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USING ETHNOGRAPHY TO UNDERSTAND TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY COLLEGE LIFE

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Abstract: Ethnography in the field of postsecondary education has served as a magnifying glass bringing into focus university culture and student life. This paper highlights the ways in which ethnography is especially useful for understanding more recent dynamics and shifts in higher education. The authors utilize existing literature to uphold the relevancy of ethnography, while exploring its opportunities for research on adult students, online education, and for-profit colleges in particular. They conclude with methodological recommendations and directions for both qualitative research and higher education scholarship.

Keywords: ethnography; qualitative research; higher education; for-profit colleges; online education; adult students.

In the 1989 text *Coming of Age in New Jersey: College and American Culture,* Michael Moffatt closely examined the intellectual and socio-emotional condition of the college campus. Through this early text, broad audiences saw a portrait of collegiate life, analogous to the manner in which ethnography allows us to understand social contexts, interactions, and processes. While the higher education landscape Moffatt explored through his study of Rutgers University undergraduates has since changed dramatically, the importance of understanding the cultural heartbeat of institutions of higher learning remains relevant. But are researchers able to discern this today, nearly 25 years later amidst a highly heterogeneous postsecondary education market? The utility of ethnography in such an endeavor is significant as it gives researchers an opportunity to experience phenomena as witnessed by participants (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Shaffir, 1985). Yet similar to any tool or instrument, ethnography is only as strong as the manner in which it is used.

These questions of methodological application are timely, as higher education research has changed significantly over the last generation (Cook & Fennell, 2001; Iloh &Tierney, in press; Keller, 1998; Kezar, 2000; Leslie & Beckham, 1986). In this essay we consider the goals and uses of ethnography within the field of higher education and suggest that with an increasingly evolving postsecondary landscape, ethnography's potential to capture such dynamics has far from materialized. The specific goal of this paper is to explore the ways in which ethnography is positioned to contribute to the understanding of the twenty-first century postsecondary institution and student, amid a plethora of institutional and societal

changes. Accordingly, this article begins with a discussion on the nature of ethnography and its contributions to the understanding of culture and societal contexts. Second, we address prominent ways in which ethnography has been used in higher education research and the implications of such. We then highlight three twenty-first century forces in higher education: for-profit colleges, online education, and adult students, and address how ethnographic work is particularly useful in these domains. This paper concludes with methodological and scholarly implications for ethnographic work in a multifarious higher education landscape.

Situating ethnography

Ethnographic research primarily involves the collection and analysis of descriptive socio-cultural data from a single social group, society, or several closely related societies through first-hand and long-term involvement (Agar, 1980; Cousin, 2009). The end product of ethnographic research is usually either an ethnography describing the socio-cultural system of a people, [for example, the college experience of adult learners at a for-profit college] or a descriptive account of some component of a people's socio-cultural system [the dynamics of an online classroom] (Zaharlick, 1992). The principal characteristics of ethnography are: a) a focus on a discrete location, event(s), or setting; b) the use of a range of different research methods where the emphasis is upon understanding social behavior from inside the discrete setting; and c) an emphasis on data and analysis which moves from detailed description to the identification of concepts and theories (Pole & Morrison, 2003). In postsecondary education spaces, classrooms or entire college campuses are examples of social units that can be described ethnographically (Erickson, 1984). What makes a study ethnographic is that it not only treats a social unit of any size as a whole but that the ethnography portrays events, at least in part, from the points of view of the actors involved in the events (Erickson, 1984). In participating in and observing everyday life over a long period of time, researchers can begin to see and experience the world through the eyes of those whose lives one seeks to understand (Cousin, 2009). This feature distinguishes ethnography from a mere descriptive account of an environment to a data-driven picture of an insider-informed space.

