Well-Being
and Higher Education

A Strategy for Change and the Realization of Education's Greater Purposes

Edited by Donald W. Harward

Bringing Theory to Practice

Washington D.C.

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ESSAY

College Makes Me Feel Dangerous: On Well-Being and Nontraditional Students

David Scobey

> *"To begin is not in the realm of possibilities; only to begin again, over and over again—and therein lies [humanity's] strength."*—ELIE WIESEL

I

AROUND A SEMINAR TABLE on the wooded campus of The Evergreen State College, a public liberal arts institution near Olympia, Washington, a group of students is telling their stories. They are adult undergraduates in the college's Evening and Weekend Studies Program. I have asked them to talk about their experiences with higher education in the past and (now that they have returned) here at Evergreen.[1] "I couldn't stand the traditional model of college," Jesi says, recalling her first stint as an undergraduate. "Everything was in columns—take these distribution requirements, those disciplines. And learning in columns isn't how I learned. I've always been a worker, and what you find in the workplace is the interdisciplinary model. Everything is connected to everything else." Jesi is a fifty-something mother of five with a long government career in corrections and emergency management; she has returned to college less for her job than for her kids. "I came back because I felt I had let my children down. They were starting to grow up, and I wanted them to go to college. How could I push them without doing it myself?" There is a poignancy to her comment because her son James happens to be sitting next to her; they enrolled in Evening and Weekend Studies together. He too was disenchanted with college the first time around. After dropping out, he found work as an information technology specialist and became a parent, and then as he notes a couple of times, "life took over." Now, a decade later, his academic goals are more job-related than his mother's; he has grown frustrated watching colleagues move ahead of him simply because he lacks a bachelor's degree. Yet something has happened to James' calculus since matriculating: "I thought it would be easy, in and out. I knew IT, and I would just take all the computer classes. But after the first quarter, I changed course. I did Prior Learning from Experience, and it made me realize that I wanted to learn how to write. Now I'm doing non-fiction writing and memoir courses."

One by one around the table, other students describe their previous encounters with college, their reasons for returning, and their experiences so far. Like Jesi, Marcia enrolled for her children. Dorian was prompted by work frustrations and family bonds: "I came back to college because I felt like an angry underling. I had a good job, but I didn't get respect at work. I felt slapped, like I didn't amount to anything without that

piece of paper. So I returned to school because of career goals. But my parents are gone, and I also came back for them." There are many such expressions of the emotional—not just economic—stakes of returning to college. Other students describe the sense of anger, embarrassment, even shame that comes with the lack of a degree and conversely the experience of validation that academic progress brings. "I always felt less-than," says Wendy, a naturalist at a wolf conservation center. "I feel like an imposter. Coming here has helped me find my voice. It helps me move through the world. And it's important that I can share this with others like me."

For educators concerned with student well-being, with the importance of well-being to student flourishing and success, this conversation will sound both familiar and strange. The Evergreen undergraduates are articulating some of the most important themes of our work: the disengagement associated with "learning in columns," the energy and joy of collaborative learning environments, and the power of supportive teachers and peers to foster self-discovery and outward exploration. The conversation is a brief for engaged learning, for college experiences that simultaneously welcome students and change them. To use our well-worn phrase, it is a brief for "educating the whole student" and for paying attention to well-being as a condition and consequence of such education.

This question of well-being for nontraditional students is especially salient when we consider that they have constituted the majority of U.S. undergraduates for the past quarter of a century

But *which* whole student? For these aren't, of course, the undergraduates that the public (or, I would submit, most academics) have in mind when we talk about the emotional and developmental tasks of college going. They are not recent high school graduates, financially and personally dependent on their parents, organizing their lives and work around central roles as full-time students, forging their academic interests and career plans on the cusp of adulthood. To the contrary: even the younger Evening and Weekend students like James have to pursue their studies in the face of a complex nexus of employment, family, and community factors. No less than traditional collegians, they thrive on educational experiences that connect their aspirations for meaningful work and economic security with opportunities for personal, intellectual, and social development. Yet such integrative learning must fit with the constraints, strengths, hopes, and histories of adult life—with work pressures and ambitions, family responsibilities, the burden of past stumbles with higher education—all of which they bring back to college. What does educating the whole student mean for such undergraduates? What academic practices foster their well-being? Wendy's words suggest the goal beautifully: "Coming here has helped me find my voice. It helps me move through the world." What can we educators do to help students find their voices?

II

This question of well-being for nontraditional students is especially salient when we consider that they have constituted the majority of U.S. undergraduates for the past quarter of a century. Federal data make it clear: the stereotypical profile of college students—recent high-school graduates financially dependent on their parents, enrolled full-time in two- or four-year institutions—describes only about 26% of undergraduates.

