Nontraditional Students: Supporting Changing Student Populations

A Guide for Chief Academic Officers & Chief Student Affairs Officers

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Framing the Issue

Today's college student populations are increasingly nontraditional. The term 'college student' is no longer exclusive to the traditional 18 to 24-year-old matriculating directly from high school. Today's college students are parents, caregivers, full-time employees, and retirees. In fact, estimates suggest that 40% of the current undergraduate population at American colleges and universities are non-traditional (CLASP, 2015).

Some institutions consider any student whose entry to college was delayed by at least one year following high school, is a single parent, is employed full-time, attending a postsecondary institution part-time, has dependents, is financially independent, or does not have a high school diploma to be nontraditional (Choy, 2002). However, this guide for Chief Academic Officers and Chief Student Affairs Officers defines a nontraditional student as any student 25 years of age or older, as this criterion can be inclusive of the previously-stated attributes, and is most inclusive of the data and research currently available on nontraditional students. Throughout the United States, the nontraditional student population is growing rapidly, in some cases twice as fast as the traditional student population (CLASP, 2015). Nontraditional students are on their way to becoming the new majority amongst college-going students.
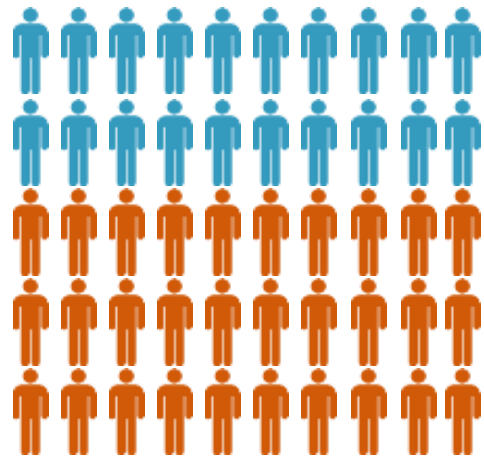
40% of the current undergraduate population at American colleges and universities are nontraditional (CLASP, 2015).

Despite their growing presence within higher education, colleges and universities are still catering to the needs of traditional students. In fact, only 58% of institutions participating in the NASPA Research and Policy Institute Vice President of Student Affairs Census (2014) have nontraditional student services.

As Chief Student Affairs Officers and Chief Academic Officers you have a responsibility to support the success of all students at your institution. However, most institutions are currently failing to support nontraditional students. If you are to meet the demands of university stakeholders, including the nontraditional student and the American economy, you must make nontraditional students a priority. This includes understanding the unique needs of nontraditional students and making institutional adjustments accordingly.

To begin this process of understanding, institutions must recognize that nontraditional students enter higher education institutions for a variety of reasons. Some enter colleges and universities in order to reenter the workforce, for intrinsic reasons such as self-improvement and a desire to increase knowledge, as well as to meet family needs (San Miguel Bauman, Wang, Wester DeLeon, Kafentzis, Zavala-Lopez & Lindsey, 2004). With them they bring great value to both higher education and the economy. When nontraditional students are interested and motivated in their studies, they are more likely to persist, engage, and contribute in the classroom (Caine & Caine, 2006). Nontraditional students are also imperative to the future of higher education and the economy. Projections suggest that the U.S. economy will require 22 million new workers with postsecondary degrees by 2018, but with current degree attainment, the economy will fall short of this need by at least 3 million degrees (Carnevale, Smith, & Strohl, 2012). Nontraditional students are imperative to the success of both higher education and the American economy.

The following sections are designed to provide an opportunity for greater understanding of the experiences of nontraditional students within higher education. Within them you will find an

Institution Has Nontraditional Student Support Services

No 42%

Yes 58%
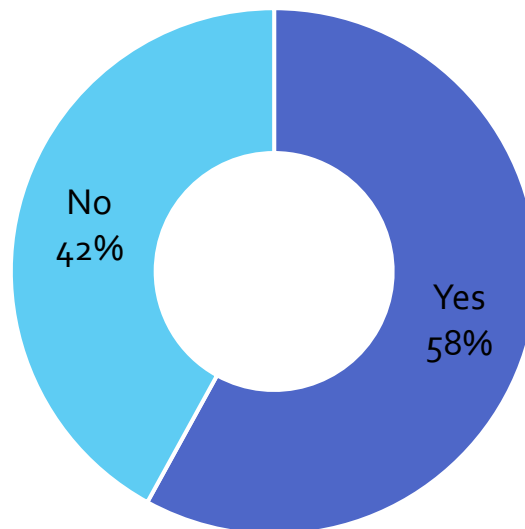
(NASPA VPSA Census, 2014)

overview of the unique obstacles that nontraditional students face when navigating higher education, as well as ways in which you as a Chief Academic Officer or Chief Student Affairs Officer can support the success of the changing student population.