Ethnography brings a wealth of benefits to a research endeavor. As some have noted, one of the clearest values of ethnography is its relationship to testing theories pertaining to social life (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). In the context of discovery, it is generally acknowledged that ethnography enables social scientists to uncover relationships that have not been explicitly spelled out in theoretical formulations (Wilson & Chaddha, 2010). These discoveries often lead to the formation of hypotheses that provide direction for further research involving either smaller ethnographic studies or quantitative studies with larger and more representative samples (Wilson & Chaddha, 2010). Moreover, as the researcher's understanding shifts over time, he or she can begin to develop theory in a way that provides much more plausibility of different lines of analysis than that available to the survey researcher or experimental theorist (Pole & Morrison, 2003). Such ability to develop theory is enabled by the use of many different data collection techniques, which allows the researcher to cross-check the accuracy of data gathered from multiple sources (Creswell, 2007; Zaharlick, 1992). This cross-checking also enhances the scope, density, and clarity of constructs developed during the course of the investigation and assists in correcting biases

that occur when the ethnographer is the only observer of the phenomena under investigation (Zaharlick, 1992). Another benefit of conducting ethnography is its emphasis on holistic understanding: a formidable search for connections stemming from the belief that an isolated observation cannot be understood without understanding its relationships to other aspects of the culture being studied (Lutz, 1981). As the researcher learns something new, they try to understand how it connects with other aspects of the culture, such as the belief system, the history of the group, or the wealth and social standing of the respondents (Lutz, 1981). Through these advantages, ethnography becomes a meticulous undertaking of sifting and connecting ideas useful for theoretical and empirical advancements.

In discussing ethnography at length, an important distinction must be made among ethnography as a method, methodology, and matter of epistemology. Some scholarship frames ethnography as a *method*, alongside categories such as interviews and observations, rather than as a *methodology* constituted by multiple methods (Lillis, 2008). In this text we depart from viewing ethnography as merely a method. Ethnography is notoriously eclectic in its employment of multiple methods of data collection, and ethnographers will typically observe, conduct interviews, and scrutinize relevant archives and artifacts during a single research effort (Reimer, 2012). The effective ethnographer is often a "jack of all trades", one who uses whatever tools and techniques that are at hand in order to gain an in-depth understanding of the phenomena in question (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p. 2). In ethnographic research, data collection is tailored to meet the information needs of each study as the ethnographer determines the information required to address the study's research questions, and designs a mix of techniques to elicit that information (Reimer, 2012; Whitehead, 2002).

Ethnography as a matter of epistemology is also significant, as it places a primacy on situated meaning and contextualized experience as the basis for explaining and understanding social behavior (Brewer, 2000). In this way, ethnographers strive to identify patterned ways of perceiving, believing, acting and evaluating what members of social groups develop within and across the events of everyday life (Atkinson, Coffey, Delamont, Lofland, & Lofland, 2007; Heath & Street, 2008; Walford, 2008). To construct such explanations, ethnographers make principled decisions about what records to collect and pathways to follow in order to explore the roots or routes associated with a particular meaning, event or cultural process practice (Green, Skukauskaite, & Baker, 2012). Ethnography as contextualized meaning ensures that the structures that shape, limit and, in some cases, define social action are central to the explanation and understanding of that action (Pole & Morrison, 2003). This paper draws on the epistemological and methodological power of ethnography, placing particular emphasis on its potential to narrow knowledge gaps regarding online education, for-profit colleges, and adult learners. And while there is limited knowledge on these three areas, their accelerated growth in the postsecondary landscape has created the urgency of scholarly exploration.

Ethnography and postsecondary education research

Ethnography is one of the standard research tools used by academics in the social sciences and humanities (Thrift, 2011). Anthropology and sociology are the two academic disciplines most associated with ethnographic research, but other fields, such as education, are also invested in the kinds of nuanced information that is gathered during

ongoing interactions between qualitative researchers and their research participants (Jackson, 2008). Over the course of time ethnography has been reinterpreted and recontextualized and has been influenced by a range of theoretical ideas: anthropological and sociological functionalism, philosophical pragmatism and symbolic interactionism, Marxism, phenomenology, hermeneutics, structuralism, feminism, constructionism, post-structuralism, post-Modernism, and [critical frameworks] (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007, p. 2). Ethnography provides educational researchers with an alternative that enables them to examine the educational system as a whole and the relationship among its many parts. To the extent that educational researchers believe that understanding beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors of sociocultural groups will enable them to design more effective strategies for bringing about educational improvement, ethnography can also be expected to continue to serve education aptly (Zaharalick, 1992).

