

# The Nontraditional Student: a Neglected Resource?

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## Abstract

*The nontraditional student has become a common sight on the college campus. With enrollment figures decreasing and a growing concern for retention, could this be an untapped resource needing attention? This paper addresses that question.*

## Background

Nontraditional student, NTS, a term rarely heard on college campuses 20 years ago, has become a new resource of income for college campuses. What an Arizona college professor has termed the "gray revolution" has begun (Lintner, 1997). In 1975, applications to postsecondary schools declined and inflation began to affect resource allocations (Mooney, 1994). The trend over the last few years has been a steady drop in the first-time enrollment figures and retention rates for traditional students, and a steady increase in the number of NTS returning to the classroom. Whether this is due to the increasing global market, changing technology skills, or lack of job training, older adults are finding they need to complete a college degree.

Historically, young adults went to school, entered the work force, married and had children--usually in that order. Today, 50-year-old men have new families, 45-year-old women start to college as freshmen, and grandparents between the ages of 45 and 80 are graduating from college (Scholssberg et al., 1991). Higher education has seen the growth of a new student population which is more diverse in age, ethnicity, academic preparation, economic ability, motivations, needs and goals than their traditional aged counterpart (Ostrowski, 1992).

## Who Is the Nontraditional Student?

The NTS has been defined in several ways, such as the following: over 25 years of age, internationals, single parents with young dependents, those with different sexual orientations (Sedlacek & Kim, 1996), high school drop-outs, commuters, or married persons with families (Mooney, 1994).

NTS have also been defined as possessing one or more of the following characteristics: delayed enrollment into postsecondary education; enrolled part time; self-supported; working full time while enrolled; not having obtained a standard high school diploma (Horn & Carroll, 1996); not participating in extracurricular or social activities of typical campus life; pursuing clock hour rather than credit hour instruction; and one who returns to study on a full-time basis after a

period of time spent in other pursuits (Mooney, 1994). According to the University of Ottawa, this period of time spent in other pursuits is a minimum of two full years (Noble, 1987). Schlossberg et al., (1991) defined NTS as students for whom school is not a primary focus; rather it is one of the many demands competing for their time and energy. Students in this group are referred to as returners (Kurland, 1978), returning students, adult learners, adult students, veterans, single parents, reentry students, empty nesters, and displaced homemakers (Champagne & Petitpas, 1989).

The NTS typically is female, married, living within 30 miles of campus and between the ages of 21 and 40. Research further suggests that approximately 48 percent of adults returning to school have previously attended a college or university (Marlow, 1989; Moore, 1990; Richter-Antion, 1986).

When combining the above definitions, one might say that the NTS is the opposite of what a traditional college student is: an on-campus resident who pursues a college degree while participating in the "typical" extracurricular and social activities on the campus (Mooney, 1994).

There is a possibility that the NTS of today are becoming the traditional or majority students of tomorrow (Moss, 1995).

## **The Numbers**

Projections for college enrollment into the twenty-first century reflect a changing pattern. While the number of 18-22 year old students is on the decline, the number of NTS is increasing and will continue to increase into the next century. In 1995, NTS, age 25 and over, made up 43.8 percent of the student body in public four-year institutions with NTS comprising 67 percent of the part-time undergraduate student body (*National Center for Education Statistics, 1997*).

A 23 percent decline in the traditional college-bound group of 18-24 year olds is predicted by the Carnegie Council of Policy Studies in Higher Education by 1997. The National Center for Education Statistics projects that NTS will be 40% of all enrollments in the year 2007. As the baby boomer generation ages, the number of students over 35 who are returning to college has increased, and is, in fact, one of the fastest growing student populations in higher education (Millsap, 1996) with part-time NTS being the fastest growing college population group (*Lifelong Learning Trends, 3rd. Edition*).

The proportion of college students age 40 or older grew from 5.5 percent in 1970 to 11.2 percent in 1993. The 1993 numbers represent a growth of 235 percent or 1.6 million students (Gose, 1996). Some community colleges are even finding it necessary to address the effects of the increasing number of adults over 65 (Hyams, 1996).

