

Exploring the For-Profit Experience: An Ethnography of a For-Profit College

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The for-profit college sector is arguably the most controversial and least understood sector of higher education today. The past decade has ushered in a wealth of public concern and scrutiny as to whether for-profit colleges and universities are providing a quality education to underserved student populations. While their politicization has captured immense attention, there is far less empirical research on student experiences at for-profit institutions to better inform conceptual, institutional, and practical understanding of this sector of postsecondary education. Using ethnographic data from one midsize for-profit college in a suburban city, the author spent seven months exploring educational culture from the perspective of enrolled students. The findings illuminate four themes: (a) student desire for institutional transparency, (b) the perception of high-quality in-person instruction, (c) varied experiences based on student schedule and learning needs, and (d) the role of age in shaping peer interactions.

KEYWORDS: for-profit colleges, ethnography, qualitative research, higher education, student experiences, vocational education, adult learners, institutional culture, privatization, social context, proprietary education

For-profit colleges and universities are rapidly changing the look, feel, and outcomes of college attendance, particularly among students most

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marginalized in postsecondary education. When compared with their counterparts attending other higher education institutions, for-profit college students are more likely to be older, women, students of color, and come from lower-income and less educated families (Chung, 2012; Iloh, 2014; Iloh & Tierney, 2013; Iloh & Toldson, 2013; Oseguera & Malagan, 2011; Rosenbaum, Deil-Amen, & Person, 2006). As the traditional model and population of American higher education continues to shift, scholars, practitioners, and policymakers are now challenged with understanding the educational experiences had by the more than 2 million students enrolled in U.S. for-profit colleges and universities today.

It is also important to understand if and how the educational conditions of for-profit colleges foster returns to the student, especially considering the costs and debt associated with enrolling in the for-profit sector (Cellini, 2012). Ninety-six percent of for-profit college students take out student loans (Health, Education, Labor and Pensions [HELP] Committee, 2012). In comparison, 13% of students at community colleges, 48% at four-year public, and 57% at four-year private nonprofit colleges borrow money to pay for school. For-profit schools also enroll far more high-dollar borrowers. Fifty-seven percent of bachelor's students who graduate from a for-profit college owe \$30,000 or more (HELP Committee, 2012). In contrast, 25% of those who earned degrees in the private, nonprofit sector and 12% from the public sector borrowed at this level (HELP Committee, 2012).

Due to ethical and quality concerns, the past several years have brought increased scrutiny, oversight, and trouble to the for-profit higher education industry. The latest gainful employment ruling will allow the Department of Education to take federal financial aid away from career college programs that fail to meet minimum thresholds with respect to the debt-to-income rates of their graduates, putting institutions at a higher risk of closing (Heller, 2011; Mayotte, 2015; Schneider, 2014). The recent closure of one of the largest for-profit higher education companies in North America, Corinthian Colleges, displaced more than 16,000 students (Kirkham, 2015). Some for-profit institutions have even sought to switch their schools to nonprofit status in order to free them from the regulatory burdens associated with for-profit colleges (Shireman, 2015). Although the role and efficacy of for-profit higher education is still debated, contemporary discussions would be remiss to overlook the for-profit sector's impact on 21st-century college students and marginalized student groups in particular.

For-profit empirical research most often employs quantitative methods, which "can reveal what works—but not how it works, who and what made it work . . . and the meaning students ascribe to their experience" (Harper, 2007, p. 56). Further, it becomes difficult to fully understand and foster the conditions to replicate or discontinue educational practices in the absence of voice and sense making among students who actually experienced them (Harper, 2007). While national concern and reform efforts in the for-profit postsecondary sector escalate, research that positions students as primary stakeholders

occupies space at the margins of higher education scholarship. This article aims to reconcile the large methodological and scholarly gaps in the for-profit literature by detailing an ethnographic study of the culture of a for-profit campus through observations and the vocalized perceptions of enrolled students.

This article begins with a description of the for-profit postsecondary education industry and its students. Next, I discuss ethnography broadly as a research method for understanding social spaces, processes, and interactions, paying particular attention to its utility in the field of postsecondary education. I then highlight the findings of a seven-month ethnographic study examining the cultural dynamics of one for-profit institution. The article concludes with new considerations for both proprietary college scholarship and higher education research.

The For-Profit Higher Education Sector

The for-profit postsecondary school sector encompasses privately funded taxpaying institutions that generate profit by providing post-high school degrees or credentials (Deming, Goldin, & Katz, 2012; Iloh, 2014; Ruch, 2001). For-profit colleges and universities (FPCUs) have highly focused missions limited to specific industries and fields of study that are targeted to specific segments of the population (Gilpin, Saunders, & Stoddard, 2015; Ruch, 2001). In responding to labor demands of numerous employers, trades, and professions, FPCUs develop and offer programs that train students for positions where there is sufficient demand and for which investment in schooling is likely to be “recoverable” with increased wages they can accrue.

For-profit colleges and universities have been a component of the educational enterprise since the 1800s (Kinser, 2006), but the recent rise of these institutions has pushed higher education researchers to more intently consider their impact on postsecondary education. On average, the for-profit sector has experienced a year-to-year growth rate of over 11% since 1976, while higher education’s total average yearly growth rate is only 1.6% (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2006). In 1999, FPCUs enrolled approximately 629,000 students, or a little over 4% of the nation’s then 15.2 million students (Heller, 2011). By 2009, this sector increased to 2.2 million students, or almost 11% of the nation’s 21 million college students (Knapp, Kelly-Reid, & Ginder, 2011; also see Heller, 2011). Most recently, this trend in enrollment growth has changed. In 2013, four-year, for-profit colleges had the largest enrollment decrease in postsecondary education at 9.7%, followed by two-year public colleges at 3.1% (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2013). In this same year, enrollment at four-year public colleges and four-year private, non-profit colleges actually increased by 0.3% and 1.3%, respectively (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2013). Even with the rise and most recent decline in enrollment at FPCUs, colleges are now challenged to learn from the for-profit college industry, especially in regards to meeting demand

and starting courses and certificate programs at multiple times throughout the year (Van Der Werf & Sabatier, 2009).

