



What Your Adult Students Want

A collection of first-person narratives from non-traditional learners

Forward

Higher education is in a state of flux, and institutions need new revenue streams and new business models in order to successfully navigate this stage.

Part of the problem lies in a drop in traditional-aged student enrollment. Institutions used to be able to rely on this population as a viable revenue stream to combat decreased funding, but no more. Now, the adult student population is growing at twice the rate of the traditional-age student population. Already, almost 50 percent of all post-secondary students in the United States are over the age of 24. Compounding this fundamental change in the marketplace is the recent decrease in state funding. Between 2011 and 2012, state funding decreased by 7.6 percent—the largest decrease in more than 50 years. Private institutions are not immune, as they have also experienced budget cuts almost across the board.

These issues are game changers that force institutions to rethink their approach to the post-secondary space. The surge in non-traditional students offers a lucrative opportunity, and institutions agile enough to respond will not only buoy their own numbers, but they will also help fulfill a national economic imperative. By 2018, 63 percent of all jobs in the United States will require a post-secondary degree—a level of education currently possessed by only 39 percent of the population. Adult students are an integral part of ensuring long-term economic stability for both institutions and the national economy as a whole.

To compete in this market, institutions must understand and respond to the specific needs and goals of non-traditional students, who often have different priorities than their traditional-aged peers. There are many ways institutions can be innovative in this space. For example, non-traditional students have flocked to online courses, where 78 percent of students are over the age of 24. Beyond unique and flexible delivery, institutions also have a number of opportunities to rework credentialing, services, scheduling and more to meet the expectations of this diverse demographic.

Non-traditional students are here to stay and schools that cater to their needs will remain viable and successful in the long-term. The following collection of articles offers a variety of perspectives directly from non-traditional students, discussing their obstacles, hopes and requirements for attending a higher education institution.

Read on and enjoy!

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "S. Huper". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "S" and a stylized "Huper".

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Section I

The Challenges and Opportunities of Returning to School

In order to develop programming and infrastructure that successfully supports non-traditional students, institutions must first have a grasp on the numerous barriers these students face when enrolling. Some have not seen the inside of a classroom in years, and many return looking to complete programs they started but never finished. Those who overcome mental barriers and return to school often juggle their schoolwork with familial and work obligations, jam-packed schedules and limited finances. Although their return to school can be challenging, non-traditional students bring valuable perspectives to the table.

That said, non-traditional students have a clear vision of the opportunities offered by returning to school. In the majority of cases, non-traditional students are looking for skills and credentials that will translate into workforce success. There are very few other options outside of higher education for individuals to improve their prospects in the workforce so drastically.

College and university leaders need to remember that non-traditional students have numerous options when choosing their learning provider and will go with the institution that best meets their needs and demonstrates the best return on investment. These articles provide insight into the challenges non-traditional students face as well as the opportunities they are seeking out when returning to the classroom.

Five Biggest Misconceptions about Adult Students



AUTHOR PROFILE:

Shirley Daniels
Student
Walden University



As increasing numbers of adult students enroll in higher education, it is important for administrators to acknowledge and deconstruct the misconceptions they may have about this student population.

Higher education administrators seem to have a number of misconceptions about adult students in their programs. As a non-traditional adult student, I have experienced treatment based on these misconceptions by both the administration and professors, which make me think the misconceptions start at the administrative level.

The common denominator across these misconceptions is administrators do not have enough confidence in non-traditional, adult students. They also do not give these students enough credit for how much they can bring over from successfully navigating life in both the personal and professional sectors that would translate into them working as amazing students. If they continue to fail to recognize that life is often harder than education, they will never recognize the full potential adult students bring to their institutions. It is so important to know one has students who will push the class's boundaries as well as their own.

The following are what I believe to be the five most significant misconceptions higher education institutions have about non-traditional, adult students.

1. Cannot Adapt or Ask for Help

The first misconception is adult students' willingness and ability to learn and adapt, as well as their ability to get help when needed. When addressing this problem, we must first look at what non-traditional adults have been doing before they re-enter college. In the working world, adults are required to ask for help from their trainers or direct managers when they are unsure of something. In the same way, they apply this willingness to ask for help to their education.

2. Must Learn How to Learn

There are few adults who need any special teaching in their courses. The only difference would be for adults in online or distance education. They may have to learn how to efficiently and effectively use a computer as well as the Internet. But this extra help may not be necessary in other types of courses. Adult students don't need special teaching techniques to teach them how to learn.

3. Cannot Learn in Different Ways

Another way administrators see adult students as a potential problem is by assuming they are set in their ways. This makes it difficult to accept that they can deal with all of the new information they will receive in their college courses as well as the amount of change they will have to make in their personal, educational and work lives. Most non-traditional adult students have decades of experience in just that. Many of them have families, friends and work obligations, if not more. Life for them is a constant juggling match where the rules are always changing. Ask any parents if they are set in their ways and they will immediately say no.

4. Too Intimidated to Participate

The fourth misconception is that adults will be too intimidated to challenge conventional thoughts and ideas in a higher education setting. Many administrators and professors are accustomed to dealing with students just out of high school. When adult students come into the classroom, they have a lot of life experience to question what they are taught and whether or not it is the best or most realistic idea. They already know many theories they are taught may not be practical or useful in the real world. Adults use their life experiences to put the ideas and thoughts they are exposed to in class to the test. This type of questioning enriches the educational experience of everyone in the class, including the professor.

5. Cannot Learn in a Self-Directed Manner

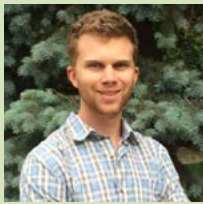
The final misconception administrators have about adult students is their ability to carry out self-directed learning. In fact, adults have self-directed learning capabilities, as they practice this form of learning in their everyday lives. Any new parent or someone who has just switched to a new job would be able to say that.



KEY TAKEAWAYS

Non-traditional students are often misunderstood in terms of how they learn, participate and ask for help. In reality, their life experience means they are adaptable and hard-working students who are firm in their goals and know what they're looking for.

Higher Education and ROI: The Employment-Education Debate



AUTHOR PROFILE:

Dan Beare
Environmental Professional and
Current Events Blogger



Higher education institutions should be preparing their students for successful careers, but curricular decisions should not exclusively rely on labor market needs.