The diverse interpretations, applications, and disciplines that utilize ethnography are particularly useful in the field of higher education where understanding an institution's culture is an aggregate of multiple sites and dimensions of cultural exchange and reproduction. The ethnographic approach allows research issues to be explored in context and adds both breadth and depth to the data that may already exist regarding a particular educational institution, environment, or subgroup. Scholars are recognizing that by viewing higher education institutions as cultural enterprises, it may be possible to learn important factors: a) how the college experience contributes to divisions of class, race, gender, and age within the institution as well as throughout society; b) how a college or university relates to its prospective, current, or former students; and c) how to deal more effectively with conflicts between competing interest groups (Lucas, 2012).

Anthropologists and higher education researchers from various theoretical and methodological backgrounds are employing ethnography as a valuable approach to studying multiple facets, sites, and themes of higher education, be it the formation and enactment of governance and policies, knowledge practices, learning and teaching, identities, or academics' and students' lives (Higher Education Development Association, 2012).While this contemporary interest in ethnography is timely, higher education at present remains largely understudied in ethnographic terms. The limited yet important ethnographies in the field of higher education tend to fall in [one of two] areas of inquiry: a) ethnography of student life, student cultures, and student learning and b) ethnographic explorations of university culture, governance and policy (Lucas, 2012). This paper places particular emphasis on ethnography as a window into understanding student life, learning, and institutional culture. In what follows we highlight select ethnographic scholarship regarding collegiate culture and student life.

Ethnography and college culture

Ethnographic inquiry of colleges in general and student life in particular have yielded provocative scholarship within the past half a century. In these studies, culture is often conceptualized as a fundamental metaphor, emerging as a composite of many different levels: the enterprise, the institution, the subgroup (faculty, administrators), and the individual levels (Kezar & Eckel, 2002). One set of studies has been concerned broadly with collegiate culture,

employing ethnography to highlight that colleges have unique cultures from other types of social institutions. Such studies explored the university as a whole or examined student and faculty subcultures as a lens to understand the university (e.g. Clark, 1970; London, 1978; Lunsford, 1963; Riesman, Gusfield, & Gamson, 1970). Findings of such attempts often demonstrate that university cultures shape various institutional functions including governance and leadership (e.g. Bergquist, 1992; Chaffee & Tierney, 1988; Tierney, 1988).

Several studies have examined college student life exclusively, approaching college students more from generational differences. These inquiries demonstrate how each generation has developed distinctively, primarily as the result of community and world issues, family values and priorities, changes confronted by or due to progress that has occurred in society, and reactions to previous generations (Howe & Strauss, 2000; Levine & Cureton, 1998; Moffatt, 1989; Nathan, 2005). Moffatt (1989) explored what college students at Rutgers "really" talk, think, and care about while posing as a freshman for a one week orientation, and then proceeding to spend one night a week in a dorm for the next two years. Moffatt (1989) found that students aim to achieve a balance between late adolescent play and academic work within the loose constraints imposed by the university. No longer interested in the formal, organized extracurricular activities that engaged previous generations of college students, they value friendliness and close friendships, which are expressed within the context of casual gatherings and informal drinking parties. Levine & Cureton (1998) concluded that the aura of college education as we know it has almost disappeared. Whether a cause or effect of disengagement, many students now view college as something to "work in" to their lives and as only one of many activities and often not the most important (Levine & Cureton, 1998, p. 49). In 2005, Rebecca Nathan (a pseudonym) enrolled as a freshman, moved into the dorm, ate in the dining hall, and took a full load of courses on the quest to understand the freshman experience. Similar to Levine and Cureton, Nathan found that first-year college students are so utterly consumed with daily life management that they have little time, energy, or inclination to embrace intellectual inquiry, politics, self-scrutiny, personal change, or much of anything beyond the pressing schedules of classes, jobs, and leisure.

