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## Non Traditional Students: “Needs and Challenges”

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Non Traditional Students: “Needs and Challenges”

By Andrew Rash, Mandy Skinner, Dallas Cline, and Kevin Blanch

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Beginning approximately 40 years ago, and stretching into the 70's and 80's, when a person reached the end of high school, there was choice that the individual needed to make. They enrolled in a college or university, began a vocational education program (usually through their High school or school district), or entered the military. Choosing one of the latter options meant getting on with a company that valued its employees and would take care of them for life after a career of loyal service. If a person chose the college option, they spent four years on studies, then entered the real world and began their journey as a citizen. But things change. Over time, many factors have contributed to the reality that many people are choosing to attend college under far different circumstances than students did even just a quarter of a century ago. These factors run the gamut from social to financial: the cost of college has been rising exponentially, corporations are failing financially; but also failing to uphold traditional commitments to their workforce. An unstable global economy and cheap foreign labor has led to countless layoffs, downsizings, and entire traditional American industries swept overseas. Workers left wondering "what next?" People are waiting longer to leave their parents houses, and waiting longer to settle down and start families. Many young people are joining the military long term, as substantial re-enlistment bonuses persuade soldiers to stay longer. People are living longer, healthier lives, and are looking for personal enrichment beyond what traditional retirement activities can offer them. What this means is that we've seen many institutions begin to hemorrhage change. Industries such as health care, government entities such as social security, and financial stalwarts such as "retirement funds" are all reacting to these changes. While the above factors have far reaching impact on much of society, none are affected more than the many institutions of higher learning in the United States. American colleges and universities are experiencing increased enrollments from students who don't fit into the

traditionally accepted “keyholes.” Non-traditional students comprise a wide range of students and are hard to define. It might be easier to define a traditional college student. A traditional student is 18 years old, single, went directly from high school to college, has no physical or mental limitations, and comes from a family of college graduates. So what’s a non-traditional student? Someone who is over 25 years old, did not come directly from high school, is a veteran, has some type of disability, married, parent, or high school aged (Non-traditional, 2008). So the important question becomes this: What are American institutions of higher learning doing to welcome this new burgeoning group of learners into their hallowed halls? What special needs does this population require be met for continued success? What follows is an examination of several groups that make up non traditional students, including those with income challenges, child prodigies, veterans, and senior citizens. Trends and issues will be brought to light and examined, and tips and solutions to several problems facing today’s non traditional populations will be offered.

Non Traditional students face a variety of concerns and special needs about attending college. Some of these concerns are similar to what traditional students face, but must be approached in a different way because they are non-traditional. Financial aid is an example of this. According to FinAid, a website that is all inclusive when applying for student loans or the famous FAFSA form that all college students must complete for any type of financial aid, students over 24 years old are eligible for increased unsubsidized Stafford loan limits (FinAid, 2008).

Many non-traditional students work full-time and attend school part-time. It is important for these students to check with their employers about a tuition reimbursement program through the company (FinAid, 2008). This is a growing trend among companies that can drastically help

the student. Generally, students are out the cost of tuition and books initially, but upon completion of the course the employer will reimburse them for the expense. Also, employees are usually asked to sign a contract with the company stating they will continue to work for the company for another 2 years (for example) after completion of the degree.

Non-traditional students will find that colleges are less likely to make adjustments to financial aid packages due to married student housing, parenting, family health insurance, etc. This is a critical problem for non-traditional students to work through that isn't a concern for the younger traditional student who can live in a residence hall and stay on mom and dad's insurance and credit card. Some married couples choose to rotate which spouse works and which one attends school first in order to work through this dilemma (FinAid, 2008).

But there is yet another type of non-traditional student with a unique financial concern—the 18 year old high school student that comes from a low-income family. Nationwide nine in ten high school graduates from families earning more than \$80,000 attend college by the time they are 24, compared to only six in ten from families earning less than \$33,000 (Harvard, 2004). Low-income high school graduates in the top quartile on standardized tests attend college at the same rate as high-income high school graduates in the bottom quartile on the same tests (Lederman, 2007). So why aren't these qualifying students attending college? Research suggests a few reasons. One, students from low-income families don't know how much need-based aid is available. They are unfamiliar with the financial aid system and are intimidated with the multiple forms that must be completed (Lederman, 2007).

