EBSCO Publishing Citation Format: APA (American Psychological Assoc.):

NOTE: Review the instructions at http://support.ebsco.com.ezproxy.uhd.edu/help/?int=eds&lang=&feature_id=APA and make any necessary corrections before using. **Pay special attention to personal names, capitalization, and dates.** Always consult your library resources for the exact formatting and punctuation guidelines.

References

Kimberly J., L., Julia C., P., Alexis, M., & Koun, E. (2015). **Determinants of Nontraditional Student Status: A Methodological Review of the Research.** (8), 876. doi:10.1353/csd.2015.0090

<!--Additional Information:
Persistent link to this record (Permalink): http://ezproxy.uhd.edu/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=coneds1&AN=edspmu.S154333821580009 4&site=eds-live&scope=site
d of citation-->

Determinants of Nontraditional Student Status: A Methodological Review of the Research

Kimberly J. Langrehr, Julia C. Phillips, Alexis Melville, Koun Eum

Journal of College Student Development, Volume 56, Number 8, November 2015, pp. 876-881 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2015.0090

Determinants of Nontraditional Student Status: A Methodological Review of the Research

Kimberly J. Langrehr Julia C. Phillips Alexis Melville Koun Eum

This article presents a review of 21 years (1990 to 2011) of multidisciplinary research on nontraditional college students that focuses on determinants of nontraditional student status and research methodology. The purpose is to address the methodological hindrances that have contributed to deficit-based views of nontraditional students in scholarly research. Specifically, the goals of the study are (a) to identify determinants used to classify nontraditional student status beyond older age, and (b) to provide a systematic analysis of methodological and theoretical approaches used to interpret findings on nontraditional students. Study findings are used to draw updated conclusions about conceptualizing nontraditional students and ways that scholars can promote a more accurate depiction of nontraditional students in the research.

Over the last 30 years, the concept of nontraditional students (NTS) has become increasingly relevant in higher education. Students are often deemed *nontraditional* if they are older than 24, have roles beyond that of a student (e.g., primary caregiver), are enrolled part time, do not attend college immediately after high school, are employed full time, or commute to campus (e.g., Bean & Metzner, 1985; National Center on Education Statistics [NCES], 2012). Also known as *adult students* or *adult learners,* the number of students with at least one of these characteristics continues to rise, yet scholars conclude that NTS are consistently marginalized based on their inaccurate depictions in higher education research (e.g., Bean & Metzner, 1985; Donaldson & Townsend, 2007; Donaldson, Townsend, & Thompson, 2004; Kasworm, 1980, 1990). In 1990, Kasworm published a review of 46 years of interdisciplinary research on NTS. From 345 articles on NTS, she found that only 96 involved substantive research studies. She noted that studies were mostly descriptive, and focused on identifying ways that NTS differed from traditional students based on academic skill, motivation, and college adaptation.

More recently, 2 articles also provided systematic analyses of research on NTS (Donaldson & Townsend, 2007; Donaldson et al., 2004), covering a select number (7–8) of journals in higher education and student affairs. Reviews addressed the limited research on NTS as well as the attitudes in research toward NTS. Overall, the percentage of studies on NTS was considerably low (from 1.27% to 13.00%), given that both reviews included journal articles exclusive to community colleges where NTS status is common (Kim, 2002; NCES, 2012). Based on their findings,

Kimberly J. Langrehr is Assistant Professor of Counseling and Educational Psychology at the University of Missouri–Kansas City. Julia C. Phillips is an Associate Professor and Co-director of Training for Counseling, Administration, Supervision & Adult Learning at Cleveland State University. Alexis Melville is a Staff Psychologist/Multicultural Serivces Coordinator at the University of Maryland Baltimore County's Counseling Center. Koun Eum is an Assistant Professor at The University of Idaho's Counseling and Testing Center.

Donaldson and Townsend (2007) concluded that research continues to view NTS in a deficit-based manner such that NTS are often "acknowledged but devalued," considered at-risk for academic problems, and are inherently separate from traditional students, based on older age alone. While Donaldson and Townsend only reviewed articles that used age as the sole determinant of NTS status, some studies used a combination of age and other criteria to define NTS; studies that used criteria exclusive of age were excluded from the analysis.