Scope and Heterogeneity of the For-Profit Sector

A noteworthy challenge in understanding the culture and practices of FPCUs is outlining the sector's immense institutional heterogeneity. The 15 largest for-profit institutions account for almost 60% of for-profit enrollments (Bennett, Lucchesi, & Vedder, 2010). While large for-profit institutions account for the majority of the sector's enrollments, more of the sector can be described as smaller career colleges that focus on a wide range of shorter degree and certificate programs (Bennett et al., 2010; Hentschke, 2011).

Classifying the culture of the for-profit sector is also difficult as new ownership of FPCUs often results in name changes, separate campuses combining to form new systems, and multi-campus systems possessing distinct degree programs, accreditations, and identities at each location (Kinser, 2006). One of the most widely used classifications was provided by the Education Commission of the States (ECS) and was specifically designed to highlight the changing and varied landscape of for-profit higher education (Kelly, 2001). Focusing on degree-granting institutions, FPCUs were divided into three categories: enterprise colleges, super systems, and Internet institutions (Kinser, 2006).

Enterprise colleges are privately owned and operated by an individual or small company. Most of these colleges have relatively small enrollments—typically fewer than 500 students per campus (Kelly, 2001). The super systems are the growth engines of the for-profit sector and are described as multistate, multi-campus institutions with stock that trades on Wall Street (Kelly, 2001). The Internet institutions are the virtual institutions of the for-profit sector, and they have no bricks and mortar buildings except for corporate offices (Kinser, 2006). While it is common for many casual observers to conflate for-profit higher education with distance learning, such a linkage does not distinguish this sector from the non-profit institutions as online education is offered in both for-profit and nonprofit universities (Breneman, Pusser, & Turner, 2006). “Millennium College,” the institution profiled in this study, would be classified as an enterprise college as its student body is under 500 students and it is not solely an Internet institution. While this study has no intent to generalize to the for-profit sector at large, Millennium College was particularly attractive for ethnographic purposes because it represents the online and land campus component common at many for-profit institutions. Millennium College also represents a midpoint between large publicly traded for-profit colleges and smaller proprietary institutions.

For-Profit College Students

Proprietary institutions tend to serve students who are most disadvantaged by educational and societal opportunity gaps (Iloh, 2014; in press).

In 2010, FPCUs enrolled 11% of all students in postsecondary education, and students of color represent 40% of these enrollments (NCES, 2012). Past data also indicate that proprietary schools have served relatively high proportions of minority students for some time. In 1977, 40% of proprietary students versus 33% of community college students were of color (Jung, 1980). From 2000 to 2008, the percentage of low-income students—between ages 18 and 26 and whose total household income is near or below the federal poverty level—enrolling at for-profit institutions increased from 13% to 19% while the percentage enrolling in public four-year institutions declined from 20% to 15% (Institute for Higher Education Policy, 2011). The most likely age, race, and income combination represented in the proprietary sector is low-income Black women (Institute for Higher Education Policy, 2010).

Other scholarship highlights additional characteristics of for-profit college students by exploring elements of their college choice. Chung (2012) stressed that a primary difficulty in defining choice outcomes comes from the fact that students, particularly those attending for-profit colleges, have been known to be “very mobile” across the set of available institutional choices. Upon high school completion, they are more likely to delay college, and then, upon enrollment, they are more likely to drop out of college, transfer, and reenter a different college. In another study that examined elements of for-profit college choice, Oseguera, Kimball, and Hwang (2011) found that students attending a for-profit college are more likely to value education to find a job over students in other sectors of higher education. Another recent study found for-profit college students based their choice on long-term projections of benefits, which allowed them to take the risk of accruing high levels of debt (Iloh & Tierney, 2014a). Many of these students valued services such as networking opportunities, hands-on training, and apprenticeships in preparing them for a career in a specific field.

Educational Characteristics of For-Profit Colleges and Universities

Focus on Student Customer

The structure and governance of the for-profit sector has a customer orientation that focuses on the student. FPCUs are often focused on providing a product for the student customer because in doing so, these institutions are able to increase their profits and maximize shareholder wealth (Bennett et al., 2010; Iloh & Tierney, 2013). The customer service emphasis in the for-profit sector not only leads to a focus on particular student services, but also a learner-centered pedagogical approach (Berg, 2005). Examples of the for-profit customer service orientation are often illustrated through student-focused admissions practices and small faculty-to-student ratios on campus (Bennett et al., 2010; Kelly, 2001).

Faculty Roles

For-profit colleges alter the familiar paradigm that defines the academic life of faculty at many traditional colleges and universities, namely, teaching, research, and service (Lechuga, 2008). While descriptions of faculty in the for-profit sector are limited, almost all note that for-profit faculty devote nearly all of their time to teaching, do not receive tenure, and have limited control over the curriculum as course content is highly standardized and pre-developed (Breneman et al., 2006; Kinser, 2006; Lechuga, 2006). Moreover, faculty at FPCUs are more likely to be practitioners working in the field in which they teach and have substantial connections to potential employers for students (Berg, 2005).

Vocational Orientation and Career Services

The objective of many for-profit institutions is straightforward in that they exist in order to prepare students for immediate employment in a rather carefully defined occupational field. Moreover, for-profit programs are typically not meant to prepare students to continue to another form of higher education, as is the case with most community colleges that are also tasked with supporting transfer efforts (Deming et al., 2012). Because FPCUs cannot rely primarily on public funding, they must be able to recover nearly all costs associated with the provision of their product in the form of tuition (Bennett et al., 2010; Hentschke, 2011). For this reason, FPCUs tend to focus on degree programs with measurable skill outcomes that are more likely to pass a cost-benefit analysis for students (Bennett et al., 2010; Iloh & Tierney, 2014a). The majority of for-profit colleges provide a small (three to five) assortment of short certificate programs in career-oriented fields, such as personal and culinary services, allied health professions, business support services, computer and information technology (IT) services, cosmetology, and legal support (Chung, 2009). Because of their vocational nature, FPCUs can be accredited at an institutional level but also have separate forms of accreditation based on programs, such as nursing.