University seniors no longer have jobs lined up after graduation, according to the satirical website The Onion. Instead, they line up for an “excruciating 14-month employment search.”¹ In any good parody, there are shades of truth, and this one is no different. This is an all-too-real issue for many university graduates. With relatively high rates of graduate unemployment (not to mention underemployment) there has been considerable public debate about the role of higher education institutions in preparing students for the workforce. One side suggests universities and colleges need to be aligned strongly to the national economy and with professions who are in demand, while others counter that the pursuit of knowledge, regardless of its utility, is the main purpose of postsecondary studies.

In a previous post I disclosed some of my struggles with finding gainful employment after graduation. Unfortunately, months after having learned my three ‘hard truths,’ I’m still working (pun intended) to land a job. I don’t blame my alma mater for my current predicament, and instead attribute it to factors beyond my control. Nonetheless, it is still difficult.

In my view, the foundation for preparing students for the workforce should be established well before they set foot on campus, back in high school classrooms. Grade 10 students (high school juniors) in Ontario are required to take a half-credit careers course, although it has its own shortcomings, for example, a lack of connection to real-world opportunities.² This mandatory class should be improved on to help students make informed career choices at a critical juncture in their lives.

Students need some access to economic and jobs forecasting with a five-or-so-year window, to give them a sense of what the economy will look like following their postsecondary graduation. Applying to university programs that seem interesting may not be the best choice if they don’t align with future market conditions. Some professions are evolving rapidly (computer science, or for that matter, any profession using specialized software), while others are in decline (like journalism).

I applied to an environment and business program that was

new and had yet to produce any graduates. It offered an innovation and unique approach to a field I was sure would be in demand (concern for the environment was polling high amongst Canadians in 2005) and that few universities offered at the time. While the ‘finding innovative programs’ approach isn’t relevant for every profession — demand for accountants is often high, and the field isn’t evolving — it is always worth considering. The problem, though, is that the material taught to me in first year was out of date by graduation, as the conversation had already shifted from basic environmental concepts (low-hanging fruit, the tragedy of the commons) toward more complex discussions (corporate social responsibility).

Once students begin their studies, they’ll inevitably learn more about their chosen field. I was fortunate to attend a university internationally known for its co-op education program, giving students the opportunity to work in their field for periods of four to eight months. Co-op opportunities help students gain highly valuable work experience and build professional networks; something difficult to do in the lecture hall where it takes time for the real world to permeate the textbooks.

It’s important for students to understand the differences between the various postsecondary options, as too much focus and importance are placed on enrolling in a four-year institution. In some cases, universities may not be the best option. Community colleges offer better returns in certain fields. The colleges are suited for crafting practical skills rather than emphasizing less-tangible academic concepts and principles.

Reflecting on my experience as an environmental professional, I regret not having high-demand skills needed for available junior environmental field technician positions; skills such as water sampling, air sampling/monitoring or groundwater collection. These skills could have been gained in a post-graduate college program through a technology diploma (or, to a lesser extent, potentially during a university co-op work placement).

Universities do have an important role to play in preparing their graduates for the workforce. They should connect current students to program alumni to discover more about their career experiences. For example, my program offers a Cool Jobs website and hosts annual get-togethers for recent alumni and former professors to generate a dialogue that can be taken back to campus.

It’s important to keep in mind that we should not tailor university education exclusively to suit labor market needs.

We enjoy the privilege of living in a democracy and all fields of study have their own value to society, be it arts or engineering. However, students need to be sure what they’re paying for will lead them to a rewarding, satisfying career.

References

- ¹ “College Senior Already Has Grueling 14-Month Employment Search Lined Up After Graduation,” *The Onion*, March 25, 2014. Accessed at <http://www.theonion.com/articles/college-senior-already-has-grueling-14month-employ,35610/>
- ² “Civics and Careers Courses Need Work, Say Students,” *CBC News*, February 15, 2012. Accessed at <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/ottawa/civics-and-careers-course-needs-work-say-students-1.1259976>



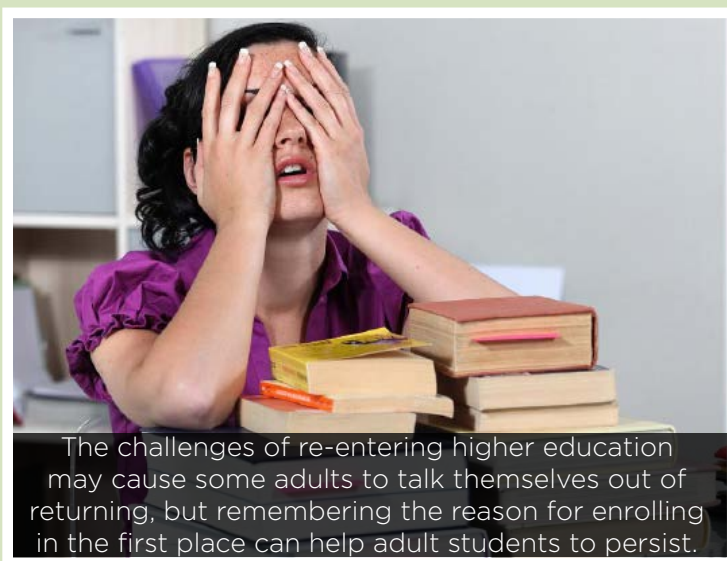
KEY TAKEAWAYS

Non-traditional students going back to school need to be sure they are getting the best return on investment possible. To do this, higher education institutions must ensure that they prepare their students for success in the workforce.

Returning to the Academy: Questions, Considerations and Concerns

AUTHOR PROFILE:

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The challenges of re-entering higher education may cause some adults to talk themselves out of returning, but remembering the reason for enrolling in the first place can help adult students to persist.

Returning to graduate school after a lengthy absence can be a major life decision; at least it was for me, in terms of relocation, job shifts, schedule management, reorganization of priorities and financial redistribution. Having been out of school for five years, it was going to be a huge adjustment for our family and commitment beyond imagination. What was I thinking?