The United States is not alone in this changing demographic student body. Other countries experiencing this same phenomenon include Great Britain, Canada, and Australia (*Times Higher Education Supplement, 1996*; Noble, 1987; Farrugia & O'Brien, 1996).

## **Reasons for Returning and Barriers**

Several factors have contributed to the increasing number of adults returning to the college campus. One of these is the change in the demographics in the United States. In regard to age, projections for the beginning of the twenty-first century population show that the number of young children and teenagers will decrease while a relative increase in the number of middle-aged and older people will occur. Americans 30 years of age or older will make up approximately 60 percent of the population by the year 2000. Changing demographics will increase competition in the workplace. The demand for better skills will require people to improve their educational levels as the world continues to move from an industrial to a high-tech and service oriented economy (Mooney, 1994).

Many Americans no longer expect to choose a profession or job and maintain it throughout their lifetimes. They are changing jobs at a high rate, even changing professions two or three times, and these changes will also require more education (Mooney, 1994). One survey indicated that 83 percent of those students 25 years and older returning to college did so because of a change in their lives (The College Board's Office of Adult Learning Services, 1985).

Not only do NTS re-enter college to secure better paying jobs but also to obtain employment and to improve self-esteem (Opitz, 1990). Instead of pursuing a degree, they may be upgrading skills or simply enrolling in courses in which they have an interest (Mooney, 1994) and where they may find the social support and group membership which is so important to adults (Peterson, 1983). Most individuals have several reasons for continuing or restarting their education (McClellan, 1990).

When an adult returns to school, he or she is in transition, as is the traditional student. Traditional students are separating from their families and making the transition from adolescence to adulthood. For NTS, the transition may be initiated by a job layoff, divorce, career stagnation, mid-life change, or an abundance of free time. Whatever the reason, entering college is a big step and usually begins a time of significant personal change (Ostrowski, 1992; Marlow, 1989; Schlossberg et al., 1991).

Various adult life responsibilities create barriers for the NTS. These include being employed full-time and having the responsibilities of families and education at the same time. Juggling these responsibilities can be very difficult. Students who must schedule classes around their family and/or work often find a limited variety of class offerings in the evening, early morning, or weekends. Often student services such as counseling, job placement, and library access are geared toward the traditional student. Other barriers may be past academic failures, lack of self-esteem, and apprehension about competing with younger students in the classroom (Cross, 1981). Only since the 1980s have many educational opportunities been offered to older adults; prior to that time, educational opportunities were almost exclusively offered to youth (Mooney, 1994).

Adults not only face obstacles getting into college but also face obstacles after they are admitted. For example, financing is often a problem (Ostrowski, 1992). NTS are also concerned about adjustments to academic life, problems relating to younger faculty members, and a feeling of isolation. Other concerns are school-related stress, time management, and unfamiliarity with available university services (Ostrowski, 1992). A study by Ham, Houser, and Donstam (1990)

points out the importance of a college counseling center that can assist married students as they cope with the marital adjustments incurred when one enters the world of academia.

Students over 40 generally earn better grades than younger students but take longer to complete their studies. One study concludes that the demographic wave of students over age 40 could overwhelm the traditional higher education institutions, especially when combined with the "baby boom echo" of students who will begin enrolling around the year 2000 (O'Brien & Merisotis, 1996).

## **Nontraditional Students' Needs**

NTS turn to education to prepare themselves for role changes; higher education must be prepared to meet this challenge even if it means deviating from traditional procedures and standards (Mooney, 1994). An institution must gain insight from the NTS and recognize and respond to their unique needs (*Focus on Adults*, 1991). Enormous sacrifices have been made by NTS when they decide to enter college, including leaving a familiar environment, comfortable routines, and known resources to enter an unfamiliar environment with many uncertainties. An effort should be made to assist these adults in becoming self-sufficient throughout the educational process--from admission to exit from the institution. One of the most important services an institution can provide NTS, as well as traditional students, is the ability to "hang-in there" when the going gets tough (Mooney, 1994).