Other studies have been concerned with how the culture of colleges and universities reflect, reinforce, or interrogate existing societal conditions or inequalities. Schwartz & Lever (1976) focused on the college mixer rather than the dyadic date to view attraction and rejection, and coupling and uncoupling within the collegiate setting. Their findings illustrate the serious consequences that dating can have for the student as they capture a socialization process where students are given continual information about their physical attractiveness and marketability (Schwartz & Lever, 1976). Through this process, a set of values emerge that indicate that individuals should not only assess themselves according to these criteria, but that they are appropriate standards to apply to others (Schwartz & Lever, 1976). Holland and Eisenhart (1990) sought to understand the bearing of the college experience upon societal gender inequality through a vivid, ethnographic account of day-to-day happenings in the lives of women undergraduates during the first three semesters of college. They conducted in-depth interviews and field studies of 23 college women, 11 of them at a predominantly white southern university and 12 at a historically black southern university. The authors discovered that the cultural model of romantic relationships set men up as the judges of women's claims to prestige in the peer system (Holland & Eisenhart, 1990, p. 106). In a one-year ethnographic

study of the cultural conflicts evident at an urban community college, Weiss (1985) found there were tensions between African-American and white students, between African-American students and African-American faculty, and between African-American men and women. Stuber (2006), using data from sixty in-depth interviews with white college students from working- and upper-middle-class backgrounds at two institutions of higher education, explored white college students' social class awareness, whether they think that social class matters, and how they construct symbolic boundaries. Stuber found that both white upper-middle- and working-class students construct symbolic boundaries vis- -vis those above them in the stratification system (2006). Through examination of the Universidad Veracruzana Intercultural (UVI), Dietz (2012) argues that intercultural universities, while still rooted in traditional indigenista orientations, are beginning to transcend these orientations by targeting diversity in more complex ways and countering historically rooted inequalities and asymmetries.

Student subgroups have also been important cultures subject to ethnographic inquiry in postsecondary education; with fraternities and sororities the most popular focus (e.g. Berkowitz & Padovic, 1999; Hughey, 2008; Kuh & Arnold, 1993; McCabe, 2011; Ray & Rosow, 2012; Rhoads, 1995; Risman, 1982). Risman's 1982 analysis of one college sorority displays additional ways in which women adopt role-specific behaviors that are formally encouraged by both official regulations and informally shaped by cultural norms. Her data suggest that the socialization processes and the consequent roles may in fact be inappropriate for facilitating women's adaptation to a changing social environment (Risman, 1982). Kuh & Arnold (1993) investigated the role of fraternity culture and how the pledgeship experience shaped alcohol use of new members. They found that regulating alcohol use is a key element in a complicated system of rewards and sanctions and that sampled fraternities are products not only of their cultures but also of the institutional and societal attitudes and values that permit them to exist in their present form. Rhoads (1995) employed postmodern, critical, and feminist theories of culture and power to highlight aspects of Greek organizations that contribute to the marginalization and, in some cases, victimization of women despite elimination of the traditional pledge process. Drawing on data from interviews, ethnographic observations, and archival materials from a multicultural sorority chapter, McCabe (2011) highlights three main ways members "do" multiculturalism: (1) recognizing and valuing differences, (2) teaching and learning about differences, and (3) bridging differences via personal friendships and organizational alliances. In a recent study using data from fifty-two men in three white and four black fraternities at a predominately white institution, Ray & Rosow (2012) demonstrate that visibility and accountability function as mechanisms of privilege. Because of a large community size, central fraternity house, and influential alumni, white fraternity men are afforded a hyper level of invisibility and unaccountability, while black men reap a hyper level of visibility and accountability based on expectations from and interactions with a host of others (Ray & Rosow, 2012).

Though ethnography has become more frequent in higher education research, we are still left with large gaps in our knowledge about students' time in higher education and the culture that circumscribes their colleges and universities. Much of the previous ethnographic work in the postsecondary education context focuses on predominately white four-year public and private institutions with traditional teaching delivery. In addition to this emphasis on a particular institutional model, ethnographic studies tend to examine undergraduates

ranging from ages 18-22 years old, and most frequently college freshmen or those belonging to exclusive groups such as fraternities and sororities. Vocational institutions, online classes and programs, and students who are much older continue to grow in the postsecondary education landscape yet remain marginalized topics in higher education research generally and ethnographic studies specifically. The following section of this paper positions ethnography as an important resource for deeper understanding of adult students, proprietary postsecondary education, and online education.

