



# Nontraditional Older Students

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instances it is used synonymously with students of color, students with disabilities, or students from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds. This paper discusses changes in the U.S. higher education student population and develops a clear profile of the nontraditional older student by compiling the information and findings from various studies that have specifically targeted this category of student. As an extension of the student profile, the studies are also used to discover what issues and concerns most affect the nontraditional student. The article examines the largest and most common obstacles nontraditional older students encounter when trying to earn a college degree. It concludes by analyzing the most relevant aspects of the educational policies and systems currently in place, points out how these policies are often incompatible with the nontraditional student profile, and makes recommendations for policy adjustments to better complement the needs and problems common to nontraditional students.

## Overview

### Defining "Nontraditional Student"

In educational literature, the term "nontraditional student" is often used so broadly that it can refer to quite different categories of students. The term is sometimes used to refer to students who are the first generation in their families to attend college; in other instances it is used synonymously with students of color, students with disabilities, or students from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds (Bundy & Smith, 2004, ¶ 2). The term is also occasionally used to mean the same as "gifted children" (Setting Students on a new path, 2007, ¶ 2). Because the term has been used to describe so many different groups or categories of students, we should first narrow our definition to focus on what is actually the central definition for "nontraditional student." For the purpose of this paper, the term "nontraditional student" will be limited to describe "those who are older than 24 years of age and who may have dependents, be financially independent, and attend college on a part-time basis" (Bundy & Smith, 2004, ¶ 2).

This definition centers on students who have already been working in full-time jobs, typically for at least a few years, and have decided to re-enter formal education so as to gradually earn a college degree, even as they continue meeting their various responsibilities of work and family. This definition

## Abstract

Generally, "nontraditional student" refers to students who are the first generation in their families to attend college; in other

can also include mothers who do not work outside the home because they provide full-time care for children. These women have committed to gradually earning a degree so as to increase their employment opportunities once their children become less dependent. So, a nontraditional student is older than a traditional student and attends school while also working and / or taking care of dependents. Nontraditional students may be full time students, but they are most often part-time students since they usually cannot manage a full-time course load while simultaneously caring for family members or working. However, in the "past few decades, paid employment among college students has become increasingly common," and this is a trend that may coincide with the growth in the number of nontraditional student enrollments (Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2005, p. 915).

It might seem upon first impression that the above-defined group of students represents a relatively minor portion of the overall number of students attending college today. Surprisingly, some of the educational surveys claim that over half of the nation's students today are aged twenty-five or older, married, or have children - meaning they fit into the nontraditional student category. This has also been a growth trend for several decades. As Taniguchi and Kaufman (2005) note:

. . .while the enrollment of students aged 24 or younger grew by 51 percent between 1970 and 2000, the increase for older students was about three times as large (National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), 2002a). In 1999-2000, 40 percent of all enrollees were in their mid-20s or older, with a large proportion of them attending part time and having dependents (p. 912).

Thus, the number of nontraditional students has grown until it has become either the majority of college students, or very close to the majority, and it seems likely that this trend will continue. Considering that this trend has been increasing for decades, educators, counselors, and educational institutions should endeavor to create an accurate profile of nontraditional students. The first step in doing so is to ask some important questions: what is the typical life situation for nontraditional students, what motivates them, what are their concerns, what needs do they have, and what are their common perspectives on college education?

### Profiling the Nontraditional Student: Sample Studies

Chao and Good (2004) performed a qualitative study that they assert yielded a theoretical model of nontraditional college students' perspectives on college education. They also noted that "very little research has investigated the counseling needs of nontraditional students. In fact, the profession has not yet clearly identified the reasons that nontraditional students enroll in college, nor adequately described their perspectives of the college experience" (Chao & Good, 2004, p. 5). This lack of clarifying the motives and common difficulties of nontraditional students

was the impetus for their relatively small study (consisting of about fifty participants).

The authors used questionnaires and held lengthy interviews with the nontraditional students in their study, after which they compiled what is essentially a profile of the nontraditional student. Their findings showed that a "dynamic interaction among several factors was central to the participants' perceptions of pursuing college education." Chao and Good write that "central to the interaction was a sense of hopefulness that participants held toward their decision, struggles, and perceptions about the future" (p. 7). The authors also believe that this core category of hopefulness "critically influenced five other themes: motivation, financial investment, career development, life transition, and support systems" (Chao & Good, 2004, p. 7). Apparently due to their hopefulness, nontraditional students have a tendency to actively manage their education, employment, family, and interpersonal relationships. The authors of the study conclude that nontraditional students also actively integrate their college education into their career development; they conclude:

In this study, some people pursued college education because they 'felt stuck with their current jobs.' Other participants intended to change career goals via college education. They saw their degrees as facilitating career development (Chao & Good, 2004, p. 9).