An important issue which universities and colleges must address is the number of scholarships available to NTS since many institutional scholarships have requirements that only traditional students can meet. Another issue is the manner in which students are treated by professors. Although many professors enjoy the participation and enrichment the NTS brings to the classroom, some professors, who perhaps feel threatened by older students, treat them as if they are youngsters and show little respect. Having adults in class can make teaching a new, exciting, challenging, and meaningful profession (Mooney, 1994; Sheckley, 1984). Coaches in forensics, for example, feel that NTS are a positive influence on their teams, partly because of their maturity and responsibility (Millsap, 1996).

The stress of family, job, and civic responsibilities alone can be enormous. With the additional pressure of returning to school, a NTS is susceptible to a wide range of personal crises. An institution should be prepared to assist them in coping with such pressures and time constraints (Mooney, 1994). NTS need child care services; scheduling of night, off-campus, and weekend classes; alternate locations for class offerings, such as the workplace, public schools, or libraries; and more student support services at night (Opitz, 1990).

While some studies indicate little or no difference between nontraditional and traditional students' needs and concerns in higher education (Arbuckle & Gale, 1996; Aslanian, 1997), other studies indicate that a NTS needs and concerns are different from those of the traditional student. Adults must be emotionally comfortable in order to learn and made to feel that they are important to the institution that serves them. Clearly then, institutions of higher education can either facilitate or hinder adult learning. To begin with, institutions can strive to provide an environment that is supportive and stimulating (Mooney, 1994). Rosenblum (1985) states that

although NTS have many different roles as well as the psychological fear of change, they also have enormous adaptability when faced with new challenges.

## **How Colleges are Meeting Nontraditional Students' Needs**

Colleges and universities are implementing a variety of plans to meet the needs of NTS, some by establishing new programs and others by giving special attention to the NTS within already-established programs and procedures.

Since initial enrollment may be the first contact with higher education, the NTS may not even know what questions to ask. University personnel should anticipate those questions and provide easily accessible and understandable information that will facilitate the entry and retention of this valuable resource. Workshops for university faculty, staff, and administration can assist in broadening knowledge about NTS needs and their roles in meeting those needs.

The NTS target market should be identified for recruitment purposes, and the establishment of a contact with area community colleges is a good source for recruiting. Tognazzini (1992) recommends the following ten methods for recruiting the adult market:

1. institute aggressive financial support programs;
2. develop adult-oriented learning programs;
3. offer career instruction, counseling, and information;
4. develop an open house program;
5. develop campus-based support organizations;
6. develop child care alternatives for NTS;
7. understand and make available NTS housing;
8. establish a mental health counseling program;
9. begin an on-campus NTS newsletter;
10. market your services to the NTS.

Specific procedures should be designed to facilitate the actual enrollment of NTS, such as simplifying the registration process. No matter how well a student has been recruited and advised, an institution may lose that student very quickly if the registration process is complicated and frustrating. Telephone registration, as well as registration by mail, can make the process easy and accessible for NTS. Once NTS have enrolled, retaining them becomes important.

Academic advising is central to the success of both traditional students and NTS. Competent advisors should be well trained to provide information that NTS need. They should be available at night, on weekends, and at off-campus sites (Mooney, 1994). Since NTS are usually self-supporting, their tuition is paid either by themselves or by a third party such as an employer, the Veterans Administration, or a retraining program. Regardless of who ultimately pays, NTS are usually required to pay up front. A fair and flexible program for paying tuition and fees can help these students.

Many NTS return to school to change careers. Computer-assisted career counseling and job

placement services should be available in the evenings and on weekends for their use. NTS programs and centers can provide a home base so that these students can meet to share problems and concerns and receive help from college personnel as it is needed (Mathiasen and Neely, 1988). To assess the quality of services offered, universities may utilize the *Focus on Adults: A Self-Study Guide for Postsecondary Education Institutions, (Guide)*, an evaluation instrument developed by the American Council of Education (ACE) (Mooney, 1994; Marlow, 1989).