In addition to occupational training, most proprietary schools provide students with support services for job placement as FPCUs attract students by promising an educational experience that will result in a career. For-profit college connections with employers are usually stronger than those found in traditional institutions (Rosenbaum et al., 2006). Further, many of the employer requests that are sometimes resented at public institutions are actively encouraged at FPCUs (Rosenbaum et al., 2006).

High Enrollment of Post-Traditional Students and Adult Learners

Today, 85%, or about 15 million undergraduates, are a diverse group that includes adult learners, employees who study part-time, low-income

students, commuters, and student parents (Soares, 2013). For-profit institutions have been particularly assertive in creating programs and policies to address the needs of post-traditional students and adult learners (Chao, DeRocco, & Flynn, 2007). Over 56% of students attending for-profit institutions are over the age of 24, compared to only 30% of those at private and public nonprofits (Silber & Fisher, 2005). Adult prospective students who are interested in FPCUs are particularly attracted to schools that offer accelerated vocational programs, online classes, and career counselors (Public Agenda, 2014). Thus, proprietary colleges are important sites for understanding the college experiences of post-traditional students and adult learners (Iloh & Tierney, 2014b).

On Understanding Ethnography and Culture

Ethnography

As both a process and an outcome of research (Agar, 1980; Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011; Iloh & Tierney, 2014b), ethnography is a way of studying a cultural entity as well as the final, written product of that research (Creswell, 2007). In this text, I depart from viewing ethnography as merely a process and product. While ethnography is a useful tool for collecting data on a particular group or organization, it also serves as a way to think about cultural spaces. Ethnography as a matter of epistemology is significant as it places a primacy on situated meaning and contextualized experience as the basis for explaining and understanding social behavior (Brewer, 2000; Iloh & Tierney, 2014b). As an epistemological tool, ethnography affords the researcher a patterned way of perceiving, believing, acting, and evaluating what members of social groups develop within and across the events of everyday life (Atkinson, Delamont, Coffey, Lofland, & Lofland, 2007; Lichterman, 2015; Walford, 2008). This article draws on both the epistemological and methodological power of ethnography.

To establish patterns of cultural meaning, the ethnographer engages in extensive fieldwork, gathering information through observation, interviews, and materials helpful in developing a portrait of the culture-sharing group (Agar, 1980; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). Fieldwork provides a situation-based inquiry process for the researcher to explore questions and develop interpretations (Erickson, 1984). Through ethnographic fieldwork, what is unfamiliar becomes familiar.

A distinct feature and primary technique used in ethnographic research is participant observation (Creswell, 2007; Dahlke, Hall, & Phinney, 2015). Ethnography usually involves the researcher participating overtly or covertly in people's daily lives for an extended period of time (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). It is through the extensive and total immersion in a context that a participant observer is able to build a rich descriptive picture of those

studied as a backdrop against which explanations can be explored (Geertz, 1973). Interviews are also often used to organize and classify information, especially that which is not clearly understood through observation (Spradley, 1980).

Using an Interpretive Framework to Understand Institutional Culture

The goal of ethnography is to make sense of a culture within a bounded space or group (Creswell, 2007; Zaharlick, 1992). In this study, an interpretive framework was used to understand the educational culture of a proprietary college. Accordingly, culture was explored from interpretations based on the student perspective (e.g., Kuh & Arnold, 1993; Levine & Cureton, 1998; Moffatt, 1989; Nathan, 2005; Ray & Rosow, 2012; Schwartz & Lever, 1976). The interpretive framework posits that the culture of an institution cannot be understood simply by examining its formal structural aspects—its policies, methods of decision making, and prescribed rules (Deal & Kennedy, 1982). Interpretive research is based on an assumption of subjective human experience as ontologically real and accessible through dialogue within a qualitative framework (Terre Blanche & Kelly, 1999). Further, the qualitative interpretive approach attempts to tell the story from the participant's perspective (Elliott, Fischer, & Rennie, 1999).

Utility of Ethnography of For-Profit Institutions

Many of the publications on the for-profit sector are based on anecdotal evidence, with fewer studies basing their reports on quantitative and qualitative research methods, including survey analysis, interviews, and analysis of data sets from the Integrated Postsecondary Educational Data System (IPEDS; Lechuga & Hentschke, 2003). Given the array of proposed and implemented policy changes that have impacted proprietary higher education, there is a need for close and prolonged ethnographic engagement with students, faculty, and leaders in order to explore the many assumptions that exist regarding for-profit institutions. In the policy realm, ethnographic inquiry on for-profit higher education would serve multiple purposes as it: (a) defines an issue or problem that is either unclear, complex, or embedded in multiple systems; (b) identifies the range of the problem's settings and the participants, sectors, or stakeholders; (c) explores the factors associated with the problem in order to understand and address them; and (d) helps with designing measures that match the characteristics of the sector when existing measures are not a good fit (Purcell-Gates, 2000). Moreover, as the scrutiny of the for-profit sector intensifies, the necessity of research that informs graduation and employment outcomes also becomes increasingly important (Center for Responsible Lending, 2014; Zamani-Gallaher, 2004).

Ethnography, unlike other research methods, is also positioned to mitigate barriers to access in the study of for-profit colleges. Because proprietary

institutions work to generate profit, the possibility of damaging reports of their educational services, whether the institution is kept confidential or not, may be considered too costly (Iloh & Tierney, 2014b). When provided access, ethnography serves as a strategic tool to aptly and thoroughly investigate for-profit institutions through its emphasis on prolonged exploration of discrete and isolated cases (Iloh & Tierney, 2014b). The goal of this study was to unearth hidden elements, dynamics, and factors at Millennium College, one type of for-profit institution embedded in an empirically understudied sector of postsecondary education.

