



# STRATEGIES FOR ATTRACTING AND SUPPORTING NON- TRADITIONAL STUDENTS

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In the following report, Hanover Research explores the needs of non-traditional student populations in higher education. This report considers key issues related to these students, ranging from identifying them to providing support services that increase retention. It also examines several model initiatives in place at three public institutions that serve non-traditional students.

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND KEY FINDINGS

### INTRODUCTION

There is an increasingly prominent demographic shift occurring in higher education, as more and more students who enroll in college do not conform to traditional metrics of what it means to be a college student. Following the recession in 2008, college and universities saw a growth in enrollment, with a substantial portion of that growth coming from students who were older, working, and had a family.<sup>1</sup> As these students make up an increasingly large section of higher education, experts note that “too few four-year institutions are adequately addressing the fact that they are run on the antiquated idea they mainly serve students in the 18-to-24 range.”<sup>2</sup> Institutions of higher education have begun reexamining assumptions about the student population they are serving and ensuring that the programs and services that they offer are appropriate for the full spectrum of students present in today’s universities.<sup>3</sup>

To this end, this report explores several key aspects of non-traditional student education, including a review of important approaches for attracting and retaining these adult student populations. By investigating strategies that span a wide range of topics—from identifying non-traditional students to providing academic, financial, and social supports—Hanover Research (Hanover) aims to inform higher education institutions’ recruitment and retention of these students. This report is presented in three sections:

- **Section I: Identifying and Recruiting** reviews important demographic indicators that characterize many non-traditional students. The section also examines strategies for attracting these students.
- **Section II: Retaining and Supporting** explores strategies for engaging non-traditional students over time. This section also reviews key support systems that many non-traditional students rely on from three perspectives: academic, financial, and social.
- **Section III: Models at Selected Institutions** briefly outlines the support structures in place at three public institutions that serve non-traditional students. This section introduces some common supports and highlights key features of these institutions’ non-traditional student approach.

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<sup>1</sup> Westervelt, E. “Shaken By Economic Change, ‘Non-Traditional’ Students Are Becoming The New Normal.” NPR, September 2016. <http://www.npr.org/sections/ed/2016/09/25/495188445/shaken-by-economic-change-non-traditional-students-are-becoming-the-new-normal>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Gulley, N.Y. “The Myth of the Nontraditional Student.” *Inside Higher Ed*, August 2016. <https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2016/08/05/defining-students-nontraditional-inaccurate-and-damaging-essay>

## KEY FINDINGS

- **Institutions that enroll, or are planning to enroll, non-traditional students should examine their policies and pedagogy to ensure that this population is effectively served and supported.** Literature points to students being “at risk” if they do not have a strong connection to the institution, if they have low confidence about completing their program, and/or if they have negative feelings about their current educational situation. Many policies and associated support structures currently in place at four-year universities assume that most college students are first-time, full-time, and recent high school graduates. This baseline increases non-traditional students’ risk status, which in turn increases their chances of dropping out.
- **There are two common types of degree program that are more attractive to non-traditional students: degree completion programs and career pathway programs.** Degree completion programs provide adult students who already have some college credit the opportunity to earn their bachelor’s degree. Oftentimes, these programs lead to a general studies credential. However, institutions that align these programs with local workforce needs can improve students’ employment prospects upon completing the program. Similarly, career pathways programs have multiple entry and exit points and require less of a time commitment.
- **Institutions should develop support systems that help non-traditional students overcome financial barriers and balance school with other responsibilities.** These students are more likely to be working professionals with family obligations, and therefore financial uncertainty is a major barrier to enrollment. However, the most commonly cited reason for returning to higher education is for career and financial advancement. Thus, institutions should devote resources to developing strong financial and career services support specifically for these students.
- **Many four-year institutions are developing relationships with community colleges to better identify and attract non-traditional students.** This partnership allows four-year institutions to target potential students and develop pathways to bachelor’s degree completion. Moreover, four-year institutions are increasingly leveraging these partnerships to extend their reach to new markets.
- **Flexible program options are important for attracting non-traditional students, and these options should be prominently highlighted in marketing materials.** Non-traditional students are often balancing more responsibilities than traditional college-age students, and therefore many non-traditional students seek education options that fit with their life and work schedules. In fact, one survey found that 93 percent of prospective non-traditional students highly value learning about an institution’s flexible offering in outreach materials.

- **Leveraging internal and external data can help universities to target students who already have some college credit, an audience that be particularly interested in earning a bachelor's degree.** Most experts identify two main avenues for outreach: targeting specific students, and large-scale media marketing campaigns. One source asserts that the former strategy can see a return of between 9 and 17 percent, and direct outreach to former students allows institutions to adapt materials to appeal to prospective students. For example, they can include the number of credits that the student still needs to earn a degree.
- **Offering credit for prior learning can help adult students apply previous coursework or professional experiences to their degree program.** Prior learning credits are particularly important to non-traditional students, as many of them have credits from several other postsecondary institutions and/or work experience. Prior Learning Assessments (PLA) and Competency-Based Education (CBE) are both ways that colleges are helping non-traditional students leverage previous experience.
- **To best engage and retain adult students, faculty may need additional training.** For example, only 62 percent of non-traditional students are satisfied with the feedback that they receive, despite almost all (92 percent) of these students indicating that it was a very important aspect of their learning process. Regular and responsive feedback helps these students progress successfully as they balance other responsibilities like work and family. This regular interaction with professors also helps non-traditional students feel less isolated and more connected to the institution.

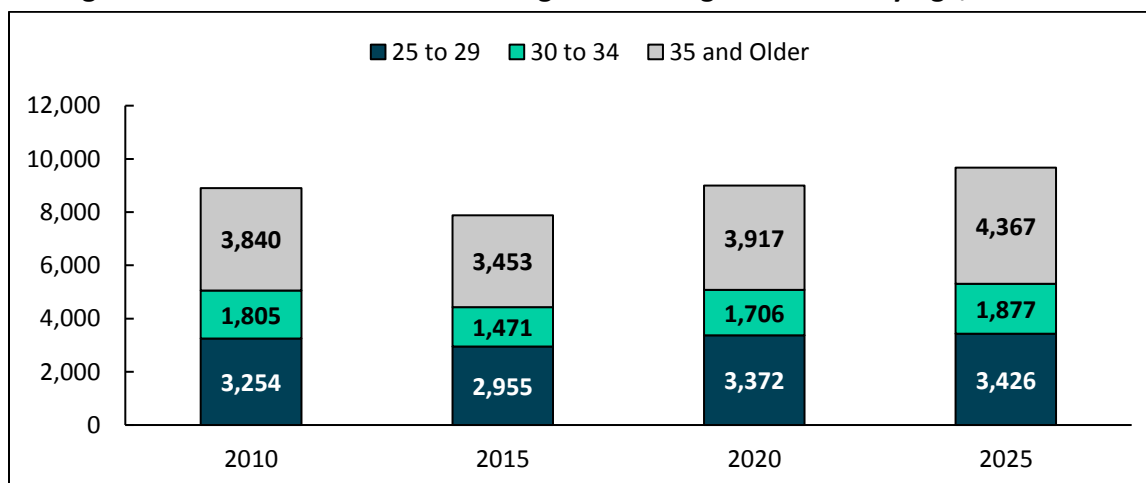
## SECTION I: IDENTIFYING AND RECRUITING

In this section, Hanover discusses identification and recruitment strategies that target non-traditional higher education students. After a review of key characteristics and motivations of adult learners, this section explores ways that institutions may appeal to this population.

### NON-TRADITIONAL STUDENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

The traditional view of college students, who come straight from high school and move into their undergraduate dorms, is changing across the United States as more and more higher education students fall outside of this traditional demographic. Indeed, over the last 10 years, a growing population of adult (often referred to as “non-traditional”) students is enrolling in higher education. As stated by the Education Commission of the States, “with this influx of the adult-student population, states and institutions need to strategize how to best support these students both academically and financially.”<sup>4</sup> Although the number of these non-traditional students remains lower relative to the traditional college-aged population, the National Center for Education Statistics forecasts that **the adult population will grow at a higher percentage than their traditional peers over the next decade** (Figure 1.1).

**Figure 1.1: Total Fall Enrollment in Degree-Granting Institutions by Age, 2010-2025**



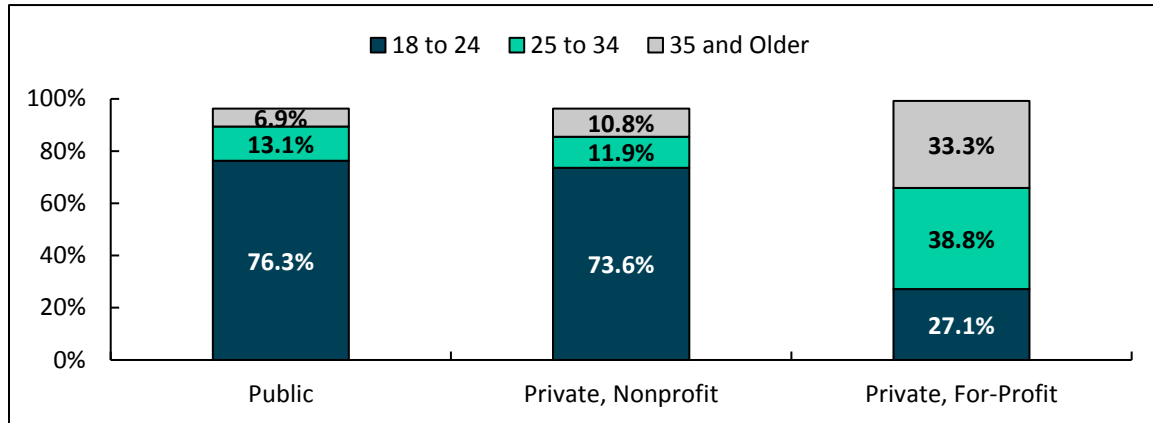
Source: National Center for Education Statistics<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Anderson, L. “27 is the New 18: Adult Students on the Rise.” Education Commission of the States, August 2016. <https://www.ecs.org/27-is-the-new-18-adult-students-on-the-rise/>

<sup>5</sup> Adapted from: “Digest of Education Statistics 2015: Table 303.40.” National Center for Education Statistics, March 2016. [https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d15/tables/dt15\\_303.40.asp?current=yes](https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d15/tables/dt15_303.40.asp?current=yes)

Non-traditional student enrollment indicators also show a preference for private, for-profit institutions relative to public or private, nonprofit colleges and universities. On average, across different types of institutional control, **17.8 percent of postsecondary students are between the ages of 25 and 34 years**. However, at private, for-profit colleges the proportion of these older students rises to over one-third of total enrollments (Figure 1.2).<sup>6</sup> This suggests that many attributes of these types of institutions—such as greater flexibility or alternative course delivery options—appeal to non-traditional students.

**Figure 1.2: Total Fall Enrollment in Four-Year Institutions by Control and Age, 2013**



Source: National Center for Education Statistics<sup>7</sup>

Finally, dependency status can be used as a proxy to identify traditional and non-traditional students. Most non-traditional students are older and may be married or have children, whereas traditional students coming straight from high school are more likely to remain dependent on their parents' incomes and other supports.<sup>8</sup> Independent students are typically attending school part time, and independent students who have children are more likely to be female, older, and be from a minority group (Figure 1.3). Understanding these student characteristics can help institutions of higher education better align recruitment, support, and retention strategies with the unique needs of non-traditional enrollees.

