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Accessing the Transition to Careers for Female Undergraduates in the Restructured University in New Brunswick¹

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Abstract:

The reality of “non-traditional” students attending Canadian universities is increasing with the absence of the baby-boom echo generation in Atlantic Canada and several other provinces. Women students who are “first-in-the-family” face multiple disadvantages in accessing the university to career transition process, none more central than the invisibility of that career transition to students from low income families or those with no previous post-secondary education. This institutional ethnography examines how three universities in New Brunswick are addressing the specific needs of these students and the question of access to careers for non-traditional women students.

Résumé:

La réalité des étudiants "non- traditionnels" suivant des cours aux universités canadiennes augmente avec l'absence de la génération de baby boom dans les provinces atlantiques et dans plusieurs d'autres provinces du Canada. Les femmes étudiantes qui sont les "premières de la famille" doivent faire face aux multiples désavantages quand elles cherchent un accès au processus de transition vers une carrière, dont le désavantage le plus important n'est autre que l'invisibilité de cette transition pour les étudiantes venant des familles économiquement faibles ou pour celles auxquelles manque l'enseignement post secondaire. Cette étude ethnographique institutionnelle examine comment trois étudiantes du Nouveau- Brunswick s'adressent à leurs besoins spécifiques. Elle examine aussi la question d'accès aux carrières pour les étudiantes non-traditionnelles.

With the restructuring of university finances in Canada, the centre of gravity is shifting to individuals to shoulder the burdens of higher education financing. The *Rae Report* on university finances has identified a crucial contradiction in the Ontario and wider university scene: as more and more students attend university, paying increased tuition, the infra-structural needs of students for loans and up-to-date employment and career information go lacking (Rae, 2005). With the restructuring of university finances increasingly toward higher individual costs, the federal government has had to re-organize student loan administration to better service the growing student constituency, and continues to provide JOBS programs for both local and international students. Rae's Report recommends the creation of “portals” or employment networks catering to the career and employment needs of students who are both working to complete their educations and constructing career futures as they struggle to put their education and training futures into place.

This requirement for an infrastructural base is nowhere more immediate than in Atlantic Canada and New Brunswick specifically. The constituencies that most acutely experience the need for help are those for which the issue of access is already a big problem, specifically low income students and more than ever, this includes women students in liberal arts programs. Students from low income backgrounds are less than half as likely to attend university than their counterparts from middle and upper income families (Corak, Lipps and Zhao, 2005). With the disappearance of resource based industries, more students from low income families are attending university, many choosing universities where academic and career support services are quite limited. One obvious feature of university restructuring is the polarization between research and teaching universities with undergraduate Liberal Arts programmes particularly disadvantaged. Perhaps just as great is the regional inequality of disadvantaged regions within Atlantic Canada where we see economizing on student services, much to the detriment of undergraduates.

From the students' point of view, the issue is at what cost, and for local constituencies in New Brunswick, the obvious problem is one of accessibility: does the package of loans, courses and career preparation add up to one that is serviceable for students themselves? Or does the current organization of universities only cater to the better prepared, well heeled whose families basically do the career preparation work along with them? In this research project we focus on an important group of "non-traditional" students: young women from low income families who are first in their families to attend university. We focus on the university to labour force transition for undergraduate women at three New Brunswick universities to see how they are accessing the transition to careers in the milieu of the university.

These students are not easily going to recognize themselves in the kind of approaches universities take to students, that is, one in which the generic student is assumed to be middle class and male (Andres & Finley, 2004). More young women from low income families in the economically depressed regions of Atlantic Canada are entering university, many first in their families to do so, at a moment when economic restructuring is creating a multitiered university system that leaves many undergraduate teaching institutions less able to provide support services for academic and career development.

We began with what students see as a problem – how to translate their degrees into jobs. Most students intend to work after graduation. Some fields, such as engineering, make the connection to careers an explicit feature of the programme, while Liberal Arts programmes, traditionally oriented toward developing the student as a whole person, leave career planning the responsibility of individual students. We conducted in-depth interviews at three New Brunswick universities with Liberal Arts programmes with seventeen women undergraduates and graduates in an array of majors, about two thirds of whom were first in their families to attend university. Then we interviewed university personnel involved in delivering student services, including

recruitment, orientation, academic advising, personal and employment counselling, and co-op programming and observed many of these processes to investigate how universities organize students' experiences. We concentrated on Liberal Arts universities and programmes, where women form as much as two-thirds of the student body.