Data and Method

The findings reported in this article are part of data collected during a larger ethnographic account of social dynamics and processes that surround students at one for-profit institution. I spent seven months investigating the culture of one midsize for-profit college in a suburban city in California. Detailed field notes, participant observation, and in-depth interviews encompass the primary means of data collection. Due to heightened confidentiality concerns, the site and all names associated were masked throughout the study. Accordingly, the institution that was studied is referred to in this text as Millennium College. Throughout data collection, all names of students were recorded as pseudonyms they chose at the beginning of the study. The ethnographic observations were ongoing for the entire seven months. While engaged in this study, for-profit students were observed in a multitude of settings, including their classrooms, the dining area, study rooms, lounge, main office, counseling office, and off-campus grounds. Because of the variety of instructional delivery offered at the for-profit college, students were also observed during day and evening courses, and four students were shadowed throughout the course of taking an online general education class. Three research questions framed the data collection process:

Research Question 1: How do for-profit college students understand or perceive the culture of their institution (particularly the academic, social, and physical climate)?

Research Question 2: What types of interactions and experiences do students have within the space of a for-profit college?

Research Question 3: What implications do these findings present for inquiry regarding for-profit colleges and universities?

Millennium College

Millennium College is a proprietary institution of higher learning in a suburban city in California (see Table 1). Millennium College from the outside appears to be one large multilevel office building, although the actual

Table 1
Millennium College Institutional Characteristics

Institutional profile	Private 2- to 4-year institution that offers certificates and associate's degrees
Average cost	\$32,000
Average student-to-faculty ratio	13:1
Length of program	13 months
Percentage completion rate (within program duration)	65
Percentage job placement rate	30
Annual cohort size	194
Program enrollment	Rolling admission

Note: This table reflects Integrated Postsecondary Educational Data System (IPEDS) data and not direct information provided by institution.

Table 2
Millennium College 2013 Student Population Data (Reported From Institution)

	<i>N</i>	%
Female	170	62
Male	106	38
American Indian/Alaskan	1	0
Asian/Pacific Islander	26	9
Black/non-Hispanic	41	15
Latino	140	51
Other	22	8
Two or more races	8	3
White/non-Hispanic	38	14
<20	29	11
20–24	111	40
25–29	56	21
30–34	31	11
35–39	17	6
40–44	9	3
45–49	6	2
≥50	17	6

parameters of the campus only encompass one floor of the building. During the 2012–2013 school year, the student body was over 60% female and more than 50% Latino (see Table 2).

Millennium College students are enrolled in one of four academic program offerings: wellness, paralegal, design, and business. Students either took classes during the day or in the evening. Of the 39 faculty that are

dispersed across the four program offerings, the majority are within the wellness program—Millennium College’s most popular major. Some of these faculty members also serve as instructors at other branch campuses of the institution. The administrators at Millennium College are relatively diverse in gender and race, although most admissions counselors were Latino. It should be noted that the majority of the board of directors are White men and women with the exception of two Asian institutional leaders.

Entry to the Millennium College community was facilitated by several factors: (a) the assistance of a top institutional leader who ultimately granted access for the study, (b) meetings with the director of Student Affairs at Millennium College to structure which participants would be sampled, and (c) a tour given by an admissions counselor, identical to the tours presented to prospective students. My status as a young Black woman with no prior experience of being enrolled or immersed in a proprietary college also played an increasingly important role in facilitating a productive research exploration. Outside of staff, I was treated more like a student than an affiliated representative of Millennium College. This was evident in the multiple instances where students inquired about what academic program I was enrolled in or whether or not I was a new student. During one focus group, students suggested, “You might as well be one of us.”

Data Collection

The data collection for this study comprised of in-depth, semi-structured interviews, student shadowing, institutional observations, and a small amount of focus groups. I spent approximately three days a week at the institution from 10 a.m. until 8 p.m. During the course of the study, 21 students across the four academic majors (wellness, paralegal, design, and business) were interviewed and/or shadowed before, during, and after class. The 21 students selected were a result of direct quota sampling (a nonprobability sampling technique wherein the assembled sample has the same proportions of individuals as the entire population). Accordingly, the collective participant sample of students was consistent with the student population of Millennium College (see Table 2) and developed with the assistance of the director of Student Affairs. In addition to interviews, there were three focus groups interspersed throughout Months 4, 5, and 6 of data collection. Two focus groups consisted of groups of three students, and the last contained two students. All participants were interviewed at least three times, and 75% were interviewed more than this. Throughout the course of data collection, no students dropped out of the study; however, because of individual schedules, some were more available than others to be involved in interviewing beyond the minimum requirements.

In-Depth Interviews and Focus Groups

Interviews and focus groups were utilized to gather a rich set of accounts of the interviewee's experiences, knowledge, ideas, and impressions about their experience at Millennium College. Both the interview and focus group protocol were developed using an open-ended approach. After agreeing to participate, face-to-face interviews with the students were conducted utilizing a semi-structured protocol, allowing participants to diverge from narrow topics and to further explore additional concepts and elements of their experience. In-person, semi-structured interviews as well as focus groups lasting 45 minutes were used to ascertain student perspectives of the for-profit college experience. Participants who were only able to meet at certain times were grouped into the focus groups. The initial question opening each individual interview was as follows: "What led you to this institution?" Using audiotapes from interviews and focus groups, a verbatim text was transcribed for each session.

Observations and Student Shadowing

Throughout the ethnographic investigation, I observed various areas of the campus during regular class hours, including morning and evening shifts. During observations of classrooms, particular attention was paid to teaching and instruction, faculty-student interactions, and student-student interactions. In common areas of the campus, I watched for interactions, behaviors, and practices by students and around students. In addition to general observations, the research process included shadowing a small sample of interviewed students throughout their day to observe the experiences that further informed what was shared during interviews. On some days, I would simply observe a student during the entire duration of one class. In other cases, I would spend more time observing the student such that I would begin the day with the student from their entrance into the institution, follow them to their first class, and even follow them to the place they ate lunch or studied. All clarifying questions pertaining to observations were saved until the interview.

