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Research Article

Motivations and Experiences in a Distance Learning-Based Degree Programme: A Case Study from a Community College

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Abstract

Due to the development of the technologically-assisted teaching and learning approaches and the change of learning behaviours of students, many students decided to start their education in a distance learning-based degree programme at a community college in the United States. Based on the lens of the Social Cognitive Career Theory, the researcher collected qualitative data from 46 traditional-aged students who are currently enrolled in a distance-learning degree programme at a community college. One research question was concerned, which was why would high school graduates (i.e. traditional-aged students) decide to enrol in a distance learning-based associate degree programme at a community college instead of a traditional senior university? The results indicated that financial considerations, and academic and career interests were the biggest concerns of these groups of participants. The outcomes of this study provided the human resources, curriculum development, and workforce plans for government agencies, policymakers, department heads, school leaders, and NGO leaders to reform their policy and regulation in order to absorb the advantages of these groups of future workforces.

Keywords: community college, distance learning, enrolment management, Social Cognitive Career Theory

1. Introduction

For more than a century, students needed to go to traditional classrooms to be educated. Although adult and returning students want to study higher education programmes, only a few universities offer suitable options. During the past decades, flexible learning models, such as evening and weekend courses, have been developed to meet the needs of locally-based students. However, students living in more remote regions may not be able to attend these courses due to a lack of transportation options (Hallett & Freas, 2018).

Over the last decade, different types of teaching and learning models have been developed to respond to the needs of such learners. For example, some public university systems have founded overseas campuses near United States military bases to provide higher education programmes to active military and their family members. One example of this is the University of Maryland University College. However, students attending such programmes may still face significant problems such as transportation, family responsibilities, and financial considerations. Recently, due to the rapid

development of distance learning-based programmes, a large number of community colleges in the United States have now begun to offer fully online programmes both domestic and international students. These are available to nongraduating students as well as under- and postgraduates.

Traditional on-campus programmes, in which students need to study face-to-face in the classroom, are still one of the more popular models in the United States now. However, a previous study (Crocker & Mazer, 2019) has shown that many students decide to enrol in a distance learning-based programme at the community college level in order to economise on costs such as accommodation and meals. As a result, many of these programmes have attracted a large number of students over the past decade.

Currently, in the United States, there are several different types of university operations, including but not limited to traditional campus-based, open-enrolment, online, and integrated universities, and community colleges (Hossler & Bontrager, 2014). Although many of these institutions have traditionally offered on-campus programmes which include daytime, evening, and weekend courses and programmes, many have now started to offer both blended and distance learning-based courses as well.

Traditionally, community colleges often serve as a stepping-stone for both traditional (in terms of age) and older adult students, who earn their associate degree and then transfer to a senior university to complete the rest of their programme (Hallett & Freas, 2018). Most community colleges welcome qualified students for enrolment as part of their mission is to make education available to students from different backgrounds (List & Nadasen, 2017). According to previous studies (Monaghan & Attewell, 2015), the student population of community colleges is made up of those who could not meet university admission requirements (Terenzini et al., 1996), people with financial concerns or simply want to save money, returning and mature students, and international students.

However, while community colleges often cater to such non-traditional students, the quality of their academic education and pastoral support is equivalent to that found in traditional universities (Shea & Bidjerano, 2014). For example, many community colleges offer excellent placement and transferring services. Although distance learning-based students will not benefit from on-campus services, they can access online education centres and support (Próspero & Vohra-Gupta, 2007).

Community colleges have upgraded their curricula and degree programmes from vocationally oriented courses to comprehensive degree programmes (Hallett & Freas, 2018). Previously, they often offered vocational courses and degrees in response to the needs of returning and older adult students whose main aim was to gain hands-on skills for career development (Stern, 2016). Contemporary community colleges, however, have invested in different types of programmes, such as liberal arts, science (including laboratory-based courses), business, social sciences, vocational, and even prelaw courses, in order to meet the demands of the current student population (Imad, 2019). They may develop these programmes further as distance learning-based courses to attract students from a wider geographical area (Huntington-Klein et al., 2017).