As life should have it, I am not a spring chicken any more and in order to stay 'up to the minute' and be competitive in the education sector, I felt the desire to return to higher education. With the hope of opening a private school for gifted students, I felt the need to pursue a doctorate to add to my credibility. This is easier said than done as a single mother with two active boys.

Many questions came to mind when I considered re-entering the higher education world. How would I manage my schedule? How would I continue to be the chauffeur, head cook and manager of the elementary homework for my boys? With night classes on the horizon, how would there

be enough hours in the day to sleep, work, attend sporting events, manage graduate projects, research, contribute to the household chores and be the supportive parent my children needed? Did I mention the built-in sleep deprivation piece that marches side-by-side with higher education?

I decided I could make this work. I am a great multi-tasker, pro with time management and had already successfully completed two master's programs as a single mother.

I could do this again ... I think ... I hope. Am I crazy?

What led me down this curvy, bumpy, washed-out path? As I mentioned before, I wanted to add to my knowledge in the education field. I am a 'terminal' student; a hopeless participant who seems to return to higher education every five years. My longest break from education was immediately after undergraduate school. There was an 18-year lapse before I started graduate school. There were five-year blocks between the two master's programs and, once this doctorate is complete, I am finished (I promised my family, I think).

At the University of Wyoming Outreach School, I was offered a graduate assistantship to help with tuition, insurance and to provide a monthly stipend. Without this option, I wouldn't have been able to make the dive into higher education at this time. The financial arena was something to be considered before the relocation and commitment to the public school system in the new city. There were many questions to think about: student housing (what about the dog I had promised the kids? How do we fit into an apartment?), transportation (the buses stop right at the complex), length of stay (can I get this degree packed into two years?) and ultimate goal (am I being selfish or is this for the benefit of the family?) Surely it will all work itself out.

I had many concerns about returning to graduate school. I really am doing it for the benefit of my children (and others) and I found a great quote to support this crazy idea:

"Never give up on a dream just because of the time it will take to accomplish it. The time will pass anyway." (Earl Nightingale; 1921-1989)

Don't worry; higher education requires 'mortgaging the farm,' selling your soul and a great temporary familial sacrifice, but the payoff is well worth it.

You can do it.



KEY TAKEAWAYS

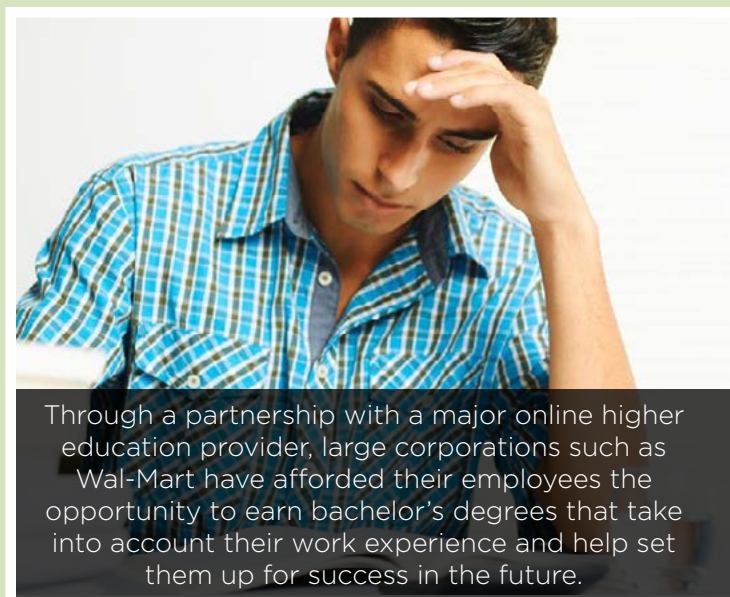
Adult students with familial obligations have to overcome numerous obstacles when completing a graduate degree, but obtaining the credential—which provides them with much-needed credibility and knowledge in a competitive labor market—is worth any sacrifice made.

Employer Lifelong Learning Programs Help Students Succeed



AUTHOR PROFILE:

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Through a partnership with a major online higher education provider, large corporations such as Wal-Mart have afforded their employees the opportunity to earn bachelor's degrees that take into account their work experience and help set them up for success in the future.

Working for Wal-Mart, the world's largest retailer, has its advantages. I began working for the company in 1999 as a cart pusher and worked my way through every department in the store as an hourly employee on my way to becoming an assistant store manager. The only jobs I have not applied for require specialty degrees, such as pharmacists.

That is where I hit a ceiling on my career growth.

The next step for me is a shift manager, for which the competition is extremely tough. While a degree is not required, it is strongly suggested. After all, most applicants have one — and that sets them apart from applicants without one. So, in early 2011, I began looking at going back to school. However, it was hard because I worked a full-time job in retail, where work hours are unpredictable, at best. As a result, going to a brick-and-mortar school was not really an option for me.

Choosing an online school was the only way I would be able to attend college, due the scheduling flexibility they offer non-traditional students like me. I learned about Wal-Mart's Lifelong Learning Program — a partnership between the company and the American Public University (APU) — that would allow my 11 years of previous work experience to be evaluated for college credit.

The application process was extremely simple and, after I submitted my career portfolio for evaluation, I received 24 college credits for my experience. APU also offers lifelong learning courses that help Wal-Mart employees receive even more academic credit. They are two-week, pass/fail classes that are self-paced with a final exam to make sure students have the required knowledge to receive credit for the course.

I am now a senior looking to finish my degree requirements

this coming winter. In three years, I will have completed a four-year degree, while working 50 to 60 hours a week and taking 12 credit hours a semester. I have pride in everything I do, which has afforded me the opportunity to participate in two honor societies. I am a member of Delta Mu Delta, a business honor society, and am also the APU chapter president of The National Society of Collegiate Scholars.

Without Wal-Mart supporting the Lifelong Learning Program throughout our stores, I do not know if I would be the collegiate scholar I am today.



KEY TAKEAWAYS

Highly accessible post-secondary programming developed in partnership with employers offer working adults the opportunity to upgrade the skills they need to advance their career. An online delivery method ensures they do not have to take time off work to complete their program.

Real-World Experience Benefits Non-Traditional Students



AUTHOR PROFILE:

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While adult students may feel out-of-place after first enrolling at a postsecondary institution, their life experience and focus puts them ahead of many of the traditional-age students in their cohort.