As noted throughout these reviews, methodological hindrances in the research continue to maintain deficit-based views of NTS. Scholars continue to advocate for an increase in scientific rigor and use of multiple criteria in determining NTS status (e.g., Kasworm, 1990). Given that prior reviews have not assessed the use of multiple criteria in defining NTS, the first objective for this study was to conduct a methodological review of research to explore the definitions of NTS and the use of criteria other than age. The second objective was to provide a systematic analysis of methodological and theoretical approaches used to interpret research on NTS in order to draw updated conclusions regarding the state of the literature. To provide a flexible view of the research, we took a multidisciplinary approach in our analysis. In this review, we focused on undergraduate NTS enrolled in 4–year institutions, 5-year community colleges, and online programs.

METHOD

Three doctoral interns in psychology and one psychologist served as raters. Two authors used PsycInfo, Google Scholar, Eric (EBSCOhost version), and JSTOR to search for articles published between 1990 and 2011 using several terms and variations used in published literature on NTS (i.e., *nontraditional student, adult learner, adult student, mature, older, part-time*, and *nonresident college student*). In addition, reference lists from major reviews of NTS in higher education and adult education literature (e.g., Donaldson & Townsend, 2007; Donaldson et al., 2004) were examined to identify and cross-validate potential articles for review. Empirical research articles (including qualitative studies) were included, while articles from research with no data collection were excluded. Articles were also excluded if study samples represented colleges or universities outside the United States, veterans only, graduate students only, adult continuing education, and programs unaffiliated with undergraduate programs. Overall, 147 articles met inclusion criteria and represented 56 different journals.

The first author used prior content analyses (e.g., Donaldson & Townsend, 2007; Donaldson et al., 2004; Kasworm, 1990) to develop an initial classification system for coding. After independently reviewing several articles, raters refined the system. Coded information included sampling procedures and sample size, population or subpopulation of interest (e.g., race, gender), criteria used to determine NTS status (e.g., working hours, age cutoff), number and type of colleges/universities included, use of comparison samples, methodological approaches (e.g., cross-sectional, qualitative), measures used and data collected (e.g., GPA, retention), data analyses (e.g., multivariate, correlational), and theoretical justification for study.

Two raters independently reviewed and coded each article. Percentage of agreement and Cohen's kappa (Tinsley & Weiss, 2000) were calculated to assess interrater reliability. Coding agreement ranged from $\kappa = 0.61$ to 0.77 (85.1 to 88.5%) for sampling information; $\kappa = 0.64$ to 0.84 (83.1% to 89.2%) for methodology; and $\kappa = 0.59$ to 0.75 (80.4%

to 92.6%) for theory. Nearly all kappa values were above 0.61 suggesting at least substantial agreement, while lower values indicated a fair to moderate agreement (Tinsley & Weiss, 2000). Discrepancies were resolved in face-to-face meetings and electronic communication.

RESULTS

Adult Education Quarterly and *The College Student Journal* together published 24% of all of the articles reviewed. Over the 21-year time frame, empirical studies on NTS represented only two tenths of 1% (0.2%) of all published articles across the 56 journals reviewed. A summary of the sampling procedures and sample characteristics are presented in Table 1.

The majority of studies utilized non-probability samples that were primarily drawn from one institution. Most articles clearly specified that samples were limited to undergraduate students, although almost one quarter did not explicitly state student status. Around half of the studies focused on specific subgroups of NTS. Most studies used one or two determinants for NTS status and nearly half used age as the sole criteria (see Table 2). In studies that used two determinants of NTS, age was often combined with a second criterion (i.e., reentry status, caregiver role). A total of 12 articles did not specify the criteria used to identify NTS status.

Half of the articles referenced a conceptual framework and one third provided a strong theoretical justification that guided the study purpose. Over half were cross-sectional (58%), including studies that compared NTS to traditional students (34%). Of the remaining articles, mixed methods and qualitative studies were equally represented (13% each); whereas quasi-experimental studies made up 11%. Longitudinal methods were rare (6% of the studies). In quantitative studies, 41% used basic multivariate statistics, 25% used correlational statistics, and 12% used exploratory, confirmatory, or factor analysis. For qualitative studies, a mix of alternate analyses were used (12%) compared to grounded theory (3%). Self-report measures were the predominant method of collecting data (95%) with 45% created by the researcher. Of the 68 studies that used established measures, 10 used career-related assessments. Just over half (55%) of the studies used some combination of grades/test scores, researcher-created surveys, and empirically tested measures; whereas the remaining (45%) used one data collection instrument.