### Career Motivations

Many nontraditional students have a very strong career development motive behind their decision to earn a degree. Such a statement may seem obvious; it may seem that all students enroll in order to develop a good career, but we should consider whether there is a relevant difference of profile between nontraditional and traditional students that creates a difference in their motives for attending college. For example, traditional students enter college straight from high school, often have no idea what they want to major in, frequently join fraternities and sororities, and otherwise extensively engage in abundant social lives. This difference may cause traditional students, who are between the ages of 18 and 23, not to be as concerned with career development compared to their older classmates.

A study that Bye, et al. (2007) carried out supports this idea; their study used a larger group consisting of 300 students. The study was carried out in a 2-1 ratio wherein there were twice as many nontraditional students in the study than there were traditional students (Bye et al, 2007, p. 149). The authors observe that, "whereas younger students interacted primarily with peers and in peer-related activities, older students were less involved in campus activities and more likely to be involved in caring for family" (Bye et al, 2007, p. 143). They also noted that a student may have less intrinsic motivation if the student "simply takes on a predetermined role from a script written by others, such as young undergraduates might do when following their parents' desire that they study in a particular field" (Bye et al, 2007, p.

146). The authors' research revealed that nontraditional students had higher levels of intrinsic motivation to learn than did traditional students (Bye et al, 2007, p. 156), and this is probably related to their strongly career-oriented motivations.

In another study, Bauman, Wang, DeLeon, Kafentzis, Zavala-Lopez, and Lindsey (2004) created a questionnaire that requested reasons why the nontraditional student decided to enroll in a college course program; the results correspond to the Chao and Good study: the number one reason given was for the sake of career advancement. The respondents gave specific answers such as "to be more marketable in a competitive job world" and "career burnout after fifteen years" (Bauman et al, 2004, p. 15). These reasons match the Chao and Good study, in which some respondents said they felt stuck in their current jobs. All of these responses indicate just how important career objectives are for nontraditional students.

### Self-Improvement

Two more motivating factors were evident in the Bauman et al. (2004) study, that of "self-improvement," which was the second most frequently given reason, and "family," which was the third most frequently given reason. The Bauman et al. study also ascertains which services the schools should offer as the most beneficial and needed for nontraditional students. Corresponding to the above-described primary motivation of nontraditional students, the most desired service was career-counseling service, with 76% of the survey respondents saying they would either be likely or very likely to use that service. Some of the other highly ranked services also indicate something about the nontraditional student's profile. The second highest ranking was for stress management workshops, at 57%, and financial aid workshops, at 53%. Other revealing findings, similar to the above rankings (from 53% to 40%), indicate a need for time management workshops, study skills workshops, personal counseling, financial assistance for child care, and support groups for returning students (Bauman et al, 2004, p. 15).

The Bauman (2004) study demonstrates a marked difference between the lifestyles of a traditional and nontraditional student. For example, it seems improbable that traditional students would highly rank support groups or financial assistance with child-care services. In fact, the Bye et al study found that only two of the traditional students had a child to support, whereas 40% of the nontraditional group had children to support (Bye et al., 2007, p. 149). Also, 68% of traditional students reported their parents as a primary source of income, whereas 95% of nontraditional students were either self-supporting, funded through loans, scholarships, etc, or were supported by a spouse.

These studies help create an accurate idea of who nontraditional students are, and what life is generally like for most of them. All educators and counselors should be aware of the characteristics that form the nontraditional student profile, and consider how educational institutions might provide better services for nontraditional students.

## Further Insights

### Barriers for Nontraditional Students

Taniguchi and Kaufman note that nontraditional students have received only limited attention in educational attainment research, even though these students have a growing presence in colleges across the nation. The authors say that, "among nontraditional students who enrolled in 1989-1990 with the intention of obtaining a bachelor's degree, only 31 percent had earned one by 1994, relative to 54 percent of their traditional counterparts" (Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2005, p. 912). They then note that "previous research suggests that factors such as part-time enrollment and the lack of access to financial assistance significantly explain the college attainment gap between nontraditional and traditional students, while their family characteristics have relatively limited explanatory power" (Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2005, p. 913).

### Part-Time Status

Though far fewer nontraditional students earn a degree within five years, this finding should not be surprising since far more nontraditional students attend school only part time, meaning it could take them ten years instead of four years to get through a degree program. However, the authors allude to studies that show a correlation between being a part-time student and not completing a degree program *at all*, and this should cause concern among educators and educational institutions. Additional support of this fact can be found in a report published by the National Center for Education Statistics (2002), which found that, indeed, adult learners are more likely to leave post-secondary education without earning a degree (cited in Compton et al, 2006, p. 74).