Limitations

In terms of the institutional sample, Millennium College represents only a microcosm of the vast number of for-profit colleges in the country, and representativeness is limited to institutions with a similar structure and form of leadership. I was intentional in selecting an institution that captured many of the complexities featured in the heterogeneous for-profit education industry but acknowledge Millennium College only reflects a particular institutional structure. This study also mostly reflects the experiences of students who physically attended class, even though some for-profit college students

only take courses online. Further research can build on the present study with more diverse samples of colleges and by utilizing different research approaches.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted simultaneously with data collection. The analysis of the data included developing descriptive charts from observational data and transcription of the interviews and focus groups. Frequently, insights gained from one data source were used to inform another data source. The goal throughout the data collection process was to find connections in what individual students said about their college experience. This goal was met by using the constant comparative method, in which any newly collected data are compared with previous data that were collected (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). Constant comparison is important in developing a theory that is grounded in the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). During the constant comparative method, theories are formed, enhanced, confirmed, or even discounted as a result of any new data that emerge from the study. This method was helpful for reviewing data from initial interviews and asking more pertinent follow-up questions during focus groups and individual interviews.

Meaning units in this study were created through the process of reduction and elimination. During this portion, statements and observations were coded and analyzed by asking: (a) Does this address an aspect of the research questions? (b) Is the statement a necessary and significant constituent for understanding a research question? (c) Is it possible to abstract and label it? Once labeled, these meaning units were clustered into common categories or themes, removing overlapping and repetitive statements, and then clustered themes and meanings were used to develop textural and structural descriptions (Moustakas, 1994). These steps were used to explore and identify relevant themes across various participants and observations in the study. As common themes were compared and theoretical saturation was reached—the point at which new data fit into existing categories—an image of the student experience at Millennium College became clearer.

Establishing Trustworthy Data

Qualitative inquirers mindfully employ a variety of techniques to increase the trustworthiness of their research. Trustworthiness concerns the degree to which the researcher did everything possible to ensure that data were appropriately and ethically collected, analyzed, and reported (Carlson, 2010). Lincoln and Guba (1985) used four attributes: credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability to affirm the trustworthiness of a naturalistic approach. For credibility, I worked from the same protocol to ensure participants were given similar prompts to discuss their college

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experience. Transferability is concerned with the degree to which the findings can be applied to other settings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Millennium College was selected because of its multiple features encompassed across proprietary institutions. For dependability, a code/recode procedure was conducted (the data were coded and after a few months, recoded). Conformability is concerned with the degree to which the findings are based on the condition of the research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Accordingly, an electronic audit trail of all research documents was developed. This audit trail included interview journals, audiotapes, and verbatim transcripts.

Triangulation

Triangulation was particularly complementary to the constant comparative method. Triangulation of different data sources (e.g., interview and observations) was used as a means of enhancing credibility and safeguarding against researcher bias (Denzin, 1978; Patton, 2002). Emphasis was placed on developing a converging line of inquiry based on “multiple forms of evidence rather than a single incident or data point in the study” (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 27). Triangulation was used not just as a tactic at the end of data collection, but more as a strategy to build a chain of evidence while still in the process of data collection. Relevant observations and shadowing experiences (e.g., attending class meetings, sitting in the computer lab, eating in the dining area) were combined with interview data to amplify the meaning of the findings.

Thick Description

Thick and rich description provides detailed accounts of settings, participants, data collection, and analysis procedures as a way of making researchers' accounts more credible—to show that they were diligent in their attempts to conduct respectable research (Anfara, Brown, & Mangione, 2002). Particular types of note taking were especially useful in achieving thick description within the context of this study. Notes were divided into four subtypes: field notes, personal notes, methodological notes, and theoretical notes. In basic field notes, I recorded details of interactions during an interview or focus group session. Personal notes regarding experience of the interview sessions were helpful for reconstructing reactions to the space. Methodological notes were used as running commentary on the mechanics of the data collection process, including interactional techniques and useful tactics for eliciting elaborate responses. Theoretical notes were utilized to identify themes or patterns across multiple interviews as data collection progressed.

Reciprocity

In order to ensure that the data collected were utilized to improve institutional effectiveness, research findings were disseminated to Millennium

College. All student participants were informed prior to participation that major themes would be presented to institutional leaders but no identifying information would be reported. Two presentations were given to Millennium College's institutional leaders, the first to five administrators and one dean at the physical campus location and the second to a board of directors that oversees the institution during a Chancellor's Cabinet meeting. The main themes from the research study were shared with administrators and leaders as well as a set of recommendations that could be used to potentially reform the student experience. In this way, reciprocity was not just an act of gratitude to Millennium College; it became an initiative that ensured the institution could improve because of the research efforts.

Findings

The goal of this study was to understand how students constructed their experience through the academic, institutional, and social settings of Millennium College. Particular emphasis was placed on how students interacted with their classmates, faculty, and administrators. In the sections that follow, I detail four relevant and recurring themes throughout data collection. Such findings are organized and illustrated with quotes from student participants during individual semi-structured interviews, observations from the institutional site, and experiences while shadowing students.

“Just Keep It Real With Us”: The Necessity of Transparency and Communication

In this theme, students voiced concerns regarding the manner and frequency to which Millennium College communicated important matters to the student body. One particular incident seemed to typify the frustrations reflected in this theme. The event happened prior to the beginning of data collection but became a point of tension revealed in over eight individual interviews with students. A 22-year-old Latina participant was first to mention this problem:

Over a three-month period at [Millennium College] we waited to hear about whether we received accreditation from [accrediting body in the state]. The staff told us we would be notified at a certain time. When that date came they did not tell us squat. They just didn't say anything. Pretty clear we did not get it but not telling us is sketchy.

As I held more interviews, the pieces of the story began to come together organically. One 41-year-old White male student in the business program shared this regarding the incident: “They decided to have a big meeting because the tension was so stiff you could cut it with a knife. And the meeting did nothing.”