Twenty-first century forces in higher education

The traditional model of college is changing, as demonstrated by the proliferation of for-profit institutions, hybrid class schedules, online learning, and older students (Van Der Werf & Sabatie, 2009). These dynamics shape student life and institutional culture, approaches to effective educational services, and ultimately the abilities that will prepare the next generation of global citizens (Center for Urban Ethnography, 2013). Broadly, ethnographic inquiry enables researchers to develop theory about the fluid mix of behaviors and conditions within this changing postsecondary landscape, without the risk of describing these spaces and subgroups out of context and thus outside the realm of reality (Wilson, 1977). Specifically, ethnography holds distinctive benefits for higher education research on for-profit colleges and universities, adult learners, and online education. Close investigation is particularly timely as for profit colleges represent the fastest growing institutional type, adult students are the fastest growing student population, and online education is fastest growing form of instructional delivery in higher education.

Privatization and for-profit colleges

The for-profit postsecondary school sector encompasses privately funded institutions that generate profit by providing post-high school degrees or credentials, and that are responsible for dispensing profit to owners and shareholders (Deming, Claudia, & Katz, 2012; Dill, 2005). For-profit colleges and universities (FPCUs) have been a component of the educational enterprise since the 1800s (Kinser, 2006); although the recent rise of these institutions has pushed higher education researchers to consider more intently the impact of privatization on higher education. Enrollment in the country's nearly 3,000 FPCUs has grown at a greater rate than non-profit public and private institutions by an average of 9 percent per year over the past 30 years (Wilson, 2010). This increase is compared with only 1.5 percent per year increase for non-profit public and private institutions (Wilson, 2010). Many colleges are now challenged to learn from the for-profit college industry, especially in regards to starting courses and certificate programs at multiple times throughout the year (Iloh & Tierney, in press; Van Der Werf & Sabatier, 2009).

For-profit colleges and ethnography

There is currently a limited number of research-based articles on proprietary higher education. Many of the publications are based on anecdotal evidence, however a small

number of studies base their reports on quantitative and qualitative research methods, including survey analysis, interviews, and analysis of data sets from the Integrated Postsecondary Educational Data System (Lechuga, Tierney, & Hentschke, 2003). The few qualitative studies on for-profit colleges often involve interviews and focus groups with institutional leaders, faculty, or students (e.g., Education Commission of the United States, 2001; Hall, 2010; Howard-Vital, 2006; Iloh & Tierney, forthcoming; Revelle, 1997). Overall the current research on for-profit postsecondary education is highly concerned with the social costs and benefits associated with the proliferation of the for-profit higher education sector (Iloh & Tierney, in press).

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. Key criticisms of the for-profit higher education industry cite its aggressive marketing to any and all potential students, regardless of their ability to perform college-level work, as well as and lack of admissions criteria (Seiden, 2009; Wright, 2013). As a result of such allegations and federal and state-level investigations, for-profit institutions across the nation have been sanctioned for offenses such as overly forceful marketing, enrollment tactics, and inability to meet graduation and job placement requirements. Through close and extended engagement with staff and students on a day-to-day basis, the ethnographic researcher is able to document the ordinary and practical activities of for-profit institutions. He or she is also in a position to make sense of the otherwise invisible aspects of proprietary college culture, the unseen curriculum of the instruction, and the unintended consequences of change and reform (Atkinson & Lesley, 2005). In the policy realm, ethnographic inquiry on for-profit higher education would serve multiple purposes as it: a) defines an issue or problem when it is not clear, when it is complex, or when it is embedded in multiple systems or sectors; b) identifies the range of the problem's settings and the participants, sectors, or stakeholders in those settings who are not known; c) explores the factors associated with the issue or 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). In this way ethnography brings clarity and direction to the convoluted state of research and regulation of the for-profit postsecondary education industry.

