

## **The Nontraditional College Student Experience**

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### **Abstract**

The rise in nontraditionally-aged college students represents an important historical shift in higher education in the United States. This presentation examines how such students in the Detroit, Michigan area experience college. Through in-depth interviews with a diverse sample and an analysis of their academic transcripts, this study examines the perspectives of nontraditional college students. Findings differentiate between two types of such students. “Returners” enrolled in college later in life, after having children and/or significant labor force experience. In contrast, “stayers” enrolled in college immediately after high school yet were still enrolled over the age of 25. The latter type of nontraditional student takes many years to complete a Bachelor’s degree as a result of academic difficulties and/or full-time work circumstances. They are thus “off time” in degree completion. The paper concludes with recommendations for program and policy supports for each of these types of students.

### **Outline**

The number of nontraditional college students has risen and is expected to continue to rise. By 2018, college enrollment in the U.S. is expected to increase by 9 percent for those 18 to 24 and by 25 percent for those students who are 25 to 34 year old (University Professional &

Continuing Education Association, 2009). In the UK, 20.7 percent of first year, first degree students are over the age of 25 (Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2011). Less than half (42.5%) of undergraduates enrolled in public 4-year institutions in the United States were “traditional” college students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2002). Yet we know little about the experiences of nontraditional college students and the factors that lead them to “success” or “failure” in college. This paper, based on in-depth interviews with students enrolled at a 4-year public institution in the U.S., examines the experiences of nontraditional college students and their academic successes and challenges. In particular, this research reveals that distinct patterns of enrollment lead to different educational experiences and needs.

The “nontraditional” label is a broad, catch-all category that actually consists of students with diverse characteristics, including those who are the first in their families to attend college, those from disadvantaged racial, ethnic, or class backgrounds, students over the age of 25, parents, part time students, full time workers, and students who are financially independent from their parents (National Center for Education Statistics, 2002). Prior research has found that disadvantaged students exhibit a constellation of characteristics that impact them at every stage of the educational process (Aronson, 2008; Elman & O’Rand, 2004; Walpole, 2003). Although previous studies have examined enrollment, retention and attainment among one or more types of non-traditional students, research has not yet examined how these varied groups of students experience college.

The present project is based on data that was collected between 2009 and 2011 at a four-year public university in the Midwestern United States. In all, over 130 in-depth interviews were completed with both traditional and nontraditionally-aged students. This paper focuses on the experiences of the 75 nontraditionally-aged (25 years old and older) college students. Nearly

one-third of the interviewees were men and two-thirds were women. The interview sample is quite diverse in racial, ethnic and class background. Specifically, 61 percent were white, of European descent. The remaining 39 percent were African American, Asian American, of Middle Eastern descent, Hispanic, or multiracial. The vast majority of interviewees were first generation college students; only sixteen percent had parents who had attained a Bachelor's degree or higher. Many interviewees had significant work and family responsibilities in addition to their coursework. Over two-thirds had one or more children, over half (53 percent) were married, and over one-third (34 percent) worked full time while attending college.

This study is tracking the academic progress of the interviewees through an analysis of their academic transcripts. About one-third of the interviewees had a grade point average below 3.0 on a 4.0 scale at the time of the interviews, one-third had a G.P.A. between 3.0 and 3.5, and one-third had a G.P.A. above 3.5. Over one-third of the sample had failed one or more courses during their time at the institution. Taking incompletes and withdrawing from courses were common, as 39 and 49 percent, respectively, had done so at least once. It was also common for these students to have taken a break in their schooling while attending this institution. In fact, 28 percent had not enrolled for 2 or more semesters in a row. Taken together, the academic transcript data suggests that the pursuit of a college degree has not been easy for these nontraditional students. At the same time, by July 2011, one-third (so far) had attained their degree, which is a considerable accomplishment given their family and work situations.

This paper focuses on the in-depth interview data with these students. In particular, it examines their perceptions of opportunities and obstacles, decision-making processes, identity development and transformation, and goal achievement and adjustment. Interviewees were classified into two types of nontraditional students based on their age and circumstances:

“stayers” and “returners.” Stayers, typically in their mid- to late-20s, are college students who have exceeded a 4 to 6-year time frame to attain their Bachelor’s degree. Stayers have typically been enrolled in college continuously since the completion of secondary education, but have experienced various obstacles that have impeded their degree attainment. In other words, they have not completed their education “on time.” The presentation will examine these obstacles (including full time work, difficulty keeping up with the financial costs of tuition, and difficulty performing satisfactorily in their academic coursework). In contrast, “returners,” typically over the age of 30, enrolled in college later in life after getting married, having children, and/or spending several years in the full-time labor force. Returners face different obstacles than stayers. In addition to a gap in schooling and their more advanced age, they are more likely to be juggling the multiple demands of childrearing, full-time work, and educational enrollment.

The paper concludes by outlining both policy and university-level programmatic changes that can help nontraditional students attain their degrees. On a policy level, a higher level of financial support of universities and its students is vital. There are also important steps that universities can take to further assist nontraditional students, including offering flexible scheduling and online courses, expanding emergency financial aid, and providing special academic programs to help adult learners make the transition to college. As a result of the class-based gap between nontraditional students and universities, it is also crucial that universities rethink their existing programs rather than simply expecting nontraditional students to fit into the existing institutions. For example, the results of this study indicate that nontraditional students could greatly benefit from creating an office of adult learning on university campuses. Such an office could act as a clearinghouse to provide access to resources and additional academic

assistance. These policy and program recommendations will be discussed in greater detail in the presentation.

### References

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