The following is one of two winning essays composed for the 2013 Mary Cone Barrie Scholarship. The scholarship is one of few annual awards that recognize non-traditional students and their pursuit of lifelong learning.

I remember the first day I walked in the front door at Bucks County Community College; I was very excited and at the same time nervous. Being in my 30s and a mother of three children, I wasn't so sure if I would be able to fit into this environment. Besides, the whole atmosphere of college has changed since a decade has passed by from the time I went to school. I immigrated to the United States in 1996 from Afghanistan, a country where women don't have much hope for a higher education and girls risk their lives every day to go to school. I came with high hopes for a better life and a chance for higher education, but unfortunately I wasn't able to continue my studies because of my family's financial problems at the time, and I had to start to work.

Last year, when my younger daughter started school full-time, I decided once again to follow my lifelong dream of higher

education so I enrolled as a full-time student here at Bucks County Community College. After spending a few weeks attending classes, I realized that being an adult student may have its challenges; however, there are more advantages in comparison to disadvantages of being an adult student, especially after meeting more students who were in their 30s or older and attending college. I realized that adult students are more focused, have better clarity for their goals and have the advantages of real life experiences.

The first and most important tool that helps everyone succeed in college is focus, and it has been clear to me from the first day in my first class that adult students are way more focused than students who come right out of high school. For example, as I observed my classmates while sitting in my nutrition class listening to the teacher's lecture, I usually found most of the younger students occupied with their cellphones. On the other hand, students that mostly engaged in the discussions with the teacher and asked questions were the adult students. The distractions of texting or updating Facebook statuses while the teacher is explaining

the learning materials for the class will make the younger students less focused, and this lack of attention will lead to a poor performance in the tests and in their overall results in college.

The second advantage that an adult student has over a younger student is the clarity for setting their goals. They know what they want and have a clear understanding of the real world out there. For example, an adult student has held many jobs over the years since graduating from high school and knows what kind of opportunities are out there, which careers will have a better job market, and recognizes the important of education for establishing a better life because they have had their share of losing a job, working for a low paid job, and struggling to provide for themselves and in some cases supporting a family. On the other hand, younger students are unaware of all these challenges and at the same time, are struggling to find out what is it that they really want to pursue in college; moreover, they are more often pushed and encouraged by their parents to attend college, whereas adult students are self-driven.

The third advantage that an adult student may have over younger traditional students is their life experiences, like having a family of their own, knowing more about the world's economy, politics and their impacts on our lives which will help them comprehend the materials way better than a younger student who tries to memorize everything. This important asset is a huge help in the classroom for an adult student. For instance, in my psychology class there were three adult students and as we discussed various issues like, family, relationship and dealing with stress. I always noticed that we, the adult students, usually had many real life experiences that will relate to those topics and had a way easier time comprehending the materials than the younger students, who had to learn everything right out of the book.

Attending college is challenging and hard work at any age, but returning back to college after being away from the study field a decade or so may seem extremely challenging or even impossible at first for an adult student, but as you spend more time in the classroom and overcome your fears, you start to realize that you may have incredible advantages that are the key factors for succeeding in college.

I am currently a biology major and pre- pharmacy student here at Bucks County Community College. Last year at this time I didn't even had my GED, and this past year has been an incredible experience for me. I just finished my second semester with a 4.00 point GPA and I look forward to the next semester. It has been quite a challenging experience

to manage my studies and my three children and family life. I have to use every minute of my day that I get to keep up with everything, for example, I carry all my books and notes with me in the car, so when I am waiting to pick up my son from his basketball practice or my daughter from her practice, I can use that five or ten minutes to do my homework and study.

I personally feel blessed to have the opportunity to continue my education and want to be a positive role model for my three children and other adult students. After my personal experience last year as an adult student, I can say with confidence that with focus, determination, hard work, positive outlook and gracious supports of donors like you, there is great hope for adult students who are returning back to school.



KEY TAKEAWAYS

Adult students bring real life experience to their institutions, which means that they are more focused and goal-oriented than their younger peers and that they are able to better apply their prior learning to their studies. However, in order to succeed academically, they require support and patience from their institutions.

Choosing a University over a MOOC: There's More to Higher Education than Learning



AUTHOR PROFILE:

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President
Adults Belong in College



Since most individuals pursue higher learning for tangible outcomes outside of knowledge enhancement, traditional higher education institutions are still preferred over MOOCs by prospective learners.

With so many possible pathways available for today's students, the competitive nature of the business of higher education has reached an all-time high. Today, students can choose to participate in traditional classrooms, blended formats, completely online academic programs and even free MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses), all of which possess significant advantages and disadvantages.

So, if the point of higher education is the pursuit of enlightenment, what factors impact students' selections between free online classes, such as MOOCs, and traditional classroom learning? I believe the best answer lies in the individual student's motives for learning.

In 2009, when my seemingly steady manufacturing facility closed its doors, I suddenly found myself unemployed with few transferable skills. I knew, in order for me to achieve my desired goals, I would have to pursue higher learning in some capacity. I was a father, husband and I was geographically fixed, so I began looking at which options existed for me. My decision came down to three realistic choices: online

academic programs, MOOCs or attending the regional campus of a state university located in my community.

I quickly removed the online academic program from my list because these programs seemed to be created for those currently employed who are only seeking a degree for advancement opportunities and not necessarily for the value of learning. This type of degree is very appealing to those who have practical experience and are looking for the fastest or cheapest way to get that "piece of paper." To someone like me, they held less value because I knew I needed more structured learning than this type of degree could offer. They are convenient in the sense I would be able to stay in my own home and take classes, but some employers have a negative perception of this type of program.

Next, I gave MOOCs some thought. At the time, this was a new concept that carried with it the same advantages of convenience as online programs, with one major additional advantage: they were completely free. I could sit at home and learn from top-notch instructors from well-respected

universities. To me, if the point of higher education was the pursuit of knowledge, then this seemed like a win-win. I could soak in all of the content offered without having to make a financial investment. However, there was one major drawback, which was that free MOOCs carry with them no academic credit.

So, no big deal, because I'm only concerned with learning. The idealistic pursuit of knowledge, right?

Wrong.

