



Success for Adult Students

Looking at the demographics of today's student body, nontraditional is the new traditional. How can public universities best serve today's older student population?

by Stephen G. Pelletier

News stories just before Labor Day always capture the back-to-college ritual of young first-year students moving in a frenzy into dorms. There's something comfortable and familiar in those accounts. Trouble is, they're not a very accurate depiction of college life today.

As everyone who helps lead a university knows, the stereotypical student is but a sliver of today's college-going population. Data reported by the consulting firm Stamats suggests that as few as 16 percent of college students today fit the so-called traditional mold: 18- to 22-years-old, financially dependent on parents, in college full time, living on campus.

The National Center for Education Statistics defines nontraditional students as meeting one of seven characteristics: delayed enrollment into postsecondary education; attends college part-time; works full time; is financially independent

for financial aid purposes; has dependents other than a spouse; is a single parent; or does not have a high school diploma. Those criteria fit a wide swath of today's college students.

Within the nontraditional cohort, of course, are a great number of adult students—a pool often defined as those 25 or older. According to Stamats, more than 47 percent of students who are currently enrolled in colleges and universities in the United States are older than 25. Public universities know this cohort well: In the fall of 2008, just over 1 million of the students enrolled at AASCU institutions were 25 or older. As Daniel J. Hurley, AASCU's director of state relations and policy analysis, says, "AASCU institutions recognize that nontraditional is the new traditional."

The very label of "nontraditional" suggests that business as usual might not work in serving this large cohort of current and potential students.

Do nontraditional students need nontraditional approaches from educational institutions—both in and out of the classroom? And if so, how well do four-year institutions fill the bill?

A Varied Group

If so-called traditional students are somewhat alike, at least by virtue of age, adult students are anything but homogenous. They may be 25—or 75. They may work full-time or part-time, or be between jobs. They may have children or other dependents. They may be striving for their first professional career foothold, retooling after a reduction in force, or perhaps even coming off active duty in the deserts of Afghanistan.

As president of the University of Maryland University College (UMUC), Susan C. Aldridge knows a thing or two about this cohort. UMUC has staked its mission on a commitment to providing “top-quality educational opportunities to adult students.”

Aldridge offers this snapshot of adult students: “Most of them are working, a lot of them working fulltime. That means that they go to school part-time rather than on a fulltime basis. Many of them have children or others that they are supporting financially. They’re coming back to school, so they are either career changers or career enhancers.” Adult students might be pursuing their first degree, an advanced degree, or another credential.

“Because they are older and working and tend to go to school part-time,” Aldridge says, adult students tend to “view the structure of education differently than do traditional students.”

“Adult students have a difficult time with the traditional format and structure—length of semesters, parking on the campus, getting to a traditional campus with a traditional schedule from their place of work,” Aldridge says. “If their travel schedule sends them out of town, they have a difficult time being in

“One problem for adults is the constant, competing tension between life obligations and educational obligations.”

—Jamie Merisotis,
Lumina Foundation for
Education



a classroom environment, particularly during the day but also on a traditional Monday-Wednesday-Friday or Tuesday-Thursday schedule. Their lives are just too unpredictable for them to commit to those types of schedules.”

Another implicit barrier for adult students is that, from billing to career counseling to tutoring, student support offices traditionally require patrons to visit an office in person—perhaps between the hours of 9 to 5. To work within those constraints, though, an adult student might have to leave work early, drive a long distance and perhaps scramble to find a parking spot.

“One problem for adults is the constant, competing tension between life obligations and educational obligations,” says Jamie Merisotis, president of the Lumina Foundation for Education. “Life obligations often come first. The price that you pay for that is that it takes much longer to get the credential. One thing that we know very well is that the longer it takes, the less likely it is for people to actually achieve that credential.”

“We have to find a way to create

the conditions where students can stay focused, on task, and be able to complete their credential in a reasonable amount of time so that they can benefit from actually having that credential,” Merisotis says. “That’s a challenge. But we think that’s something that must get increasing attention.”

Demarée K. Michelau, director of policy analysis at the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE), directs the Lumina-funded project “Non-traditional No More: Policy Solutions for Adult Learners,” which has identified strategies to help adults who have nearly enough credits for a degree to complete their education.