Students from these types of homes are often concerned with working as early as possible in order to help support the family and the student has little time to attend school. It has been

argued that low-income students drop out of college at a higher rate because they are also working one to two jobs while attending school and the need to self-sustain overpowers the desire to earn a degree. Low-income students must work to survive. They do not have any family to help them when times are rough. Because they have to work, grades suffer and eventually they drop out. Only 36 % of college-qualified low-income students complete bachelor's degrees within eight and a half years, compared with 81% of high-income students (Lederman, 2007).

Another underlying problem with this is students who are attending college on need based grants have a one time chance at school. If they mess up and make bad grades they will lose their financial aid package and will have to drop out. A wealthier student who does the same has a much easier chance of going back to college, because they have families who can pay the cost of tuition and the student can enroll back in school.

Knowing these concerns and knowing that college is important for many individuals to pursue better job opportunities, how do we help non-traditional students from low-income families? There are multiple approaches to this question. At Western Kentucky University there are the federal Trio programs that were established in 1965. Within Trio Services are Veteran's Upward Bound, Education Talent Search, and Upward Bound. Each of these three groups works with non-traditional students and helps to alleviate the barriers to secondary education (Parsley, 2008).

Veteran's Upward bound works strictly with veterans to help improve their basic skills (math and english) to help them be successful in school. They also help them complete all the necessary paperwork to enroll in school (Parsley, 2008).

Educational Talent Search deals more directly with low-income students and families. Educational Talent Search works with eligible middle school, high school, or persons who wish to go back to college or earn a GED and then enroll in school. Middle school and high school students are provided both group and individual career counseling, financial aid counseling, and educational counseling at their schools. These students also get to take field trips to educational programs and colleges. Adult participants receive the same services plus get assistance with completing applications and financial aid forms. These services are provided on campus as well as other off campus locations convenient for participants (Educational, n.d.).

Upward Bound services are for low-income high school students or first generation high school students. In this program students devote one Saturday a month to educational sessions and six weeks out of the summer to living on WKU's campus and receiving high school courses. This helps students to learn what it is like to live on campus and have rigorous course work (Parsley, 2008).

Harvard College has set new financial guidelines and recruitment strategies for low-income families. Now if a family makes under \$40,000 they are not expected to contribute anything to their child's college education. Harvard has also started a summer program known as The Crimson Summer Academy. It is similar to WKU's Upward Bound program. The academy starts the summer after the 9<sup>th</sup> grade year. Low-income students are recruited based on their grades and spend four weeks taking educational field trips, listening to guest speakers, living on campus, and learning about the benefits of rigorous college life. If students complete all three summer at the academy they will receive a \$3,000 scholarship to be used at any college or university of their choice. Harvard wants to make it known that they accept students from all backgrounds and they don't exclude based on the family situation (Harvard, 2004).

Some research estimates that the gap between high academic achieving students from low-income families and high income families has now reached 20 percent (Jamison, 2007). This number must be reduced. It is also estimated that nine out of ten of the fastest growing jobs now require a two or four year degree or certificate training (Jamison, 2007). Postsecondary school should never be an option for only the affluent. It should be an option for every academic qualifying individual. But this will only happen with the continued growth of support services programs such as Trio services and the Crimson Summer Academy.

When thinking of non traditional students, many think about people who would be much older than a traditional college age, usually over the age of twenty-five years of age. Other characteristics that are widely accepted as being non-traditional are attending school after military service, returning college from a break, and older students with children. However, one segment of non-traditional students that is often overlooked is students younger than traditional aged students. These young students range from ages 6 years old (Child Geniuses, 2005) to that of high school aged students, typically fifteen to seventeen years old. For these non-traditional students, some belong to academies, mostly teenage students who use the first year(s) of college to obtain college credit while earning their high school diploma (Gatton Academy, n.d.). More youthful students in college, showing more specified forms of giftedness and under the age of ten, could be categorized as a prodigy (Child Prodigies, 1993). Both sets of these advanced, youthful students present a set of concerns and special needs; needs both similar and different that than of traditional aged students.