Students who complete a distance learning-based associate degree programme at community college may transfer to a senior university for their bachelor's programme (i.e. both on-campus and distance learning) (Huntington-Klein et al., 2017). Recently, a large number of public-funded community colleges established transfer agreements with public-funded senior universities in which associate degree graduates can enter the third year of a bachelor's degree programme (Sublett, 2019). As a result, many students have decided to enrol in community colleges to save money during the first two years of their university career. This is particularly the case for students studying online (Schudde et al., 2020).

Distance learning-based models often require a high degree of self-regulation and motivation to maintain academic standards and proceed to completion, as there are fewer interactions with peers and instructors. Previous studies (Kehr, 2004) show that students in such programmes face challenges in terms of both academic achievement and accessing support, given that they normally require to study and resolve issues more independently.

As well as acquiring the skills to make the most of such independent learning models, distance

learning students may require excellent computer and technology skills in order to make the best of the distance learning-based platform and participate fully in discussion and interaction. One study (Bates & Khasawneh, 2007) indicates that online students need to contact a number of different offices and services via email and phone services to access support. Unlike on-campus students who can talk to faculty members and education staff while physically present in the school, online students need to manage the same procedures on their own using email and phone. This can be difficult, especially for returning and older adult students who may lack these skills.

1.1 Purpose of the Study

Based on previous studies looking at community colleges and distance learners' motivation and behaviours, this study set out to focus on the motivations for traditional-aged students to enrol in one of the distance learning-based associate degree programmes at a community college in the United States. The primary research question was,

- Why would high school graduates (i.e. traditional-aged students) decide to enrol in a distance learning-based associate degree programme at a community college instead of a traditional senior university? What are their motivations and reasons for doing so?

1.2 Theoretical Framework

Each empirical study should be guided by the theoretical framework. As for this study, the researcher employed the Social Cognitive Career Theory as the theoretical framework and approach for the investigation.

Based on the development of the Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1986, 1989, 1991, 1992), the Social Cognitive Career Theory absorbed the notion of cognitive learning and motivation from Bandura's works and ideas. However, the Social Cognitive Career Theory (Lent et al., 1994; Lent & Brown, 1996) tends to investigate the motivations, reasons, and behaviours of individuals career developments and perspectives. However, a large number of research and studies (Dos Santos & Lo, 2018; Dos Santos, 2018, 2019a, 2019b, 2020c, 2020a, 2020b, 2020e; Gibbons & Borders, 2010; Thompson et al., 2017) employed the Social Cognitive Career Theory as the means for the investigation of motivation and decision-making procedure.

Originally, the Social Cognitive Career Theory tends to focus on the motivations and reasons why individuals and groups decided to develop their career pathways in a certain direction (Brown and Lent, 2017; Lent and Brown, 2019; Lent et al., 1994; Lent and Brown, 2008). However, due to the development and the behavioural changes of the contemporary individuals and groups, other researchers enhanced the Social Cognitive Career Theory (Dos Santos, 2019b, 2020c, 2020d, 2020e; Lent and Brown, 2019; Lent et al., 1994; Lent and Brown, 1996, 2008) with an additional factor. As a result, the current study employed the enhanced version of the Social Cognitive Career Theory (i.e. with four factors of concerns), which are,

- Interests of career developments;
- Achievements of education and career goals;
- Academic and career interest; and
- Financial consideration.

2. Methodology and Research Design

The qualitative research methodology (Tang & Dos Santos, 2017) has been employed for this study. Be specific, the case study research design (Yin, 2012) was employed in a single site, at a community college in the United States. In fact, the case study research methodology has the nature of investigating a particular site or situation in a designated target. Therefore, based on the purpose of this study (i.e. understanding of a situation and enrolment management of a community college in the United States),

the application of the case study research methodology would be appropriate (Merriam, 2009).

2.1 Recruitment and Participants

The purposive sampling strategy (Creswell, 2014) was employed to recruit a total of 46 participants from a community college in the United States. First, the researcher contacted the community college administrator for the permission of this study. The administrator agreed with the study and transferred the invitation email to a group of currently enrolled community college students (i.e. online students). Second, the invitation letter and content form were sent to the appropriate parties for the research invitation. Third, after two weeks, a total of 46 participants agreed with the participation. Fourth, the researcher sent the invitation details and contact information to both administrator for the arrangement. Firth, the researcher arranged the interview date for the online-based interview.

