

Redefined, Retrained, and Rejuvenated: Displaced Male Students Head to College

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It is once again that time of year when the seasons are beginning to change and across the country institutions of higher education are gearing up to welcome students back into the classroom. Higher education at all levels (two and four year schools and graduate schools) has steadily seen growth in enrollment numbers over the years, but this fall many institutions are reporting record numbers of students (NCES, 2009). The current state of the United States economy is not necessarily considered a positive thing, but for many college administrators, especially at the community college level, they are seeing positive enrollment gains. Enrollment at many community colleges across the country has tripled this fall primarily because a new group of students are making their way onto college campuses. However, these students are not your typical college students (Streitfield, 2009). Many campuses are seeing a growing number of students who are identified as displaced workers (defined as being at least 20 years old and have lost employment due to business closure or cut-backs) trying to make the best out of a harsh reality that is associated with the current state of the economy by exploring options to advance their education.

Community colleges are attractive options for displaced workers because of their location, cost, open admission standards, and the curriculum offerings (Bradley, 2009). The federal government has passed The American Recovery and Re-investment Act of 2009, which will assist in making such an education a reality by expanding financial aid options and adjusting federal unemployment requirements. In light of this important legislation, community colleges are seen as key players in helping jump start the educational training of America's displaced workers.

Although the economy is not discriminatory when it comes to who is impacted, a larger

portion of displaced workers are men because the majority of industries in decline are predominately and historically staffed by men such as manufacturing and construction. According to US Department of Labor statistics (2008), the number of men displaced is close to 56% and the number of men adding to this statistic is steadily increasing. Finding employment in other fields is difficult for these men since most are limited when it comes to transferable work skills and to the amount of education they possess. Many displaced men find themselves in situations where they need to learn a new marketable skill or trade, which means they are looking at educational institutions to provide the training and skills needed to secure a job in today's market. The age group of men being most impacted by job loss is 24-54 years old, which would identify these men as non-traditional college students (NCES, n.d.). In an effort to make the overall college experience positive for these displaced men, it is imperative that student affairs administrators, especially those at community colleges, become conversant with issues impacting displaced men and implement developmental practices and strategies designed to make sure displaced workers are successful in achieving their educational pursuits.

Administrators need to recognize they will need to be proactive in dealing with some of the issues displaced men may encounter. Men may be reluctant to seek out help or assistance because of fears of being seen as weak or vulnerable. Cultural beliefs and traditional male gender role stereotypes that men need to be independent and self-reliant are drilled into young boys at an early age and stays with them their entire life (Courtenay, 2004). Research repeatedly shows men are often discouraged from seeking help and if they do seek assistance, they report incidents of ridicule and shame (Courtenay, 2000). Displaced men on college campuses may encounter situations where they need extra help or assistance in order to be successful. One such area could be in academic/study skills, as displaced men are

having to re-learn what it means to be a student and will need a quick refresher course in note-taking and study skill strategies.

The issue facing student affairs is that displaced men may not seek out this help on their own because many believe it is a sign of weakness if they do. Furthermore, they believe they should be able to figure out how to survive the college environment on their own. One suggestion for student affairs administrators to combat such a belief structure is to assure these displaced men it is common and understandable for them to struggle when it comes to entering today's academic classroom. Conversations around different learning styles, taking time off from being in an educational setting, and utilizing available resources can help men feel more comfortable as they attempt to be successful in their academic pursuits. In addition, the promotion of academic tutoring centers where all students who need extra academic help attend would be a good step for administrators to make with displaced men. Reassuring them anyone in their situation may need extra help could help decrease embarrassment or shame these men may feel for seeking help. If these displaced men see that traditional college age students often times need help and attend tutoring centers, this can help normalize their own feelings and hence, their overall college experience. Helping these displaced men realize if they are successful with their educational pursuits, it will greatly help them secure employment in today's economy could also provide some of the encouragement they need to seek out additional resources.

Much like your typical first year student, displaced men are often naïve when it comes to understanding how the university environment works, but these students will need an orientation session that is more tailored to address their essential issues. This orientation session should encourage displaced men to ask questions that they have. Administrators may assume they have all the answers and develop orientation sessions they think can be helpful, but that may not be the case. Displaced men need an orientation session that is designed to acquaint them with basic services provided by the institution in simple and clear terms to adjust the transition to the university. Providing

contact information for follow-up is key because many men often feel intimidated to speak up in situations with others present, but may feel compelled to on their own later. Administrators humanizing that it is acceptable to have questions should stress to displaced men that attending college, many for the first time at an age outside of the traditional college aged population, can be intimidating, but not impossible to conquer. Answering their questions and stressing that it is acceptable to have many, will hopefully allow displaced men to put all their fears and worries out in the open and create a culture of institutional concern and desire for all students to make a smooth transition from the workforce to the classroom, regardless of age.