This is almost exactly the same proportion as collegians who are parents. Half of all students are financially independent. Nearly half are enrolled part-time. A majority work at least twenty hours per week while pursuing their studies; about two out of five are employed full-time. An estimated 43% are 25 or older.[2] Of course, not all such undergraduates are enrolled in baccalaureate programs, much less in adult-centered, liberal arts programs such as Evening and Weekend Studies. Yet the Evergreen students belong to a new, nontraditional majority who mainly attend community colleges, for-profit institutions, and non-elite public universities.

This new majority is remarkably heterogeneous. *Nontraditional* is a catch-all rubric for a range of demographic factors (age, employment, family role, enrollment status) and a variety of backgrounds.[3] It includes military veterans and former prisoners; twenty-something food servers and fifty-something parents of grown children; and workers who are unemployed, underemployed, or steadily employed without prospects of advancement. Nontraditional students do not share some core identity or social background. Yet three commonalties are crucial to understanding their well-being. First, as I noted above, nearly all have to fit their educations within a complex ecology of roles and stressors. Their footholds in college are often precarious; from term to term, even week to week, any change in work shifts, family income, children's health, daily schedules, even access to transportation can provoke an academic crisis. "One time my kid was sick with the flu," one community-college student told a research focus group. "And then I got the flu. And that was two weeks out of my math class. Well, all of a sudden, I'd wiped out of math. There was no way I could make it up. There was no leeway."[4]

Second (as the Evergreen conversation underscores) this social complexity is fraught with emotional complexity as well. Nearly every nontraditional undergraduate I've talked with or taught expresses some version of the *less-than* feeling described by Wendy. Returning to school means dealing with the reality of having strayed from the normative script of high-school to college that is so central to the American success story. "I was a thirty-something adult working towards his undergraduate degree (for the third time)," wrote Kevin, a former student of mine, in a course journal, "a task [I] felt [I] should have completed years ago. Academically successful individuals surrounded me daily, and there was an undeniable amount of shame and embarrassment." Prevailing over these feelings and defeating the voice that whispers, "I don't belong here," can itself become a key goal and a signal achievement of college. New-majority undergraduates are clear about the emotional victory and the experience of agency and pride this represents. "I thought that I wasn't college material until I got into this program and started doing well," an interviewee explained in a study of adult working students. "Before I took the initiative to see what I could achieve, I felt really stunted and being in the program has really helped me to just grow so much as a person."[5]

Returning to school means dealing with the reality of having strayed from the normative script of high-school to college that is so central to the American success story

But such victories are much too rare. For along with the socio-economic and emotional challenges of returning to college, most new-majority students share a third experience: educational marginality. In myriad ways—from financial aid rules to Federal completion metrics, from the academic calendar to the business hours of student offices—educational

policies and practices tend to default to the traditional norm, to penalize students whose lives do not conform to it, and to discourage institutions from investing in such students.[6] The costs of such marginalization are not simply financial and logistical, but also are emotional and cognitive and undermine students' learning and prospects of success. I vividly recall one of my most passionate, creative students bursting into tears unable even to listen in seminar after being stonewalled in the financial aid office. The focus group comment that I quoted above, "There was no way I could make it up. There was no leeway," could serve as the epigram for a host of encounters with inflexible administrators and clueless instructors.

This is not the only story, of course. New-majority students also offer appreciative accounts of educators who have been attentive to their needs, their strengths, and the complexity of their lives. "Night school seems to work real well," another participant told the same focus-group. "There, teachers understand people have other things going on in their lives—parents, work, whatever the situation may be."[7] My point is that no matter the mix of good and bad encounters, nontraditional students must struggle to sustain themselves and their studies, swimming upstream, so to speak, in an academy designed for someone else.

So it should not surprise us that they succeed more slowly and less frequently than their traditional peers. Academic leaders and policy makers are rightly concerned about the low completion rates of all U.S. undergraduates, but attainment rates for new-majority students are even more worrisome. In one national survey, it was estimated that traditional undergraduates seeking bachelor's degrees are three times more likely to graduate than those with at least two nontraditional, demographic markers.[8] Other researchers who focused on discrete nontraditional factors found that "adult students who work 20 hours or more a week are at 'high risk' for failure," and that full-time undergraduates have a six-year completion rate nearly four times higher than part-time students.[9] Facing job, family, housing, health care, transportation, or debt pressures, members of the new majority are at far greater risk of falling behind in classes, missing tuition payments, or dropping out.