My real motivation was to acquire knowledge to advance my pursuit of a chosen career, not to simply become a man of greater thought. Thus, I discovered the answer I sought. I would attend a regional campus.

As a non-traditional student, my return to school was all business. From day one, I knew the point of my return was to obtain a degree that would assist me in the competitive job market. I was confident in my decision because I spent significant time looking over job boards and 'help wanted' ads examining what employers were seeking prior to making a decision. What I found was that most employers wanted candidates to have both academic degrees and related experience. To me, a degree in Applied Management made obvious sense. I could simultaneously achieve the degree required by most employers while gaining the valuable experience they desired.

A MOOC, while fundamentally sound, could not offer that "piece of paper" for free. Thus, if I had to pay to receive a credential gained from a MOOC, I would essentially be taking an online course, which I had already decided against.

To me, MOOCs are a great value for those who have the desire to learn for the sake of learning alone. If I ever have the desire to discover knowledge in a new content area that does not necessarily relate to my career path, a MOOC will be my choice. However, when trying to utilize my knowledge for something more tangible in the workforce, I recommend the traditional classroom for the more palpable "piece of paper" at the end.



KEY TAKEAWAYS

While MOOCs provide great information, students looking to improve their standing in the job market are better served by an accredited on-campus education because it provides a holistic learning experience while also giving students the credentials that employers require.

Section II

How Administrators Can Better Meet the Needs of Non-Traditional Students

Non-traditional students have different priorities than their younger peers. In order to improve acquisition and retention rates for non-traditional learners, institutions must recognize the specific needs and wants of this large section of the prospective student pool.

There is no one-size-fits-all approach or quick-fix solution administrators can turn to in their attempt to serve non-traditional students. Institutions must look at how they operate as a whole. In order to be leaders in this market, they must take an institution-wide, well-rounded approach to developing services and programming for these learners. Most importantly, they cannot think of this cohort as secondary to their mission. Instead, if institutions are to successfully attract and retain non-traditional students, they must incorporate them into the core of their purpose.

Non-traditional students need more from their institution than innovative teaching and program delivery. They expect a high level of customer service that permeates all levels of the institution, from flexible class scheduling to quick self-service account management and much more.

With higher levels of expectations, institutions must ensure they are meeting the needs of their non-traditional learners in order to stay ahead in this market. These articles provide insight into the most critical expectations non-traditional students have of their institution and offers solutions on how administrators can better meet these needs.

Five Ways for Colleges and Universities to Better Serve Adults



AUTHOR PROFILE:

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The majority of college students are not carefree 18 to 22-year-olds studying full time, living on campus, attending frat parties and returning home for summer vacation. Many are parents seeking new professional skills, personal growth, career advancement and a better future. In his study presented to the Secretary of Education, Peter Stokes pointed out that traditional-aged students only account for 16 percent of the student population in the United States. Today, non-traditional students are the majority. Outdated methods of enrolling and educating students need retrofitting.

Non-traditional students have lived, learned, grown and acquired wisdom and maturity. They come with prior degrees and careers, business and work experience and street smarts. They turn to higher education for many reasons; personal dreams, divorce, empty nest, increased earning potential, career advancement or finding an entirely new career. These students have many day-to-day demands and responsibilities. In addition to attending school, non-traditional students are working, raising families, caring for

a home, contending with health issues and caring for their aging parents.

Currently, our higher learning institutions are neither designed nor equipped to meet the needs of this new student majority. Yet a few simple changes will improve the non-traditional college experience considerably:

1. Tailored Advising and Counseling

Tailor-made advising ensures that non-traditional students are not jeopardizing their limited time and resources. Non-traditional students want to partner with a specialist they can make their “go-to” person for the duration of their program. Colleges need to train student success specialists who understand the unique needs of the non-traditional student. These specialists should be professionals that non-traditional students feel understand them. These specialists must have a genuine respect and understanding

of non-traditional students' self-knowledge. These students are driven; get to know their strengths and weaknesses.

2. Dedicated Non-Traditional Student Orientations

Schedule dedicated non-traditional student orientations where new students are able to meet their fellow incoming peers and specialist advisors. Current non-traditional students should attend, share personal experiences, offer encouragement and invite the new students to join the non-traditional student organization on campus. This way, new students immediately have a peer network, information and resources specific to their future college experience. Dedicated orientations will also prevent non-traditional students from being mistakenly directed to the parent orientation, as happens all too often.

3. Target Marketing Campaigns and Community Outreach to Non-Traditional Students

Colleges and universities need to target marketing efforts to non-traditional students. Featuring current non-traditional students' stories and alumni accomplishments will elicit more of a response than current marketing campaigns targeted at high school students. As soon as those in the community realize they will fit in, that there is support and that they possess the potential to succeed, colleges and universities will see increased enrollment.

4. A Central Resource for Assistance and Information

Non-traditional students need easy access to information and resources on a wide range of subject areas, including (but not limited to):

- Childcare
- Transportation
- Food
- Healthcare
- Employment
- Clothing
- Everyday necessities

Non-traditional students are often unaware of what is available to them on campus and in the community. Information about such resources will alleviate some of their struggles. Central resources can be student success specialists, an online student forum, peer mentors and/or student-run non-traditional student organizations.

5. Technology, Arts and Sciences Workshops and Support

Non-traditional students often embark on higher education with little technology savvy. Often it has been 10 or more years since these students were in school. Computers, PowerPoint, email and online homework were not present when they were previously enrolled in classes. Colleges need to provide basic skill sessions to non-traditional students in areas such as using a computer, navigating your college account and email, online homework course components, writing and submitting a paper on a computer and basic math review.

Conclusion

Non-traditional students must be an integral part of the transformation. As students ourselves, we are proud to attend an institution that listens to our requests for change. We have worked with amazing faculty and staff to implement these initiatives over the last year. We have already seen a significant improvement in the college experience for many students. While still at the beginning of the process, there is much excitement about the future for this student demographic on our campus.