The literature provides examples of special NTS programs which have been established by institutions throughout the United States, such as the School for New Learning (SNL) at DePaul University. The SNL program was established in 1972 especially for NTS. In this program, the students are adults, age 24 or older, who want to accelerate their progress toward a degree by using real-life experience, as well as classwork, for academic credit, and who want to design their own programs with help from an advisory committee of experts (Mirel, 1995).

The following are other examples of nontraditional programs:

- Duquesne's "Saturday College" program in the Greater Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, area began in the spring of 1992. This program was designed for the working adult who wants to complete a bachelor's degree in four years by attending classes on Saturday (Newberry, 1996). You may gain access to their website at [www.duq.edu](http://www.duq.edu).
- Thomas Edison College in Trenton, New Jersey, a nontraditional college with neither a campus nor scheduled classes, offers twelve degree programs (Manzo, 1997).
- The University of the State of New York - Regents College, in Albany, New York, provides flexibility to students by acting as an organizing body, steering students to appropriate courses and programs at hundreds of other accredited institutions, and compiling those credits toward a Regents College diploma. It also evaluates each student's job experience and provides proficiency examinations that meet some course requirements (Manzo, 1997). Their website may be reached at [www.regents.edu](http://www.regents.edu).
- Pennsylvania State University began offering off-campus academic programs a century ago through correspondence. Delivery methods have improved dramatically since that time. In the last 25 years, programs have developed throughout the United States that allow students almost anywhere to take classes through the mail, cable television, and the Internet. Needs of the NTS are also addressed through distance learning and through scheduling evening and Saturday classes.

## **Support Systems Available**

NTS must be made aware of the various types of assistance available to them. One real-life scenario which illustrates a lack of information occurred recently when an NTS was surprised to discover that non-resident students could eat in the university cafeteria. She believed the cafeteria was only for students who lived on campus. If the university does not promote the services it provides for students, the chances of the services being used are slim. Newsletters can be used to communicate services and helpful tips for the NTS. News articles and briefs in the school paper can also be used to disseminate information.

Effective orientation programs can ease the NTS transition into the university setting by

providing useful information. Orientation programs have been found to lessen stress and to create a better support system for NTS (Tingle, 1993). These programs can be held either on campus or at off-campus sites where large numbers of potential transfer students are enrolled. Kirk has developed a gaming simulation, "Night Rehearsal," that is designed to familiarize both the NTS and faculty with some challenges inherent in entering college (Kirk & Kirk, 1995).

Northern Arizona University calls its orientation program "Adults Back to School" and gives one hour of credit on a pass/fail basis. Topics addressed include learning styles, life cycles, goals and expectations, and academic and personal support, as well as information about available services (Lintner, 1997). Studies have suggested that not only are NTS unaware of some of the support services available, but their perception is that most services are aimed at the traditional student and that these services do not accommodate the needs of the NTS (Ostrowski, 1992).

Orientation programs may be viewed positively as an attempt by the university to meet the NTS halfway. Students must know the rules of the game, and an orientation setting provides a vehicle for dispensing information about the regulations, norms, and expectations of the new environment. NTS immediate families should be included in these programs, to the same extent as the traditional students' families. Support from family and others is important to the NTS (Spanard, 1991); should it be lacking from the family, the institution can make efforts to supplement this support (H. G. Lyon, Personal communication, March 17, 1998).

Personal counseling/mental health services to students, their spouses, and their children may be provided to furnish both interpersonal counseling and academic advising. The advising staff can assist students in coursework and career options and keep up-to-date records for NTS. This will enable them to communicate with the students and, hopefully, prevent or at least lower stop-out and drop-out rates, increase morale, and improve the overall performance of the NTS. If a college or university has a Counselor Education Department, the counseling center could be opened in the evening hours by counselor interns (Mooney, 1994).

Student Support Services (SSS), a part of the TRIO program, is a federally funded program sponsored by the United States Department of Education. SSS is found on many school campuses throughout the region, and its services are free to the clientele it serves. Its mission is to provide support for first-generation college students and students with economic and/or disability-related needs, approximately half of whom are nontraditional. SSS promotes its participants' academic success, retention, career planning, and graduation.