Nontraditional students must struggle to sustain themselves and their studies, swimming upstream, so to speak, in an academy designed for someone else

III

Student well-being (or lack of well-being) is clearly at the heart of this story. Many nontraditional undergraduates have languished in their initial experiences with college. Most have to overcome a nexus of barriers (material, social, psychic) to resume their studies. If they progress, it is by tapping sources of resilience and support (material, social, psychic) from their families and communities and from the teachers, mentors, and peers they encounter in school. Success reinforces their well-being and enables them to flourish in their lives and at work in ways that the metrics of promotions and pay raises do not fully capture.

So it is striking that academic leaders and policy advocates have not paid more sustained attention to the issue of well-being for the new majority. Indeed, I would argue, current policy discourse and programmatic innovation in higher education often reinforce the marginalization of these students by ignoring them or by misrecognizing their lives, needs, and goals. I do not mean that we lack research on nontraditional undergraduates.

To the contrary, educational psychologists, economists, and other scholars have produced significant work on their demographics, role pressures, academic experience, and educational outcomes. Yet for the most part, as a leading voice in the field has argued:

> *research on undergraduate higher education [has been rooted in] a traditional student profile [that] . . . represented the undergraduate as an on-campus residential student who was solely focused upon the academic pursuits related to future career and life goals and primarily concerned with the key developmental tasks of identity and intimacy formation . . . .Higher education was both a foundation for developing adult identity and competence . . . and a developmental bridge between the family circle and the future adult world of family, work, and societal decision making.*[10]

This paradigm, with its stress on the undergraduate's post-adolescent identity formation and entry into the future adult world, has proven enormously generative. It informs much of the best research and practice on student well-being and development, including important work presented in this volume. Yet this framework does not fully speak to the experience of the new majority for whom college is not a launching pad into adult identities and adult roles.

Conversely, a more recent trend among educational thought leaders and policy experts does focus on nontraditional undergraduates, but it does so without paying serious attention to their well-being, emotional needs, or developmental tasks. Indeed it is assumed that they have no distinctive developmental agenda beyond that of acquiring degrees and job skills. To a great extent, this is because the new focus on the new majority is driven by policy advocates—for instance, the National Governors Association or the multi-state consortium Complete College America—whose primary goals are to boost graduation rates and align academic priorities with the dynamics of the labor market.[11] Such completion and workforce goals have emerged as dominant themes in the national conversation on higher education, and they deserve critical examination. Personally I would argue that they are legitimate (as part of a more holistic educational agenda) and dangerously instrumental (if enshrined separately). But this is not the occasion for such a discussion. My point here is that given its stress on targeted, accelerated, training-oriented education, this way of thinking about college for nontraditional students has little to say about their well-being. It treats them as neoliberal ciphers, emptied of emotional or developmental complexity, their inner lives and personal journeys shaped by nothing more than cost and time factors. "Adult learners . . . use a simple calculus," argues Richard Kazis and colleagues in an influential policy brief, "they ask: How can I maximize the economic value of my time in school while minimizing the amount of time I have to spend in classes? They are looking for flexibility, convenience, and accelerated progress to skills and credentials that pay off, as well as better odds for completion."[12]

It's a powerfully simple model of the needs and motives of the new majority, and it leads to a powerfully straightforward policy agenda: streamlined vocationalism. As the student voices I've quoted make clear, it's also inaccurate. Nontraditional students need academic opportunities that take full account of their lives, needs, and goals. To provide

such opportunities, educators need models of well-being that also take full account of students' lives, needs, and goals. What should that model look like? We have much work to do in answering this question.

IV

Let's begin by stressing the complexity of the needs that nontraditional students bring to college. Some (such as affordable tuition and engaging teachers) are shared with their traditional peers; others (such as child care support and flexible schedules for courses and administrative offices) reflect their distinct situations. And even among nontraditional undergraduates, these needs are strikingly heterogeneous. The full-time office assistant, the unemployed machinist, and the parent with a part-time job will have divergent time pressures; the middle-aged administrator and the young barista may require quite different levels of help with digital, writing, or financial literacy.

Yet however diverse the needs, they are tightly interwoven within the lives of individual students. When I queried my adult undergraduates at The New School to describe what they wanted the institution to provide, I was apt to hear an eloquent flow of responses. Sufficient financial aid, responsive financial-aid staff, friendly teachers, challenging teachers, advisers who "get it" about their lives, a strong peer community, classes full of snacks, tutoring and academic services with flexible hours, and massage sessions during exam periods ran seamlessly together. Sometimes my students invoked Maslow's famous hierarchy of needs to describe the range of their hopes and frustrations, but I came to think of Maslow's classificatory model (in which the meeting of basic requirements is presumed to be a precondition for higher self-actualization) as too static and, well, hierarchical.[13] What nontraditional students convey is rather the manifold connections among their needs that function like compounds in organic chemistry; each student's life is its own complex molecule in which material, social, intellectual, and emotional factors are bent toward one another and bound together.