The WICHE project has found that adult students who are pursuing higher education have “general confusion about how to navigate the system,” Michelau says. As one finding, the project is publicizing a “conciierge” model, or single point of campus contact that connects returning adult students with services they need. Among many other recommendations, the project suggests that universities extend student services

beyond “regular” business hours and find creative ways to tailor services to accommodate the varied needs of the diverse adult student population.

Echoing WICHE’s findings, Aldridge says that to the extent possible, support services for adult students “should be available online or through a 24/7 call center so that the students are not at a disadvantage just because they happen to be working.”

While paying for college is a concern for virtually all students, regardless of age, this issue poses unique challenges for adult students. Institutional policies may gear financial aid to full-time students, leaving adult students who attend part-time or intermittently out of the loop. Institutions with a serious commitment to serving adult students recognize that they may need to change their financial aid policies, as have state agencies (see sidebar).

Another complicated but critical concern for adult students is the transfer of academic credit. Michelau says that the “Non-traditional No More” project has found that a pivotal marker for adult student success is a university’s ability to process transfer credits from other institutions. Aldridge says that universities that take weeks or months to process transfer credits create impediments that can delay a student’s

In Context: Adult Students and Policy

President Obama wants the United States to lead the world with the highest proportion of college graduates by 2020. Meeting that goal will require that more adult students complete their higher education.

That reality rings true with Jamie Merisotis, president of the Lumina Foundation for Education. He views adult students in the context of Lumina’s “Big Goal,” which is to increase the proportion of Americans with high-quality degrees and credentials to 60 percent by the year 2025. “We could dramatically improve high school graduation rates and significantly increase participation rates [of so-called traditional students] in college and simply not have enough people to meet the goal,” Merisotis says. Achieving the foundation’s ambitions “cannot happen without adults,” he states. “It’s that simple.”

Beyond reaching the numbers, though, Merisotis says that getting more adults through the educational pipeline is important to society for economic, cultural and social development—to say nothing of economic recovery in the short term and “advancing success for people who are unemployed and underemployed.” And while much recent discussion in adult education has emphasized associate-level credentials, Merisotis makes a point of saying that “too little attention has been focused on the baccalaureate conversation in the sense that many [available] jobs are high skill/high experience jobs that in fact do require a baccalaureate degree.”

Lumina has focused some of its programming on adult students who have some college experience but have not yet earned a credential. With support from the foundation, for example, the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education is working with policy makers and educators

in Arkansas, Colorado, Nevada, North Dakota and South Dakota to help create “a more navigable path to degree attainment for adults.” The effort targets “ready adults”—those who have nearly enough credits for a degree but who haven’t yet completed that credential.

Nine AASCU member institutions are among the 35 colleges and universities involved in Project Win-Win, an effort sponsored by the Institute for Higher Education Policy, also with Lumina support. The goal of this project is to find former students who are no longer enrolled in college and who were never awarded a degree, but whose records qualify them for associate degrees, and get those degrees awarded retroactively.



State initiatives are also working to tear down barriers that adult students face. The Indiana Commission for Higher Education, for example, recently announced recommendations to redress the reality that the state’s current financial aid system provides limited support and flexibility for working adults, who today comprise the majority of all college students in the state. Proposed changes would create a dedicated fund for adult and part-time students, allow state aid to cover summer tuition, and offer increased aid for students who complete a two-year degree at a community college and successfully transfer to a four-year college.

“There’s no magic bullet in all of this,” Merisotis says. “We are talking about a series of efforts that will increase degree attainment.” In that success for adult students hinges on whether they are prepared academically, financially and socially, he says, “you increase success by ensuring that the right kind of support systems and structures are in place to serve them well.”

pursuit of a degree, or even cause the student to drop out of higher education altogether.

Ultimately, Aldridge says, adult students “need a very clear pathway, a degree audit, that tells them exactly what courses they need, how long it will take them to finish, and how much it is going to cost them for their degree.” While 18- to 22-year-old undergraduates might get that kind of roadmap routinely, Aldridge says that when it comes to adult students, “most traditional institutions aren’t used to providing that information in a timely manner.”

Still, another important consideration is the assessment of prior learning. As Michelau says, adult students “want credit for their work-based prior learning and competencies.”