**Figure 1.3: Characteristics of Students Based on Dependency Status, 2012**

CHARACTERISTIC OF STUDENT	% OF STUDENTS	ATTENDING LESS THAN FULL TIME	OVER 30	FEMALE	BLACK OR HISPANIC	MEDIAN INCOME
Dependent	49%	39%	0%	53%	28%	\$65,469
Independent, No Children, Unmarried	18%	59%	33%	48%	33%	\$12,149
Independent, No Children, Married	6%	65%	51%	58%	24%	\$40,310
Independent, With Children, Married	28%	58%	60%	70%	41%	\$23,807

Source: New America Foundation<sup>9</sup>

<sup>6</sup> "Digest of Education Statistics 2015: Table 303.50." National Center for Education Statistics, November 2014. [https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d15/tables/dt15\\_303.50.asp](https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d15/tables/dt15_303.50.asp)

<sup>7</sup> Adapted from: Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Miller, B. "Breaking With Tradition: Making Federal Grant Aid Work for Today's Students." New America Foundation, 2014. p.4. [http://www.edcentral.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/BreakingWithTradition\\_7\\_8\\_2014\\_2.pdf](http://www.edcentral.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/BreakingWithTradition_7_8_2014_2.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> Adapted from: Ibid., p.5.

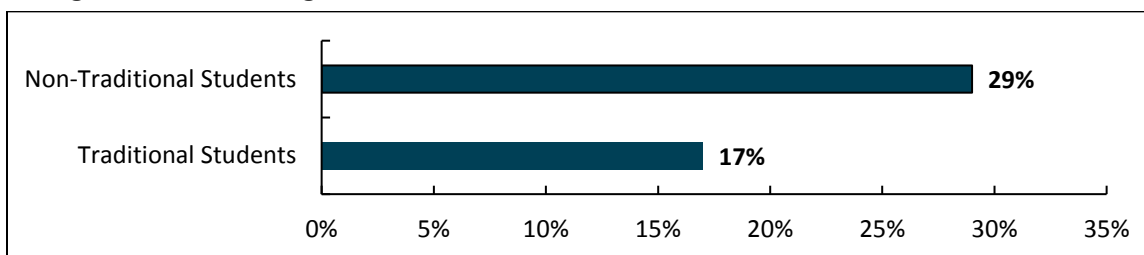


## UNDERSTANDING NON-TRADITIONAL STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVES

Experts in higher education acknowledge the unique needs of non-traditional students and highlight the importance of understanding these needs before developing targeted initiatives to attract this audience. Indeed, “at a time when many colleges and universities face increased challenges to their recruitment and retention goals, a deeper understanding of this non-traditional student population is crucial to help meet the social and academic expectations of a rapidly emerging and vital student population.”<sup>10</sup> However, because this population is varied—with different personal, employment, and financial situations that impact how they enroll in higher education—colleges and universities often have to provide an array of services to meet their needs.<sup>11</sup>

Despite the growing population of non-traditional students in higher education, these students continue to face barriers to success that their more traditional counterparts do not (Figure 1.4). A student is considered “at risk” if he or she demonstrates: 1) a low sense of connection to the institution; 2) low confidence about completing his or her program; and/or 3) negative feelings about his or her current educational situation.<sup>12</sup> In terms of academic, financial, and social risk indicators, **experts typically find that non-traditional students are more likely to be considered “at risk” and to drop out than traditional college students.**

**Figure 1.4: Percentage of Students Considered “At-Risk” Based on Enrollment Status**



Source: Barnes & Noble College<sup>13</sup>

The at-risk status of many of these non-traditional college students stems from the fact that most policy and pedagogy in higher education is designed from the perspective of first-time, full-time students, rather than adult learners and other non-traditional groups. The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) asserts that U.S. higher education is at “a pivotal time at which policy and practice must come to terms with the reality that most students attending institutions of higher education in the United States are not, in fact, 18-22 year olds fresh out of high school.”<sup>14</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Zimmer, C. “Achieving Success for Non-Traditional Students: Exploring the Changing Face of Today’s Student Population.” Barnes & Noble College, January 2017. p.2. <https://www.bnccollege.com/Achieving-Success-for-Non-Traditional-Students-01-11-17.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> Hibbel, A. and K. Haley. “Is the Adult Student the New ‘Traditional’ Student?” *Inside Ed Jobs*. <https://www.higheredjobs.com/HigherEdCareers/interviews.cfm?ID=266>

<sup>12</sup> Zimmer, Op. cit., p.7.

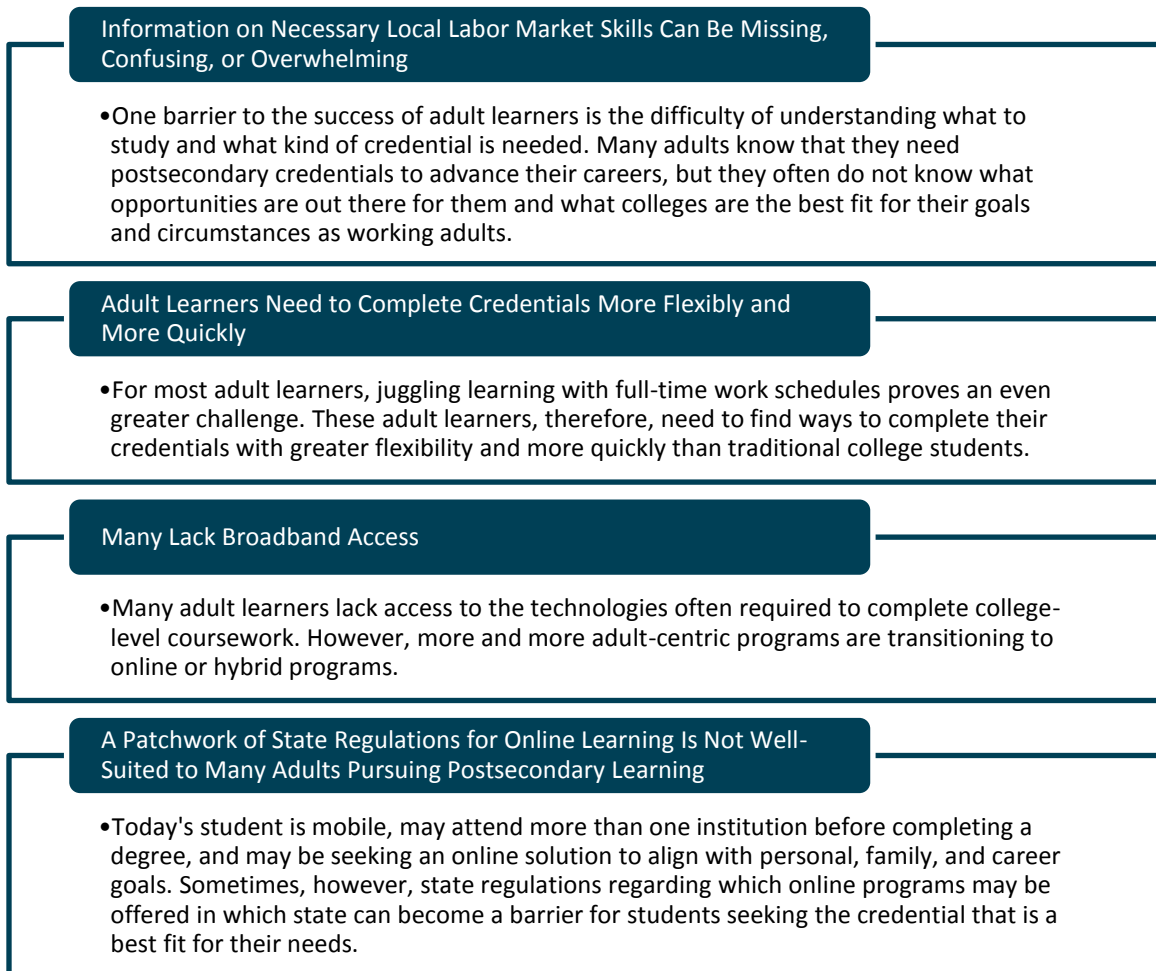
<sup>13</sup> Adapted from: Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> “Strengthening America’s Economy by Expanding Educational Opportunities for Working Adults.” Council for Adult and Experiential Learning, 2017. p.4. Accessed from CAEL.



CAEL identifies several notable challenges that may limit the success of non-traditional students in higher education in the coming years, as outlined in Figure 1.5. **Barriers that this population faces often relate to the gap between education and workforce opportunities, as well as limitations in time, access, or policy.**

**Figure 1.5: Important Barriers to the Success of Non-Traditional Students**



Source: Council for Adult and Experiential Learning<sup>15</sup>

## REASONS FOR LEAVING OR POSTPONING POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION

**The most common reason for leaving college (or otherwise failing to earn a degree as a “traditional” student) is financial, followed by academic problems.** In one study of over 45,000 non-traditional students, for example, researchers found that more than half of the respondents reported either finances or difficulties in managing multiple commitments as the primary reason for stopping out or dropping out of college.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, barriers to enrollment

<sup>15</sup> Adapted from: Ibid., p.5.

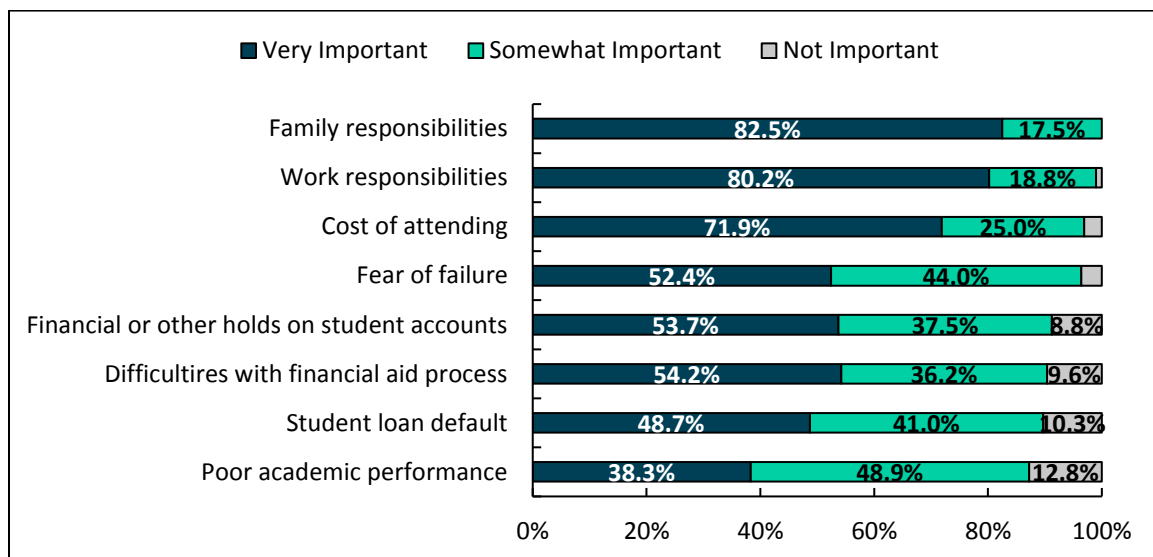
<sup>16</sup> Erisman, W. and P. Steele. “Adult College Completion in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: What We Know and What We Don’t.” Higher Ed Insight, June 2015. p.11.  
[https://higheredinsight.files.wordpress.com/2015/06/adult\\_college\\_completion\\_20151.pdf](https://higheredinsight.files.wordpress.com/2015/06/adult_college_completion_20151.pdf)