Their motivations in returning to college are similarly complex and interconnected. Indeed, I'd argue, the biggest misconception about the new majority—and one of the largest obstacles to their success—is the current conventional belief that their only salient goals are income- and job-related. In saying this, I do not diminish the role of economics in their educational choices; financial security and career advancement (not to mention the affordability of college itself) are as crucial to them as to any other students. Yet perhaps even more than traditional undergraduates, they do not segregate economic goals from academic and personal ones. In one survey of adult prospective students, affordable tuition was ranked as "absolutely essential" by 74 percent of respondents and was second only to "instructors [who] care about students" at 76 percent.[14] Recall Dorian's comment in the Evergreen discussion, with its fluid description of career, family, and emotional motivations:

"I came back to college because I felt like an angry underling. I had a good job, but I didn't get respect at work. I felt slapped, like I didn't amount to anything without that piece of paper. So I returned to school because of career goals. But my parents are gone, and I also came back for them." We can hear a similar fluidity, with financial worries segueing into larger personal dreams, in this community-college student's comment: "I think education is the only way to do better in life . . . like without enough money, if

you want to be better and do something . . . be something in life—education is the only way I've found.[15]

As such voices make clear, it is not the desire for a pure and simple pathway to employment that typically drives nontraditional students to college. Rather a compound of goals—financial, occupational, familial, emotional, sometimes communal, and (not least) intellectual—impels them to imagine, each in his or her own way, when, where, and what to study. If educators do not design institutions and programs in recognition and support of this whole spectrum of needs and aspirations—and the interconnections among them—we will simply add to the headwinds against which nontraditional undergraduates have to push, heads down, on their journeys.

V

The first time I mentioned the phrase *self-authoring* to my adult students at The New School, they seemed to sit straighter and take notice. When I followed up by assigning a scholarly article in which the authors used the concept to analyze the goals of nontraditional undergraduates in Australia, they responded to the reading with emphatic assents.[16] By the end of the semester, they had adopted self-authoring as a kind of rhetorical touchstone, a meme for their educational goals and their advocacy for better institutional support.

At first glance, this may seem surprising. As theorized by the psychologist Robert Kegan and elaborated by Marcia Baxter Magolda and other scholars, the concept of self-authorship has served as an influential framework for understanding *traditional* undergraduates and their developmental tasks.[17] It posits a process by which young adults gain mature autonomy and self-direction and move from "relying on external formulas" and "adult guides" to "using [their] internal voice and core personal values to guide [their] life."[18] Magolda parses this developmental journey into three processes that work together to cultivate and activate an individual's internal voice and core values. There must be "cognitive" growth in which s/he creates a belief-system distinct from the guidance of parents and other authorities and tests it iteratively in the face of experience and conflicting world-views; "intrapersonal" growth in which s/he constructs a grounded identity and core personal commitments; and "interpersonal" growth in which s/he develops authentic, mutual relationships that engage others without either conformist deference or defensive stubbornness.[19]

It is easy to see why the self-authorship framework has become a valuable model for undergraduate development in traditional academic institutions. Despite the whiff of individualism in the word itself, Magolda, Patricia King, and other proponents stress the need for a collective fabric of "learning partnerships" that catalyze self-authoring, and it has been widely deployed in the student affairs literature and in the design of undergraduate curricula and student life programming.[20] Indeed the model's key themes—the importance of separating from external authorities and inherited rules, the importance of building autonomous identities and values, and the importance of cognitive development in both—comprise a powerful blueprint for educating the post-adolescent undergraduate to become reflective, self-directed, and socially engaged.

Yet we should not be surprised that members of the new majority also find the idea so resonant. It was conceived as a model of adult (not simply young-adult) development, grounded in longitudinal research that followed interview subjects from college into early middle age. Magolda's tagline for self-authorship—"developing an internal voice to

navigate life's challenges"—is echoed uncannily in Wendy's description of her Evergreen experience: "Coming here has helped me find my voice. It helps me move through the world." The force of Wendy's words is clear: for nontraditional students, going to college can itself be an act of self-authoring.