2.2 Data Collection

2.2.1 Interview Sessions

In order to collect in-depth and rich data and materials from the participants, the researcher decided to employ two online interview sessions and one session of focus group activity. First, qualitative researchers should establish a connection and relationship with the participants in order to collect in-depth and rich data (Seidman, 2013). Therefore, based on the guideline, the researcher invited the participants for two online interview sessions in order to build up the relationship and capture in-depth sharing.

The first interview session mainly focused on the ideas about the motivations and reasons why would the participants decide to join the distance-learning based degree programme at the community college level. The nature of these interview sessions tended to collect the motivations, reasons, and influences from their high school and pre-college voyage. In other words, how would their secondary school experiences impact their decision-making process?

The second interview session mainly focused on the ideas about the motivations and reasons why would the participants continue with their current distance-learning based degree programme at the community college level. For example, how would they describe their experiences? Will they change their mind after the enrolment etc.

Each interview session was hosted online via Google Team interview tool. One of the advantages of the online interview tools was flexibilities. Unlike the traditional face-to-face interview sessions, both researcher and participant(s) need to go to a private room, such as the library and classroom, for the interview sessions. Due to the limitations of the locations and transportations, many participants refused the interview sessions. However, as all these participants understood the arrangement of the online-based interview and teaching and learning environment(s), they all agreed with the Google Team interview tool arrangement.

Each interview session was hosted from 67-89 minutes. During the interview sessions, the researcher used a digital recorder for recording. Only voiced messages were captured. No visual and facial expressions were captured as they were not essential for the study.

2.2.2 Focus Group Activity

After all of the participants completed the interview sessions, the participants were invited to different sessions of the focus group activities. Due to the number of participants (N=46), the researcher arranged six groups of focus group activities. Each focus group activity involved eight participants. Due to nature and arrangement, the focus group activities were hosted online as well. Each focus group activity was hosted from 89-98 minutes. During the focus group activity, the researcher's role was the coordinator. The participants shared their stories and ideas with other participants. During the focus

group activities, the researcher used a digital recorder for recording. Only voiced messages were captured. No visual and facial expressions were captured as they were not essential for the study.

2.3 Data Analysis

After the data collection procedure, the researcher transcribed all the voiced messages and data to written transcripts. The researcher re-read the written transcripts and data multiple times for the categories and groups. First of all, the researcher employed the open-coding technique (Merriam, 2009) for the first-level themes and subthemes. In fact, many sharing and stories shared a similar idea and direction. As a result, the researcher has categorised 13 themes and 15 subthemes as the first-level themes.

Second, many qualitative researchers indicated that the themes and subthemes of qualitative studies should be further narrowed. Therefore, the researcher employed the axial-coding technique for second-level themes and subthemes. After several rounds of inductive coding, the researcher eventually yielded two themes and subthemes for this study.

2.4 Human Subject Protection

Privacy of all the parties is the most important part of this study. The researcher employed all factors and potentials to protect the confidentiality of the participants and site (i.e. the community college). Therefore, all participants were matched with a pseudonym. The signed and unsigned agreements, content forms, personal contacts, communication between the school administrators and participants, digital records, written transcripts and related materials were locked in a password-protected cabinet. Only the researcher has the rights to read it. After the completion of the study, the researcher deleted all the information immediately in order to exercise the ideas of privacy.

3. Results and Discussion

The interviews with 46 traditional-aged participants currently enrolled in a distance learning-based associate degree programme at a community college in the United States showed that many had similar accounts based on their background and life experiences.

After completing all 92 online interviews and six focus group activities, the researcher coded the transcripts in terms of meaningful themes and subthemes, using the general inductive approach. This inductive analysis (Thomas, 2006) allowed the themes relevant to the research question to be developed through an iterative process. As a result, two themes and three subthemes were merged.

3.1 Financial Considerations

All 46 participants commented on how financial considerations had affected their decision to select a community college distance learning-based programme to start their academic career. Indeed, all of them indicated that finances were one of their biggest concerns. Many previous studies (Lee et al., 2018) indicated that the tuition fee and related costs in the United States always cause concerns for graduates. Therefore, many decided to go to a community college for their associate degree in order to reduce their tuition fees and potential loan payments after graduation.