(here a proxy for dropping out or leaving) are often categorized across several groups that colleges and universities should consider (also see Figure 1.6):

- **Personal Barriers:** Adult students lead complicated lives, often including work and family responsibilities, and they view those priorities as the most important barriers for returning because they place significant limits on when and where adults are able to attend school.
- **Financial Barriers:** The cost of college is another challenge, with as much as 97 percent of adult students indicating that it is an important barrier for them. In addition to cost, financial barriers can include lack of eligibility for federal financial aid, difficulties completing financial aid applications, and previous student loan default.
- **Psychological Barriers:** More than half of respondents identify fear of failure as a very important barrier for adult students. Other psychological barriers include having to attend class with much younger students, learning to use computers and other forms of unfamiliar technology, re-learning the study skills needed to succeed in college, and simply figuring out the many bureaucratic complexities of the higher education system.
- **Academic Barriers:** Those who do identify academic barriers for returning adults often indicate that these barriers relate to difficulties in completing a particular required class, such as college-level math or English composition.<sup>17</sup>

Experts note that overcoming these barriers can be more difficult for adult students than for more traditional students, and the process may involve “counseling students on issues related to balancing school and other obligations, advising them on course selection or financial aid options, connecting them to academic or social services, directing them to the right office [...] and/or offering them a supportive ear as they work through their fears and concerns.”<sup>18</sup>

**Figure 1.6: Adult Students’ Perceptions of Barriers to Completing Credentials**



Source: Higher Ed Insight<sup>19</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Bullet points adapted from: “From Contact to Completion: Supporting Returning Adult Students in Obtaining a College Credential.” Higher Ed Insights and the Lumina Foundation. p.4.

<http://adultcollegecompletion.org/sites/files/documents/higherEdInsightBrief.pdf>

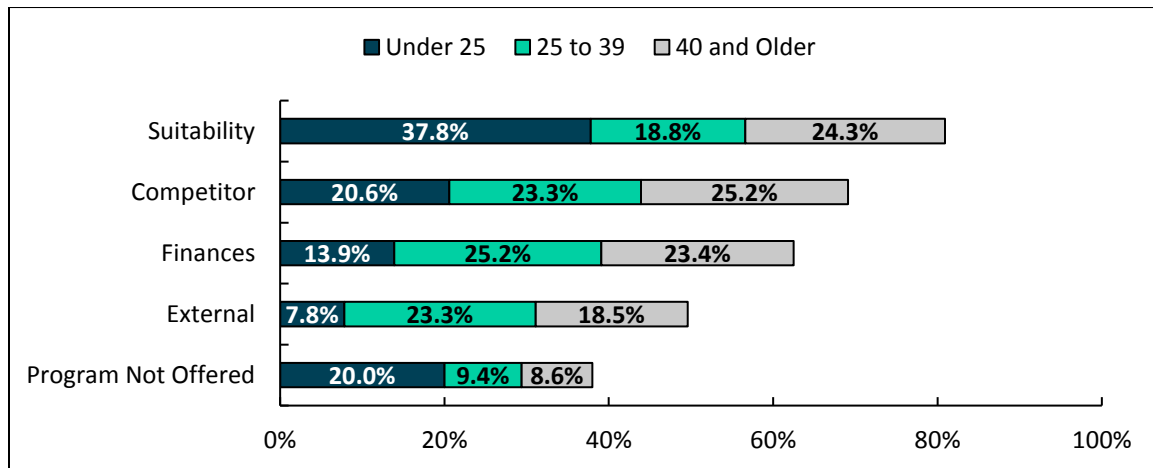
<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p.5.

<sup>19</sup> Adapted from: Ibid., p.4.

In another study, data similarly show the impact that financial and other external factors can have on non-traditional student enrollment relative to traditional students. Across all age groups, suitability is the most common reason for non-start, which includes “location, course schedule, and delivery format, but almost half of these students were not qualified for the program about which they inquired.”<sup>20</sup> However, these concerns were much more prominent among more traditional college-age students.

In contrast, external and financial factors are cited more often by students 25 years and older as compared to their younger peers. For example, 25.2 percent of adults aged 25 to 39 years indicated that financial concerns prohibited them from enrolling at the time of the survey compared to only 13.9 percent of students younger than 25 years (Figure 1.7). Managing commitments (29.7 percent) and finances (25.9 percent) were also cited as the most common reason for dropping out among the non-traditional student population.<sup>21</sup>

**Figure 1.7: Non-Start Reasons in Non-Traditional Student Populations, by Age Group**



Source: InsideTrack<sup>22</sup>

## MOTIVATIONS FOR RETURNING TO HIGHER EDUCATION

Roughly two-thirds of adults without a college degree who have completed some college-level education indicate a desire to return to complete their program. Most of these adults cite a bachelor's degree (31 percent) as their aspirational credential.<sup>23</sup> Across aspirations, however, two key motivators consistently emerge as the primary drivers for returning to higher education: **career advancement** and **personal satisfaction**. According to some experts, “career advancement is a particularly strong motivator for many adults with some college credit when contemplating completing a degree.”<sup>24</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Drekmeier, K. and C. Tilghman. “An Analysis of Inquiry, Nonstart, and Drop Reasons in Nontraditional University Student Populations.” InsideTrack, Spring 2010. p.4. [http://kycareercolleges.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/InsideTrack\\_Adult\\_Student\\_Research\\_Paper.pdf](http://kycareercolleges.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/InsideTrack_Adult_Student_Research_Paper.pdf)

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p.6.

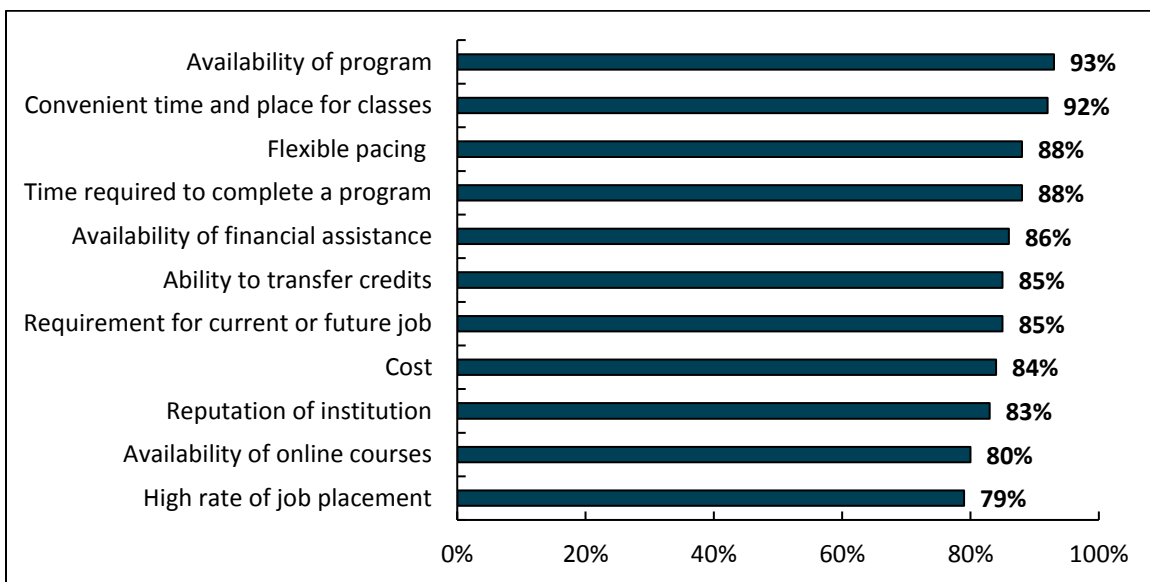
<sup>22</sup> Adapted from: Ibid., p.5.

<sup>23</sup> Erisman and Steele, Op. cit., p.11.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p.12.

These motivations are primarily centered around key life circumstances, such as employment, job security, family responsibilities, and perceptions of college degrees; however, cost and school-life balance continue to be significant barriers to reentry, even for the most driven prospective non-traditional students. Higher Ed Insight concludes that **these findings “demonstrate the importance of non-academic factors in supporting adults with some college credit as they return to college.”**<sup>25</sup> As shown in Figure 1.8, though, institutions of higher education can support non-traditional students’ motivation to return to school by offering a wide range of programs in convenient and flexible formats. These students are also interested in programs that offer financial assistance, allow transfer credits, and have high levels of job placement, all which work to alleviate some of their primary concerns.

**Figure 1.8: Top Enrollment Factors for Adult Learners at Four-Year Institutions**



Source: Ruffalo Noel Levitz<sup>26</sup>

## OUTREACH TO PROSPECTIVE NON-TRADITIONAL STUDENTS

Institutional recruiters can face several challenges when preparing to market to non-traditional student populations, who often look for and receive information differently than their traditional counterparts. Moreover, most programs designed for non-traditional students may leverage more flexible or distance learning formats, which further require specific outreach strategies compared to more traditional coursework. Indeed, “research suggests that traditional college recruitment strategies may not work well with prospective adult students [...]. Unlike traditional age students, who can more easily be reached through their high schools, [...] adults with some college but no degree are an elusive group.”<sup>27</sup>

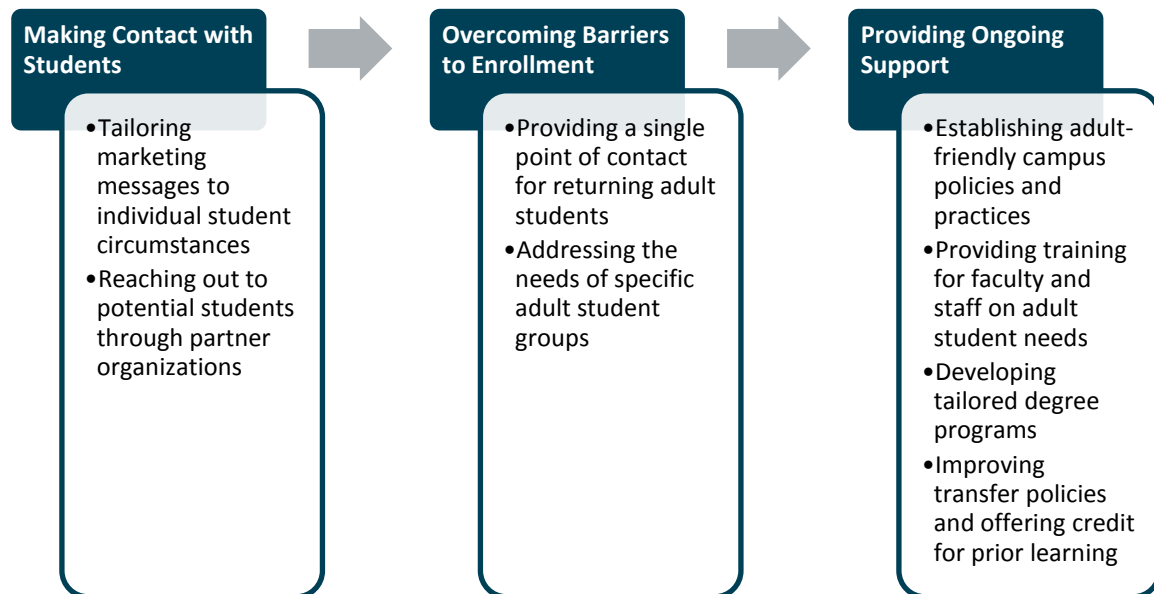
<sup>25</sup> Ibid., pp.13–14.