One small college in Nebraska established a special reentry support program to provide individual and group support for new NTS in their first academic year. Students in the program are paired with adult mentors who act as personal guides. These volunteer, adult mentors are carefully chosen for their role as resource and support persons to assist with registration, financial aid, part-time work, housing, and campus information (Mathiasen & Neely, 1988).

The University of South Carolina at Lancaster implemented a pilot project called Peer Intervention Program to identify needs, eliminate barriers, and provide participatory programming for its NTS. A telemarketing approach assisted with registration, parking, student IDs, classes, and advising. Student concerns are documented and special problems referred to the

coordinator of student development for follow-up (Rice, 1991).

At Georgia State University, a support group program is offered to explore the interaction between academic stress and adult developmental issues (Levin, 1986). With group support, a student returning to school at midlife has a renewed opportunity for personal growth. Studies suggest that returning students have higher grade point averages, are more active on campus and in the community, and have fewer absences (Ostrowski, 1992), all of which makes them an even more valuable resource for colleges and universities.

Drake University, a private university in Des Moines, Iowa, uses the Internet to teach its students useful academic tools, such as note taking. For more information, their website is [www.drake.edu](http://www.drake.edu). Other programs can be found in the book, *100 Ways Colleges Serve Adults*, published by the College Board's Office of Adult Learning Services in New York.

## **Survey and Results**

Questionnaires were mailed to 50 four-year public institutions with reported student populations of 5,500 or less for the purpose of determining actual increases in NTS enrollment, percentages of NTS, and types of services offered to NTS. Six of the seventeen responding institutions reported higher overall enrollments for the fall 1997 semester over the previous year. All respondents were located in Arkansas and its surrounding states. Seventeen yes/no questions and five open-ended questions were asked.

Respondents were asked to furnish their definition of NTS. Eleven institutions defined these students as being 25 years of age or older, one defined them as 24 years of age or older, one defined them as 21 years of age or older, and one defined them as 22 years of age and first time entering freshman. Two other respondents considered the 25-year-old to be nontraditional, but included other characteristics as well; those characteristics included part-time non-residential, degree or non-degree seeking, enrolled at off-campus centers, with children, or having a commute of over 60 miles. One also defined the NTS as "a person who is a high school graduate or holder of a GED, and who has been away from formal education for at least two years."

Respondents were asked total student enrollments as well as enrollments of NTS. Results are shown in Chart 1. The majority of responding institutions reported a minimum of 20% of the student population comprised of NTS.

Universities were asked about the total number of institutional scholarships awarded in the fall of 1997 and the number that were solely for undergraduate students entering college directly from high school. This information is shown in Chart 2.

While some respondents stated that scholarship information was not available, the information that was submitted suggests that many scholarship opportunities are theoretically available to NTS.



Chart 1		
Enrollment Figures Fall 1997		
Total Enrollment	NTS Enrollment	NTS %
1393	515	37%
2219	41	2%
2404	505	21%
2963	615	21%
3041	2968	98%
3221	619	19%
3946	1539	39%
3951	787	20%
5235	2355	45%
5485	1758	32%
5613	1123	20%
5770	2158	37%
6004	N/A	
6381	2425	38%
6817	2129	31%
7240	1865	26%

Chart 2	
Scholarships Awarded Fall 1997	
Total Number	Restricted
160	65
375	244
447	133
587	487
1140	295
1643	554
2416	755
2714	10

Several questions were asked about general concerns of the NTS and what services the universities made available to the NTS. Only four respondents had made some form of formal assessment to determine the needs of the NTS. Responses to these questions are shown below.

