

# Notes on Nontraditional Students

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From the Wikipedia entry for “non-traditional student.” See footnote <sup>8</sup> for source citation.

The [National Center for Education Statistics](#) (NCES) acknowledges there is no precise definition for non-traditional student, but suggests that part-time status and age are common elements in most definitions. In a 1996 study the NCES included anyone who satisfies at least one of the following as a non-traditional student<sup>8</sup>

- Delays enrollment (does not enter postsecondary education in the same calendar year that he or she finished high school);
- Attends part time for at least part of the academic year;
- Works full time (35 hours or more per week) while enrolled;
- Is considered financially independent for purposes of determining eligibility for financial aid;
- Has dependents other than a spouse (usually children, but sometimes others);
- Is a single parent (either not married or married but separated and has dependents); or
- Does not have a high school diploma (completed high school with a GED or other high school completion certificate or did not finish high school).

By this standard, the NCES determined an astounding 73% of all undergraduates in 1999–2000 could be considered non-traditional, therefore comprising the vast majority of total undergraduate students in the United States, and representing the newly “typical” undergraduate.

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## CHARACTERISTICS OF NONTRADITIONAL STUDENTS<sup>2</sup>

A number of factors characteristically separate nontraditional students from younger college students. Adult learners tend to be achievement oriented, highly motivated, and relatively independent with special needs for flexible schedules and instruction appropriate for their developmental level (Cross, 1980). Adults generally prefer more active approaches to learning and value opportunities to integrate academic learning with their life and work experiences (Benshoff, 1991). Financial and family concerns are two of the biggest considerations that impact on the adult student experience. Additional factors (Richter-Antion, 1986) which distinguish nontraditional students from traditional students include:

- stronger consumer orientation (education as an investment);
- multiple non-school-related commitments and responsibilities;
- lack of an age cohort; and

- limited social acceptability and support for their student status (operating outside of traditional adult roles).

## **NEEDS OF NONTRADITIONAL STUDENTS**

Nontraditional students need many different kinds of support and assistance from family, friends, and institutions of higher learning. Research evidence suggests that "both [sexes] have difficulties juggling the roles of student, worker, and family member" (Muench, 1987, p. 10). Adult students need help in building their self-confidence as students, in acquiring or refreshing study skills, and in managing their time and other resources while in school. In addition, adult students benefit from opportunities to interact with their peers and need to be actively involved in the educational process through sharing their relevant work and life experiences (Muench, 1987).

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## **Facts**

### **A. Nontraditional Students**

1. Interests and sense of commitment are very different from most 18-22 year olds.
2. "Traditional" students now estimated to represent little more than 16% of the higher-education population in the U.S.<sup>1</sup>
3. Nontraditional students comprise 40% -- 80% of today's college students
4. Far more likely to attend school part-time (60% work while attending college)
5. Whereas many students want college to be an extension of high school, "with instructors who are fun and relatively less challenging," NTs "want instructors and courses that are 'by and large more rigorous, more serious, and more readily applicable to the real world'."
6. Older students are interested in starting, or changing, their career, and therefore want to get on with it, want career counseling and job placement

### **B. Women**

1. Nearly 2/3 of students 35 and older are women.<sup>1</sup>
2. 55% of traditional college-age students, 58% of nontraditional
3. Of the 6.65 million students enrolled in 2-year colleges in fall of 2006, 2.76 million were men, 3.9% were women.
4. At less-than-2-year institutions, fully 75% were women!
5. 63% of Associate Degrees conferred at public community colleges were awarded to women, 37% to men. (Digest of Education Statistics, 2001, Table 170)

### **C. Community Colleges**

1. 95% of CCs have an open admissions policy<sup>4</sup>
2. 47% of all students enrolled in public institutions were enrolled at CCs (Digest of Education Statistics, 2001)<sup>3</sup>