<sup>26</sup> Adapted from: “2015-16 National Adult Learners Satisfaction-Priorities Report.” Ruffalo Noel Levitz, 2016. p.3.  
[http://cdn2.hubspot.net/hubfs/617695/2015-16\\_RNL\\_AdultLearners\\_Report\\_Final.pdf?submissionGuid=4f688ed0-d5f6-42d5-845d-9d343aba27c4](http://cdn2.hubspot.net/hubfs/617695/2015-16_RNL_AdultLearners_Report_Final.pdf?submissionGuid=4f688ed0-d5f6-42d5-845d-9d343aba27c4)

<sup>27</sup> Erisman and Steele, Op. cit., p.16.

Reaching these students requires addressing the entire recruitment and completion pipeline to ensure that institutions are offering supports and services that effectively address adult students' needs. Higher Ed Insights emphasizes that "addressing the complex circumstances and barriers these students face requires attention to the entire pipeline from making contact with prospective students to overcoming barriers to re-enrollment and ultimately to supporting them in completing a college credential."<sup>28</sup> As shown in Figure 1.9, outreach efforts to non-traditional students should begin with tailored, specific marketing messages and extend to ongoing, institution-based supports and programs.

**Figure 1.9: Stages in Assisting Returning Adults with Completing a College Credential**



Source: Higher Ed Insights<sup>29</sup>

In general, most adult students place a high value on flexibility, and marketing efforts should highlight any flexible aspects of institutions' programs. These students want to see that prospective institutions offer courses that fit with their life and work schedules, yet survey data show that many institutions, particularly four-year universities, do not develop outreach strategies that capitalize on this need (Figure 1.10).<sup>30</sup> Ruffalo Noel Levitz's most recent adult learners survey finds a 29 percentage point gap in outreach satisfaction around the topic of flexibility.

However, colleges and universities are increasingly developing special recruitment plans for these students. For example, the Nevada System of Higher Education structured its dedicated adult learner outreach strategic plan around three key components: 1) specific academic programs, 2) receipt of credit for prior learning, and 3) flexibility in pursuing their academic

<sup>28</sup> "From Contact to Completion: Supporting Returning Adult Students in Obtaining a College Credential." Higher Ed Insights and the Lumina Foundation. p.1.

<http://adultcollegecompletion.org/sites/files/documents/higherEdInsightBrief.pdf>

<sup>29</sup> Adapted from: Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> "2015-16 National Adult Learners Satisfaction-Priorities Report," Op. cit., p.5.

program.<sup>31</sup> On the other end of the spectrum, though, “students gave positive ratings for the ability to obtain necessary information and convenient processes for enrollment.”<sup>32</sup>

**Figure 1.10: Adult Learners’ Perceptions and Satisfaction about Institutional Outreach at Four-Year Institutions**

ITEM	IMPORTANCE	SATISFACTION	GAP
My program allows me to pace my studies to fit my life and work schedules.	93%	64%	29%
I am able to choose course delivery that fits my life circumstances.	90%	61%	29%
I am able to obtain information I need by phone, fax, email, or online.	90%	79%	11%
I receive the help I need to stay on track with my program of study.	89%	65%	24%
Processes and procedures for enrolling here are convenient.	88%	75%	13%
I receive the help I need to make decisions about courses and programs that interest me.	88%	65%	23%
Staff are available to help me solve unique problems I encounter.	85%	66%	19%

Source: Ruffalo Noel Levitz<sup>33</sup>

As highlighted by the Nevada System of Higher Education’s plan, **four-year institutions can be especially successful by targeting adult students who already have some college credit.** In one survey, 83 percent of responding institutional staff identified “outreach to potential adult students as a very important strategy [...] as part of a larger effort to raise public awareness about the value of returning to college.”<sup>34</sup> However, even this subgroup of non-traditional students is greatly varied, and experts note that institutions should be aware of the different needs of different adult students. This group pursues and pays for education differently than traditional students (who are often dependents), and therefore more specifically tailored marketing messaging may be beneficial. One study notes:

One of the biggest challenges to any outreach effort focused on returning adult students is the fact that these students are not a unified group. They come from widely varied life circumstances and face a range of barriers in trying to complete college credentials. For example, adults who are unemployed and wish to return to college to train for a new career experience different challenges than those who are currently employed and are seeking a postsecondary credential in order to be promoted at work [...] **This variety in background and circumstances suggests a need for outreach strategies that can be adapted to appeal to prospective students whose motivations for returning to college are not uniform.**<sup>35</sup>

<sup>31</sup> “Strategies for Recruiting and Graduating Adult Learners.” Nevada System of Higher Education, December 2013. p.7. <http://system.nevada.edu/tasks/sites/Nshe/assets/File/BoardOfRegents/Agendas/2013/dec-mtgs/asa/ASA-8.pdf>

<sup>32</sup> “2015-16 National Adult Learners Satisfaction-Priorities Report,” Op. cit., p.5.

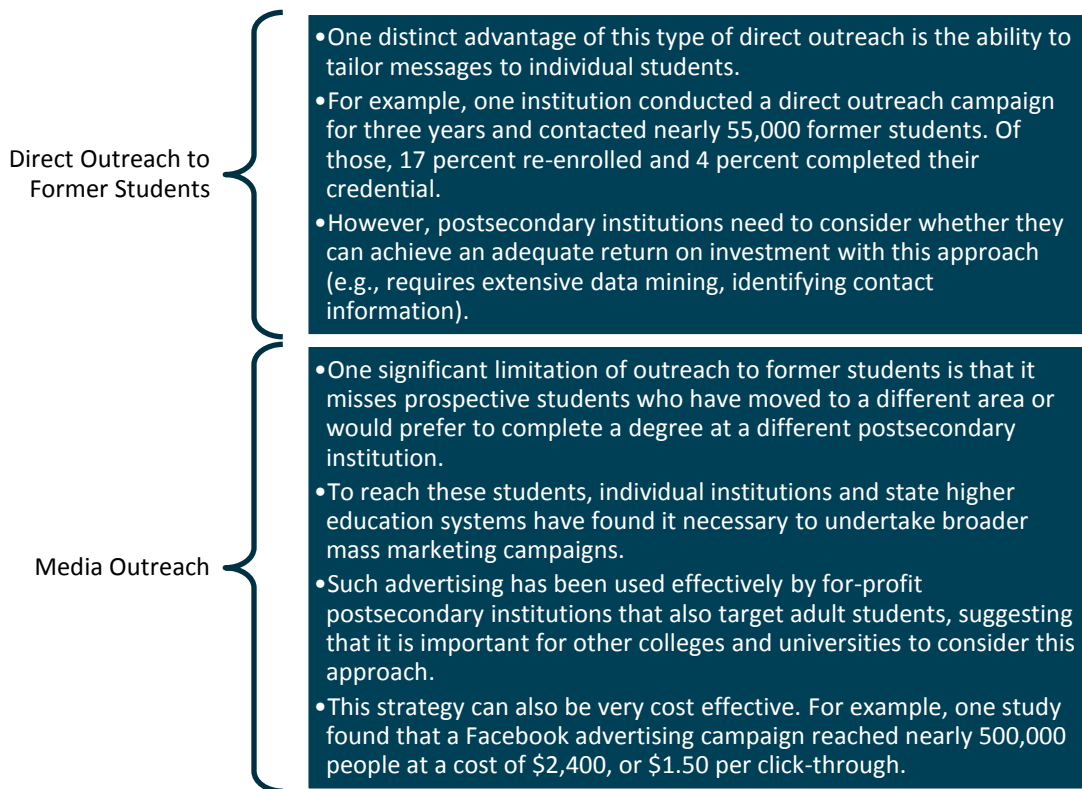
<sup>33</sup> Adapted from: Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> “From Contact to Completion: Supporting Returning Adult Students in Obtaining a College Credential,” Op. cit., p.2.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid. Emphasis added.

For example, outreach campaigns to former students who did not complete their degree can be personalized to the individual student. For example, universities can include the number of credits still needed to graduate to provide a tangible benchmark. Although this strategy may require additional resources, institutions that have targeted students with previous credits have found positive responses (response rate of between 9 and 17 percent).<sup>36</sup> In fact, Higher Ed Insights generally categorizes outreach efforts to non-traditional students in two buckets: 1) direct outreach to former students, and 2) media outreach (Figure 1.11).

**Figure 1.11: Common Outreach Strategies Targeting Non-Traditional Students**



Source: Higher Ed Insights<sup>37</sup>

The Association of American Colleges and Universities (AACU) similarly identifies specialized marketing materials and large-scale advertising campaigns as important strategies to reach this population of students. According to the organization, “adult learners are not just interested in personal enrichment but also in retraining, refreshing workplace skills, and preparing for new careers. **The outreach strategies need to acknowledge those very real goals and show how the institution is prepared to help the adult learner reach them.**”<sup>38</sup> Tailoring messaging in this way can help many non-traditional students overcome key barriers to re-enrollment and imagine themselves returning to higher education.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Adapted from: Erisman and Steele, Op. cit., pp.16–19.

<sup>38</sup> Klein-Collins, R. “Strategies for Becoming Adult-Learning-Focused Institutions.” *Peer Review*, 13:1, Winter 2011. Emphasis added. <https://www.aacu.org/peerreview/2011/winter/KleinCollins>



## COMMUNITY COLLEGE PARTNERSHIPS AND PIPELINES

Strategic partnerships can help institutions interested in serving non-traditional students ensure that programs are aligned with key area workforce needs and students' academic histories. Four-year universities can leverage these partnerships—with community colleges, employers, and other local organizations—to “ensure that their curricula and practices remain relevant and current.”<sup>39</sup> These partnerships allow institutions of higher education to enhance virtually all aspects of their adult student strategy, from outreach to academic and other support services. Higher Ed Insights asserts that, in recent years, there have been “considerable increases in partnerships among postsecondary institutions at the state level as well as a broader community partnerships intended to promote increases in postsecondary attainment for a metro region.”<sup>40</sup>

**Partnerships with community colleges are particularly beneficial and can help adult students transfer more seamlessly into a four-year environment.** Data suggest that as much as 80 percent of community college students begin with the goal of completing their bachelor's degree; however, only about 14 percent do so within six years of enrolling.<sup>41</sup> To better serve these students, particularly non-traditional students who may need associate degree-level coursework before starting at a four-year institution, experts are increasingly highlighting 2+2 programs. These programs allow students to take courses at a community college and earn an associate degree before transferring to a partner four-year university and completing a bachelor's degree program. In this system, “the community college and four-year school work together to ensure all of the courses they offer complement each other for an overall, comprehensive degree program.”<sup>42</sup> Advertised advantages of 2+2 partnerships include:

- Financial savings because tuition at community colleges is traditionally much less than tuition at four-year institutions;
- Additional academic assistance for students who need remedial help to succeed in school; this sort of assistance is usually more plentiful at community colleges;
- Community college may be easier to access;
- Better college access for first-generation college students, immigrants, and others who might not be eligible for immediate entrance to a four-year institution; and
- **A better fit for mature students who typically enter community college after a number of years in the workforce.**<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Erisman and Steele, Op. cit., p. 40.