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A 24-year-old Black woman in the wellness program also reflected on this meeting:

You can tell when someone is giving you an answer to sugar coat something. When we got out of the bogus meeting, we all were basically like “yeah they just totally avoided it.” For many students that was a major frustration. You can’t ask us to get involved in accreditation and then when it comes down to it you say nothing.

A Latino male student ambassador in his mid-20s said this on the matter: “I mean they didn’t tell us anything. It was hard for me because as a student ambassador other students are asking me questions and I have no answers.”

Over the next few months, students remained confused and described feeling “blown off” by administrators who did not provide answers. A 29-year-old Latina female stated:

If they didn’t know, they just could have kept it real. I mean, they emphasize family and us communicating with them, and we want the same thing too. We just want to know what is going on with our education. I felt ignored and that’s not right.

For more than half of the students who discussed this issue, the accreditation communication was the biggest problem they would change about Millennium College. The following two students described the accreditation communication as one of the most paramount problems in their education experience. One White female student in her mid-20s shared:

The one thing I would change here would be communication. I mean I don’t like to gossip or you know . . . *talk* . . . but at a recent meeting we discussed how classes have gone with the new students coming in. They asked just like you are doing . . . “Anything ever bothered you?” Hands down a major complaint, besides finances, was that this accreditation system just was not handled right. We all knew the accreditors were coming. They asked us to be involved, wear our uniforms, all that stuff. People started asking other students and faculty what happened. No one would answer.

A 25-year-old mixed-race (Latina and White) female student had this to say while reflecting on the aftermath of the accreditation situation:

Now there is all this baggage and all these rumors. It affects this school now, ya know? I can promise you this because I have heard it . . . people are telling the new students. All those future students are being affected by it and changing their mind about coming. So if you are going to involve us, follow through. I mean this is our education.

In addition to this incident, there was an internship/scholarship the institution advertised, particularly to those in the paralegal program. Three

participants claimed they even factored this scholarship into their financial aid. A 31-year-old White female student first shared this event:

I later find out that this supposed scholarship was no longer offered. We are paying all this money and in the middle of the way through you just cancel it? I talked to financial aid counselors and everything was set. Now this opportunity is no longer available.

Another White female in her mid-30s reflected,

Yeah that whole scholarship thingy-ma jig. . . . Major problem. I mean we all take money seriously and this was not dealt with correctly. I don't understand how *not* sharing this information or not even talking to students is appropriate.

In talking to administrators about this particular opportunity, they said the scholarship is still available, but the stipulations have changed. Dynamics such as these highlight how the necessity of more transparency shaped student experiences and perceptions of Millennium College. The next theme highlights students' more positive outlook toward in-person instruction.

“Class Time Is a Great Time”: High-Quality In-Person Instruction

Every student interviewed raved about the quality of in-person teaching given across the four areas of study. Through observation, it was apparent that many of the faculty had close connections to students. Moreover, most classes used a hands-on style of teaching and learning, where each professor knew the students' names and would often provide one-on-one instruction during demonstrations and exercises.

There were also multiple observations where students would form huddles with the instructors. Before, after, and during class, students would candidly and informally discuss their educational needs. On one occasion, I observed during a break in a massage therapy class, a group of five students (one White male, three Latina females, and one Black woman) huddled around a Black female instructor. One Latina female student said, “For this test coming up . . . I'm not sure if I will do as well as I know I can. It's not the class, it's just stuff has been crazy with my kid. How can I get up to speed?” The instructor turns from writing on the whiteboard, smiles, and responds “Yeah, I planned to do a review next class for anyone who needs it afterward.” Once she made this statement, all five began to let out a sigh of relief while three even hugged her. The instructor smiled and laughed saying, “Okay, okay! Be cool everyone!” One of the huddled students replied, “Thanks so much for this. I am going to make you so proud!”

One 25-year-old Latina woman discussed how contemporary issues were brought into the class and also the ways in which instructors connected students with opportunities:

The application we get is great. A guy had an injury during March Madness and we discussed it in my sports wellness class. It helped knowing that what we were learning applies to fields that people want to go into. I actually already have a job lined up because I got put on by one of my instructors. I came to a massage networking event. They asked me to come interview and I got the position. I am thankful for how the teachers try to provide opportunities that can work out if you put in the work.

Some students discussed how not only was the teaching effective; it was well aligned with the subject matter. One Black male student in his mid-30s shared:

They don't just tell you everything. They really want you to learn it for yourself. A part of the success here is that it is a match. In the wellness program you have people here that are natural givers and want to care for people. That comes out in the classroom, and the teachers really work to bring that out through class activities.

In other cases, the impact of students' learning and engagement became evident in interviews. One 24-year-old Latina female, who went by Mia, had the following to say at the end of an individual interview:

Constance, can I ask you something?

Sure?

Why do you sit like that? The way you sit . . . I mean it's like you are hunched over. It doesn't look good especially for you to be so young and tall.

Oh, I didn't notice that.

She then replied:

Since being here [at Millennium College], it's all I do. I analyze people; how they move, and possible health consequences. I watch you in our interviews. When you hunch over, your body constricts and it can't get all the air it needs to function. Over time, this is going to decrease the quality of your health. Our teachers here, they remind us that while we can make money, we can also change people's lives every day for the better. So, with that said, I think you need me to help you with your bad sitting posture.

All students taking online general education classes expressed various degrees of concern with the utility of these courses, and some even made comparison to the more effective in-person courses.

One Black male in the paralegal program shared, "I would much rather be in class than taking these general education online classes. Just boring and unnecessary if you ask me. I could do without them. But when I have a teacher in front of me that cares, it's great."

When inquiring if I could shadow one student as she completed an online class activity, the Latina student in her mid-20s said:

You want to shadow me while I am taking an online class? Prepare to take a nap. This is not fun. The interface is boring. These assignments are boring. And I am performing the worst in these classes. Now, when we are in my real classes with my instructors . . . that is the good stuff!