We found that students whose parents have high levels of education provide social capital that helps them understand the university-to-career transition. First-in-the-family students, however, are disadvantaged by not having the same knowledge of how educational institutions work and how university processes are linked to careers and job markets (Bourdieu, 1978, 1986 in Looker, 1997). These students may not know that resources are available, much less how to access or use them. Students and parents who are unfamiliar with how universities relate to careers very often presume that a Liberal Arts degree provides direct or even certain access to better paying jobs.

Research in Atlantic Canada shows that participation rates for women in universities are high, but graduates do not achieve the same kind of careers or incomes as their male counterparts (MPHEC, 2004). School-to-work outcomes are determined by the socially constructed and distributed work images, or "cultural milieu" associated with being female and from low income backgrounds (Andres, 2002; Lewko et al., 1993; Looker and Thiessen, 1999). Young university women anticipate high paying professional careers, but also expect to care for their family. But often they are not aware of the competitiveness of the labour force and the financial trade-off of staying at home and putting family first (Looker & Magee, 2000).

Graduate Surveys show that women are under-represented in high paying fields of study and occupations, and an increase in the number of women graduates is not leading to an improved position in the labour market (MPHEC, 2004). As well, New Brunswick graduates have a higher debt load than the national average, with two times the number of students in debt over \$25,000, or 24.7%, compared with 13.4% nationally (Junor and Usher, 2004). Many remain in the province but move directly into clerical and service jobs from which advancement is quite difficult.

This is informative research, but we wondered about those important four years at university. What do students learn – and not learn – to support their transition to careers? Could there be something in their university experiences that limits the career success of women from low income backgrounds in New Brunswick? Is it possible that the organization of the university is not neutral in supporting all students to take full advantage of career resources - orientation, academic advising, employment counselling, etc.? Does the university support the particular needs of New Brunswick women from lower incomes who are first in their families to go to university, to access the career process and the transition to work? This is the topic of our research.

Institutional ethnography provides the theoretical and methodological tools to investigate how institutional processes shape people's experiences (Smith, 1987). Beginning in standpoint analysis with students' experiences

(Mueller, 1995), we then turn to the ways universities contribute to the transition to work and careers. As a method in the interpretive tradition of sociology, institutional ethnography allows us to see how people (students, university personnel, parents) actively organize the social processes that result in the socially structured pathways associated with gender and class that result in unequal access to the labour force. The aim is not to generalize from a small sample to a large population, but rather uncover the generalizing social practices in formal organizations that shape people's experiences. We are opening up organizational analysis to make visible how university processes from outside their knowledge or awareness shape women's local, everyday actualities of moving through the university experience to careers.

The Role of the University in Shaping the Transitional Experience

We found that the information that these students hear from university sources fully reinforces the assumption made by many parents that a Liberal Arts degree provides direct or even certain access to better paying jobs. The problem is the universities make the career process invisible. University recruitment brochures make statements like "A Liberal Arts degree will prepare a student to enter any kind of job". Academic advisers tell students that their major does not matter and it is the Liberal Arts degree that employers look for. Administrators tell parent information sessions that no one course has a direct connection to the labour market, but that it is the Liberal Arts degree, and the transferable skills associated with it, that is in demand in the job market.

However, they don't state that the career process is a competitive one based on overall grades, and students who have never heard of a master's degree or prerequisites for professional work, for example, are unaware that it is important to begin early in the first year to investigate careers. By the third and even fourth year, it may already be too late to turn around a grade point average to qualify for a professional program. It will be the fortunate few who are able to put off employment another year to acquire the requirements for professional school admission, and even fewer who are qualified to do a fifth year honours degree.

For many students in Atlantic Canada, their knowledge of the world of professional careers is largely restricted to the military, the RCMP, and what they see on television, such as C.S.I. (Crime Scene Investigation). This makes criminology a popular major at some New Brunswick universities, but for many graduates, such careers remain elusive due to requirements beyond the degree itself, not to mention the competition for a limited number of jobs.