<sup>41</sup> Fain, P. “Demanding Results on Transfer.” *Inside Higher Ed*, May 2017.

<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2017/05/09/foundation-fund-college-partnerships-community-college-transfer>

<sup>42</sup> Chen, G. “2+2 Programs Going Strong at Community Colleges Nationwide.” *Community College Review*, May 2017.

<https://www.communitycollegereview.com/blog/2-2-programs-going-strong-at-community-colleges-nationwide>

<sup>43</sup> Bullet points adapted from: Ibid.

These types of partnerships also allow four-year institutions to expand their reach in areas where they do not operate a campus. For example, Drexel University partnered with Burlington County College (now Rowan College at Burlington County (RCBC)) in New Jersey, and Drexel faculty taught courses in Burlington. This arrangement was established because “there are no other colleges in Burlington County. And it is [not] easy for most Burlington students who want to pursue a four-year degree to leave home to enroll elsewhere.”<sup>44</sup> Burlington’s President explained that “the draw is [not] just convenience [...] the jump to a university looks less intimidating when students can continue on at a campus where they [have] already succeeded once.”<sup>45</sup> Although Drexel no longer offers this arrangement, it still maintains ties with community colleges to allow these students to earn a four-year degree from Drexel.<sup>46</sup> RCBC now has a partnership with Rowan University for students interested in earning a bachelor’s degree from Rowan University.<sup>47</sup>

Lesley University, in Massachusetts, is pursuing a similar partnership with nearby Bunker Hill Community College that provides “its associate’s-degree holders with an affordable, flexible, and convenient pathway to earning a Lesley University bachelor’s degree.”<sup>48</sup> The University accepts full transfer of BHCC credits, and after “personalized advising, students enroll in one of three Lesley programs (Early Childhood Studies, Psychology, or Business Management) all conveniently offered Friday evenings and Saturday mornings on the Bunker Hill campus.”<sup>49</sup> Not only does this arrangement offer a targeted outreach list, but the pipeline provides the convenience and flexibility that many non-traditional students desire.

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<sup>44</sup> Fain, P. “No Transfer Needed.” *Inside Higher Ed*, February 2014.

<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2014/02/04/drexels-community-college-partnerships-win-fans>

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> [1] Fain, P. “Short-Lived Transfer Degrees.” *Inside Higher Ed*, January 6, 2015.

<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2015/01/06/promising-partnership-between-drexel-university-and-three-community-colleges-ends>

[2] McCrystal, L., S. Snyder, and J. Lai. “Drexel to End Degree Programs with Community Colleges.” *The Inquirer*, December 27, 2014.

[http://www.philly.com/philly/education/20141227\\_Drexel\\_to\\_end\\_degree\\_programs\\_with\\_community\\_colleges.html](http://www.philly.com/philly/education/20141227_Drexel_to_end_degree_programs_with_community_colleges.html)

<sup>47</sup> “The Rowan Connection, Student Pathways.” Rowan College at Burlington County. <http://www.rcbc.edu/rowan>

<sup>48</sup> “First Students From Innovative Community College Partnership Earn Their Bachelor’s Degrees.” Lesley University, November 2016. <https://www.lesley.edu/news/first-students-from-innovative-community-college-partnership-earn-their-bachelors-degrees>

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

## SECTION II: RETAINING AND SUPPORTING

In this section, Hanover explores retention and support considerations for non-traditional students in higher education. This section reviews key aspects of engaging and retaining these student populations and outlines support structures from several important points of view including academic, financial, and social.

### ENGAGING NON-TRADITIONAL STUDENTS

Given the increasing prominence of online learning, and the draw of this flexible delivery format for adult students, colleges and universities are finding it increasingly important to actively engage these populations. Indeed, according to experts in the field, “engaging the online student, the types of activities professors utilize, assignment follow up, feedback, and interventions all impact the non-traditional student’s retention.”<sup>50</sup>

A recent survey of non-traditional students at four-year institutions found that **adult learners place a high priority on receiving timely feedback** (Figure 2.1). However, despite being highly important for this population, respondents only report a 62 percent satisfaction rate with the feedback they receive. On the other hand, “students feel positive about what they are expected to learn, are challenged, and have the appropriate frequency of interactions.”<sup>51</sup> This highlights a key engagement area that institutions should promote for these students.

**Figure 2.1: Adult Learners’ Perceptions and Satisfaction about Teaching-Learning Process at Four-Year Institutions**

ITEM	IMPORTANCE	SATISFACTION	GAP
I have a clear understanding of what I am expected to learn in my classes.	93%	73%	20%
My instructors provide timely feedback about my academic progress.	92%	62%	30%
The learning experiences within my program of study challenge me to reach beyond what I know already.	90%	77%	13%
My instructors respect student opinions and ideas that differ from their own.	87%	72%	15%
The frequency of interactions with my instructors is satisfactory.	86%	72%	14%
Most instructors use a variety of teaching methods.	79%	62%	17%
Instructors incorporate my life and work experiences in class activities and assignments.	74%	58%	16%
My instructors encourage student-to-student interactions through a variety of techniques.	66%	65%	1%

Source: Ruffalo Noel Levitz<sup>52</sup>

<sup>50</sup> Arbelo-Marrero, F. “Staying the Course: Engaging and Retaining Non-Traditional Students in Online Education.” *The EvoLLLution*, March 2015. <https://evollution.com/opinions/staying-course-engaging-retaining-non-traditional-students-online-education/>

<sup>51</sup> 2015-16 National Adult Learners Satisfaction-Priorities Report,” Op. cit., p.8.

<sup>52</sup> Adapted from: Ibid.

Feedback can help these students stay organized and progress from one course to the next, which is particularly important as they try and balance other responsibilities. Faculty, for example, are encouraged to provide quick responses to non-traditional students and should dedicate time each day to responding to emails and reviewing submitted work.<sup>53</sup> In this example, the faculty's rapid and engaged response not only promotes students' academic success but may "help to reduce feelings of isolation, confusion, and address questions that students may have. In an online environment [in particular] it is important that faculty anticipate questions in order to remain a step ahead of the needs of their students."<sup>54</sup>

Experts in adult higher education posit that colleges and universities also need to address the root causes that lead non-traditional students to become disengaged from the institution or program. Because this disengagement can lead to dropping out or delayed progress toward graduation, it is important for institutions to keep non-traditional students actively involved in their programs.<sup>55</sup> **Four-year institutions are encouraged to leverage their data collection efforts to analyze their non-traditional student populations and make programs and other services available and accessible based on these analyses.** In this way, colleges and universities can make sure that non-traditional students' needs are reflected through their offerings, thus helping to keep these students engaged.<sup>56</sup>

## SUPPORT STRUCTURES AND SERVICES

Experts agree that non-traditional students require a different set of support structures than their more traditional peers, which will require institutions to reimagine what services are offered and how they are implemented.<sup>57</sup> However, "some observers of academe believe that higher education does [not] go far enough in supporting adult students."<sup>58</sup> Leaders in higher education and other support sectors note that while many institutions are disbanding their dedicated adult services offices, there are examples of departments that serve these students well and provide comprehensive supports for non-traditional students. In the exemplar colleges and universities, these units "understand how this cohort differs from their younger classroom colleagues. **Adult students need a lot of information [...] They are worried about failure, cost, and about whether they can balance the other activities in their lives.**"<sup>59</sup>

However, the majority of colleges and universities today are not equipped to support these students adequately in the same way that supports are established to serve traditional students. Indeed, "a major challenge [...] both within and outside of higher education is the extent to which colleges and universities are not currently oriented toward meeting the needs

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<sup>53</sup> Arbelo-Marrero, Op. cit.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> McCullough, T. "The Five A's of Engaging Non-Traditional Students." *The EvoLLution*, September 2015.  
[https://evollution.com/attracting-students/todays\\_learner/the-five-as-of-engaging-non-traditional-students/](https://evollution.com/attracting-students/todays_learner/the-five-as-of-engaging-non-traditional-students/)

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Erisman and Steele, Op. cit., p.22.

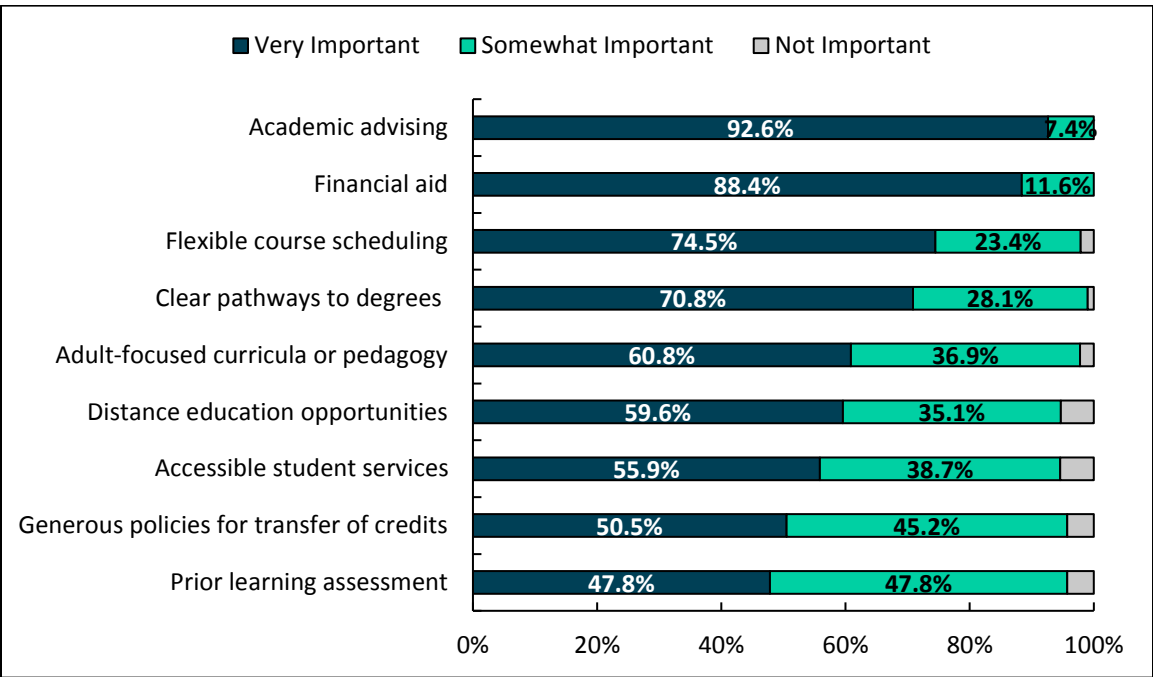
<sup>58</sup> Pelletier, S.G. "Success for Adult Students." *Public Purpose*, Fall 2010. p.6.  
[http://www.aascu.org/uploadedFiles/AASCU/Content/Root/MediaAndPublications/PublicPurposeMagazines/Issue/10fall\\_adultstudents.pdf](http://www.aascu.org/uploadedFiles/AASCU/Content/Root/MediaAndPublications/PublicPurposeMagazines/Issue/10fall_adultstudents.pdf)

