

Nontraditional Students

Leadership Toolbox

Podcast Transcript

Centennial Student Union & Student Activities

Minnesota State University, Mankato

Traditional college students have the benefit of having services and classes geared towards their success in college. Many times nontraditional students face added difficulties and stressors that can inhibit their ability to have a great collegiate experience and can hinder their academic success. Many times nontraditional students lack an understanding of how a university works. Their last experience with education may have been high school and may have been five or more years since they graduated. This can pose a challenge in their transition to college life and can have a negative effect on their success. Many nontraditional students have little knowledge of specific tools utilized by all students on the campus such as D2L or E-services. Some nontraditional students have not worked with software programs or online resources which creates a learning curve for them.

While having the necessary skill sets to succeed in college are necessary, there are mitigating factors that can be challenges on the lives of nontraditional students. As defined, a nontraditional student at MNSU can be a student over the age of 24 who is going for their first undergraduate degree, a student who is a veteran, a student who is married/divorced/widowed, a student who has children, or a student who commutes from over 15 minutes away or virtually. These factors can have negative effects on the ability of those students to fully participate and have the proper resources to succeed in college. Many nontraditional students fall into more than one of these categories which adds depth to the amount of things that can help or hinder their experience at college.

A commonality between nontraditional and traditional students that may be overlooked or assigned specifically to nontraditional students is the support of family, friends, and significant others in their pursuit of an education. While many times nontraditional students rely on their support system more readily because of having children, a significant other, working full time, or having to run a household, all students can run into the issue of having a positive support system that will help them in their academic pursuit.

According to the National Center for Educational Statistics three-fourths of today's students no longer fit that traditional model. About half of today's students are financially independent; 49% are enrolled part-time; 38% work full time; 27% have dependents of their own. Almost half — 12 million — attend two-year community colleges rather than four-year schools. And most undergraduates who start college don't finish. Only 56% of students at four-year colleges

complete a degree within six years, and just 20% of first-time students at public community colleges get a degree or certificate within three years.

(<http://www.usatoday.com/news/education/degrees-of-difficulty.htm>) The information from the National Center for Education Statistics provides a clearer picture of the lives of nontraditional students across the nation.

In the Classroom

Many professors gear their teaching styles towards traditional students and can at times make class difficult for nontraditional students, who may have different learning styles or have different expectations of how the class is going to operate. Academic advisors and academic support services tend to be geared towards a different developmental level, and many times nontraditional students become frustrated with how the services are provided or that they feel that they are being talked down to in the process. When working with students in the classroom, the terms adult learners and nontraditional students are synonymous with each other. The following will discuss typical attitudes and characteristics in how nontraditional students/adult learners approach their education, and some tools and tips for how to stay motivated and enrich their experiences.

Adult learners tend to be individualistic and operate at an autonomous level. They like to be self directed and prefer to have the ability to be a part of the learning process. Frustration levels can increase when professors and staff do not explain the reasoning behind projects, learning groups, or other assignments. Adult learners tend to be very *practical* and *relevancy-oriented* in that they believe that the information that they are learning should be able to be applied in the real world immediately, and it should be relevant to their course studies. An example would be an adult learner in an engineering class having an assignment related to the socio-cultural implications of engineering in Mexico. While the benefits of learning about the implications of the engineering practices in a different culture would be excellent in expanding a student's knowledge base, they may see it as a waste because many would assume that they would never be working in Mexico, thus making the assignment mute to them.

Adult learners also assume a level of *respect* should be given to them based on their life experience and their age. Sometimes they feel they are treated poorly and professors and staff do not give them the respect that they deserve. This fits especially well with the characteristic of *life experiences* and *knowledge*. Many adult learners have been removed from education for more than 5 years, in many cases graduating from high school, starting a career, and then attending college for the first time after 20 years. They bring a wealth of information, knowledge, and experience with them. At times they may feel that they are not utilized as they should be in the class room, and that their ideas/opinions are not given the merit that they should.

While certain aspects of education can have an effect on how students learn, there are other barriers that can prevent adult learners from being successful in their academics. Many nontraditional students/adult learners have outside commitments that put restraints on their time and availability to complete assignments, study for exams, or work on projects. As stated previously, 38% work full time; 27% have dependents of their own (this includes children and family members); and many others commute or have other life commitments that may prevent them from participating fully in their academics as well as inhibiting them from getting the most out of their collegiate experience.

At times there are financial constraints that nontraditional students/adult learners have to cope with while attending school full-time. If they own a home, multiple vehicles, have children, and have bills that need to be paid; education can appear to be a daunting task if they feel that they cannot afford it. Five years ago, in 2006, the nation average cost of a full credit load was \$2,490. Today, it has risen to over \$8,000. Not only is it costing students more to get an education, many times nontraditional students/adult learners do not complete their degree in four years, which can increase the amount of money they spend to attend school. Financial aid is available, and grants/scholarships are given out, but often times they do not fulfill full financial need.

Ways to Enhance the Nontraditional Student Experience

A way to motivate adult learners is to *enhance* their reasons for enrolling and *decrease* the barriers. Instructors must learn why their students are enrolled (the motivators); they have to discover what is keeping them from learning. Having a nontraditional student center where undergraduates can participate in a community made up of students like themselves creates a network effect, in turn allowing them to connect with others, share stories, tips, and help. Staff and faculty are in the process of learning about nontraditional students/adult learners, and with the increase in nontraditional student enrollment, will be adapting their approach to education and services.

For help in the classroom, here are some tips that you can do on your own to help you along the way:

- Connect with your program advisor to inquire about the services on campus that are geared towards nontraditional students or towards academic success.
- Connect with each of your professors in the beginning of the semester. Discuss with them concerns you may have, questions related to the course work, and to ask for critical feedback on assignments if you feel you are not performing up to their expectations. You will also build rapport with them when contacting them first, and it shows initiative in wanting to get the most out of the class.

- Join study groups, workshops, and orientation programs to help you comprehend the material or to understand the tools you have to enhance your experience on campus.
- Set aside a specific time in your schedule for academics. Balance is important in the lives of all students, and setting aside specific times for schoolwork will help you keep on track.
- Make sure you make time for yourself! It is important to get school work done, but it is most important for you to be healthy and happy.

Let's review quickly what was presented: we discussed what it means to be a nontraditional student/adult learner, the tools for academic success, ideas on enhancing your collegiate experience, and tools for success. By investigating opportunities, you can grow and make better choices. If you would like more information on services here at Minnesota State Mankato, come to the Nontraditional Student Center located in the Centennial Student Union, room 173.

This podcast was presented by Student Activities at Minnesota State University, Mankato. Please visit the Leadership Toolbox website for others topics that benefit you. Thank you!