KEY TAKEAWAYS

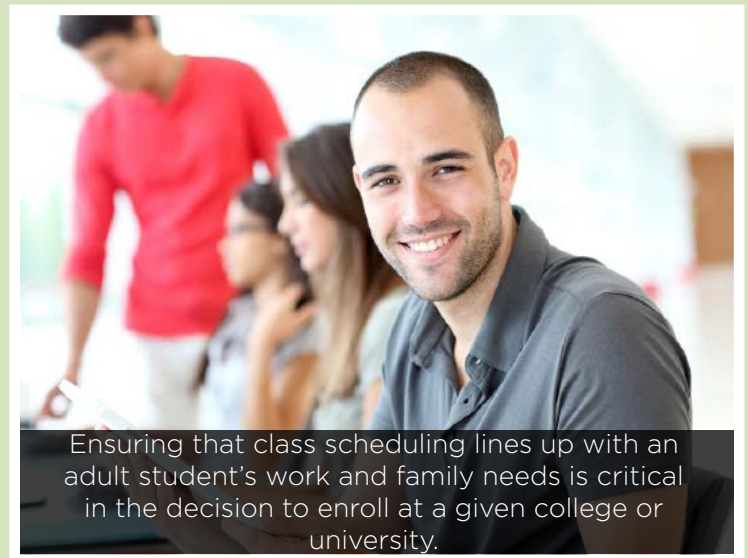
Institutions must ensure the staff members who are delivering customer service to students are trained to respond to the specific needs of adult learners and to develop programming and services—like counseling and technological support—with the non-traditional student in mind.

Behind My Decision: Picking the Right Institution



AUTHOR PROFILE:

Asta Turner
Student
Pfeiffer University



Ensuring that class scheduling lines up with an adult student's work and family needs is critical in the decision to enroll at a given college or university.

When you are young, sometimes you make mistakes that affect your life down the road. One of the mistakes that a number of young adults make is to finish high school as soon as possible and run from education. In this situation, these individuals quickly learn that without higher education, they are not qualified for many well-paid jobs. Therefore, these individuals need to return to college or university and get the education that they missed earlier. However, this is harder to do as an adult than as an 18-year-old. When you are 18, you are young; you don't have many other commitments taking up your time, and you can be 100 percent committed and focused on your learning. The challenge you come across as an adult going back to school is finding the institute that is designed for working adults.

There are many great institutions that provide great education programs. However, the majority of them are designed for students who enroll right out of high school. Classes are scheduled early in the morning or mid-day. It works well for the students who are young, without full-time jobs, and with no family to take care of. What about the students who are

full-time working adults with families who might not have been able to take classes in the morning or mid-afternoon?

Class availability and scheduling is one key obstacle for adults who want to continue their education. When morning and afternoon classes are ruled out, often, there is not much choice left. This is exactly the challenge I had to go through when I made the decision to continue my education. Figuring out how to balance working two jobs and trying to go back to school as a full-time student was the biggest challenge.

Pfeiffer University is one institution that provides adult programs in Charlotte, North Carolina that are strictly intended for working adults. Classes are scheduled twice per week from 6-10 p.m. There are also classes available on Saturdays. The undergraduate program is under a split semester system, broken into two parts. Instead of needing to take four classes for 16 weeks, full-time students take two classes for the first eight weeks and two classes for the next eight weeks. Don't get me wrong, the workload is intense, but concentrating on two subjects at a time is less stressful than

four. With this program, I was able to juggle my jobs and still make it to my classes.

Furthermore, Pfeiffer University provides online classes for undergraduate and graduate programs. Online courses are very challenging and definitely require more time. One common misconception about online classes is that they are less work and easier to complete than in-class courses. However, they are a great option for the institution to have, as many adults do prefer online classes because they save them the time it takes to drive to and from campus. Time is what adults returning to continue their education do not have. On several occasions, online classes were the only way that I was able to continue my undergraduate program if I wanted to graduate in two years.

I am now looking to return to school for the last time and have had to begin the application process once more. While finding the right program is important, the school I apply to will be the one that meets my scheduling needs best.



KEY TAKEAWAYS

Most universities are built around the needs of 18-22 year old traditional students, but working adult students have their own unique needs. Flexible class availability and scheduling that includes online delivery are two assets an institution can offer to better attract and retain adult students.

Clubbing: A Non-Traditional Student's Pathway to the True Higher Education Experience



AUTHOR PROFILE:

Jo Emanuelson
Student
Christopher Newport University



While institutional services are included in the tuition price, non-traditional students have a part to play in making their higher education experience valuable in intangible ways.

I am a non-traditional student and I hate getting involved at school. It's a huge inconvenience for me. I have to drive all the way to campus, away from my nice house and darling husband, to spend time with these kids who don't appreciate what I'm giving up to be there. It's such a pain, but I do it anyway.

My school has about 200 different clubs, teams, societies and study groups. They really want to make sure everyone can get involved in the campus community and, for a long time, this truly baffled me. College, for me, wasn't a social experience. It was a place to learn what I needed to get a good job. I wasn't there to hang out or make friends. It was a job.

This seems funny because that anti-social, work-focused attitude is not the approach I took in the Army. Of course, the Army is the kind of job that creeps into the rest of your life. You spend up to 12 hours a day with your people, doing all of the normal, mundane stuff such as training and paperwork. Then you go home to your barracks where your neighbors

and friends are all from work. And that's before you deploy and spend all day, every day with your co-workers. It's difficult to separate on-duty and off-duty in those situations, so I mostly stopped trying, except in how I addressed people. And now I'm out, but my husband is still in and all I want to do is be more involved. I need connections to people, to other spouses, to some of my old friends. It's important to have that community available.

In school, it's not as easy to integrate into the community, especially if you live away from campus. It was rough when I got to my new school. I had two friends my first semester, both of whom were transfer students like me. I did want to do something on campus, but I was completely put off by the 'club day' they hosted at the beginning of the year. It was in the gym, there was horribly loud music, and a mass of jumbled tables, all with homemade signs and people jostling. I just couldn't take the noise and the crowd, so I bolted. It all seemed so juvenile. So I spent two lonely semesters complaining about how boring college was.

Then I had a revelation of sorts. I had been waiting for the campus community to come to me, somehow, to tell me they needed me. They did, in a way, by inviting me to join honor societies. That was my chance. I decided it was time for me to step out of my whiny comfort zone and socialize. I went to the first meeting of the English Honor Society and was elected as the vice president. This was not a big accomplishment, but it did mean I then felt obligated to participate even if it meant driving down on a weeknight for a 'banned book reading' or staying a few extra hours after class for a few rounds of literary board games. I also started writing for the school paper, though I have no inclination toward news writing. It got me out of the house and engaging with other students. My friend count immediately shot up.