One of the biggest concerns facing non-traditional student is the social concerns they encounter. These social issues range from transitioning to college life, homesickness, and being independent. The transition to college life can be tough, such as finding classes on the first day



to creating sleep and study routines. Transitioning closely ties into being independent such as doing laundry, however this independence also has more social concerns as well making friends with others in independent lifestyles where not everyone knows one another or sees one another on a regular basis. One social concern for these youth is that some may not be outgoing as they can be quieter and more introverted than non-traditional peers (Gott, Tim. personal interview, 11 November, 2008). These social concerns faced quite simply are essentially the same social concerns everyone faces, however with a largely underrepresented group such as precocious youth, transitioning into an older, collegiate environment does present a larger challenge than traditional-aged counterparts.

It seems ironic that young prodigies and teenagers belonging to college level academics would have academic concerns, yet even precious youth are not impervious to the academic challenges. One of the hardest bites of reality academy students' face is the reality making grades lower than accustomed. At the Carol Martin Gatton Academy of Mathematics and Science in Kentucky, entering seniors entered with an average 3.91 cumulative grade point average. Within a year, these students graduated with a 3.75 cumulative grade point average (Gott, Tim. personal interview, 11 November, 2008). While outside factors may have been in play such as it being the first year of Academy, a .16 decrease in the cumulative grade point average shows a downward spike from the near perfect grade point averages that they are accustomed to. Grappling with the reality that colleges and universities are tougher academically than high schools can be extremely tough, especially when perfectionism is more prominent among non-traditional youth than traditional aged college students (Gott, Tim. personal interview, 11 November, 2008).

Becoming too one dimensional with academics or with particular subjects are among the academic concerns among prodigies. This too is of great concern as social and leisure needs, involvement, and emotional needs are sacrificed for the benefit of academics and research.

One big special need for young non-traditional students is the attention to detail to their mental and health needs, especially for academies. One of the best ways to serve academy students is to work with a school or communities Health Services. At the Carol Martin Gatton Academy at Western Kentucky University, each student is already set up with Health Services where the health clinic has copies of the insurance cards so that the academy students can walk in and receive care without worrying about insurance or payment issues. After hours, staff from the academy would take a sick or hurt student to urgent care (Gott, Tim. personal interview, 11 November, 2008). This is especially important in that academy students do not have access to vehicles while on campus and thus would not be able to take themselves to an urgent care or after hours health clinic. On the mental health side, resident advisors are trained to be keenly aware of any mental health concerns such as depression, homesickness, and suicidal tendencies (Gott, Tim. personal interview, 11 November, 2008). While this would be true for traditional college students living in residence halls, one main difference lies in the fact that there is a full time counselor at the Gatton Academy. This not only is important for the mental health concerns, but also gives parents greater assurance whose sons and daughters are in part of the academy.

One of the greatest concerns of anyone attending a college or university would be the safety. Safety is of top priority for anywhere, especially in that of non-traditional youth. Colleges, universities and academies alike must ensure to both the student and parents/guardians that the environment in which the student will live in will be safe, after all, it must be terribly

hard to let students so young be out of the safety net of home. At academies for non-traditional youth, curfew systems are enforced so that at night, one knows the whereabouts of the students. At the Gatton Academy at Western Kentucky University, security systems are in place where students scan in the get onto their dorms and onto their halls. Furthermore, students may only ride in a car with a parent approved driver list or with staff. For students wanting to get off campus, they must use a buddy system where they check out with other academy students and to places like the mall, grocery stores, etc. (Gott, Tim. personal interview, 11 November, 2008). All this doesn't exactly come easy to colleges and universities. At Oxford University in England, they are no longer accepting undergraduates under the age of seventeen years old (Oxford, 2005). This is largely due to the major costs in The Children Act, where both the teachers with whom they come in contact with and students sharing the same premises would all have to have a criminal background check. While there are similarities in the safety measures for both non-traditional young and the traditional college student, extra measures such as full time counselor on staff, curfews, and The Children Act in England, help ensure the safety of precious youth enrolled at colleges and universities.