For most nontraditional students, college is a second act, a project of self-renewal rather than self-creation

But it is an act that shifts the typical understanding of the concept and inflects it with the distinctive experience of the new majority for whom self-authorship is not a matter of launching an adult identity and forging core values in the face of inherited norms and external authorities. They have usually (if incompletely and imperfectly) undertaken these tasks already. Rather, self-authorship is about self-efficacy, about building the capacity to transform the circumstances and responsibilities that hem in adult life into episodes of a new story, one that new-majority students compose and enact themselves. And it is about claiming that story telling power against a backstory of languishing, a past freighted with unfinished business, and the *less-than* feeling that so often results. For most nontraditional students, college is a second act, a project of self-renewal rather than self-creation. The authoring that it asks them to undertake may seem like a sequel, or the completion of an unfinished chapter, or a correction of the first edition, or a palimpsest in which they overwrite the earlier story without erasing it. But whichever of these metaphors is apt, there is no blank sheet, no page one. Coming to college means overcoming the burdens of the backstory in order to rewrite the future. And that requires collaboration and support.

VI

What should we do, then, to help nontraditional undergraduates flourish and to foster their self-authoring? Some answers will be clear, I hope, in what I've written. New-majority students deserve educational opportunities that take account of the social, material, and emotional complexity of their lives, of the breadth and interconnectedness of their needs and aspirations. They deserve an educational environment that is similarly broad and integrated in meeting those needs and aspirations. And quite apart from what they deserve, their academic success depends on it.

In this, of course, nontraditional undergraduates are no different from traditional ones. The success of *all* college students depends on integrated support for their material, emotional, social, and intellectual needs—for their self-authoring. Too often the traditional college environment falters in fully offering such support, especially when academic life and co-curricular sociability are misaligned. But at its best, the residential campus works as a kind of total institution for the nurturance of the whole student and embeds academic study in an environment that offers food, shelter, sociability, athletic and creative facilities, spiritual community, and health and counseling services, all aimed at post-adolescent flourishing.

That same environment poorly serves the needs and goals of nontraditional students. Their well-being does not require the compact integration of a residential campus but rather a nexus of infrastructures and services that help them to sustain their studies within the conditions and stressors of their outside lives. The most effective four- and two-year programs are designed to do just that. Evergreen's Tacoma campus and the

Providence based College Unbound, for instance, strengthen engagement and retention by mandating weekly, faculty-led community forums that build mentoring and peer relationships and are scheduled at times and locations that fit the lives of working students.[21] The Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP) initiative of the City University of New York is similarly student-centered and provides an integrated suite of support and services to low-income, educationally at-risk undergraduates (traditional and nontraditional) in CUNY's community college system. Participants are asked to commit to full-time study, clustered courses, and a gateway seminar that builds study habits and soft skills; they receive intensive advising, tutoring, career services, tuition and fee waivers for all costs not covered by their financial aid, free textbooks, and stipends for public transportation.[22] Were I the Czar of Nontraditional Well-Being, I might add child care support and short-term, supplemental funding for household emergencies.

What makes such best-practice programs so effective is not only their responsive logistics and wrap-around services, as useful as these are, but also their integration of support of an academic experience in which the curriculum and learning climate are similarly student-centered. Weekly forums with faculty mentors and supportive peers, intensive (sometimes intrusive) advising, gateway courses that germinate academic plans while building academic skills—such practices braid together students' personal, career, and intellectual development even as they deepen teachers' and advisers' understanding of students' lives and needs. The result is a specifically new-majority culture of engaged learning. For many faculty, this may entail adjusting expectations and habits that have developed in traditional settings. Especially if teachers come from elite educational backgrounds, it can be difficult to keep in mind just how precarious nontraditional students may feel. "Understanding that you belong on campus—and that an institution believes in that belonging and your potential—are important assets in succeeding as a student," one adult, working, undergraduates notes. "Privileged students most likely take this acceptance for granted…[but] these questions remain open and salient for [nontraditional undergraduates]."[23] This why "instructors who care" score so high in enrollment surveys. It is also why the most effective adult programs, like Evergreen's Tacoma Program and College Unbound, always open their weekly forums by celebrating the academic and personal milestones of students. Such a full-throated culture of welcome enhances persistence and completion, not because it coddles students in need of grit, but precisely because it conveys trust in their resilience and agency.[24]

Of course a culture of welcome means little if the academic experience into which it welcomes students does not foster their success. Adult education research emphasizes that nontraditional undergraduates flourish most when curricular, pedagogical, and credit-earning practices closely engage their lives; draw on their personal, community, and work experiences; and directly advance their goals. As Carol Kasworm summarizes it, nontraditional students value "[learning] engagements that are adult experience-based, challenging, and relevant . . . and that apply to adults' work worlds."[25] Such goals and preferences impel many nontraditional students to pursue career-related degrees. Yet it would be a mistake to equate the desire for "adult experience-based, challenging, and relevant" education with a call for vocational training pure and simple. National data show that new-majority students at four- and two-year institutions distribute themselves broadly across degree programs in health care, business, STEM, and liberal arts or general studies. The most popular areas of

study are variously in health care or liberal arts depending on the level of nontraditional factors students display and the type of institutions they attend.[26]