Ethnography also presents a new dimension into understanding the unique marketing culture of for-profit colleges. Publicly traded for-profit education companies spent, on average, $248 million on marketing and recruiting in 2009, which includes all spending on advertising, other marketing spending, lead generation, and the recruiting sales staff (Lee, 2012). By employing ethnography, researchers can utilize campus images, documents, websites and messages that are used to build the "public image" of the institution (Toma, Dubrow, & Hartley, 2005; Terkla & Pagano, 1993). These materials contribute to the look and feel of a campus and are part of institutional brand, identity, and promise of a unique community "sold" to prospective students (Hartley & Morphew, 2008). In ethnographic inquiry, such marketing materials can serve as artifacts, narratives, and powerful organizational symbols that provide insight into the college-going culture and enterprise of for-profit colleges and universities.

Ethnography, unlike other research methods, is positioned to mitigate barriers to access that remain current challenges in the study 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, in press). In addition to concerns from for-profit institutions, higher education researchers must also navigate limited exposure and relationships with proprietary colleges. Establishing and maintaining rapport has been cited as important to ethnographic work (Russell, Touchard & Porter, 2002), but will play a key role in narrowing the distance and anxiety between education researchers and for-profit higher education leaders. Ethnography also allows researchers to maximize their data collection efforts through its emphasis on prolonged exploration of discrete and isolated cases. The likelihood of large, qualitative, and in-depth case studies of for-profit colleges is slight considering the costs of such exposure to the institutions and overall difficulty for the researcher. When provided access, ethnography serves as a strategic tool to aptly and thoroughly investigate for-profit institutions.

Adult students

The stereotyped image of the college student as one who is 18-23 years old in residential, full-time study is being challenged by a new reality (Council for Adult and Experiential Learning, 2000). Adult learners over age 24 currently comprise about 44 percent of U.S. postsecondary students, but many millions more need postsecondary credentials to succeed economically (Chao, DeRocco, & Flynn, 2007). As a result, colleges and universities are enrolling a greater number of nontraditional students, who are older than 24, work full-time, and/or are single parents (Hussar & Bailey, 2011). The presence of adult students in particular has created a new majority among undergraduates at college campuses across the country. Between 2009 and 2020, NCES projects there will be a 21 percent increase in students aged 25 to 34 and a 16 percent increase in students aged 35 and above (Hussar & Bailey, 2011).

Given the preponderance of adult learners who are looking for maximum labor market bene t from shorter courses, institutions that grant vocational and technical certi cates and degrees are attracting the largest numbers of adult learners, rather than traditional four year baccalaureate institutions (Chao, DeRocco, & Flynn, 2007). In 2001, over 2.6 million people aged 25 and over enrolled in public two year institutions, comprising 44 percent of total community college enrollment (Chao, DeRocco, & Flynn, 2007). In addition, over 56 percent of students attending for-pro t institutions are over the age of 24, compared to only 30 percent of those at private and public non-pro ts, illustrating the appeal of for-pro t colleges and universities to the adult learner (Silber & Fisher, 2005).

Adult students and ethnography

Unlike the for profit sector where very little research exists, a fair amount of research has focused on adult students in higher education. The research regarding adult education has focused broadly on several categories of topics: student retention, student needs, classroom behavior and perceptions, new ways to think about and work with adult students, and professional development of instructors of adults (Donaldson & Townsend, 2007). A

significant amount of the research regarding adult learners in higher education has employed quantitative methodologies, especially the seminal works that inform practice (Deggs, 2011). Giancola et al. (2009) called for more qualitative research in order to understand the impact of personal, school, and work stressors on adult learners in higher education. Because of less qualitative studies, research efforts have yet to explicitly explain the meaning of the barriers as they are perceived by the adult learner or how those barriers are manifested in the life of the adult learner (Deggs, 2011).

Ethnographic research provides keen analytical tools to capture and understand the complex and vibrant realities adult students experience in education in such dynamic times. Early higher education research set the tone for representing the undergraduate as an on-campus residential student who was solely focused up academic pursuits related to future career and life goals and primarily concerned with the key developmental tasks of identity and intimacy formation (Astin, 1978; Feldman & Newcomb, 1969). With this undergraduate profile, many researchers suggested that higher education was both a foundation for developing adult identity and a developmental bridge between the family circle and the future adult world of family, work, and societal decision making (Kasworm, 1990). Ethnography frequently produces inductively developed research on 'unknown' societies where the ethnographer has limited knowledge of the investigative field and could not therefore commence with a deductive inquiry (Picken, 2013). In this way, ethnography mitigates bias, allows the researcher to understand the qualities of adult students more organically, and reconciles gaps in the literature. Thus ethnography is positioned to develop the skeletal body of empirical research on students at more advanced stages of life.