Non-traditional youth have a wide range in differences of special needs. The needs of an eight year old are vastly different than the needs of a sixteen year old academy student, only two years younger than the traditional college starting age. It is up to the parents and the students as to whether or not the student is prepared to the college environment, both academically and socially. Some non-traditional youth, such as Greg Smith, graduated with his bachelor's at thirteen and by fifteen was already nominated for multiple Nobel Peace Prizes (U.Va., 2003). A University of Washington reports that non-traditional youth who enter college at twelve to fourteen years of age are "versatile, interested, interesting, and sociable," (Study, 2007) however

as previously mentioned some places turn away students so young because of the incredible cost associated insuring the safety these young. One also has to consider whether or not pushing precious youth through school is right or wrong. In Michael Kearney's case, his father felt Michael needed to be a high school student at age five to be normal and in college when he was age six to be normal (Child Geniuses, 2005). While the above case is an extreme exception rather than the rule, cases like these should be handled on a case by case basis. Ultimately, what is best for the child is what matters most.

Another group of non-traditional students are veterans. Most of these students have served at least one enlistment (usually consisting of 4 years) or more in the armed services, and all of these men and women work closely with the Department of Veteran Affairs to ensure that the injuries sustained while in active duty are cared for and to help them exist in a world outside of the military. The Department of Veteran Affairs has five strategic goals that apply to all veterans they are as follows: 1. Restore the capability of veterans with disabilities to the greatest extent possible, and improve the quality of their lives and that of their families. 2. Ensure a smooth transition for veterans from active military service to civilian life. 3. Honor and serve veterans in life and memorialize them in death for their sacrifices on behalf of the Nation. 4. Contribute to the public health, emergency management, socioeconomic well-being, and history of the Nation. 5. Deliver world-class service to veterans and their families through effective communication and management of people, technology, business processes, and financial resources. The Department of Veteran Affairs currently guarantees 2.2 million active home loans to veterans, which totals up to \$243 billion dollars worth of homes. Over half of the VA home loan guarantees went to first time home buyers and 90% of the home loans use the "no down payment" feature that makes the VA loan guaranty so effective. The Department of Veteran

Affairs provides a host of Health Care options for the veteran. There is a suicide prevention hotline that is available 365 days a year 24 hours a day. They are the leading the way in Traumatic Brain Injury surgeries. In 2007 they provided healthcare services to approximately 5.5 million veterans.

According to the Department of Veteran Affairs as of September 2007 there were roughly 24,816,000 veterans to date. This figure was reached by using the veteran population from the 2000 census which was 26,745,000. Each time someone separates from the military the number goes up and each time someone dies the number goes down. The number has taken a drastic down turn due to the high mortality rate of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Of the 24,816,000 veterans 7.5% are women and 92.5% are men. There are roughly 37 million dependents (spouses and dependent children). Together the veterans and their dependents make up 20% of the United States population.

Most of the veterans that are still living today served in a time of war. Because of this these students are unique in the fact that they when they come to college for the first time they are not your typical college freshman. Many of these students have seen and been involved in battle. They have lost friends and family in battle. They may have a family. They may have psychological disorders that typical college students don't have. These students require extra time and attention. They have special financial needs than most students, and they come to college with college credit unlike most of the students who come to college for the first time.

Most all of the veterans that come to college will be able to use one of the two GI Bills,

The Montgomery GI Bill or the Post 9/11 GI Bill. The Montgomery GI Bill was created in 1944 prior to WW 2 ending. The GI Bill, as it's most commonly known, was a document that President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed into law on June 22, 1944. The GI Bill was made available to every veteran (male or female) upon their release from active service. The GI Bill allowed the service members to attend any public university, college, tech-school, community college, or on the job training. There was a monthly stipend for tuition, books, and living expenses. The GI Bill also made home loans more affordable so that service members were able to own their own home. The idea of the GI Bill was to help transition service members back into society and help them become contributing citizens to the United States economy (Greenberg 2008, Inside Higher Ed 2008, Schugurensky 2008).