3. 6.65 million students enrolled in CCs in fall of 2006

#### **D. Persistence**

1. 15% of students enrolled in 1995 with the purpose of attaining an associate degree attained their goal by 1998, while 6% had earned a certificate, and others were still enrolled in school (The Condition of Education, 2001, Table 27-1)
2. “In 2006, about 50 percent of students who began at a CC in 2003-04 were still enrolled in college (either in the same school or having transferred to a new school), 6% had completed a degree or certificate program and left college, and 45% had left college without completing a degree or certificate program.”(see figure 18 on p. 23) <sup>7</sup>
3. 47% of high school seniors who enroll in a CC with no intention of pursuing any education higher than an associate’s degree raised their expectations to start or complete a bachelor’s degree.
4. However, retention rate lower among students who start at a CC compared to those who go directly to a 4-year institution.

#### **E. Minorities**

1. 32.2% of students in “degree granting institutions” were classified as “minority” in 2007—more than twice the number in 1976. At your institution?

#### **F. Academic Preparation**

1. The number of students enrolled in adult basic and secondary education programs in 2005 (U.S./Colorado) <sup>5</sup>
  - a. Total: 2,543,953 / 15,011
  - b. Adult Basic Education: 1,009,706 / 4,244
  - c. English Literacy: 1,139,965 / 9,427
  - d. Adult Secondary Education: 394,282 / 1,340
2. “One of the key educational tasks that has fallen to CCs is to offer development or remedial education to prepare students who, for one reason or another, are not ready for college-level coursework.” <sup>7</sup>
3. Ratio of low to high GPA immediate enrollees is much higher in CCs than public 4-year institutions (figure p. 17) <sup>7</sup>

#### **G. Socioeconomic Status (SES)**

1. 1,045 CCs in the U.S. in 2006-07. <sup>3,4</sup>
2. Percentage of immediate enrollees in lowest and highest SES groups are reversed in CCs versus public 4-year institutions (see chart, p 16) <sup>7</sup>

#### **H. Disability**

1. Percentage of undergrads who reported some type of disability <sup>6</sup>
  - a. Total (50 states, DC, and Puerto Rico): 11.3%
  - b. Male: 11.2%
  - c. Female: 11.4%

## **I. Community Colleges - resources**

1. Student tuition has remained flat since the mid-70s, while nearly tripling at public and private 4-year institutions.<sup>7</sup>
2. Focus at CCs in on teaching, with more part-time instructors
3. Only 33% of faculty at CCs are full time (72% at public 4-year schools)<sup>7</sup>

## **J. References**

- <sup>1</sup> America.gov, "Nontraditional Students Enrich U.S. College Campuses, April 29, 2008
- <sup>2</sup> Benshoff, James M. and Lewis, Henry A. Characteristics of Nontraditional Students. ERIC identifier: ED347483. December 1992.
- <sup>3</sup> ED.gov. Community College Facts at a Glance. Retrieved from <http://www.ed.gov/print/about/offices/list/ovae/pi/cclo/ccfacts.html> on 22 October 2009.
- <sup>4</sup> The Condition of Education, Special Analysis 2008—Community Colleges. Retrieved from <http://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/2008/analysis/index.asp> on 22 October 2009.
- <sup>5</sup> National Center for Education Statistics, Digest of Education Statistics, 2008 Tables and Figures, Table 369. Retrieved from [http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d08/tables/dt08\\_369.asp](http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d08/tables/dt08_369.asp)
- <sup>6</sup> U.S. Dept. of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. (2006). Profile of Undergraduates in U.S. Postsecondary Education Institutions: 2003-04 (NCES 2006-184). Retrieved from <http://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=60>
- <sup>7</sup> Community Colleges: Special Supplement to the Condition of Education 2008, August 2008 (NCES 2008-033)
- <sup>8</sup> [National Center for Education Statistics. "Special Analysis 2002 Nontraditional Undergraduates", Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education. Accessed 03/18/2009.](http://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/2002/analyses/nontraditional/sa01.asp) Retrieved from <http://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/2002/analyses/nontraditional/sa01.asp>.