General Questions	Yes	No	N/A
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Are courses offered by your institution in the following ways?			
• Distance learning	14	2	1
• Correspondence course	2	11	4
• Independent Studies	13	2	2
• Off-campus courses	16	1	0
• Evening courses	17	0	0
• Early morning courses	5	8	4
• Weekend courses	13	3	1
• Mini-semesters	7	5	5
Is registration available during the evening and/or weekend hours?	15	2	0
Are academic advisers available to assist students with degree planning in the evening and/or weekend hours?	11	6	0
Has a formal assessment been made to determine the needs of the NTS?	4	13	0
Is there a recruitment plan focused toward the NTS?	6	11	0
Is academic counseling available to NTS having difficulty in their courses?	16	1	0
Are the following services available to the NTS?			
• Child Care	10	6	1
• Food Service	17	0	0
• Center for NTS (i.e., commuter lounge)	9	7	1
• Student employment opportunities	16	0	1
Is separate housing provided for the NTS?	2	15	0

Support for the NTS and the types of support services provided for the NTS were major concerns of this survey. Questions were asked about the types of services the universities provide to the students. #9;

<b>Support Questions</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>
Is there an office/department on campus for the purpose of assisting the NTS?	7	10
Do entering NTS have an opportunity to participate in orientation activities?	17	0
Are seminars or mini-courses conducted to equip the NTS with academic tools (i.e., time and stress management, study skills)?	12	5
Are informational sessions held for the families of NTS?	2	15
Are tutors available to students who need extra assistance with their studies?	16	1
Are personal counseling/mental health services available to NTS?	17	0
Are personal counseling/mental health services available to families of NTS's?	3	14
Are support groups/organizations for NTS available on a regular basis?	11	6
Is there regular communication (mailouts, newsletters, etc.) informing NTS of available services?	8	9

Four comments were made in the space provided for observations or recommendations.

- Historically black university, HBU. Statewide special purpose institution providing special services to students of 'diverse ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds.'
- This is the fastest growing segment of the student body and care is given to provide for needs without special treatment per the request of the Non-traditional Students Association.
- Non-traditional aged students are generally perceived by faculty as an advantage in class discussions. They are usually more focused on studying and have life experiences to draw on when finding applications of course content. We are 90% a commuter campus, so non-traditional aged students are not set apart because they don't live on campus. Many are involved in campus organizations as much or more than traditional-aged students.
- The greatest weakness for NTS at this campus is lack of academic support. The advising is quite weak in many departments, and no academic counseling or tutoring is available.
- We have an organization for nontraditional students. This organization provides nontraditional students with a support group and a formal voice on campus.

Seven institutions were interested in the findings from this survey.

## **Closing**

Although many institutions of higher education are now recognizing the need for providing programs and services to the NTS, continuous improvement in this area is needed. Figures show that this is an increasing population on the college campus and is a resource that needs more attention. Colleges and universities face the problems of declining numbers of high school graduates and budgetary constraints; an increase in the number of NTS on the campus may be the solution to this problem.

When implementing improvements in an institution's services to students, all areas of operation should assess the services provided to the student, accept the concept of constant change, and engineer new programs and services as needed. Services provided for NTS not only benefit this population but the entire college community and population as a whole. Many of the recommendations included in this paper will require minimal financial assistance; but they will require a commitment of time, energy, and creativity (Mooney, 1994).

When more is done to accommodate the student, the return is increased recruitment and retention of a new and a more diversified student body and an increase in revenues for the university.

"Students are...

the most important people on the campus

...not cold enrollment statistics but flesh and blood human beings with feelings and emotions like our own.

...not people to be tolerated so that we can do our own thing. They are our thing.

...not dependent on us. Rather we are dependent on them.

...not an interruption of our work, but the purpose of it.

...Without students there would be no need for the institution."

(Paraphrased from L. L. Bean Customer Creed)

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## **Biographies**

Emma Lou May is a senior management major who was a recipient of a SILO Research Fellowship. She presented this paper at the Allied Academies Spring Conference in Myrtle Beach, SC. After receiving her BBA in December 1998, she will begin her Masters of Science in

Community Counseling here at Henderson. She is currently employed by Henderson State University and is a wife and mother of four.

Ramona Akin, Professor of Business for the School of Business, retired in May 1998 after 22 years of service. She received her Bachelor's and Master's degree from Henderson State University and her Doctorate from the University of Arkansas. She is certified in Professional Human Resources. She has been published in the Journal of Educational Leadership and other journals and received two distinguished paper awards. Before retirement, she was also the Quality Teaching Circle Director and QTC Journal Editor.

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