was perceived as a benefit to college preparation. Participants illustrated that being older strengthened (a) self-concept, (b) self advocacy, (c) goal focus, and (d) time-management skills. For example, “I think [having a goal] has to do with having some time not being in school and being in a job.” Specifically, one shared how being older helped students to give “heartfelt” responses during class discussions, sharing how: “It’s actually things that you’ve lived through; you can apply [what you know] and it makes learning a lot easier.”

Five participants shared how they were surprised by their own success. Many of the participants became quite animated, sharing their stories of being surprised and the continued struggle to recognize their own work as “good enough” for college. One participant, when asked what he would give as advice for nontraditional students, said: “[They] need to know it’s possible!” This study suggests that nontraditional students may be more prepared than they think for the demands of college and, moreover, that their life experiences may contribute to college readiness.

Knowledge of the college system and having personal support were all mentioned as important factors for success in college. All participants reported that they lacked sufficient guidance and support from family or high school counselors to help prepare them for understanding the college system. Awareness of financial aid availability was an area in which participants felt particularly underprepared. One participant, even though she reported being academically prepared in high school through advanced placement classes, said: “I didn’t know how to get [to college] or what I needed to do, and [my parents] were not so helpful in that area because they didn’t know either, so it’s kind of been learn by trial and error.” While six participants spoke of having parental encouragement to go to college, four of these six also emphasized that their parents had little to offer because of their own inexperience.

Discussion

One distinctive finding of this study is that first-generation students’ life experiences contributed to the development of skills perceived as critical to success in college. In other words, work experience and family motivations gave students the time management, goal focus and self-advocacy skills that prepared them for the demands of college. While academic skills are clearly important, time management, goal focus and self-advocacy emerged as more

important through stories, experiences, and reflections. These skills, it seems, are woven into or emerge out of life experience more than do academic skills.

While the results of this study do not emphasize academic skills, one interesting finding is that college reading was an area in which participants felt particularly underprepared. Reading skills mentioned included vocabulary level and the amount of reading required. This discrepancy of feeling underprepared for reading but not for writing could be because students come to college expecting to be challenged by writing but not by reading, and then they are surprised by their ability to write well. Also, writing and composition courses are offered at the college level and many colleges offer the support of writing centers while reading courses are usually offered only at the developmental level.

This study provides insight into the development of nonacademic skills that previous researchers have recognized as important to college student success. For example, the emphasis on goals in this study aligns with research conducted by Hoyt (1999) and Napoli and Wortman (1996), which identified goals and commitments as fundamental to college student retention. Likewise, time management may be an obvious factor for college readiness, but the fact that participants of this study expressed it explicitly, emphatically and often underscores its importance. More importantly, the theme that emerged from this study is that first-generation students develop strengths that prepare them for college through their life experiences.

The theme of self-advocacy in this study is congruent with ideas about the relationship between college student success and self-regulating behavior (Ley & Young, 1998). Ochroch and Dugan (1986) suggest that successful students believe they have control over the outcome of their lives. This belief is central to the ability to self-advocate. Furthermore, self-advocacy emerged in this study as a particularly important skill for first-generation students who might not

have background knowledge of the college system to understand resources such as advising, financial aid, and student-professor relationships.

Another distinctive implication of this study is that younger first-generation college students might be particularly at risk for college readiness, given that life experience and being older contributed to the skills of older first-generation students. This is of particular importance because the responses for the theme of self-concept suggest that students whose parents did not go to college may view themselves as less than adequate for college. This finding echoes K.P. Cross's (1968) observation that we tend to view nontraditional students as less than adequate for the demands of college. Indeed, the results of this research suggest that first-generation students may internalize the view that they are inadequate for college.

Limitations of the Study

This study has limitations related to the design of the study and the potential for generalization of findings due to sampling methods. An important limitation of this study is the lack of multiple raters for data analysis. The first author collected and analyzed data and coded transcript, and both authors interpreted the data for themes and conducted analysis of the transcripts for each theme. No other researchers were trained in or performed data analysis, so no inter-rater reliability was possible.

The sample used for this study also presents limitations for generalizability of the research findings. The sample size of eight participants is a small one; furthermore, all of the participants were students of the same program of study at the same small liberal arts college. The study sample was limited to volunteers, which may affect the results of the study. Because of this limited sample, it may have been more likely for students to articulate similar themes related to college readiness than if the population had been broader. For example, this particular

population of students who are of junior or senior status in humanities studies may be stronger writers than students who are in a different program or area of study. Also, the participants of this study were well into their college studies, so their responses may not accurately reflect their experiences and abilities when they began college. Perhaps some of the themes related to college readiness reflect student development while in college.

Implications for Future Research

This study could be replicated with other samples of students for insights related to college readiness. The patterns that emerged through these interviews suggest that there are many factors that contribute to a student's readiness for college-level work. A study like this one could be carried out with comparative groups; for example, a study could be done to compare nontraditional students with traditional college students (students whose parents went to college and who are attending college right after high school). The results of this research also support further research to understand college reading skills and college-level reading courses. Findings from this study support further research to gain an understanding of college readiness and to add to our understanding of nontraditional student populations in order to advance toward the goal of helping all students be ready for college.

Implications for Practice

One of the implications of this study is that a definition of college readiness is more complex than often acknowledged. A thorough understanding of college readiness must include skills not measured by standardized tests. The results of this research indicate that skills in time management, goal focus, and self-advocacy are all essential to college readiness. The researchers recommend recognizing nonacademic skills for advising and placement decisions, especially for first-generation students who might not be familiar with the college system. Acknowledgement

of these skills could help first-generation students recognize their strengths, especially if they are required to take developmental coursework to prepare them for the academic demands of college.

Another implication of this study is that younger college students may need to be taught time-management, goal focus, and self-advocacy skills explicitly in first-year courses. In their discussions of nontraditional students, Valadez (1993) and Hoyt (1999) both recommend programs and support for first-generation college students to understand the college system and college culture. The results of this study underscore their recommendation, especially for younger first-generation students. This study also supports Light's (2001) claim that "good advising may be the single most underestimated characteristic of a successful college experience" (p. 81). Advising is likely to be even more important for first-generation college students, especially younger ones.

The findings of this study support high standards at community colleges to prepare students for university studies. This suggestion stems from the finding that community colleges often did not adequately prepare students for the demands of a four-year college or university. Perhaps community colleges could offer advising services and courses that target students who are intending to transfer to four-year colleges. Furthermore, based on the results for academic skills, the researchers recommend the development of and support for college-level reading skills throughout the college experience.

While in the past some have viewed nontraditional students as inadequate for the demands of college, this study highlighted nontraditional student strengths in connection to college readiness. Results of this study indicate that life experiences, including work and family

experience, as well as being older contribute to the development of skills seen as essential to college readiness.

Author notes:

Protocols and coding examples are available from the first author.

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