After interviewing these students, we wanted to know what university administrators know about this problem. We found that they have another set of considerable problems. With the decreasing federal and provincial government funding for over a decade, tuition comprises a greater percentage of operating expenses, 38.9% of the total in New Brunswick in 2003 (CAUT, 2005). At the same time as our government redirects funding from fishing, mining, pulp and

paper and manufacturing to the call-center industry, there is an exodus of people from the province, and the overall numbers of high school students have declined. An enrollment decrease of even a hundred students can result in thousands, even a million dollar decline in revenue, and all three universities have been impacted. As a result, the administrative focus on recruitment and retention is paramount; and promotional materials emphasize “excellence” and “community” while the connection of university to careers remains invisible.

Under these circumstances, we found that in student advising, orientation, and parent meetings, the Liberal Arts degree is heralded as one that leads to any possible job, making invisible that a process is involved for learning where jobs are and how to qualify for them. In the present context, it might be counterproductive for an administrator to harangue students with the provincial unemployment figures at orientation. It *would* benefit the students, however, if the university made the career transition more transparent.

Our research finds that university resources are often visible to middle-class students with the social capital to take advantage of those resources. But while equality of access means that “non-traditional” students – and their tuition – are welcomed, being able to take advantage of the resources for career planning eludes them. Just as there have been great changes in the organization of university from an institution for the elite to mass higher education, a concern for social justice today would require that universities address the need for career preparation in this, the least privileged segment of the student body.

There are a large number of “first in the family” attenders in New Brunswick universities but their silence and invisibility is organized in relation to a whole array of university practices where the meaning of this transitional period is not explained. University personnel give accounts of the BA as an abstract or universal degree that will prepare students for a list of jobs without providing particulars as to where these jobs are available or how the competitive process works. What this omits is the context, for example, of the New Brunswick labour market, where a limited range of professional and entry level managerial jobs exist in only a few fields such as nursing, engineering, business and teaching jobs in French, math and science. As Looker and Thiessen (1999) have shown, it is also a region where rural women are less mobile and likely to locate in low paying, service sector jobs, often in call centres, in an attempt to remain near to their family.

What follows are two narratives from students with differing levels of access to and engagement with the university to career transition to illustrate the university transition to careers, and which groups of students are supported in the university in organizing their career process. You can see in the narratives how career activity comes about and is organized in students’ experience and how career process is a priority for some of them and for others it is invisible.

Narrative I: “Joanne’s” University Experience

“Joanne’s” transition skills have been honed over a lifetime of family coaching on the purpose of education.

I always knew that I would become a teacher. Education is important in my family, and doing well. For my mom, school comes before athletics.... My parents have always been supportive of my interests. "Go with what you like" and "be happy in your career" is the way they look at it.

The daughter of a teacher, "Joanne" graduated from highschool in the academic stream as an 'A' student. She was accepted to the university of her choice, where her father worked in IT and she was recruited to the basketball team. Like many of her classmates, she began university in a science stream but switched out after not liking sciences. Her parents supported her decision. "Joanne" expected to go into English, but was turned off by the "brutal" marking practices in that department. She switched to History, and met with the department chair for academic counselling.

The family provided numerous material supports while in university: room and board, tuition, career advice, etc. By the time she applied to the university of her choice, she knew its ranking in McLean's magazine, and was impressed by its standing. She got the first of a string of summer jobs that were, wisely, related to a teaching career. The family hosted an event with the coach of the team to which she was recruited, and her brother personally provided her with a campus tour.

The need to do well in university courses was clear to "Joanne" and she resented the tough marking she encountered in English courses. She dealt decisively with this obstacle, switching out of English and her marks took a marked swing upward at that point. She was also not intimidated to go a department head in another major for counselling, and in her third year, researched exchange programs with other universities, finding one that accommodated her desire to move where her favoured teacher training program was located, "Big City University".

What stood out for "Joanne" was the Arts students at Big City University who didn't have any plans to link their degree into further career preparation and many are engaged. While plenty of her friends at "Local University" planned to take the next year off and to travel, this was a well orchestrated break prior to entering seriously into graduate or professional school. These students are typical of the group of young people who are putting off marriage until after they finish their education and have launched their careers.

"Joanne" was one of the few selected at the most competitive Bachelor of Education programs in the province, and has her eye on getting a masters degree to possibly go into educational administration. She exemplifies how students who are prepared to benefit from the process of undergraduate studies are more likely to apply it to a future career. She was one of our more articulate interviewees, noticing a stark contrast between the striving and confidence of

children of educated professionals and business owners and the less focused whom she met from lower income backgrounds.