DISCUSSION

Building on prior reviews (Donaldson & Townsend, 2007; Donaldson et al., 2004), this study provides a methodological analysis of 147 articles across 56 multidisciplinary journals that represent 21 years of research on NTS. Results provide valuable insights toward current research on NTS, by addressing sampling practices, determinants of NTS, and overall scientific rigor.

First, empirical studies on NTS represented merely 0.20% of all published articles across the 56 journals between 1990 and 2011. Although this is a decrease from Donaldson & Townsend in 2007 (1.03%) and Donaldson et al. in 2004 (1.02%), the smaller percentage may reflect our inclusive selection criteria and the open nature of our initial article search (unlimited in journal number and study discipline). Casting a wider net beyond journals formerly reviewed may have also diluted the total proportion of available articles on NTS. Given that we accounted for studies that used criteria other than age for NTS, the small percentage remains notable.

In addition, results speak to the variation across NTS based on the number of studies that focused on NTS subgroups and used

determinants of NTS status other than age. Instead of examining NTS as a general population, nearly half of the studies looked at specific subgroups (e.g., females, caregivers). To extract meaning from these results, however, is challenging given that there is no frame of reference on NTS subgroups: across studies, NTS status was largely designated by age as either the sole criterion or combined with determinants such as caregiver or work status. Similar to the findings on NTS subgroups, the dearth of research that accounts for criteria of NTS not related to age makes it difficult to fully interpret these results.

Furthermore, unless clearly focused on a specific subgroup, such as reentry students, studies typically defined nontraditional students as older in age, part-time students, or full-time workers. This practice may reflect the common use of institutional data on student demographics (e.g., age), but typically excludes contextual information (e.g., caregiver status). Still, given the oversimplified views of NTS, it is encouraging that studies are accounting for a more diverse profile of NTS.

Although fairly rare, study results provide new information about the use of mixed methods and qualitative research in studies on NTS. Over the past decade, use of qualitative methods appeared to increase; yet overall, qualitative studies remained limited, which precluded a meaningful analysis of the data. The majority of qualitative and mixed method studies also focused on specific subgroups of NTS, such as female caregivers. In addition to allowing smaller sample sizes, qualitative methods may be especially valuable for research on NTS, as it is helpful in theory-building and gaining knowledge on underrepresented groups (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

A disappointing finding was the lack of theory used to guide the research on NTS. It was common for authors to briefly cite prior research based on well-known theories; however, the connection to the study at hand was often vague or not clearly addressed. These results may speak to the limitations of using preexisting datasets (e.g., grades, test scores), which are often restricted to descriptive analyses and simple designs in lieu of sophisticated theory (Donaldson & Townsend, 2007). In addition, it was common for studies to collect data using researcher-constructed surveys and instruments originally intended for use on traditional student populations. Additional methodological concerns included overreliance on nonprobability sampling from one institution and lack of procedural clarity (e.g., not clearly stating number of universities or colleges targeted for recruitment). Overall, these findings exemplify the need for relevant theory to guide future inquiries on NTS, given that conceptual practices specific to traditional students continue to dictate and hinder the scholarly merit of research on nontraditional students.

In order to serve the increasing population of NTS college students, higher education must make concerted efforts to recognize the various and often intersecting identities of NTS and to explore the implications of this diversity. Overall, institutions would benefit from expanding the type and frequency of data collected on their students to maintain more accurate and inclusive information on their student populations. Such information, particularly on NTS can help provide more contextual breadth in creating policies, procedures, and programs to meet their needs. Institutions with established programs for NTS should also continuously revisit the eligibility criteria to capture the expanded definitions of NTS. Allowing flexibility in defining NTS may also help reach students with specific needs, given that some may meet one criterion of NTS status (e.g., caregiver) and would be ineligible based on other determinants (e.g., age).

TABLE 1.

Summary of Sampling Criteria, Sample Characteristics, and Determinants Used to Classify Nontraditional Students for Articles Published 1990–2011 (*N* = 147)