This theme illustrates the ways in which teaching was viewed positively at Millennium College, with the exception of online education courses. This particular theme underscores the profound impact that in-class instruction had on the student experience at Millennium College. The following section discusses the variability of student perceptions and experiences based on student needs and course schedules.

“It Really Depends”: Varied Experiences Based on Class Schedule and Student Needs

Within this theme, some of the nuances of student experience are illustrated based on when students took classes at Millennium College and their educational needs. Through several observations, it is noted there were differences in the amount of social activities held for day and evening students, with day students receiving more academic and social functions. On one particular occasion, a pizza party was supposed to be held for both day and evening students during specific times. During lunch time, there was pizza readily available for day students. Later in the evening as evening students arrived, many looked for pizza, but none was delivered.

One male evening student shared, “I rushed in traffic just to make sure I got pizza. Where is it?” Another group of three young women in the wellness program were overheard talking among themselves, “Wow. . . . Now we actually have to rush and get dinner before class. . . . I don’t feel like walking.” In response to some of the initial reporting of these differences in frequency and quality of sponsored activities, one administrator stated, “Many evening students are disinterested in these activities, but get mad when we hold them for day students.”

Another issue, noted by evening students, was the frequent tardiness of their classmates. Several students felt that late start times ultimately impacted the duration and quality of class time as many evening courses would start on average 10 to 30 minutes behind the official class start time, a window in which half the students in the class would arrive. Through observations, it was noted that paralegal evening classes never started on time, and on most occasions, 30 minutes would elapse before class started.

A 35-year-old Latina female student stated in an individual interview:

I paid to start class on time. I understand other people work and yes there is traffic but it’s like any other school. Come to class on time and

be prepared. It is even more annoying when people come in late and they aren't prepared.

Day students seemed to receive the bulk of institutional support, particularly those pertaining to technological, tutoring, and advising services. Consequently, these resources decreased heavily as evening courses began. One White female participant in her late 30s shared:

If you just watch, you will notice they don't provide the same resources for the night students as they do the day students. I mean, just look at the Wi-Fi situation. I mean, you can't even log on and, for some of the classes, you need it for class activities. They don't even have a staff person here that can help with just turning on Internet after hours. It is really a problem. I mean [pointing to my laptop] try and log on for yourself right now and see.

Some students also discussed the ways in which diverse academic needs were not addressed in the school environment. In particular, self-reported high-achieving students said that often their academic needs were left unattended. A paralegal female student mentioned:

It's beyond problematic. Most of the resources here are for students who are doing poorly. If I miss one day of class, they are always calling. But I am a student that does well. There is not one single quiet place anyone can go to study. The computer lab/library is basically a nonstop social hour. The dining area . . . yeah no one does work there. They [referring to Millennium College] will basically stalk students who don't come to class but don't do much for the students who are doing well.

A 51-year-old White woman in the paralegal program similarly echoed:

I would just like a quiet place to study. I can't always complete work at home because I work part-time. I wish there were more accommodations for students performing well. I would not describe the campus overall as a good study environment. This is a school, and it should not be this way.

These data demonstrate the variability of student experiences and perceptions based on academic schedule and student needs. For some students, observations of different treatment greatly impacted their perceptions in unfavorable ways. The next theme focuses on the interpersonal dynamics between students based on age and maturity level.

“Just Grow Up”: A Need for Maturity Among Classmates

“We're not in high school anymore.” This statement echoed by at least three participants illustrates an expectation regarding the level of maturity that many students believed should be displayed by classmates at

Millennium College. Overall, age seemed to mediate most classroom divisions and appeared to be a more salient student identity than others, such as race and gender, which were almost never discussed even when prompted through interview questions. Guided by Silber and Fisher (2005), younger students were considered age 24 and under while the remaining were classified as older. And while many students addressed age, they held varying perspectives on what it meant to them in creating a successful classroom environment.

One student even switched to take evening courses because he could “not handle the immature and high school mentality” of his peers in the day classes. This 26-year-old Latino male shared:

Yeah, I used to date a girl in the day class cohort. At first it was cool but when our relationship faced drama she started spreading rumors. I confronted her and eventually broke up with her. She got even more bitter and now her crew is gossiping. Her and her friends in the class were all immature. It's not just because we were dating, there are a lot of students here that really are not mature enough to be in a college classroom. I went to the front office and requested to be switched to evening classes. Since then I have had no drama. It is just a different vibe and people overall are just more serious about their work.

One 21-year-old White female student shared that older students are often rude and dismissive to younger students:

Honestly, all the issues I have ever had have been with older students. One older lady kept telling me to quiet down. Every time I talked in class it was, “Shhhhh” from her when I would talk to my friends. In my head I am thinking, “Bitch, what is your problem?” She really seemed to have something against me. We have had words and now we just don't talk at all. I really think there is potential for us to go at it again. There was an older guy I had drama with, but we just squashed it. He is kinda like a big brother now.

While this younger student also attested to feeling better understood by students her age, other students stated that as long as their classmates behaved in a mature manner, they hoped for peaceful classroom and group work relations.

One 24-year-old Black male shared in a focus group interview:

If people knew how hard I worked to get here, they would understand why I have no time for age drama. My grandparents raised me so I have always had respect and gotten along with older people. I do see that there are tensions with age though.

Some students, while cognizant of the conflicts that may arise due to age differences in the classroom, believed that ultimately this environment

provides an important developmental space. One Black female, who affectionately wanted to be called Blue, shared in a personal interview:

At Cal States you kind of just show up and you don't have to interact. Because of the way classes are set up here [at Millennium College] you end up talking to people of different ages and backgrounds. The group work demands you be mature. You basically are forced to grow up because you are surrounded by people you would not normally hang out with but have to work with. In the work field you will fail if you decide to stay in your bubble. Even though there may be age-related problems, it's needed because this is reality.

This last theme highlights the complicated nature of student interactions based on age and maturity. While for some students this was not a significant challenge, for others, it visibly impacted their educational experience.