While adjusting to the challenges and rigors of college, many adult students are creating new identities in all areas of their lives. In fact, most adult college students are a portrait of life's transitions (Council for Adult and Experiential Learning, 2000). The researcher can learn of some of these perspectives by hearing adult students express them in interviews, focus groups, or surveys. To learn of others, however, almost inevitably requires direct observation as some perspectives or meanings no participant could spontaneously articulate or be conscious of (Wilson, 1977). Ethnography helps explore these facets as the researcher's day-to-day observation of the full range of activities and the status of outsider/insider places them in a unique position to understand behavior (Wilson, 1977). Ethnography has the power in this instance go deeper than what information may be provided from surveys or interviews and can also confirm or disconfirm other data provided from various research methods via triangulation. Nathan's 2005 ethnographic study demonstrates that student self-reports can be incongruent with their actions in educational spaces. For example, students typically report that they have at least one close friend who is a member of a different racial or ethnic group (Nathan, 2005). But when she looked around the cafeteria or the lecture hall, Nathan found relatively little interaction between racial groups, even though nearly one-fourth of the students at her university were students of color.

Recent ethnographic research tools, such as geographic information systems (GIS), can also serve as a helpful resource to explore space and movement within the everyday lives of adult students. What may have once been following students around from class and then their dorm in the Moffatt 1989 study, today may have researchers following students from work, to daycare, to school, then back home all throughout the course of one day. These social spaces

and various cultural contexts older students traverse serve as important sites of fieldwork needed for a more concrete understanding of the educational pathways and experiences of adult learners.

Online education

Online education is growing as a viable platform for instruction and learning (Uzun & Aydin, 2012). Today, more than one in four postsecondary education students take at least one course online (Frederick, 2010; The Sloan Consortium, 2009). Over 4.6 million students were taking at least one online course during the fall 2008 term: a 17% increase over the number reported in 2007, far exceeding the 1.2% growth of the overall higher education student population (The Sloan Consortium, 2009; Frederick, 2010). In a survey of 1,021 internet experts, researchers, observers and users, 60 percent agreed that by 2020 "there will be mass adoption of distance learning and 'hybrid' classes that combine online learning components with less-frequent on-campus, in-person class meetings" (Anderson, Boyles, & Raine, 2012). Not only has the nature of classroom learning changed, the very concept of the classroom itself has been redefined by the proliferation of distance education and e-learning.

Most definitions specify that distance education is teaching and learning that occurs asynchronously—the learner(s) and instructor separated by time and space—using a variety of technical media to support the teaching and learning (Eastmond, 1998; Locatis & Weisburg, 1997). The web is the central method for distance education courses, but there are many avenues educators and students can use for delivery of information, including a wide range of virtual learning environments from a more traditional learning management system to massive open online courses (MOOCs) or even holding class in a 3D virtual world (Annetta, Folta, & Keseat, 2010). For the purpose of this text, distance education is referred to as an asynchronous, web-based, online format in postsecondary education.

Online education and ethnography

Castells (1996) argues that the most effective way to understand the internet or "network society" is through ethnographic work. Navigating this media ecology involves a palette of literacies that are being defined through practice but require more scholarly scrutiny (Ito, 2009). Even with the improvement needed, ethnography remains a useful research approach towards understanding online education because akin to a social system, the virtual education space is a self-sufficient environment (Uzun & Aydin, 2012). Through ethnographic observation of online educational spaces, the researcher is able to analyze the members, community, events and the interactions that take place within the online educational community (Garcia, Standlee, Bechkoff, & Cui, 2009). Further, ethnographic investigation, unlike quantitative or select qualitative approaches, can traverse both the actual and the virtual, without separating or prioritizing one over the other (Dyke, 2013). In this vein, researchers can personally observe how participants move between online and offline spaces and also the ways in which students, instructors, and education providers construct small cultures in the spaces or 'border crossings' between the virtually real and 'actually' real (James & Busher, 2013). Ethnographic study of online education also raises useful questions

about 'being there' and research validity as it pushes scholars to see their data collection process as embodied, distributed and mobile (Landri, 2013). And while it remains difficult to execute ethnography online, such an attempt is on the cutting edge of understanding how higher education spaces and our social environments are changing.