Whatever they study, it is clear that new-majority undergraduates thrive best when they can integrate their learning and credit earning into the fabric of their lives. Research suggests that they persist at higher rates when they can garner credit for prior learning—documented knowledge and skills already gained in non-academic settings—and when they can pursue new opportunities for practice-based learning linked to their current jobs, career aspirations, or unpaid community, creative, and advocacy work.[27] It also points to the value of high-impact practices like community service and project-based learning if these can be made accessible and useful within the time and role constraints of their lives.[28] Indeed, leading adult baccalaureate programs, such as College Unbound and DePaul University's School For New Learning, require that students complete their studies with capstone projects that bring their academic plans to bear on their personal goals in real world settings. Leann, for instance, a recent graduate of College Unbound, developed a business plan for a community performance center. A divorced mother of two with a passion for theater, she long languished in traditional colleges that she found unresponsive to her family situation and for-profit courses that were "low-quality and worthless." By contrast, she loved the blend of peer community, no nonsense mentoring, and student-centered academic planning that she encountered at College Unbound. "All of a sudden, I felt like I wasn't in school," she said, recalling the arc of goal setting, reflection, skill-building, and action that she wove together in her capstone project. Now she is pursuing a master's in theater administration and working part-time as an advisor for incoming College Unbound students.

VII

This, it seems to me, is what educating the whole student looks like when that student belongs to the new majority.

The vision of well-being that I have tried to capture in this sketch is complex—as complex as the lives of nontraditional undergraduates themselves. It points to the need for institutional infrastructures, student services, learning communities, and curricular practices that work together organically to welcome new-majority students and at the same time challenge them. It calls for academic programs that offer strong guidance from faculty and staff and at the same time offer vibrant and supportive peer communities. Such programs would nurture the inward and outward dimensions of self-authorship and empower nontraditional students (to quote Wendy's words one last time) to find their voices and move through the world.

The academy is filled with committed educators who advance this vision in their everyday work. But higher education as a whole has not done enough to realize it, even as the students who stand to benefit from it have become the majority of our undergraduates. Actualizing this vision will require creativity, institutional will, and resources on the part of academic institutions, faculty, staff, and students themselves. It will also require significant changes in Federal, state, and accreditor policies, but that is an argument for another essay. Yet, as I have tried to show in this essay, we can see glimpses of what it might look like in the research of adult education scholars, the best practices of places like Evergreen, and the voices of students like Wendy.

I hope it is clear that investing creativity, will, and resources in the well-being of non-traditional students is well worth it. When academic programs take account of their lives,

needs, and goals, the results are impressive. Participants in CUNY's ASAP program complete their associate's degrees at twice the rate of their peers and at a lower cost per graduate, despite (or rather because of) the extra resources invested in supporting them.[29] Students in College Unbound and Evergreen's Tacoma Program persist and graduate at rates as high as 80%—a level usually limited to select liberal-arts institutions—and Pell Grants cover about two-thirds of tuition in both programs.[30]

Such indicators of cost and completion are important; nontraditional undergraduates (like traditional ones) cannot flourish if they cannot graduate from affordable programs. But the most powerful evidence of student well-being comes from the students themselves. So let me end where I started: listening to the stories of Evergreen undergraduates. The last person around the seminar table that afternoon is named Jesse, "spelled like boys spell it," she tells me. She is a judicial educator in the Washington State court system, and she has come back to school many years after a first, unhappy stint, feeling confident in her subsequent successes and resentful that her lack of a degree has held her back:

> *While I hate to admit this, I often compare myself . . . to others—feeling that a degree doesn't make the person. It is passion, effort, and genuine care that does. I've worked next to a great deal of highly educated individuals who couldn't apply their knowledge to practice, yet they get the interviews and jobs I'm not considered for because I didn't have the paper. It created a great deal of resentment that I have had to figure out how to deal with. It also created a really bad opinion of higher education . . . It was very hard to go back to school and trust that I would not be wounded by it again. And that's what makes Evergreen so different in my mind.*

At Evergreen, in the Evening and Weekend Studies Program, Jesse has flourished, loves the course-work and the writing, and is even considering a career in higher education. "I began to crave college," she tells me, almost fiercely. "College makes me feel dangerous. I hated school before. Now it feels great to be so self-directed."

Acknowledgement

My greatest appreciation goes to the many students who have shared their stories. It begins with my former students in the Public Engagement Fellows Program of The New School's adult bachelor's program, who first dislodged me from my own cluelessness about the experience of nontraditional undergraduates. In field visits, I learned enormously from students at College Unbound, DePaul University's School for New Learning, and the Evening and Weekend Studies and Tacoma Programs at The Evergreen State College. I am grateful to all of them for letting me publish their words and lift up their achievements. Thanks also to Provost Adam Bush and his colleagues at College Unbound, Dean Marisa Alicia and her colleagues at DePaul, and Dean Sarah Ryan at Evergreen for opening their doors and their work to me.