That's not to say that all I got from these groups was more friends. I got a much more positive college experience, which sounds like hippie talk, but let me explain. I have met so many great people and built up a larger network of connections which may be a big help when I leave the college world. I have a list of useful activities to add to my resume, which is always good. More than that, I have contributed to the experience of others. I have shared my stories with those kids, been an advisor and sounding board, been a confidante and been an editor when needed. My favorite part about being a non-commissioned officer (NCO) was helping my soldiers be better, and getting involved in school programs has allowed me to do that again, just in a different context.

Our society is one of entitlement, wherein the customer is catered to by the business. Our food is brought to us, our cars are parked for us and we believe we have the 'right' to demand better service. College, too, is a business. I pay for a service and they provide it. The mistake I made was thinking that the experience of college is included in the tuition. The experience is the part I have to strive for because it provides me with more than just grades or a diploma. It provides community, direction and an opportunity to be needed.



KEY TAKEAWAYS

Higher education institutions must ensure co-curricular opportunities are available and desirable to students as they contribute to both a positive college experience and real-world success post-graduation.

Minimizing Transactional Distance in Online Learning

AUTHOR PROFILE:

Tanya D. Von Canon
Undergraduate Student
University of Arizona South



By taking a few small steps towards improving their communication skills, online educators can boost their students' retention and success rates.

Online learning has transformed the delivery of education for today's students. People are able to access online courses from the comfort of their own homes. As a result, online courses give people the opportunity to take classes when it is convenient for them. Though the benefits of online courses are countless for many users, there are also certain downfalls to virtual learning. One downfall educators need to become more aware of is the communication barrier between students and instructors in online courses. By reviewing course content each semester, providing specific feedback on assignments and being responsive to student needs, online professors can create a more productive learning environment for all involved.

An important aspect of creating a positive online learning environment is for professors to regularly review course content. Professors can certainly re-post the majority of their course's content with each new cohort; there is no need to rewrite the whole curriculum since the learning outcomes will presumably stay the same. However, instructors should definitely review course content to verify that the information

will be relevant to their new students. For instance, professors should ensure the due dates for assignments correspond precisely to the new school calendar. Doing so will avoid misinterpretations on the student's part about when to turn in assignments. Reviewing course content seems like a simplistic task, but irrelevant or incorrect information commonly appears in online courses. As a senior in college who has taken many online classes, I have seen instructors simply copy and paste their course information from class to class. In this case, students become frustrated and often have to write avoidable emails to their professor for clarification on "housekeeping" issues.

Another suggestion to improve communication is for online professors to provide specific feedback on student assignments. Feedback is critical in the learning environment since it offers students the opportunity to obtain advice from a subject matter expert. Instructors have to remember that students want to know specifically where in the assignment they went wrong (or right) and if there may be room for improvement. Providing constructive feedback

helps students stay engaged in the class, in turn creating greater communication between online students and their professors. Simply posting grades along with “good job” or “needs improvement” on students’ work does not help students understand their errors or their strengths. Without adequate feedback, online students may feel disconnected or uninterested in the class. Feedback also gives students the opportunity to network with their professor.

Online professors should also consider being more actively responsive to students’ needs through email, phone or in the online classroom. Professors can do so by making sure they respond to students in a timely manner, or at least stating how long it will take for them to respond. For instance, the instructor could explain early in the course that students should expect to wait between 24 and 48 hours to receive responses. As professors look forward to having engaged and interactive students in their classrooms, students expect the same from their professors. By being responsive, professors allow online students to experience a well-rounded learning environment in which misinterpretations or class disagreements are clarified as they come up. Additionally, instructors can now even choose to use modern communication methods such as video chat and instant messaging to connect with students. Meeting professors face-to-face for questions is another great option that can foster stronger communication between online educators and their students. Online students who meet with their professors in person gain insights into class discussions on a more interactive basis, which can lead to higher grades and higher retention rates.

Online professors who review course content for its relevance, offer direct feedback and actively respond to class inquiries demonstrate that they are open for communication and ready to support their students. There are many instructors who excel in their communication with students, but I know from personal experience that there are some online professors who need a gentle reminder of the importance of developing great communication in their virtual classrooms.



KEY TAKEAWAYS

Online courses are extremely beneficial for non-traditional students, but in order to break through the communication barrier between students and educators, professors must provide timely feedback, review course content regularly and address student concerns as they come up.

Better Information Critical for Adult Student Retention



AUTHOR PROFILE:

James Osborn
Student
Penn State University



With better information from the institution, adult students could be more comfortable when they first enroll in postsecondary education.

The following interview is with James Osborn, a Marine Corps veteran and student at Penn State University. Osborn recently spoke about the value of accelerated evening classes for working adult students. In this interview, he discusses his educational journey and shares insights on how higher education could be restructured to better meet the needs of adult students.

1. Why did you decide to enroll in higher education as an adult?

I spent six years in the Marine Corps. I deployed multiple times throughout that tenure and after I got out, I established myself with a job. I had eight years [of] work experience and decided I was going to go back into school and better myself with education so I'd have both sides of the field; experience with the military as well as a college degree.

2. Did you find your colleagues either in the military or in your job, once you began, were

themselves interested in going back to school to improve their skills?

Out of all of the classes I've taken so far, I've been the only veteran that has been in those different classes. Obviously I'm not the only veteran that's going back to school. Also in the civilian sector, I don't work with a lot of veterans, but I do know a few young adults that have gone back to school to better their education based on their job and where they want to succeed in the future.

3. Reflecting on your own experience in postsecondary education, what are a few services your institution has in place to support the academic success of adult students?

I would say, first and foremost, I was overwhelmed with Penn State; the way their adult learner program works. I was very

nervous going back into it, especially working a full-time job. I work 8 a.m. to 5 p.m., Monday through Friday. At the end of the day, I [go] to Penn State York; all the classes are in the evening around my schedule. The homework assignments are pretty demanding as far as the amount of work outside of class, but that's due to me taking accelerated courses. I can space out the workload with my everyday life, my work schedule and so on. This way I can plan accordingly to get my assignments done and submitted on time.