Sampling Methods	***n***	***%N***
Nonprobability	116	78.90
Probability	30	20.40
Unclear	1	0.68
Sample Characteristics		
Sample Size		
Range	6 to 27,811	
Mean (*SD*)	978.61 (3401.60)	
Median	209	
Student Status		
Undergraduate Only	100	68.00
Undergraduate and Graduate	14	9.00
Assumed Undergraduate – Not Clearly Stated	25	17.00
No Indication With No Assumed Status	9	6.00
Specific NTS Subgroup of Interest	66	44.90
Program-Specific	8	5.44
Females	23	15.64
Caregivers Alone	15	10.20
Return or Transfer Students	8	5.44
Racial and Ethnic Minorities	6	4.08
Other (i.e., Commuter, First-Generation)	6	4.08
Summary of Determinants Used to Classify NTS[a]		
One Determinant (*n* = 86, 58.50%)		
Age Alone: *M* = 24.35 Range: 21–27 years	71	48.30
Caregiver Only	4	2.72
Program Status Only	5	3.40
Return or Transfer Student	4	2.72
Other (i.e., Work, Part-Time Status)	2	1.36
Two Determinants (*n* = 40, 27.21%)		
Age + Return Student	10	7.00
Age + Caregiver Status	6	4.08
Age + Part-Time Status	4	2.72
Age + Work Status	5	3.40
Age + Other (e.g., Commuter, Time Since High School)	3	2.04
Work + Caregiver Status	7	4.76
Program + Other (e.g., Caregiver Status, Work)	5	3.40
Three or More Determinants (*n* = 9, 6.12%)		
Age + Caregiver Status + (e.g., Return, Work, Etc.,)	4	2.72
Age + Commute + Other (e.g., Part-Time Status, Work)	2	1.36
Age + Program + Generational Status	1	0.68
Age + Caregiver Status + Work Status + Part-Time	2	1.36

[a] 12 articles (8.16%) did not indicate determinants of NTS status.

In terms of theoretical frameworks, researchers are encouraged to challenge traditional beliefs surrounding the purpose of college as providing an all-encompassing, developmental experience. Instead of framing scholarly inquiries based on concepts derived from research and theory on traditional students (e.g., integration, engagement), researchers are encouraged to broaden perspectives on NTS and work toward theory-building specific to NTS. Although there is a considerable need for theoretically driven research on NTS, there is a greater demand for the application of appropriate theory relevant to NTS. Given their history of being overgeneralized and constantly compared to their traditional-aged counterparts, research that accounts for the implications of marginal identity status may provide context to help challenge some of the deficit-based views toward NTS. In addition, theoretical frameworks that account for multiple identities and interacting systems, such as ecological theories (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) may help elucidate the various and overlapping experiences that denote nontraditional student status.

Finally, researchers are encouraged to attend to the external validity in the scholarship on NTS. Instead of minimizing differences by using arbitrary definitions, researchers should make concerted efforts to account for multiple and intersecting dimensions of NTS status. This will warrant less reliance on preexisting datasets and increased efforts at original data collection using appropriate measures. Given the complexities of NTS status, smaller-scale studies that use qualitative or mixed methods approaches may enable researchers to gain in-depth information about the experiences of NTS that have been absent in the existing literature.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Kimberly J. Langrehr, University of Missouri–Kansas City, 215 Education Building, 5100 Rockhill Road, Kansas City, MO 64110–2499; LangrehrK@umkc.edu

REFERENCES

Bean, J. P., & Metzner, B. S. (1985). A conceptual model of nontraditional undergraduate student attrition. *Review of Educational Research, 55*, 485-540.

Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The ecology of human development: Experiments by nature and design*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Donaldson, J. F., & Townsend, B. K. (2007). Higher education journals' discourse about adult undergraduate students. *Journal of Higher Education, 78*, 27-50.

Donaldson, J. F., Townsend, B. K., & Thompson, R. W. (2004). Adult undergraduates in higher education journals: A marginal and insecure status. *Journal of Continuing Higher Education, 52*, 13-23.

Glaser, B., & Strauss, A. (1967). *Discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. Chicago, IL: Aldine.

Kasworm, C. (1980). The older student as an undergraduate. *Adult Education Quarterly, 5*, 30-46.

Kasworm, C. (1990). Adult undergraduates in higher education: A review of past research perspectives. *Review of Educational Research, 60*, 345-372.

Kim, K. (2002). ERIC review: Exploring the meaning of "nontraditional" at the community college. *Community College Review, 30*(1), 74-89.

National Center for Education Statistics. (2012). Institute of Education Sciences, U. S. Department of Education. Washington, DC. Retrieved from http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2012/2012001.pdf

Tinsley, H. E. A., & Weiss, D. J. (2000). Interrater reliability and agreement. In H. E. A. Tinsley & S. D. Brown (Eds.), *Handbook of applied multivariate statistics & mathematical modeling* (pp. 95-124). San Diego, CA: Academic Press.