<sup>59</sup> Ibid. Emphasis added.

of returning adult students.”<sup>60</sup> The challenges are similar among adult students who are enrolling for the first time and those that are returning to complete a credential. **An important step for institutions interested in appealing to adult students is to complete a policy audit to assess the impact of campus policies on non-traditional populations.**<sup>61</sup>

Despite the gap in services provided to many non-traditional students, most institutions acknowledge and value the importance of creating an academic environment that supports the needs of non-traditional students. For example, nearly all institutions responding to one survey recognize the high value of providing dedicated academic advising (92.6 percent responding “very important”) to these students. Other key areas of support include creating clear pathways to degree completion and developing an adult-focused curriculum (Figure 2.2).<sup>62</sup>

**Figure 2.2: Institutions’ Perceptions of Supports that Help Adult Students**



Source: Higher Ed Insights<sup>63</sup>

As stated by Higher Ed Insights, “creating awareness among institutional leaders about the needs of adult students, particularly those who have already earned some college credit, is a crucial first step in changing institutional culture and practice around this student population.”<sup>64</sup> This awareness must permeate all aspects of institutional governance to be the most effective; this includes training campus staff, clarifying transfer credit policies, amending admissions procedures, developing support office hours during non-working hours,

<sup>60</sup> “From Contact to Completion: Supporting Returning Adult Students in Obtaining a College Credential,” Op. cit., p.6.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Adapted from: Ibid., p.7.

<sup>64</sup> Erisman and Steele, Op. cit., p.22.

and providing dedicated academic advising. Appendix A provides the 10 principles for effectively supporting adult students, developed by CAEL, which provide an overview of the types of considerations that institutions should keep in mind. The remainder of this section discusses specific support structures according to three key areas: academic, financial, and social.

## ACADEMIC SUPPORTS

Non-traditional students perform differently than their younger peers in academic settings, and institutions that understand and support these differences can better help these students achieve positive academic outcomes. For example, adult students tend to prefer self-directed and active learning strategies.<sup>65</sup> **One of the biggest concerns among this student group, however, is that institutions are not offering enough courses in their programs of study.** Students at four-year institutions are regularly dissatisfied with the number of courses offered in their fields (Figure 2.3), and an important step that institutions can take is understanding the types of offerings that non-traditional students seek. Further, “satisfaction scores are notably low for these items” compared to other indicators of satisfaction, suggesting that this is an area where institutions can be particularly proactive in developing support systems.<sup>66</sup>

**Figure 2.3: Adult Learners’ Perceptions and Satisfaction about Life and Career Planning at Four-Year Institutions**

ITEM	IMPORTANCE	SATISFACTION	GAP
Advisors are knowledgeable about requirements for courses and programs of interest to me.	91%	69%	22%
Sufficient course offerings within my program are available each term.	90%	55%	35%
This institution provides students with the help they need to develop an education plan.	87%	66%	21%
I can receive credit for learning derived from my previous life and work experience.	83%	51%	32%
Mentors are available to guide my career and life goals.	75%	51%	24%

Source: Ruffalo Noel Levitz<sup>67</sup>

Selecting an appropriate degree program, beyond any limitations in course selection, also requires specific supports as many non-traditional students may need guidance with determining the best degree completion pathway. Experts encourage higher education institutions to specifically develop supports for adults with some previous college credit because these students may wish to either continue in the same type of degree program or begin a new one. Coupled with outside obligations that limit the types of programs in which they can enroll, “college completion project coordinators said that **degree programs tailored**

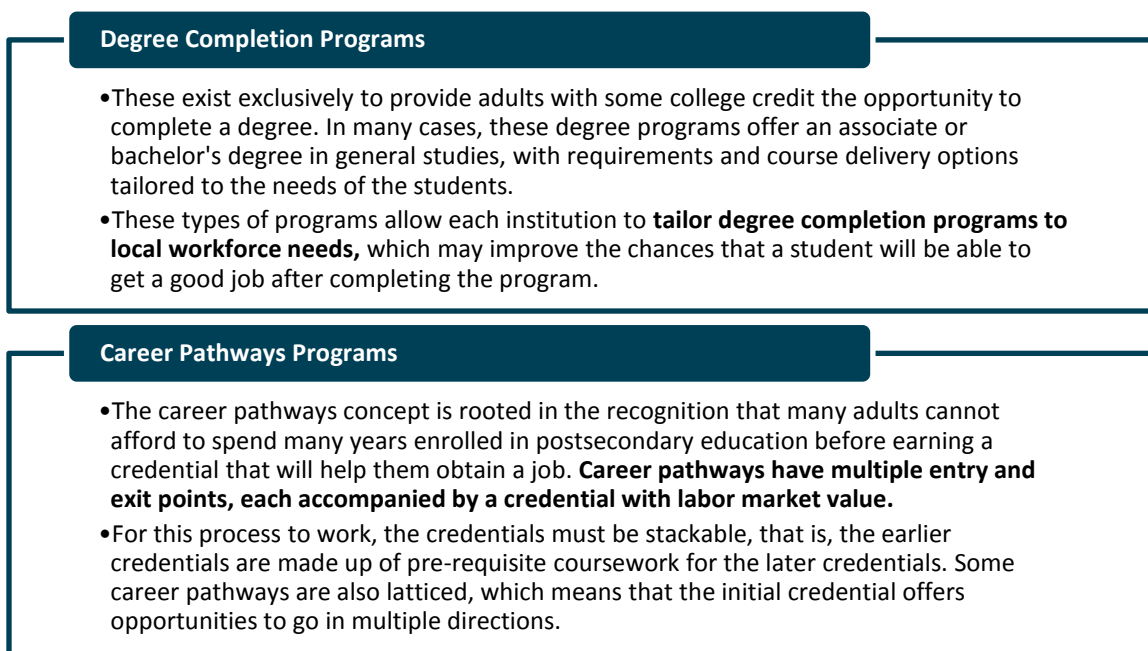
<sup>65</sup> Ibid., p.30.

<sup>66</sup> “2015-16 National Adult Learners Satisfaction-Priorities Report,” Op. cit., p.6.

<sup>67</sup> Adapted from: Ibid.

to adults with some college credit are a very important service for adult students.”<sup>68</sup> Higher Ed Insights identifies two key types of degree programs that colleges and universities may consider that specifically support non-traditional students (Figure 2.4).

**Figure 2.4: Degree Options that Support the Needs of Non-Traditional Students**



Source: Higher Ed Insights<sup>69</sup>

Most non-traditional students enroll or re-enroll in higher education to pursue career-related outcomes. Therefore, **career preparation supports are critical for this population**. These students report wanting career preparation opportunities and services both within and outside of the classroom. Specifically, according to a national survey of these students, they are interested in “getting help with developing skills to get hired, finding and applying for jobs, understanding the job market, and networking.”<sup>70</sup>

### *CREDIT FOR PRIOR LEARNING*

Institutions that have developed strong non-traditional student support systems note that colleges and universities that enroll these students need to reexamine the way that they handle **transfer credit** and **credit for prior learning**. These areas are “of particular importance to adult students because many of them have credits from multiple colleges or universities as well as training and/or work experience that has provided them with college-level learning in a particular field.”<sup>71</sup> However, these prior credits or experiences can often hinder enrollment. For example, many students cannot get an assessment of how their previous

<sup>68</sup> Erisman and Steele, Op. cit., p.31. Emphasis added.

<sup>69</sup> Adapted from: Ibid., pp.31–33.

<sup>70</sup> Zimmer, Op. cit., p.5.

<sup>71</sup> “From Contact to Completion: Supporting Returning Adult Students in Obtaining a College Credential,” Op. cit., p.8.



learning will transfer until after they have enrolled, which impedes matriculation due to uncertain and/or unclear transfer policies.<sup>72</sup> Thus, “to avoid requiring these students to take courses on subject they already know, adult-friendly colleges are offering or seeking to offer ways for students to earn college credit by demonstrating learning or competencies in specific subject areas.”<sup>73</sup>

Two types of alternative crediting system that some institutions are developing are Prior Learning Assessments (PLA) and Competency-Based Education (CBE). CAEL identifies both strategies as building blocks that can help colleges and universities overcome some of their key challenges pertaining to this student demographic (Figure 2.5). In particular, CAEL finds that adult students who are awarded PLA credits are two-and-a-half times more likely to complete their degree, as students who receive these credits can save both time and money by reducing the number of credits they must fulfill.<sup>74</sup>

**Figure 2.5: Overview of PLA and CBE**

PRIOR LEARNING ASSESSMENT	COMPETENCY-BASED EDUCATION
<p>Many adults have done significant learning outside the college classroom. That learning may have been acquired through military service, work in industry, or other activities like volunteer work or self-study. Some colleges offer what is called Prior Learning Assessment, or PLA, which is a service that evaluates a student’s learning for the purpose of awarding college credit when appropriate. The methods for assessing this learning include standardized exams (like CLEP tests), individual portfolio assessment, faculty-designed exams, and formal review of non-college training.</p>	<p>Competency-based education, or CBE, is an approach to postsecondary education that focuses on what students know and can do, rather than on how much time it takes to learn or how it was learned. CBE provides an intentional and transparent approach to curricular design, and learners only earn credentials when they can demonstrate mastery through multiple forms of assessment. CBE has started to gain momentum across postsecondary institutions as a method of educating students, and most specifically adult students, in part because these programs directly address the employer complaint that today’s graduates are not ready for the workplace.</p>

Source: Council for Adult and Experiential Learning <sup>75</sup>

## FACULTY ROLE

Non-traditional students also typically highly value their relationships with professors and advisors, and these relationships serve as an important support system for many adult learners. In fact, **88 percent of non-traditional students cite accessibility and personalized help as a very important aspect of support services.** This suggests that the “more that schools can do to [...] keep professors, advisors, and students connected, the better equipped students will be for success.”<sup>76</sup> The AACU finds that “adult learners may also need the human connection outside the classroom to help them feel that they belong at the institution and

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Erisman and Steele, Op. cit., p.35.

<sup>74</sup> “Strengthening America’s Economy by Expanding Educational Opportunities for Working Adults,” Op. cit., p.7.

<sup>75</sup> Adapted from: Ibid., pp.6–7.

<sup>76</sup> Zimmer, Op. cit., p.5.

that they have people to whom they can turn for help and guidance.”<sup>77</sup> As seen in Figure 2.6, most non-traditional students feel that they have good relationships with faculty, and institutions should work to ensure that they have supports in place to facilitate positive and consistent interactions.