I would also say just the atmosphere. I show up to the campus, everyone's friendly. All of the professors I've dealt with are there to help, no matter what time. I've talked to a professor at 11:00 p.m. because that was the only time I could, just to get more clarification on an assignment. From that standpoint, that's very beneficial, especially for someone who's been out of the education environment, so to say, for so long.

4. What kinds of changes do you think could be made at the institutional level to help more adults succeed and access higher education?

I found Penn State on my own; it wasn't like they reached out to me at a career fair or a school fair and [I] heard about their extra activities for adult learners or their programs for adult learners. I think they can probably do a better job at targeting adult learners who are interested in going back to school. Another thing is I'm not going to lie, I was pretty nervous when I first started to take on this role, just for not knowing, "Am I going to be able to get good grades? Is this going to work for me?" Obviously I've got to focus at work first and then do the college in between work, because I don't want that to impact my day-to-day job.

I just think they can probably do a better job at teaching adult learners how [higher education] works. I think a lot of it is on the individual who wants to go back to school, but I think the orientation could do better at providing adult learners the information they need to get them to say, "Yes, this school will fit for me."

5. Looking at the same question, but from a higher level, do you think state or federal government bodies could make any changes to make higher education better for adults?

I'm using my GI Bill, so I'm not absolutely strapped down with time to find out how I'm going to pay for my classes. I know one of the biggest struggles today with education is

a lot of people, they don't have to pay anything while they're going to school, but then after they get out of school, they have to start paying and a lot of people are running into the issue that they can't afford to pay their tuition bills. If the government is going to allow that, maybe they can put something in place where it comes out of your paycheck. To me, you don't want to ruin generations in the future of having that opportunity to go to school.

6. Since employers benefit most from employees being capable of doing higher level work, do you think they have a responsibility to see higher education as a necessary step for their employees to take to grow their businesses?

I would say yes. I'm going to use an example of a full-time college student going to school right out of high school. So, they go to school, they don't really have to pay anything until they graduate. So, say they get employed by not just any employer, but let's say it's a pretty big, well-known employer. Maybe there could be agreements where, since the employer is hiring that individual, the employer is responsible for some of that education; because they hired that student based on what they went to school for, what they qualify for and the skill sets the employer is looking for.

This interview has been edited for length.



KEY TAKEAWAYS

After enrolling in higher education, adult students need to be responsible for their own academic success, but institutions still have a role to play. Institutions can support that success by providing them with flexible schedules and relevant information about the program and school.

Five Critical Services for Non-Traditional Students



AUTHOR PROFILE:

Lori Perkovich
Master's Student
New York University



As the number of non-traditional students on postsecondary campuses across the United States grows steadily, institutions must develop and deliver services that cater to the needs of this unique group.

A large number of non-traditional students enroll in traditional education programs across the country every year. The varied circumstances of these individuals differ from those of a traditional student and, therefore, require different types of services and assistance from the university. Though my undergraduate university offers many first-rate services for non-traditional students, our demographic is growing and I recognize room for improvement.

Here are the top five services every university should have for non-traditional students:

1. Office dedicated to non-traditional students

An office specific to non-traditional students is imperative because much of the population is not on campus during regular business hours. The office should have advisors available to meet with students in the evening or on weekends, advisors who understand the outside commitments many older students may have. It should have referral services for tutoring, financial aid assistance,

scholarships, mentoring programs for non-traditional students by non-traditional students, an active organization that participates in campus activities and other services such as an after-hours drop-off/pick-up delivery service to and from other departments.

2. Tutoring or refresher courses for non-traditional students

Typical tutoring at my undergraduate university meant showing up for the free one-hour weekly session, attempting to learn concepts I had not seen in more than 20 years and then receiving the astonished or exasperated looks from the tutor in his or her early 20s who could not grasp why this was difficult for me. If these types of general education classes are going to be mandatory for all non-traditional students, those who have had a significant gap in their education should have access to significant tutoring or non-graded refresher courses for subjects such as algebra, calculus, chemistry and foreign languages.

3. Housing

Housing on campus or in surrounding neighborhoods should be provided for non-traditional students and could make attending a university more economical. Individuals could opt for shared housing on a dedicated floor of a dorm or in a flat with other non-traditional or graduate students. A limited number of rental apartments that traditional students share in apartment complexes surrounding a campus could be offered to full-time students with families that have limited incomes and meet financial aid requirements.

4. Advisors

In my case, advising became more complicated and frustrating over time. I started with an advisor for non-traditional students. Unfortunately, once I completed all of the general education requirements, the advisor could no longer advise me on my degree path, but they became more of a source of guidance. Once I declared two majors and one minor, I had three advisors from different departments. These advisors were overloaded professors who would tick off boxes on the core checklist. One professor/advisor whom I had never taken a course with told me that since I had not attended an Ivy League school, coupled with the fact that I was too old, I would potentially never gain a job in the field that I aspired to after graduation. I left that appointment stunned and confused, wondering if I had made a huge mistake returning to school. I approached a professor I knew in the department and asked if she would be my advisor. The professor agreed and it turned out to be one of the best decisions I made while at that university.

My point is that the advising process can be convoluted and that not all advisors are equipped to deal with non-traditional students. In my experience, departments do not talk to each other or tell you that one class might fill requirements for another department. I was proactive and did a lot of research after the first semester, when I realized I also wanted to pursue a master's program. If that had not been the case, I would not have taken specific courses as electives that were requirements for the master's programs that I later applied for.

5. Career counseling

It is important for career centers to understand that restructuring a resume, interviewing, discussing internships and advising for future careers often requires a different approach with a traditional versus non-traditional student.

It involves a person who is familiar with the challenges of reentering the workforce or knowledgeable about which industries are willing to accept significant previous work experience from a different industry instead of requiring multiple internships. Moreover, it necessitates understanding why a non-traditional student might not be in a position to intern for free, whereas a traditional student might. It means rethinking the one-size-fits-all model that currently exists.



KEY TAKEAWAYS

Universities need to ensure they are delivering a high level of customer service to non-traditional students and focusing on their unique needs. Institutions must make sure that their resources designed for non-traditional students go beyond teaching and learning.

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