One of the main features of the “Joannes” we interviewed was their own sense that the university is connected to a wider world, and that to make a career happen for her, she must be actively engaged in that process. The possibility of doing an exchange year at “Big City University” was attractive not only because of the prestigious education program, but also due to the convenience of living with her boyfriend. For roughly half of our interviewees, the convenience of living with a partner was a part of the university package. This was less true for women with more resources, as the family home or money for residence was typically provided.

The obvious ways in which family resources contribute to this kind of student’s success provide a grounding that proves invaluable. In contrast to “first-in-the-family” students we interviewed, parents are active in coaching students on requirements for careers to which they are knowledgeable. These students are less likely to miss finding out about a major requirement for admission to a professional school, due to the fact that often advising falls to the untrained faculty, who sometimes misadvise students due to their own lack of training.

Family resources have been invested throughout the schooling experience, including the mothering process described by Dorothy Smith and Alison Griffith (2004) that differentiate children by class and level and achievement. The many layers of parental involvement include the immediate resource based features of a university education from tuition, room and board and residence fees to tutoring in specific subjects or researching given career streams.

Narrative II: “Heather’s” University Experience

Though “Heather” knew she wanted to go to university from the time she entered high school, she had very little preparation for how to do university from her high school or her parents. “Heather’s” story is one of “learning on the job”. She starts out with little information about the socially organizing processes of the university that shape her experiences, of particular concern, how a Bachelor of Arts degree relates to the world of careers and jobs. “Heather” is learning “how to do university” as she is doing it. In practice the timing and sources of her information do not support planning beyond immediate decisions and actions. Indeed, in some important areas of the organization of her university career, “Heather” appears rather disconnected from many of the usual institutional supports. Time pressures from commuting and working, trouble maintaining a higher grade average as a consequence, concerns about repaying the large student debt, and exhaustion figure importantly in “Heather’s” talk about her university career at the end of the third year.

I changed my mind millions of times [about careers] but I always knew that I wanted to go to university, ever since, once I got into high school I knew that I wanted to go to university. . . . I just knew that after I was done high school that I'd need more education in order to have a successful career.

As is the case with many young people in the region, an early career plan for "Heather", while she was still in high school, was to join the RCMP. Indeed, she took the first test and failed, yet the idea of law enforcement as a career has remained with her. It played a part in where she went to university, what her major and minor are, and how she thinks about a future career.

Neither of "Heather's" parents attended university themselves, though her mother had attended a technical programme in accounting, which would fit with her mother's current work doing the books for her father's fishing operation. Yet she sees her parents as having given her important help and support. When she was denied a student loan because the family income was too high, her mother, who had worked in a bank, handled arrangements for the student line of credit to pay tuition and other university expenses, and they have helped with some incidental financial support. But as for any help with figuring out the things she's doing at university, "They're just, they just go with what I do. As long as I do good, they're happy".

Her high school experience seems not to have provided much help in understanding how to do university. She felt that the guidance counsellors had not done "a very good job". Indeed she said one had misadvised her about the classes she needed to get into university. Her decision where to go to university was informed by her desire to stay close to home and she commuted from her hometown about forty minutes each way. For more information about that university she relied on people from her small town who had gone there.

Once at university, she seems to have had limited encounters with institutional supports. She never went to see the faculty advisor she was assigned, though she did go to academic counsellors at Student Services for her major and minor requirements and for help with course selection. This had become a particular problem during her third year when she had not been connected into the usual e-mail information circuit and was unaware that registration was underway until another student mentioned it.

"Heather" talked about a college programme in Crime Scene Investigation that she had heard about from another student. She had little if any further information besides learning that she would have to return to university for a fifth year in order to take the courses to qualify for that programme. At the time of the interview she had done nothing further to find out about it, not speaking with either of the two professors who would have that information or investigating what jobs the CSI programme might qualify her for.

Like, I'm just a lot of undecided right now, but next year [her fourth] for sure, like as soon as I get back here, I'm gonna be finding

out what I need to do and how long one course is gonna take, and what it consists of, what's the career.