**Figure 2.6: Non-Traditional Students’ Views of the Relationships with Faculty**



Source: Barnes & Noble College<sup>78</sup>

**To this end, advising is an essential support service required by many of these non-traditional students.** Because these students value their relationships with faculty and because many are unfamiliar with effective degree planning, institutions are encouraged to provide guidance both before and after enrollment. This includes “easily accessible and clear guidance about course selection, how they are progressing academically, and where to go for help if they need tutoring or other academic assistance.”<sup>79</sup> Institutions with non-traditional student populations are increasingly recognizing the need for dedicated advising services; for example, 93 percent report offering specialized advising for these students and 67 percent increased the number of advisors available between 2012 and 2013.<sup>80</sup>

This also means that colleges and universities will need to dedicate resources to better training faculty and staff to understand the needs of non-traditional students. Indeed, more than half of the staff members at institutions with high non-traditional student populations agree that this kind of dedicated training is very important.<sup>81</sup>

### FINANCIAL CONSIDERATIONS

Non-traditional students must consider a wide range of financial requirements that can add complexity to the enrollment process. Institutions, in turn, are encouraged to provide dedicated financial aid and financial planning resources that consider the unique financial

<sup>77</sup> Klein-Collins, Op. cit.

<sup>78</sup> Adapted from: Zimmer, Op. cit., p.5.

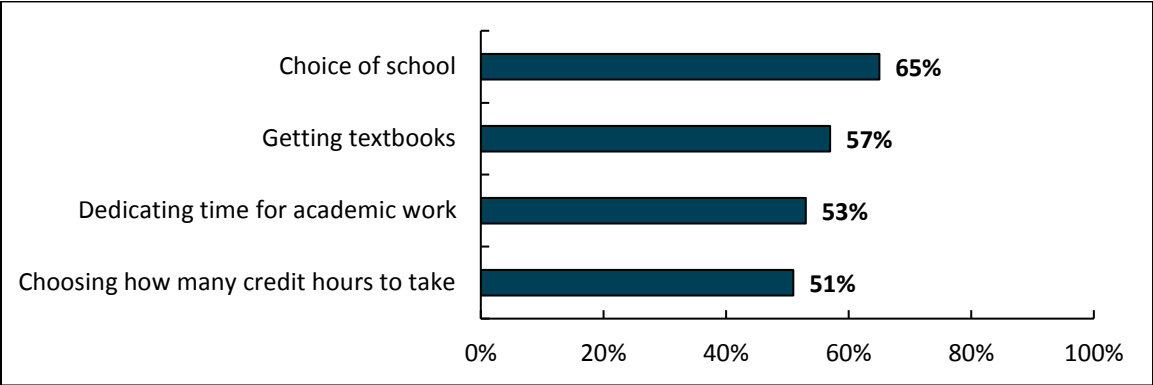
<sup>79</sup> Erisman and Steele, Op. cit., p.26.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> “From Contact to Completion: Supporting Returning Adult Students in Obtaining a College Credential,” Op. cit., p.7.

needs and obligations of non-traditional students. **These students consistently rank finances as their top challenge, meaning that colleges and universities need to provide supports to alleviate some of these students’ concerns.**<sup>82</sup> To this end, “financial considerations are far more likely to make a lasting impact on a non-traditional student experience than that of a traditional student—only 15 percent of non-traditional students say they feel financially secure.”<sup>83</sup> This preoccupation with finances, much more apparent in adult students, can in turn affect a wide range of topics related to enrollment in a four-year institution (Figure 2.7).

**Figure 2.7: Areas Impacted by Finances for Non-Traditional Students**



Source: Barnes & Noble College<sup>84</sup>

Despite the importance of financial support and planning services for these students, the most recent national survey of adult students conducted by Ruffalo Noel Levitz found that most indicators in the category consistently present challenges for institutions (Figure 2.8). At four-year institutions, “adult learners prioritize tuition billing that is tailored to their needs. Addressing financial issues, including options for financial assistance and flexible billing, are key ways that institutions serving adult learners can help students to overcome barriers.”<sup>85</sup>

**Figure 2.8: Adult Learners’ Perceptions and Satisfaction about Financing at Four-Year Institutions**

ITEM	IMPORTANCE	SATISFACTION	GAP
This institution assists students who need help with the financial aid process.	84%	65%	19%
Billing for tuition and fees is tailored to meet my specific needs.	84%	57%	27%
I can make payments or inquiries about tuition at times that are convenient for me.	84%	67%	17%
I receive adequate information about sources of financial assistance available to me.	83%	53%	30%

Source: Ruffalo Noel Levitz<sup>86</sup>

<sup>82</sup> Zimmer, Op. cit., p.3.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> Adapted from: Ibid.

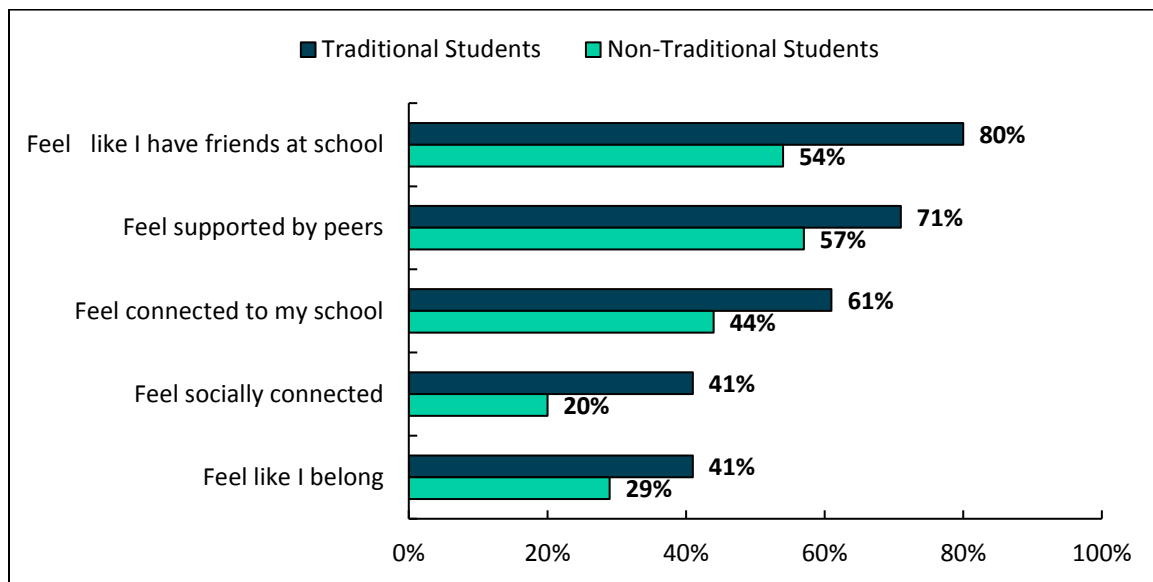
<sup>85</sup> “2015-16 National Adult Learners Satisfaction-Priorities Report,” Op. cit., p.7. Emphasis added.

<sup>86</sup> Adapted from: Ibid.

## SOCIAL NEEDS

One of the main challenges that adult students face is a feeling of social isolation from their institutions. Indeed, “with a number of responsibilities pulling them away from campus, it [is] not surprising that non-traditional students also feel less connected to their school and their peers compared to traditional students” (Figure 2.9).<sup>87</sup> These feelings of isolation can lead to lower retention and program completion rates; therefore, institutions need to consider non-traditional students’ social needs when developing support structures.

**Figure 2.9: Students’ Feelings of Connectedness**



Source: Barnes & Noble College<sup>88</sup>

To foster more social cohesion among non-traditional student cohorts, particularly if these students take most classes online or off-campus, institutions are encouraged to develop activities that promote group work and lively discussion. For example, “collaborating with peers, reading and reflecting upon posted assignments, sharing from personal experiences, moving beyond the learning management system to chat boards or web meetings [...] and other faculty- and peer-related exchanges promotes and supports the social experience while learning.”<sup>89</sup> Some experts conclude that **“having a campus that allows non-traditional students the opportunity to make a connection between their families and their education can make a significant impact.”**<sup>90</sup> Events such as appreciation nights or social gatherings can serve as a good way for these students to incorporate their families while meeting other similar students.

<sup>87</sup> Zimmer, Op. cit., p.6.

<sup>88</sup> Adapted from: Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Arbelo-Marrero, op. cit.

<sup>90</sup> McCullough, T. “Five Essential Mechanisms for Supporting Non-Traditional Student Success.” *The EvoLLution*, April 2013. Emphasis added. <https://evollution.com/opinions/essential-mechanisms-supporting-non-traditional-student-success/>

## SECTION III: MODELS AT SELECTED INSTITUTIONS

In this section, Hanover provides a high-level overview of three public institutions that provide services specifically for non-traditional students. This section outlines program models, support offerings, and other key characteristics of these institutions' non-traditional student apparatus.

### EMPORIA STATE UNIVERSITY

INSTITUTION	EMPORIA STATE UNIVERSITY	
Location	Emporia, Kansas; regional campuses in Kansas City and El Dorado	
Undergraduate Enrollment	5,900	
Non-Traditional Student Office	Center for Student Involvement	
Definition	"In the past, most students entered college right out of high school, worked very little (if at all) while pursuing their degrees, and had no spouses or dependents. Today, more and more students coming to college do not fit that traditional profile."	
Key Dedicated Services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ New Student Orientation</li> <li>■ Involvement Consultants</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Graduate Student Mentor</li> </ul>

Emporia State University (ESU) operates the Center for Student Involvement, which serves as the institution's main support center for all students. According to ESU, "We believe the center, and all of the learning experiences provided through it, gives students the opportunity to learn about themselves, develop their identity, discover and cultivate their talents, and practice the skills necessary to be positive, productive, and contributing members."<sup>91</sup> The Center for Student Involvement oversees several dedicated offices, including departments for diversity and equity and fraternity and sorority life, for example.

In particular, the TradPlus and Veteran Student Services office provides dedicated support for ESU's non-traditional student population. ESU refers to its non-traditional students as "TradPlus" because, according to ESU, the University "view[s] this diversity as a plus—a positive! As a TradPlus student, you bring a wealth of life experience and knowledge to the university community."<sup>92</sup> Specifically, ESU defines non-traditional students along the following metrics:<sup>93</sup>

- Over the age of 24 as an entering student;
- Married;
- Parent;
- Have been out of school for one or more years; and/or
- In the military or a veteran of the armed services.

<sup>91</sup> "About the Center for Student Involvement." Emporia State University. <https://www.emporia.edu/getinvolved/about/>

<sup>92</sup> "TradPlus & Veteran Student Services." Emporia State University. <https://www.emporia.edu/getinvolved/nontrad/>

<sup>93</sup> Bullet points taken verbatim from: Ibid.

**One of the Center’s key initiatives is the TradPlus and Veteran Graduate Student.** This individual is paired with non-traditional students to be a “resource, guide, and mentor for [them] as they pursue [their] studies at Emporia State University.”<sup>94</sup> This program helps non-traditional students to connect to and engage with the campus community, helping to overcome some of the key challenges that this population face such as isolation from campus or an unfamiliarity with academic policies or requisites. ESU also offers a separate new student orientation program for TradPlus and Veteran students.