3.1.1 Unnecessary Expense

Forty of the participants categorised themselves as from low-income families. Without scholarships, none could afford the four-year degree tuition fees at senior universities. Therefore, community college provided an alternative route by way of completing an associate degree and then transferring. As two participants put it,

I wish I could go to a private university... I received an offer from one of the top private colleges in my state ... but without any scholarships ... I cannot even think about it ... I can only complete my associate degree online and transfer to [one of] the universities that I want...(Participant #34, Interview Session)

...the tuition fee must be my biggest concern...the tuition fee in the American university system is insane...I received really good SAT and Advanced Placement scores...but I did not receive any scholarships...or enough scholarships...to support my living and tuition fees for four years...in order to reduce my potential loans and else...I have to start at a community college for a full-scholarship and transfer to a four-year university afterwards... (Participant #3, Interview Session)

Besides tuition fees, many of the participants indicated that living expenses also had an impact on their decision making. One previous study (Cuy Castellanos & Holcomb, 2020) has shown that living expenses might account for nearly one-third of an individual's student loans. In this study, participants said that if they could save on two years of accommodation expenses, they would also be able to skip several years of loan repayments in future. For example,

[T]the dorm and meal plans are too expensive for my family and me ... my accepted university is located in the downtown area ... the dorm fees are unacceptable ... I could only save the resources from my associate degree and apply to university again two years later...(Participant #46, Focus Group Activity)

My dream school is located in New York City...even if I don't live in the school housing, I still need to find a place to live in New York City...as my hometown is not in New York...but I cannot afford the rental fees and other expenses in the City...I will save my first two years...and see what will be the plan...(Participant #21, Focus Group Activity)

3.2   Academic and Career Interests

3.2.1   Academic Trends and Learning Behaviours

Most of the degree programmes offered at the community college were liberal arts and knowledge-based courses (Imad, 2019). These did not require an internship, practicum, or vocational experience. Indeed, the community college only offered distance learning options in these liberal arts fields, such as business, social sciences, and languages. Vocational programmes, such as nursing or culinary arts, were not available through this route. Consistent with the findings of one previous study (Imad, 2019), vocationally oriented programmes at community college level always require the student to engage in internship and practicum, which is not an option that can easily be offered in a distance learning-based programme (Spector & Infante, 2020). Two participants commented on this as follows,

I want to become a translator in the future ... but I don't think basic foreign language courses should be learnt at school ... I can read the textbook, listen to the conversation, and complete the exercise on my own ... then I can transfer to a university for further development...(Participant #17, Interview Session)

What is the point of coming on to campus if I can complete my history essay in my room?... History is about personal sharing and fact sharing ... If I don't understand, I can send an email to my instructor ... I don't need to sit in the classroom. (Participant #19, Interview Session)

Other respondents who were business majors expressed similar views. They all indicated that foundation business and accounting courses do not require significant interaction between peers and instructors. As long as they can complete the assignments, they will meet the requirements at the associate degree level. As one participant said,

Introduction to business and introduction to basic accounting courses are independent courses which do not need to have extensive interactions and communications between peers ... I don't want to drive to the

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school every day at 8:00 for a 45-minute lesson. I can complete it by myself...(Participant #24, Interview Session)

Not only did business and language students express these ideas, but also social science students, as the following examples illustrate,

Basic psychology is about knowledge and cognitive learning ... I don't see why I can't study my associate degree online ... I took courses about cognitive psychology ... I shared my discussions on the platform...the discussions are workable...(Participant #5, Focus Group Activity)

Racism and discrimination courses ... I am taking now ... I don't see why I should have to come on campus for these knowledge-based courses ... All that we should do is the discussion and homework ... I can email my classmates and professor for an explanation...(Participant #8, Interview Session)

Again, as seen through the lens of Social Cognitive Career Theory (Dos Santos, 2019b, 2020c, 2020d, 2020e; Lent and Brown, 2019; Lent et al., 1994; Lent and Brown, 1996, 2008), almost all participants' views reflected the academic trends and learning behaviours of their major. As indicated in previous studies (Imad, 2019), most liberal arts degree programmes do not require extensive interaction between peers or other parties, nor is an internship necessary (Spector & Infante, 2020). In this sense, therefore, these findings are consistent with the existing literature.