“Prior learning assessment is an emerging science in higher education,” Merisotis says. “There has been some derision of prior learning assessment in the past, because measurement tools haven’t been very precise. But I think there’s an increasing degree of sophistication around prior learning assessment where, if we are shifting to a system where what we are measuring is not inputs but the outcomes—the learning that results from higher education—prior learning assessment could become very important.”

Lumina has joined with the Joyce and Kresge foundations to help fund a new nationwide center whose evaluators will assess prior learning. Under the aegis of the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning, a pioneer in the assessment of prior learning, the new center seeks to increase access to assessment of prior learning in order to help boost completion of postsecondary credentials and degrees.

Different Expectations

Aldridge believes that universities also need to recognize that adult students bring different expectations to the



University of Maryland University College students outside of Dorsey Station in Elkridge, Md.

“Faculty members need to know that adult students learn differently...They don’t just memorize. They have a context within which they take information [they learn] and apply it.”

—Susan Aldridge,
University of Maryland
University College

teaching and learning experience.

Apart from the fact that they prefer evening and weekend classes, for example, Aldridge says adult students prefer hybrid classes that combine face-to-face and online learning. That pedagogical mix, Aldridge says, decreases a student’s commitment to a specific time and place, but also opens new channels for students

to interact with professors.

UMUC has found that adult students like to get actively engaged in the classroom. “They are not as tolerant of the lecture-type format,” Aldridge says. “They have experiences and they want to talk about those experiences.”



UMUC student takes notes during a course at Dorsey Station.

“I think faculty members need to know that adult students learn differently,” Aldridge says. “They don’t just memorize. They have a context within which they take information [they learn] and apply it. They tend to ask more questions. They challenge issues more in a classroom.”

Moreover, Aldridge says, adult students have an experiential focus. “They want to apply the knowledge that they gained in their education to their work environment in order to enhance their career right away,” she says. Consequently, Aldridge has found, adult students gravitate to faculty who have real-world experience. UMUC has found, too, that faculty with rich work experiences can provide de facto career advising in the classroom, and give assignments that help students build portfolios that can help them land jobs.

Not Far Enough

Some observers of academe believe that higher education doesn’t go far enough in supporting adult students. Carol E. Kasworm, a leading authority on adult students, notes, for example, that many universities “have dissolved specialized entities that have focused on adult students,” often because of financial pressures.

Kasworm, a professor at North Carolina State University, does point, however, to institutions that serve adult students well. For example, she says, the Office of Adult Students and Evening Services at the University of North Carolina-Charlotte, provides “robust and targeted” outreach to adult students. Another example is USF4YOU, the University of South Florida’s comprehensive set of academic programs and support services focused on adult students.

Brian Bosworth, the founder and president of FutureWorks, a consulting and policy development firm, believes that universities need to go even further. “Time is the enemy for working adults as they contemplate postsecondary education,” Bosworth says.

Arguing that the traditional path to earning a degree takes too long for students in the workforce, Bosworth argues that the educational process needs to be reorganized “to fit the reality of the needs of working adults.” He advocates that time-to-degree be shortened with tools such as block scheduling, and for “compressing classroom time to the

absolute minimum.” He further believes that adults in college would be better served if student support services were embedded directly into the courses they take, rather than offered separately in campus offices.

More broadly, Bosworth also believes that educational content needs to be tied much more directly to the needs of the labor market. “The educational process would be enriched and enhanced by far greater engagement of employers,” Bosworth says, “both in terms of shaping the competencies required but also in helping students develop the soft skills appropriate to their educational needs and to the economy.”

Mission Focus

To best serve adult students, Aldridge says universities need to understand how this cohort differs from their younger classroom colleagues. Adult students “need a lot of information,” she says. “They may be a little bit older, but some of them are insecure about coming back to school into a traditional environment. They’re worried about failure, cost and about whether they can balance the other activities in their lives along with academic studies.”

A university’s assessment of how well it is serving this unique group needs to start with that institution’s fundamental purpose, Aldridge suggests. “It goes back to assessing the mission in terms of the extent to which the institution wants to serve adult students,” she says.

“Think about how you are delivering education to all of the students you are serving,” Merisotis counsels. “Don’t assume that serving [adult] students is an add-on—that is, it has to be part of the fundamental change that I think most institutions are now exploring.” **P**



Writer/editor Stephen G. Pelletier is based in Rockville, Maryland.