Dr. Patricia King was a helpful guide through the scholarly literature on self-authorship and a generously critical reader. Don Harward has been, as always, a supportive editor and inclusive leader of the Bringing Theory to Practice project. A decade ago, he invited me into this special community of researchers and educators. I hope that this essay makes clear how much I have learned from them.

Notes

1. The Evergreen State College has two bachelor's programs for adult working students: the Evening and Studies Program on the main Olympia campus and the stand-alone Tacoma Program an hour away. These have distinct faculties, curricula, and student bodies; both are exemplary in different ways. I discuss each of them at various points in the essay.
2. Thomas D. Snyder and Sally A. Dillow, *Digest of Education Statistics 2013 (NCES 2015-011)* (Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics, 2015), Table 303.40, 42, http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2015/2015011.pdf; National Center for Educational Statistics, *Demographic and Enrollment Characteristics of Nontraditional Undergraduates: 2011–12* (Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics, 2015), 6, http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2015/2015025.pdf; Sandy Baum, "Student Work and the Financial Aid System" in *Understanding the Working College Student: New Research and Its Implications For Policy and Practice*, ed. Laura W. Perna (Sterling, VA: Stylus, 2010), 5.
3. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) defines as *nontraditional* any students with one or more of these seven demographic markers: (1) financial independence, (2) having one or more dependents, (3) being a single caregiver, (4) lacking a traditional high school diploma, (5) delaying college enrollment at least a year after high school, (6) part-time enrollment, and (7) full-time employment (more than thirty-five hours a week) (National Center for Education Statistics, *Who is Nontraditional?* accessed March 5, 2016, https://nces.ed.gov/pubs/web/97578e.asp). Different individuals have varying factors and varying numbers of factors; NCES surveys are used to measure both. The NCES does *not* use age as a marker, but many adult education researchers define students who are twenty-four or older as nontraditional. In this essay I treat NCES factors and student age as criteria of nontraditional status.
4. Lisa Matus-Grossman et al., "Opening Doors: Students' Perspectives on Juggling Work, Family, and College," Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation, 30, published July, 2002, http://www.mdrc.org/sites/default/files/full_466.pdf.
5. Brian Pusser, "Of a Mind To Labor: Reconceptualizing Student Work and Higher Education," in *Understanding the Working College Student: New Research and Its Implications For Policy and Practice*, ed. Laura W. Perna (Sterling, VA: Stylus, 2010), 144.
6. See especially Peggy A. Sissel, Catherine A. Hansman, Carol E. Kasworm, "The Politics of Neglect: Adult Learners in Higher Education," *New Directions For Adult and Continuing Education* 91 (Fall, 2001): 17–27 and David Scobey, "Marginalized Majority: Nontraditional Students and the Equity Imperative," *Diversity and Democracy* 19 (Winter, 2016): 15–17.
7. Matus-Grossman et al., "Opening Doors," 29.
8. Susan Choy, Nontraditional Undergraduates: NCES 2002–012 (Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics, 2002), 14 (six-year graduation rates), https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2002/2002012.pdf; Heather T. Rowan-Kenyon et al., "Academic Success For Working Adult Students," in Understanding the Working College Student: New Research and Its Implications For Policy and Practice, ed. Laura W. Perna (Sterling, VA: Stylus, 2010), 93 ("high risk"); Doug Shapiro et al., "Completing College: A National View of Student Attainment Rates—Fall 2009 Cohort (Signature Report No. 10)," Herndon, VA: National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 17 (part-time graduation rates), published November 16, 2015, https://nscresearchcenter.org/signaturereport10/.
9. Ibid.
10. Carol E. Kasworm, "Adult Undergraduates in Higher Education: A Review of Past Research Perspectives," *Review of Educational Research* 60, no. 3 (Fall, 1990): 345. Peggy A. Sissel, in "When 'Accommodation' Is Resistance: Towards a Critical Discourse on the Politics of Adult Education," in *The Cyril O. Houle Scholars in Adult and Continuing Education Global Research Perspectives*, eds. R.M. Cervero et al. (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia, 2001), 103–116, similarly argues that adult students are marginalized in higher education research and journalism.
11. See, for instance, Linda Hoffman, Travis Reindl, and Jeremy Bearer-Friend, *Complete to Compete: Improving Postsecondary Attainment Among Adults* (Washington, DC: National Governors Association, 2011); Complete College America, "Time Is the Enemy," published 2011, http://www.completecollege.org/docs/Time_Is_the_Enemy.pdf; and Complete College America, "Four-Year Myth," published 2014, http://completecollege.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/4-Year-Myth.pdf.
12. Richard Kazis et al., *Adult Learners in Higher Education: Barriers to Success and Strategies to Improve Results* (Washington, DC: United States Department of Labor, 2007), 15.
13. Abraham H. Maslow introduced his model of human needs in "A Theory of Human Motivation," *Psychology Review* 50, no. 4 (July, 1943): 370–96 and developed it more fully in his 1954 book *Motivation and Personality*.
14. Public Agenda, "Is College Worth It For Me? How Adults Without Degrees Think About Going (Back) To School," 14, published October 23, 2013, http://www.publicagenda.org/pages/is-college-worth-it-for-me.