## MISSOURI STATE UNIVERSITY

INSTITUTION	MISSOURI STATE UNIVERSITY	
Location	Springfield, Missouri; regional campuses in West Plains, Mountain Grove, and Dalian, China	
Total Enrollment	26,216	
Non-Traditional Student Office	Adult Student Services	
Definition	“Assisting new or returning students 22+ years old who juggle school, work, and family obligations!”	
Key Dedicated Services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Advisement</li> <li>▪ Student Services</li> <li>▪ Admissions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Cost and Scholarships</li> <li>▪ Courses and Programs</li> </ul>

Missouri State University (MSU) has a robust catalog of student support services, including an Academic Advising Center, a Counseling Center, and a Multicultural Services office. Notably, MSU also operates dedicated support offices for several student sub-groups, including inter-collegiate athletes, citizenship and service learning, disability resource center, English language institute, and adult student services.<sup>95</sup> The Adult Student Services office is a standalone entity and offers services across five key areas: 1) advisement, 2) cost and scholarships, 3) student services, 4) courses and programs, and 5) getting admitted.<sup>96</sup>

Adult Student Services offers advisement to all adult and evening students, both enrolled and prospective. The office advertises that “adult and evening students can take advantage of advising services with or without admission to the University. Our staff will be happy to sit down and discuss your questions on how to add college classes to an already busy schedule.”<sup>97</sup> The office also oversees several dedicated scholarships for non-traditional students. These include Return to Learn Scholarships, which are awarded to undergraduate, degree-seeking students 25 years or older who are either entering college for the first time or returning after more than three years, and a Continuation Scholarship for students who maintain high levels of success through the first two years of the Return to Learn program.<sup>98</sup>

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> “Guide to Services: Student Support.” Missouri State University.  
<https://www.missouristate.edu/services/student-support.htm>

<sup>96</sup> “Adult Student Services.” Missouri State University. <https://adultstudents.missouristate.edu/>

<sup>97</sup> “Student Services > Academic Advisement.” Missouri State University.  
<https://adultstudents.missouristate.edu/advisement.htm>

<sup>98</sup> “Cost and Scholarships.” Missouri State University. <https://adultstudents.missouristate.edu/scholarships.htm>

Beyond these types of dedicated services, Adult Student Services offers several student supports that are designed specifically for non-traditional students (Figure 3.1). The office is staffed by the Director of Adult Non-Traditional Students, as well as dedicated Academic Advisors/Marketing Specialists and student representatives.<sup>99</sup>

**Figure 3.1: Student Services Offered through MSU’s Office of Adult Student Services**

<b>Adult Student Welcome</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Adult Student Services offers an orientation for adult students each fall and spring semester. This one-day orientation features presentations from various university offices (e.g., Associate Provost for Access and Outreach, Director of Student Learning Services).</li> </ul>
<b>Academic Advisement</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•One-on-one advisement services offered by our professional staff. University departments also offer program-specific advisement services.</li> </ul>
<b>Scholarships</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•The Office of Adult Student Services administers a scholarship designed specifically for adult students. The University also offers many scholarships for the non-traditional student.</li> </ul>
<b>Alpha Sigma Lambda</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Become a member of this honor society for non-traditional students. This national honor society is a nonprofit organization devoted to the advancement of scholarship and to the recognition of non-traditional students continuing their higher education.</li> </ul>
<b>Child Care Options</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•As an MSU part-time or full-time student, you will have access to several child care options--ideal for families with young children.</li> </ul>

Source: Missouri State University<sup>100</sup>

<sup>99</sup> “Staff and Contact Information.” Missouri State University.  
<https://adultstudents.missouristate.edu/staffcontact.aspx>

<sup>100</sup> Adapted from: “Student Services.” Missouri State University. <https://adultstudents.missouristate.edu/services.htm>



## UNIVERSITY OF KANSAS

INSTITUTION	UNIVERSITY OF KANSAS	
Location	Lawrence, Kansas; regional campuses in Kansas City, Overland Park, Wichita, and Salina	
Total Enrollment	28,447	
Non-Traditional Student Office	Student Involvement and Leadership Center	
Definition	“You might be asking yourself, am I a non-traditional student? Well, if you commute 10 or more miles to the Lawrence campus, have any dependents, are a veteran, or are three years older than your classmates (i.e., 21-year-old freshman), then yes you are!”	
Key Dedicated Services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ New Student Orientation</li> <li>▪ Non-Traditional Student Week</li> <li>▪ KUEA Scholarships</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Non-Traditional and Commuter Student Welcome</li> <li>▪ Academic Forgiveness Policy</li> <li>▪ Child Development Facilities</li> </ul>

The University of Kansas’s (KU) non-traditional student support services are operated through the Student Involvement and Leadership Center (SILC). This center is meant to “provide impactful co-curricular experiences through educational, social, and community-building programs and events. [It] engages in each student’s identity development by providing mentorship, resources, and involvement opportunities.”<sup>101</sup> SILC is organized across several core values that impact its programming:

- **Critical Thinking:** Identifying important issues, considering alternative perspectives, seeking information, and making informed judgments.
- **Ethical Reasoning:** Incorporating and exemplifying values and principles in personal decision-making and actions.
- **Self-Awareness:** Recognizing one’s multiple identities exhibiting interdependence within one’s groups, organizations, and communities.
- **Engagement:** Establishing a meaningful connection through campus involvement developing supportive relationship with others.
- **Social Justice:** Demonstrating a commitment to creating programs, services, and experiences which are inclusive, accessible, equitable, and purposeful.
- **Leadership:** Preparing students to take responsibility to make positive impacts in their communities.<sup>102</sup>

The center operates dedicated offices for several different student groups, including student organizations, sorority and fraternity life, leadership programs, and non-traditional student services. KU defines a non-traditional student along several metrics, including being a parent, married, or a veteran, being three or more years older than their classmates, or commuting

<sup>101</sup> “Find Your Community. Get Involved. Make An Impact.” University of Kansas. <https://silc.ku.edu/>

<sup>102</sup> Bullet points taken verbatim from: Ibid.

10 or more miles to the campus.<sup>103</sup> According to KU, “a highly diverse group of students are identified as ‘non-traditional’ at KU, not as a label, but to provide a way for the University to recognize and provide additional outreach assistance to students who may, for a variety of reasons, experience more than the average difficulty in accessing information.”<sup>104</sup>

**One of the key goals of the non-traditional student offices at SILC is to help these students become actively involved in the KU community.** For example, SILC directs non-traditional students to the Non-traditional Student Foundation at KU, a student-led organization specifically for this population. The purpose of this foundation is “to create connections and foster relationships with other non-traditional students, as well as obtain information that is related to being a non-traditional student.”<sup>105</sup> KU also encourages these students to find other student organizations (the institution has over 600) to get involved with and stresses the importance of getting to know both traditional and non-traditional students in their classes. SILC employs a dedicated staff member who oversees non-traditional student issues, and non-traditional students have dedicated representation on the Student Senate.<sup>106</sup> These considerations help non-traditional students become more integrated in the campus.

Although KU makes clear that SILC services are designed for all students, the dedicated non-traditional student support offices provide a way for these students to receive assistance that is specifically tailored for them. SILC acknowledges that “while not a ‘one-stop-shopping’ office, the Student Involvement and Leadership Center has information and knowledge of a broad array of issues and concerns.”<sup>107</sup> As shown in Figure 3.2, there are a number of other supports that aim to incorporate non-traditional populations as much as possible.

**Figure 3.2: KU Supports for Non-Traditional Students**

The Office of New Student Orientation has a special orientation program for non-traditional students in the summer and during the regular “transfer day” orientation programs. There is an interest/information session for non-traditional students. New non-traditional students who are freshmen are given the option to attend orientation on a transfer student day.

Hawk Week (the week during which classes start) includes the “Nontraditional and Commuter Student Welcome,” and a special reception is held for graduating non-traditional students. KU celebrates the “National Nontraditional Student Wee” in early November each year since it was established in fall 2000.

The Student Involvement and Leadership Center administers three endowed KUEA scholarships that are specifically for non-traditional students. A small number of readmitted non-traditional students may benefit from the University’s Academic Forgiveness Policy.

Source: University of Kansas<sup>108</sup>

<sup>103</sup> “KU Nontraditional Student Handbook.” University of Kansas, January 2014. p.4.  
<https://silc.ku.edu/sites/silc.ku.edu/files/docs/Nontraditional%20student%20Handbook%202013-14.pdf>

<sup>104</sup> “Nontrad FAQs.” University of Kansas. <https://silc.ku.edu/nontrad-faq>

<sup>105</sup> “KU Nontraditional Student Handbook,” Op. cit., p.10.

<sup>106</sup> [1] “Nontrad FAQs,” Op. cit.

[2] “Student Senators.” University of Kansas. <https://silc.ku.edu/student-senators>

<sup>107</sup> “Nontrad FAQs,” Op. cit.

<sup>108</sup> Adapted from: Ibid.

## APPENDIX A: 10 PRINCIPLES FOR EFFECTIVELY SERVING ADULT LEARNERS

This appendix presents CAEL’s 10 Principles for Effectively Serving Adult Learners. These are areas of focus that enhance adult learner retention and completion, and they represent areas where colleges and universities can best support these non-traditional students.

**Figure A.1: CAEL Principles for Serving Adult Learners**

PRINCIPLE	DESCRIPTION
<b>Adaptivity</b>	Adjusts to shifting external market forces and is able to adapt to the changing expectations of internal stakeholders, students, and employers—understanding the needs of those they serve by developing creative academic solutions
<b>Assessment of Learning Outcomes</b>	Defines and assesses the knowledge, skills, and competencies acquired by adult learners—both from the curriculum and from life and work experience—in order to assign credit and confer degrees with rigor
<b>Financing</b>	Promotes choice using an array of payment options for adult learners in order to expand equity and financial flexibility
<b>Life and Career Planning</b>	Addresses adult learners’ life and career goals before or at the onset of enrollment in order to assess and align its capacities to help learners reach their goals
<b>Outreach</b>	Conducts its outreach to adult learners by overcoming barriers in time, place and tradition in order to create lifelong access to educational opportunities
<b>Technology</b>	Uses technology to provide relevant and timely information and to enhance the learning experience
<b>Strategic Partnerships</b>	Engages in strategic relationships, partnerships and collaborations with employers and other organizations in order to develop and improve educational opportunities for adult learners
<b>Student Support Systems</b>	Assists adult learners using comprehensive academic and student support systems in order to enhance students’ capacities to become self-directed, lifelong learners
<b>Teaching-Learning Process</b>	Faculty uses multiple methods of instruction (including experiential and problem-based methods) for adult learners in order to connect curricular concepts to useful knowledge and skills
<b>Transitions</b>	Supports guided pathways that lead into and from the institution's programs and services in order to ensure that students' learning will apply usefully to achieving their educational and career goals

Source: CAEL<sup>109</sup>

<sup>109</sup> Adapted from: “Ten Principles for Effectively Serving Adult Learners.” CAEL. <https://www.cael.org/higher-education-ten-principles>

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