Discussion

Depending on one's imagination or opinion, the image of a for-profit college may resemble anything from a proprietary predator to an innovative leader in higher education. The insights and observations of this study reveal a portrait of a for-profit college whose culture transcends the extreme depictions used to describe the industry. The four themes presented are much more complex than dichotomies of "good" and "bad" and illustrate that Millennium College, much like many postsecondary institutions, has some areas of strength and many opportunities for improvement. The findings illuminate: (a) student desire for institutional communication and transparency, (b) the perception of high-quality instruction, (c) varied experiences based on student learning needs and schedule, and (d) the role of age and maturity in shaping student interactions. While the first two themes emphasize the value of educational processes rather than just products, the last two themes underscore the significance and nuances of micro-level understanding of the for-profit sector.

The Importance of the Process and Not Just the Product

While the for-profit college industry may be known for delivering a certain type of educational product, observations and interviews revealed that the process of delivering such an education is just as important for students. Previous research asserts that for-profit institutions tend to view processes such as accreditation and instruction as a business objective, determining what it will take to meet or exceed accreditation expectations (Ruch, 2001). And while this straightforward strategy is often described as effective for for-profit institutions, this study highlights that business objectives become complicated when student experiences are considered.

Ethnography in this study provided a close-up view of how complex processes and delivery of educational objectives impact students.

For many of the students, the failure of Millennium College to keep them informed regarding “something as important as accreditation” and other opportunities raised concerns and complaints about institutional communication efforts. In this way, accreditation was not just an objective that was not met at a particular time, it was a missed opportunity to inform students about a process and matter students deemed extremely important to the quality and outcome of their educational experience. Recall the student who shared, “We just want to know what is going on with our education.” And while students were clear that they may not have held these expectations from public institutions they attended prior to enrolling in Millennium College, the price, promise of a career, and perceived customer focus led them to believe that consistent communication and transparency regarding important matters was warranted. This study also highlights how it was not enough for students to receive some type of education and training as it was also very important how the training was delivered. Students across various areas of study upheld the importance of quality in-class instruction to their personal and career development. This might suggest that research on for-profit post-secondary education evolve from a “product-informed” view of its culture to one that positions culture as the co-creation of students and the institution, where processes are of particular importance.

The Nuances of Micro-Level Understanding

Some of the previous research on for-profit colleges describes their unique value proposition and argues nonprofit higher education institutions lose their share of students to for-profit colleges because they are ill equipped to deal with the changes taking place in the higher education market (Bailey, Badway, & Gumpert, 2003; Cook & Fennell, 2001). These changes often include innovation, technology, as well as serving diverse consumer populations in the higher education market. This study highlights that macro-level assertions of the for-profit industry may not always be compatible with the lived experience and needs of students. What does innovation and technology really trickle down to at the local institutional level? While the small sample of students interviewed that were in online classes felt that these courses were cumbersome, all interviewed students described their on-campus classes as phenomenal experiences. Perhaps having 21st-century facilities and educational products means relatively little when most students just want institutional transparency, fully-functional Wi-Fi to complete coursework, and instructors who care and will prepare them for a successful career.

This study further revealed that students’ experiences of the institutional environment were informed by perceptions of the treatment their peers

received. When some students noticed what appeared to be “preferential treatment” and better conditions to other students, it made them feel as though they were not getting “their money’s worth” and, in some cases, less prepared for the job market. This was not a phenomenon only common to evening students, who felt that institutional resources were lacking during their class time. Some self-reporting high-performing students stated that almost too many resources were allocated to students that were on the verge of dropping out or underperforming. The student that shared, “It’s beyond problematic. Most of the resources here are for students who are doing poorly,” typifies this sentiment. Other students addressed that there are baseline institutional resources that need to be provided to all students. In these cases, micro-level understanding allowed for examination of the ways in which institutional resource allocation shaped student experiences. It may be important to ensure that institutional offerings and practices are as comparable as possible, especially as prospective employment and cost of attendance is at the forefront of many students’ concerns.

This exploration also highlights what might happen when students are immersed in mixed-age college classroom environments. Whereas some students pointed out that these conflicts could be lessened by institutional practices, other students believed that such tensions were just a natural extension of the working environment they have been in or would soon be navigating. Recall the student that stated, “Because of the way classes are set up here you end up talking to people of different ages and backgrounds. . . . In the work field, you will fail if you decide to stay in your bubble.” Without closer examination, such tensions and inner thoughts might not be as readily discerned in understanding the for-profit college on-campus student experience. Whether Millennium College chooses to address these concerns, these dynamics remain important points of discussion for for-profit postsecondary education research and other institutions of higher learning that educate more of the adult learner population.

Conclusion

This article began by positioning for-profit colleges as one of the most controversial and least understood sectors of higher education. This study was developed with the intent to address gaps in the empirical scholarship on for-profit higher education generally and the culture, climate, and student experiences at these institutions specifically. The findings highlight how with more dedicated attention to their internal environment, for-profit colleges will continue to relay vital information about the condition and direction of 21st-century higher education.

Studies of institutional culture from the student perspective often reflect the student experience; however, this study also highlights how culture can be informed by how students negotiate and understand their education as

a type of service. Factors such as “lack of communication” were not necessarily just elements of the lived experience of students, but perceptions indicative of the quality of the educational product. Through an interpretive framework, institutional culture was informed by both student experiences and the ways in which students constantly evaluated the institution for its utility, benefits, and shortcomings.

Current literature on for-profit higher education illustrates a command of macro-level forces, such as innovation, privatization, and corporatization, that have given rise to the for-profit postsecondary industry. Such focus has been at the expense of micro-level meaning, which has been given much less consideration in the current discourse on for-profit higher education. This article demonstrates how an ethnographic study reveals the significance of meaning and processes at the individual institution and student levels and how some of these factors even counter current macro-level conceptions of the for-profit education culture and industry. Moving forward, comparative ethnographic studies that examine for-profit colleges and universities along with other institutional settings can serve as useful next steps following this study. Ultimately, this study positions the for-profit college as more than just a postsecondary education movement but as a complex educational space profoundly shaping student experiences.

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