15. Matus-Grossman et al., "Opening Doors," 33.
16. Lesley Scanlon, "Adults' Motives For Returning To Study: The Role of Self-Authoring," *Studies in Continuing Education* 30, no. 1 (2008): 17–32.
17. See especially Robert Kegan, *The Evolving Self: Problem and Process In Human Development* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982); Robert Kegan, *In Over Our Heads: The Mental Demands Of Modern Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994); and (among many publications) Marcia Baxter Magolda, Authoring Your Life: Developing an Internal Voice To Navigate Life's Challenges (Sterling, VA: Stylus, 2009); Marcia Baxter Magolda, "Self-Authorship: The Foundation For Twenty-First-Century Education," *New Directions For Teaching and Learning* 109 (Spring, 2007): 69–83.
18. Magolda, *Authoring Your Life*, 9–10.
19. Ibid.
20. See the articles in Marcia Baxter Magolda and Patrica M. King, eds., *Learning Partnerships: Theories and Models of Practice to Educate for Self-Authorship* (Sterling, VA: Stylus, 2004) and Peggy S. Meszaros, ed., *Self-Authorship: Advancing Students' Intellectual Growth: New Directions for Teaching and Learning* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2007).
21. Throughout this section, my accounts of the practices of College Unbound, Evergreen State College's Tacoma Program, and DePaul University's School for New Learning rely on field visits to each program.
22. Susan Scrivener et al., "Doubling Graduation Rates: Three-Year Effects of CUNY's Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP) for Developmental Education Students," iii, Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation, published February, 2015, http://www.mdrc.org/sites/default/files/doubling_graduation_rates_fr.pdf.
23. Mary Ziskin *et al.*, "Mobile Working Students: A Delicate Balance of College, Family, and Work," in *Understanding the Working College Student: New Research and Its Implications For Policy and Practice*, ed. Laura W. Perna (Sterling, VA: Stylus, 2010), 87.
24. I should emphasize that a culture of welcome with strong, persistent practices of inclusion and support, is equally essential and effective for the success of low-income, first-generation, and nonwhite undergraduates in the traditional student body.
25. Carol Kasworm, "Adult Workers as Undergraduate Students: Significant Challenges for Higher Education Policy and Practice," in *Understanding the Working College Student: New Research and Its Implications For Policy and Practice*, ed. Laura W. Perna (Sterling, VA: Stylus, 2010), 39.
26. See National Center for Educational Statistics, "Demographic and Enrollment Characteristics," for details on the fields of study chosen by associate's and bachelor's students disaggregated by number of nontraditional demographic factors.
27. See Council For Adult & Experiential Learning, "Fueling the Race To Postsecondary Success: A 48-Institution Study of Prior Learning Assessment and Adult Student Outcomes," published March, 2010, http://www.cael.org/pdfs/pla_fueling-the-race and Jovita M. Ross-Gordon, "Research On Adult Learners: Supporting the Needs of a Student Population That Is No Longer Nontraditional," *Peer Review* 13, no.1 (Winter, 2011), https://www.aacu.org/publications-research/periodicals/research-adult-learners-supporting-needs-student-population-no.
28. See for instance, Susan C. Reed et al., "The Effect of Community Service Learning On Undergraduate Persistence in Three Institutional Contexts," *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning* 21, no. 2 (Spring, 2015): 22–36; Center For Community College Student Engagement, "A Matter of Degrees: Engaging Practices, Engaging Students: High Impact Practices for Community College Student Engagement," published 2013, http://www.ccsse.org/docs/Matter_of_Degrees_2.pdf; and Susan C. Reed and Catherine Marienau, eds., *Linking Adults With Community: Promoting Civic Engagement Through Community Based Learning* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2008).
29. Scrivener et al., "Doubling," iii.
30. Scrivener et al., "Doubling," iii.