

ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: Nontraditional Students Attending A Nontraditional College: The National Labor College Experience

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The establishment of the National Labor College in 1997 provided union members their first opportunity to earn a Bachelor's degree within the structure of the AFL-CIO. This fully accredited college serves a very specific population of nontraditional learners and is seen as an extension of the labor movement by students and graduates.

The purpose of this research was threefold; first, to identify characteristics of these graduates before and during attendance, and post-graduation. Second, to determine whether the construct of nontraditional student was legitimate or relevant in the context of attending this college. And third, to examine the relationship between the college and graduates to determine why these graduates were successful in their educational efforts.

A mailed survey was distributed to more than 425 graduates from years 2000 to 2003, and informal interviews were conducted with a number of students and graduates of the College. More than 54 percent of the surveys were returned and utilized in the research, and the interviews were used to confirm and expand the survey findings.

Analysis of the data and interview results suggest that the shared values and mission between the College and these graduates were a key element in their successful journey to graduation, and that the experience was for many reasons, a significant event in their lives. Graduates considered the College an extension of their lives, and this identity made the transition to college studies a more natural process for them than might be expected in a traditional academic setting. Results confirmed that these graduates are not nontraditional within the context of the College or the labor movement.