For displaced men, dealing with the anxiety and stress of trying to provide for their families, paying bills, and the fear of not finding another job, may create negative self-esteem. As research has shown, men tend to use maladaptive coping mechanisms such as alcohol and stimulants to find an escape from reality (Courtenay, 2004). Repeated use of alcohol leads to violent behaviors and periods of aggression in some men. Administrators need to be proactive and educate faculty and staff about warning signs of alcohol abuse and aggression. Finding healthy ways for men to deal with their stress is often a challenge, but college administrators need to make this a priority for displaced men. Counseling services on college campus is an obvious option; however, that option may not be available for many campuses, especially at the community college level. Finding other alternatives for helping displaced men deal with their issues should be taken into account. One suggestion is to point displaced men to volunteer activities such as "Make a Difference Day," where they can make a positive difference by actively contributing to others that are in less fortunate situations than they may be experiencing. Getting them to focus on a project where they are seen as needed and wanted can help them get their mind off their worries and see that there are other more productive ways to deal with life's current challenges (McCafferty, 2009). Another alternative would be to seek out free or low cost counseling options in the community, which

would provide them an outlet with a certified professional. In addition, working with faculty in social sciences and humanities courses to build seeking out such resources into their curriculum could minimize the anxiety on behalf of men not wanting to take more time out of their already busy days to seek the help they likely need.

Creation of support networks or of a student group for displaced men where men come together to discuss their issues and challenges without being judged can lead to encouragement and positive affirmation. In addition, displaced men could recognize they are not alone in the challenges they face. Involvement with men who are seen as having been successful from the community could be invited to mentor and help displaced men through their academic challenges, which could also be an initiative to help retain displaced men. One technique that has the potential to be successful is to utilize a coaching model that promotes teamwork to accomplish tasks. Getting displaced men to rely upon each other and keep each other accountable for completing all their academic endeavors could be a successful solution administrators can employ to keep these displaced men on track and finish whatever academic goal they set out to accomplish.

One functional area that has the potential to make a great impact on displaced men is career services. Displaced men are interested in learning skills and receiving an education that will help them secure new employment so they can contribute back to the workforce, thus helping to promote positive self-esteem. Having displaced men meet with career service staff members who can educate them on what career fields are growing and hiring would help these men choose an academic major that would be a good fit for their educational pursuits during an orientation session. Another benefit career services staff can provide for displaced men is to identify what occupations may be a good fit for their personality and overall interests by introducing them to career assessment inventories such as Holland's Self-Directed Search. Oftentimes, men often times are skeptical when it comes to seeing how the education they are acquiring will benefit them. If administrators can bring in employers from

industries that are hiring to meet with the displaced men and inform the workers of what skills and education they are looking for in their employees, then it could provide inspiration for displaced men to continue their education and earn the necessary credentials to land another job.

In addition to helping them find a career that fits for them, these men will need extra help in making them top quality candidates, especially during a competitive job market. Showing men (either in person or through social outlets like Youtube) resume tips, job databases to search, interviewing techniques and appropriate attire are definitely beneficial tips that will make displaced men stand above their competition when it comes to landing their next job.

In a recent interview with unemployed and displaced workers conducted by *Time* magazine, displaced men report incidents of desperation for any type of employment so they can provide for their families (Ramo, 2009). The traditional male gender role stereotype of needing to be the financial bread winner and provider is a common source of anxiety for displaced men, many of whom feel as though they must seek any type of employment rather than thinking more long range and finding something that could benefit them and/or their family in the future. Administrators need to educate displaced men on financial opportunities that are available both on and off-campus while they are students. Informing displaced men on how and where to look for such jobs would prove beneficial as many have little to no idea where to turn and could likely not want to ask out of embarrassment. Educating displaced men on the steps to take and deadlines to secure federal grants, scholarships, and loans are available to them will help ease their minds about adding another expense like tuition costs to their tight family expenses.

The challenges for all displaced workers seem insurmountable; however, it is not the end of the road for men. Displaced men must realize the traditional gender role stereotype with them playing the role of a as a factory man and financial provider may no longer be a reality for them. However, differently defined role of what it means to be a man, including a new career, is certainly capable. Displaced men must adjust

their attitudes in order to succeed in this significantly changed economy. The economic challenges have to be understood and the past needs to be forgotten. The path ahead may appear daunting to them, but opportunities are available and continually being developed.

As student affairs professionals, we need to be aware of where economic growth lies for the future and direct displaced men to consider such careers. These are the opportunities men must take advantage of and educators must emphasize the long term benefits of such opportunities and career fields. Career choice is vital and displaced men must choose a new career where one finds an interest. Employers are skeptical of jobseekers only interested in a paycheck, and are looking for employees who have a genuine interest in their field (Van Noy & Zeidenberg, 2009). Men have to embrace this fact and if they do not want to be in the same situation ten years from now they must make smart decisions regarding their livelihood. A quick fix is not the answer, but being committed to a new and possibly unknown career is the ultimate end result. Individuals must exert will power to act in the face of uncertainty to reach the highest ideals they can set for themselves (Dalton & Crosby, 2009). As student affairs professionals, we can do our part and help these displaced men by rejuvenating their outlook of the future by providing them with the services and education they need to find their niche in an ever-changing American economy.

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