It cannot be said that “Heather” is not looking for career possibilities. She took social work classes to explore that career direction, and when a guest speaker in one of her criminology classes talked about her work doing assessments of criminals entering a correctional facility, that interested her. Asked how she moves from considering one career line to another, “Heather” said “I just jump”. Yet “Heather’s” experience, while it is not a carefully planned process of exploring a wide range of career possibilities, isn’t as haphazard as that sounds. Here she talks about her openness to learning about new career possibilities.

It's just, when I was introduced to new things, like when I was introduced to criminology whenever I came into the university and took criminology classes, and it just introduced me to new things, and just opened my mind to different careers.

The contrast between the university experiences of these two women could not be stronger. “Joanne” knows how to build longer-term plans into her university career, while “Heather” is focused on graduating, that is, accumulating enough of the right credits to walk across the stage to receive her diploma. It is easy to say that “Heather” needs to find out about more of the student services available at her university. Or perhaps she would have been happier, as she hints at least twice in this interview, had she gone to a college for a one or two year programme that was more directed at a job.

Yet those conclusions are too quick and easy. First, on practical grounds, the connection between college degrees and certificates and the labour force is by no means direct or immediate. Moreover, “Heather’s” grade transcript shows that she understands the value of good grades in a B.A. programme and knows how to get them, an important feature of the social organization of university not all students grasp. With the exception of one of the terms when she was exhausted from paid work and commuting, her term GPA has been right at a B-. Indeed, she said that after that disastrous term she has worked to raise her GPA.

Invisibility of the Career Process in Liberal Arts Universities and Faculties.

The contrast between the experiences of “Heather” and “Joanne” demonstrates the costliness of entering a Liberal Arts programme with expectations of a job at the end but little understanding of how that is actually accomplished. “Heather” has a hefty student loan to repay and minimal career prospects with just her BA, but further years of studies, as others undertaken seem daunting to her. She would likely have to do what three other first-in-the-family we interviewed did: take a year or two additional of undergraduate courses to qualify for post-graduate studies. Further, “Heather” is already exhausted from combining work

and studies and could only look forward to more of the same of working while doing an M.A.

We are discovering that in some respects, a strong focus on career is somewhat of a forbidden territory under the Liberal Art's model of education for education's sake. Yet for many of the students in Liberal Arts, and particularly those in the group on which we focus, getting a job is the point of going to university, and they may have little sense of the traditional values of a Liberal Arts education.

One programme where the career process is made visible is a work experience programme at one New Brunswick university. Here is how the benefits of that programme are described in the University calendar:

Students develop a sound awareness of their strengths and career interests, and understand the benefits of a post-secondary education. Upon graduation, students will have a varied work history to offer prospective employers, and a breadth of knowledge and depth of understanding that is becoming ever increasingly needed in professional circles. On a personal level, students develop self-sufficiency and independence and a capacity and life-long desire for learning.

Except for the term "varied work history", this does not seem much different from the usual statement of the value of Liberal Arts (Axelrod, Anisef, Lin, 2001). The difference is that it makes the career process visible. For students with family resources, that is, family members who have gone through the university to career process, the invisibility of the transitional experience is not a barrier as it is for first-in-their-families to go to university students. It is not that there are no career process resources or that they are totally hidden, but they remain largely inaccessible to students who do not have a fundamental grasp of the way that the career transition is built into the social organization of the university. In our observations of two universities, a relatively small proportion of the operating budgets is dedicated specifically to elements of that process, such as student advising and career development. This is despite student services personnel's perceptions that both universities have significant student constituencies that are first-in-the-family. Given the current social organization of the university to career transition, much of the existing resource base is oriented to people like "Joanne", with her strong family supports. "Heather" is in this sense a "non-traditional student", that is, how she comes to be at university and much of the background she carries with her is not directly addressed in the social organization of university.

Our research suggests that it would be beneficial if an emphasis on transitional experience began early – in student orientation at least – and was continued throughout the first year and beyond. Given that many students come to university with a future time frame, knowing they will get a job after graduating, university support for the transition to careers ought to be provided to everyone. First in the family students, however, require programming that

addresses their special needs to understand university courses in relation to a career process, as well as in terms of the local and national labour force realities in which careers play out. If universities are to maximize the chances of attracting and retaining the entire student constituency, these issues have to be taken seriously.

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