Ethnography, unlike quantitative methods, surveys, and other qualitative approaches, provides evidence-informed analysis of the benefits and roots of personalization of learning through online spaces. Institutions that provide distance education usually fail to produce data that informs retention rates, although retention rates of online students are usually lower than on-campus students (Park & Choi, 2009). When applied to interrogate the developing use of technology as a means of teaching and learning, ethnography of online education permits the investigation of the social and cultural conditions that best promote learner engagement (Keeley-Browne, 2011). It also permits the exploration of the conditions of the technological environments most likely to improve productivity of practitioner and learner time, thus revealing how collaborative learning environments are best utilized (Kulavuz-Onal & Vasquez, 2013). In addition to teaching and instruction, ethnography in the virtual realm examines the additional social support networks that connect learners to learn where, when and with whom they wish (Dyke, 2013).

Ethnography, twenty-first century forces, and the challenge of caricature

Ethnography in many instances calls for researchers to make the strange familiar, however a great deal of precaution must be exercised in doing so. Distortion is a paramount challenge while exploring culture, but may be particularly difficult to navigate in research inquiry on adult learners, online education, and proprietary higher education. In postsecondary education, online learning, adult students, and for-profit colleges are domains and subgroups to which scholars may have less exposure in comparison to more "traditional" students and educational spaces. These potential limitations in access or familiarity may heighten distortions of the socio-cultural environment of the research site. In educational research, identities, [particularly of marginalized communities and spaces], are often reduced to harmful caricatures that preclude readers from understanding participants and sites as complex and more than just "at-risk," and/or "deficient" (Kress, 2012). Through caricature, the researcher perceives the most salient features of the site and presents those features in exaggerated form (Erikson, 1984). Fine details are left out intentionally, for they may distract the audience from the overall pattern of main features intended for emphasis. This practice consequently slants description of the research site and lowers the sophistication of findings and utility of theoretical and empirical implications. While we acknowledge that distortion to some degree may be inevitable, finding ways to lessen such tensions will be critical to fair and rigorous research in these areas.

What may be particularly usefully in reducing caricature is embracing the interdisciplinary literatures to which adult students, distance learning, and proprietary higher education are embedded. Defined as the integration of knowledge from two or more disciplines, interdisciplinary work requires a change in the boundaries and norms that have long defined the academy (Holley, 2009). An interdisciplinary focus is especially salient to these research areas where the topics of technology, adult identity, and business culture are

also housed in outside disciplines. Delamont (2002) insists that ethnographers must read widely so that their explorations and theorizing are always in interplay between what they see, hear, or read. Hammersley & Atkinson (1993) also point out that the ethnographer can triangulate his or her theoretical perspectives by comparing them with other researcher's elaborations of a similar issue. This mechanism provides another guard against grandiose caricature by allowing the researcher to make use of previous work. When handled with patience and employed with rigor, ethnography can reduce the challenge of distortion by drawing from diverse knowledge bases in the conceptualization, data collection, and data analysis process.

Conclusion

We began this discussion by upholding the use of ethnography generally, and then particularly within the higher education landscape. At the heart of our analysis, however, is a call for augmentation of higher education scholarship to better understand dynamics and elements that have forever changed its nature, function, and culture. We do not merely argue for more ethnographic work for the sake of more ethnographic work, but position ethnography as a strategic tool for advancing quality research in three pressing areas of inquiry. Moreover, we not only assert ethnography as a tool to challenge the limited empirical work in these domains, but also as a way to mitigate the inherent challenges in attempting to research these topics. Krizek (1998, p. 91) cautions that as we duplicate the accepted procedures of our disciplines, those into which we have been socialized, we correspondingly limit our potential for advancing the personal, the creative, or, ultimately, a truly innovative perspective. Underutilization of ethnography would be negligent of the ways in which the culture of twenty-first century landscape has changed, but also jeopardize the wealth and sophistication of knowledge we usher into a new era of higher education research.

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