One example of a negative factor is that prolonged enrollment interrupted by periods of absence from school can hamper the continuity of students' learning, and this can make courses that progress from basic to increasingly advanced material much more difficult. These kinds of educational disruptions can be an obstacle to degree completion. Also, Taniguchi and Kaufman (2005) note that nontraditional students often have lower interaction with their instructors and fellow students outside classrooms - a characteristic we have already seen in the profile - and this can lessen their support system for getting help when problems arise.

Additionally, the length of time it takes nontraditional students to finish their degree programs can simply be too discouraging for some. Researchers point out other major obstructions that nontraditional students encounter on their path to obtaining a degree.

### Financial Considerations

For example, the very definition of a "nontraditional student," as established above, forms the "federal lines of demarcation between students who are dependent on their parents and those whose personal income alone is considered by the financial aid system" (Hart, 2003, p. 100). Consequently, nontraditional students do not have the same financial aid opportunities that the

federal system and the educational institutions provide traditional students, and this also means that the current system may be unfair, or is at least causing unnecessary hardship for the older half of today's college students. Nontraditional students are usually not eligible to apply for financial assistance programs such as scholarships, assistantships, tuition waivers and student loans, and this makes financial hardship one of the bigger barriers for the nontraditional student. Research indicates that financial aid probably helps increase educational outcomes because it lifts some of the student's financial burden and allows him or her more time for studying, completing assignments, researching or otherwise concentrating on important academic activities. According to Taniguchi and Kaufman,

Financial aid has built-in incentives to encourage its recipients to maintain high grades and work toward the timely completion of their education. Therefore, part-time students' degree completion is also hindered by their exclusion from financial aid (2005, p. 914).

### Family Responsibilities

Another factor is family care. The Bauman et al study showed that 40% of the nontraditional students had children to care for. According to Taniguchi and Kaufman (2005), one additional infant or toddler decreases the odds of degree completion by about 50% for *both* genders. Juxtaposing these two sets of statistics gives us good reason to believe that 20% of nontraditional students do not complete degrees because their infants need so much attention and time that, as parents, they cannot also find the time to attend school (Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2005, p. 924). That is probably why such a high percentage of nontraditional students in the Bauman et al study highly ranked the need for financial assistance for child-care services.

Older students have more complex life circumstances and therefore need personal assistance that differs from traditional students. The added financial responsibilities of older students, as well as their necessarily more varied attendance patterns, mean that a system predicated on a model intended for traditional students sometimes does not serve them very well.

One example is that the financial aid system was designed and implemented for traditional students who depend upon their parents' resources. Unlike nontraditional students, the traditional student often has never been part of the workforce, the student goes to college full-time, and graduates according to the traditional, four-year model. Society and institutions have created a system around this model, and this needs to be examined in relation to nontraditional students - particularly now that nontraditional students constitute quite possibly the majority of those going to college.

As Hart notes, such students are likely to be more interested in distance education, and this is why the author argues that national leaders should provide a forum to review and revise the financial aid system that serves nontraditional students. One interesting

suggestion that Hart makes is to alter the traditional finance model and consider how we might allow student aid and financing for distance education, since distance education is often a good alternative for nontraditional students.

Another example from the area of financial aid is Hart's point that financial aid programs usually assume that a student does not attend one term of an academic year (the summer), and thus annual aid is limited to two semesters or three quarters. But for many nontraditional students, this model does not match their lifestyles. As Hart observes, "Students who attend year-round reasonably assume that they should be able to get aid for every term in which they enroll, but the system currently does not meet that basic need" (Hart, 2003, p.106).

## Viewpoints

### Educational Innovation for Nontraditional Students

The growth of the nontraditional student population has important implications when considering the policies and services that have traditionally applied to college students, and this is why we should be examining policy in a different light than that of the past. For example, Chao and Good argue that the close connection between "educational and career aspirations underscores the importance of vocational / career counseling with nontraditional students," and that "understanding the travails and aspirations of nontraditional students during their career and educational transitions is therefore crucial for counselors to facilitate student success" (Chao & Good, 2004, p. 10).

### On-Campus Child Care

One of the most obvious but as yet underdeveloped areas that could help nontraditional students is to provide child-care services either free of charge (perhaps as part of a newly designed financial aid package) or very inexpensively for those nontraditional students who need child-care services. This obviously could be done in any college large enough to support such a program. Some colleges are already starting to innovate with such programs. For example, Brookhaven College in Dallas, Texas formed a joint venture with Head Start to build a preschool education center right on the campus. The new facility is designed to accommodate 142 preschoolers, all of whom are children of nontraditional students. The school has created a win-win-win situation:

- The program allows parents of young children to continue their education, and the parents can conveniently stop at the child-care center on their way to and from class.
- This helps the school itself since it will very likely experience a higher retention of nontraditional student enrollment, and
- The early-childhood education students at the school are using the opportunity to get hands-on practical experience by working at this same new facility (Hensley & Calhoun, 2007, p. 58).