3.2.2 Career Interests and the Distance Learning Model

Many students identified the relationship between their career interests and the distance learning-based degree programme as relevant to their motivation and decision making. In past decades, most careers and job roles have been based on site and are likely to require in-person attendance. However, due to the development of technology and social media applications (Alhadabi & Karpinski, 2020), many jobs are now fully remote and available online. Many participants said they intended to work remotely or become full-time home workers after graduation, as set out below,

I don't want to work in the traditional office environment with other co-workers and supervisors ... I want to work in my own office and start my own solo business ... this is the trend of the current decade ... I think this online degree meets my needs...(Participant #1, Interview Session)

People have their own ways and wants for working ... I want to work at home ... I don't want to take the commuter rail every day from my home to the city ... I am an adult; I can select my online degree and I want to select my job as well...(Participant #45, Interview Session)

The views expressed by the participants suggest that there has been a change in the career interests and trends of contemporary learners (i.e. from the traditional face-to-face model to the internet-based model). Reflecting the findings of one previous study (Spector & Infante, 2020), universities should develop programmes and courses that meet the needs of this group of students. Three decades ago, colleges invested in developing evening and weekend courses. Now, distance learning is the key to attracting current students.

As well as saying they wanted to work remotely or from home, many participants wanted to become social media creators; a role which does not require going into an office. One previous study (Crocker & Mazer, 2019) indicated that career development trends in the current decade will be led by technologically oriented professions. In line with this, according to a previous study, many young people and entrepreneurs are developing their careers and businesses in this direction (Alhadabi & Karpinski, 2020). The following comments from participants illustrate this trend,

I want to become a Youtuber after university ... I will make my own videos and upload them online ... my home and my room is my office ... I don't need to go to an office or classroom for any purpose ... I enjoy

this working environment. (Participant #38, Focus Group Activity)

My dad needs to go to the office for a living ... because he has no choices ... but in this century, I can do it over my own lab ... why can't I do something that I want? I can still study for my degree and make some money to cover my own expenses. (Participant #31, Interview Session)

In conclusion, based on Social Cognitive Career Theory (Dos Santos, 2019b, 2020c, 2020d, 2020e; Lent and Brown, 2019; Lent et al., 1994; Lent and Brown, 1996, 2008), many of the participants in this study indicated that their career development plans (for both education and employment) might be strongly connected to the distance learning environment. Unlike previous decades, where both education and work required in-person, face-to-face attendance, current technological tools afford flexibility and creativity in terms of visually based office and classroom environments (Brown et al., 2015). The findings of this study demonstrate how career interests may affect the motivation and decision making of distance learning community college students.

4. Limitations and Future Research Developments

Each study has its own limitation. The researcher indicated two limitations to this study. First, the current study only focused on one community college as a single-site case study in the United States. As United States is one of the biggest countries internationally, students from different parts of the country may share different ideas and feedback for their motivations, reasons, and decision-making process (Eisenberg, 1992). Therefore, future research studies may expand the horizon to different parts or regions of the countries and different community colleges in the United States. The expanded studies may be beneficial to larger populations and students.

Second, the current study only focused on the problems and issues for traditional-aged students, non-traditional, returning, evening, and adult students (NTREA) (Dos Santos, 2020d, 2020f) may face the same issues and problems as well. Therefore, future research studies should focus on the problems and voices from these groups of learners in order to cover the colourful population at the community colleges in the United States (Leong, 2015).

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, based on the lens of the Social Cognitive Career Theory and the qualitative sharing from the participants, the outcomes of this study provided the recommendations to the school leadership, school counsellors, department heads, government departments, policymakers, parents, and NGOs to reform and polish their current curriculum plans and human resources plans for the next generation. Based on the feedback from the participants, the learning behaviours and career intentions of the traditional-aged students (i.e. the workforce in the soon future) have been changed due to the development of the technologically-assisted communities. If the government and communities do not change in order to meet the needs of these group of workforces, many sectors and departments will not be able to absorb the advantages and benefits from these upgraded professionals in the future.

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