Obstacles to Success

Given the current lack of resources and support services for nontraditional students, many encounter great obstacles that hinder their success in higher education. Broadly, these obstacles include interrole conflict, social isolation, lack of academic flexibility, and barriers to persistence and completion. Each of these obstacles will be explored in greater depth in the coming sections.

Interrole Conflict

Many nontraditional students enter higher education with a multitude of roles. In addition to being a student they may also be a parent, an employee, a caregiver, on top of many other competing roles. As such, these students often

experience a great deal of interrole conflict as fulfillment of one role hinders their ability to fulfill their role as a student, and vice versa (Markle, 2015). This interrole conflict has the ability to create great stress and even guilt for non-traditional students.

Social Isolation

Given their age difference, nontraditional students also experience feelings of social isolation within their given campus community. Many students find difficulty connecting with traditional students, and thus lack a sense of belonging (Gonclaves & Trunk, 2014). Additionally, institutions of higher education are designed to create bridging relationships among heterogeneous groups that enter the institution. In contrast, many nontraditional students enter higher education with strongly-established bonded social networks, thus facilitation of social interactions within higher education may attempt to separate nontraditional students from their social networks, rather than incorporating existing bonded relationships (Exposito & Bernheimer, 2012). In many cases, institutions have taken little to no care regarding the social incorporation of nontraditional students, and it is clear that many feel as though they are not a part of their campus community. This social isolation has significant impacts on a student's success, for students are more likely to be satisfied and successful if they actively engage with their campus community (Wyatt, 2011).

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Lack of Academic Flexibility

Some interrole conflict occurs due to structural barriers within institutions, as nontraditional students have difficulty finding classes that fit into their existing roles. Courses are designed for traditional students, and nontraditional students frequently report frustration in the lack of course availability and course times, particularly in the evening (Gonclaves & Trunk, 2014). Students also echo that traditional coursework plans do not allow for needed flexibility, and even those professionals who are meant to assist them in their academic journey rarely have the skills or knowledge needed to adequately advise nontraditional students (Gonclaves & Trunk, 2014).

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Persistence & Completion

These obstacles to success are not only challenging for nontraditional students, in some cases they prevent students from obtaining their degrees. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2011), nontraditional students are significantly less likely to complete their degrees within six years when compared to nontraditional students. In fact, persistence rates provide evidence that of those enrolling in 2003-2004, only 20% of students 24-29 years of age, and 16% of those over the age of 30 graduated within six years of starting their postsecondary degree (NCES, 2011). Compiled on top of the obstacles these students face within colleges and universities, nontraditional students often begin their postsecondary career lacking self-confidence (Ross-Gordon, 2003). Thus, some students enter colleges and universities without confidence in their ability to succeed. Even students recognize obstacles hindering their persistence, for when asked what factors most impact their decision to remain or withdraw from higher education, men most often cite finances, suggesting an interrole conflict between work and school, and women most often cite the overwhelming nature of interrole conflict (Markle, 2015). The lack of support within higher education is clearly having a significant impact on nontraditional students and is resulting in an astonishing disservice to these students.

Recommendations

While within many institutions there are very few resources for nontraditional students, as Chief Academic Officers and Chief Student Affairs Officers you have the power to change the narrative within your institution. In order to address the unique needs of this student population, nontraditional student services must take the form of both academic support and student support services.

Academic Support Services

A variety of academic support services are necessary in order to ensure success for nontraditional students. These support services are macro and interpersonal, including logistical adjustments, improved classroom environments, positive faculty interaction, and recognition of existing skills and knowledge.

First and foremost, greater **flexibility in time and location** needs to be available to students. This includes expanding course offerings for nontraditional students (Markel, 2015). Potential options for institutions include expanding opportunities for **evening courses** and providing the opportunity for **online courses**. Students may also benefit from the opportunity to take **courses at their own pace**, whether this be an accelerated pace or an extended pace.