This is the kind of successful integration for a new child-care program that more colleges should endeavor to create - if they want to meet the needs of a growing nontraditional student population.

### Flexible Course Delivery

Even the college programs can be designed more sensitively for nontraditional students. For example, McHenry County College's Academy of High Performance has designed some of their programs so that the students enroll in a cohort, and remain in that group. This likely strengthens their support system; the students attend class once per week for 5 hours; students take two or three courses and can earn up to 9 credit hours each term. Offering classes in an 8-week or 16-week format using different delivery methods including classroom, on-line, and telecourse provides much more flexibility for nontraditional students at McHenry County College. The cohorts meet at work sites or on the campus, and the school often alters the start times to help the employer. This is another example of how schools can innovate so as to help nontraditional students (Léger, 2005, p. 641).

### Additional Support

Compton et al point out that if institutions want to excel in serving adult students, the institution needs to be flexible and serve them in what may seem like unconventional ways (Compton et al, 2006, p. 78). Compton et al propose that institutions should reduce the time and effort necessary for adult learners to move through the system. If a nontraditional student has unique and relevant experiences from his or her working life, then teachers should consider ways to incorporate this. Also, according to Compton et al, coursework should have practical applications because "adults tend to have career-focused goals, and they will often value courses and assignments that are seen as relevant to their goals" (Compton et al, 2006, p. 79). By way of example, the authors propose that instructors could allow projects completed in the workplace to count for credit, or they could make workplace-related assignments. The authors also suggest initiating those same services that the participants of nontraditional student studies ranked as their priorities. Thus, counseling centers should be available to help students through their emotional, physical, intellectual, cultural, and vocational transitions, and such centers should offer programs or workshops on stress management. Finally, argue Compton et al, "our institutions need to take a proactive approach to uncovering the needs of adult learners, rather than waiting until the traditional exit interview or 'autopsy study' to learn about problems" (Compton et al, 2006, p. 79).

## Conclusion

America is a leader in allowing nontraditional college student enrollment. As Taniguchi and Kaufman observe, "there are few other nations whose tolerance for 'educational late blooming' matches that of the United States" (Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2005, p. 924). America has many schools available in many places,

such that there are community colleges, four-year colleges or universities near most communities in every U.S. State. Compared to European or other institutions of higher education, the U.S. does have relatively flexible and open admission policies that make college entry relatively easy.

However, as Taniguchi and Kaufman have also noted, and as we have seen through profiling and examining degree completion obstacles, nontraditional students have college-completion rates that are significantly lower compared with those of traditional students. This needs attention from government, educational institutions and the academic community; by focusing more on nontraditional students, there will be many changes that American society, its government, and its educational institutions can undertake to help nontraditional students, and it is time to begin working in earnest in that direction.

## Terms & Concepts

**Career Counseling:** Career counselors or coaches use analysis and assessments to focus on the clients' issues of career exploration, changes or development. Counselors work with people at any level and assess the worker's skills, abilities and work habits, level of education, work experience and general interests. This information helps to direct and fit a worker into the occupational requirements of a jobs or point out a path for attaining a desired career level.

**Intrinsic Motivation:** Motivation that comes from internal, individual sources rather than from any external or outside rewards. While a person may still seek rewards, external rewards are not enough motivation for completing a task. An intrinsically motivated student wants to get a good grade on an assignment, but if the assignment is not interesting or personally rewarding, the possibility of a good grade may not be enough to maintain that student's motivation to put significant effort into the project. People with intrinsic motivation accomplish a task because it is pleasurable, important, or personally significant.

**National Center for Education Statistics (NCES):** is located within the U.S. Department of Education and the Institute of Education Sciences, and is the primary federal entity for collecting and analyzing data related to education.

**Nontraditional Student:** According to the National Center for Education Statistics, this is a large, heterogeneous population of adult students who often have family and work responsibilities as well as other life circumstances that can interfere with successful completion of educational objectives. Usually, a defining characteristic of this group is being over the age of 24.

**Telecourse:** A coordinated learning system which uses a series of television programs supplemented by printed materials faculty involvement in the form of lectures, and/or consultation. Most telecourse programs are broadcast via local cable stations.

**Traditional Student:** A student who enters college directly from high school, takes courses on a continuous full-time basis, completing a bachelor's degree program in four or five years by age 22 or 23. Generally, traditional students are financially dependent on others, do not have spouses or families, consider the college career to be their primary responsibility, and if employed, are so only on a part time basis.

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