Faculty members also have a responsibility in serving nontraditional students. When asked what would be most beneficial to their success, nontraditional students stated that **sensitivity from professors** would be of significant assistance (Markle, 2015). In some cases, faculty members are unaware of the unique stresses and obstacles faced by nontraditional students, and are thus not accommodating to their needs, including exemption from attendance policies when the student's roles come into conflict (Markle, 2015). Additionally, faculty members are crucial to the success of nontraditional students. While these students require flexibility and understanding from faculty, many report that positive interactions with faculty members have a significant impact on their success (Gonclave and Trunk, 2014). Faculty members also have the opportunity to bridge the cultural and social gaps for nontraditional students. A portion of this involves **valuing nontraditional students for their life experience, stories, and cultural capital**. By providing a space for all students to share their stories and cultural capital, faculty members have the incredible power to create an inclusive pedagogical environment for nontraditional students (Exposito & Bernheimer, 2012).

The utilization of **Prior Learning Assessments (PLA)**, opportunities for nontraditional students to receive course credit for their existing knowledge and expertise, also positively impacts retention and completion. In fact, nontraditional students who had the opportunity to use PLA were more likely to graduate within seven years compared to those who did not receive credit for PLA, with graduation rates of 43% and 15% respectively (Klein-Collins, 2010).

Student Support Services

Higher education strives to create a holistic experience for students, thus nontraditional student services must also extend beyond the classroom. It is unacceptable that nontraditional students often do not feel welcome or incorporated into the colleges and universities they attend, though institutions have the power to change this. Creating a designated **on-campus space for nontraditional students** to gather, socialize, and study could begin to address the sense of belonging needed by these students. Additionally, a **student organization or affinity group** specifically for nontraditional students could also work to resolve the social isolation experienced by

many of these students. In one study, 90% of students indicated that they would participate in an organization specifically for nontraditional students (Gonclaves and Trunk, 2014).

Given the significant interrole conflict experienced by nontraditional students, there is also an opportunity for universities to incorporate these roles rather than create additional conflict. By providing access to **affordable on-campus childcare**, institutions would have the opportunity to resolve some financial strain, particularly in regards to families. Additionally, colleges and universities desire for their students to be engaged in the campus environment, though if this takes away from the time nontraditional students spend with their children and families, engagement is unlikely. Thus, by creating **campus programming that is inclusive to children and families**, students can be engaged without exacerbating their interrole conflict.

The Need for Collaboration

Recognizing that institutional resources are often scarce, as well as the fact that nontraditional students often hold many roles that demand their time and energy, collaboration between academic affairs and student affairs is crucial to meeting their needs. In example, faculty members could take the time within their classroom environments to foster social integration through teambuilding and facilitation typically utilized in student affairs. Student affairs and academic affairs should also be communicating with one another regarding the success and well-being of nontraditional students, to the extent that privacy laws allow. Concerning behavior or trends observed in the classroom have the potential to be addressed by student affairs professionals and vice versa. Partnership could also be valuable when seeking to engage students in co-curricular activities. If academic affairs were to provide credit for engaging co-curricular engagement, nontraditional students may find more incentive to participate, while also participating in activities that benefit their overall success. Additionally, providing on-campus childcare and developing campus programming inclusive that is inclusive to children and families could also become a partnership between student affairs and academic affairs. By allowing students in child and human development academic programs to assist in the development and execution of such programs, a service is provided to nontraditional students, while an academic opportunity is also created. Regardless of the service or resource, it is integral that Chief Student Affairs Officers and Chief Academic Affairs Officers work hand in hand to cultivate the success of nontraditional student populations.

Call to Action

Nontraditional student populations are growing rapidly throughout all facets of higher education and institutions must be prepared to address the unique needs of these students. The success of nontraditional students is not only imperative to institutions of higher education, but also the future of the economy. It is truly unacceptable that nontraditional students are less likely to graduate than their traditional peers, and frequently lack a sense of belonging within their institution. Without well-informed nontraditional student support services, higher education institutions, as a whole, are currently failing a significant portion of students.

However, every institution has the power to change this narrative, first by understanding the unique needs and challenges of nontraditional students, and subsequently implementing specialized support services for these students. When understanding the experiences of nontraditional students, it is necessary to understand that their obstacles to success are often different than that of traditional student populations. These obstacles include social isolation, interrole conflict, lack of academic flexibility and challenges related to persistence and completion, each of which require complex solutions to ensure success. Chief Academic Officers and Chief Student Affairs Officers should be leading the way in advocating for the needs of nontraditional students, training faculty

members to be equipped to create positive classroom environments, designating space for affinity groups, creating flexibility in the academic schedule, and valuing the skills and talents students bring to higher education. Looking towards the future, if colleges and universities intend to create environments that foster the success of all students while also meeting the needs of the American economy, greater understanding of the unique challenges of nontraditional students and well-informed student support services are nonnegotiable.

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