Prior to WW 2, higher education in the United States was mostly private, liberal arts, small-college, rural, residential, elitist, and often discriminatory from institution to institution with respect to race and religion because of this fact in the early 1940's a total of about 160,000 people in the United States earned a college degree, but due to the GI Bill of 1944 in the early 1950's almost 500,000 people in the United States earned a college degree The GI Bill allowed 2.2 million WW 2 veterans to attend college, 3.5 million veterans to attend vocational schools, 1.5 million veterans to complete on-the-job training. Due to this fact many state run institutions doubled and tripled their enrollment causing long lines, overflowing classrooms, and many overworked faculty and staff (Greenberg 2008).

The most important aspect of the GI Bill was it was a catalyst for social change. Views that had long been settled about sex, religion, and race were shaken up. There was a new world

of opportunity being offered to the veterans of WW 2. They were being exposed to new ideas and concepts through higher education that normally they would not have been exposed to. It was an era of learning and of great success for the American people, and that's largely in part due to the GI Bill of 1944 (Greenberg 2008).

But like all things times change, technology changes and veterans are now finding that the GI Bill that worked so well for WW 2 veterans is not going as far as it use to. Many veteran students are struggling to make tuition payments and they are struggling to work and go to school and to be able to meet living expenses. Being a forward thinker, like President Franklin D. Roosevelt, Senator Jim Webb introduced the Post 9/11 GI Bill in 2007, and on June 30, 2008 President George W. Bush signed the new GI Bill of 2008 into law. The Post 9/11 GI Bill has not taken effect yet it will take place starting August 2009, under the Post 9/11 GI Bill veterans will receive tuition paid directly to the public university of their choice, receive a one thousand dollar book stipend per year, and will be given a housing allowance that will range anywhere from seven hundred and twenty dollars to two thousand six hundred and fifty dollars with the average being twelve hundred and fifty dollars. Under this GI Bill it will allow veterans to go to school without the burden of student loans which, for most veterans is how they were paying for school since the previous GI Bill was not sufficient enough to successfully pay for school and meet living expenses. If veterans should decide that they don't want to go to school right out of the military they can postpone their benefits for fifteen years before it goes away, unlike with the previous GI Bill where it was only ten years. The new GI Bill also has an option that was not offered with the previous GI Bill. In order to encourage military personnel to stay in the armed forces they are able to transfer this benefit over to a spouse or to children. This option was added to the GI Bill of 2008 because the Department of Defense was concerned that if the GI Bill was

too enticing that there would be a shortage of experienced military personnel left to run the military. So the option to pass along the benefit was added as a compromise so that the military might be able to retain the more experienced military personnel to help sustain our military. VA loans are still available to veterans allowing a veteran to obtain a home loan with 0% down, which in today's economic struggles is a hard thing to come by (Inside Higher Ed 2008)

The Department of Veteran Affairs knows that the struggles that the veterans have been through are sometimes great, and sometimes veterans think that once they are discharge, for whatever reason, that their life is over, that there is nothing left out there for them. But Veteran Affairs is working hard to educate these young men and women to let them know that there is still a lot out there for them and they work hard to make sure they are aware of the endless opportunities that are before them.

As people age and begin to entertain thoughts of retirement, they begin to realize that they have the chance now to perhaps go back and do some or all of the things that "life" or circumstance may have prevented them from experiencing or achieving. A new blank slate of possibility awaits them, and many aging Americans choose to fill at least some of this canvas with higher education. Senior citizens are returning to colleges and universities in record numbers, and with the exponential number of baby boomers at or about to reach retirement age, this sector of non traditional learners promises only to become more influential. Many retirees who turn to higher education are looking to start on a new journey or second career. For those who want a new path, many times it is fueled by a sense of indebtedness to the community. Learning a new skill to be able to better help people definitely is a motivation for many older Americans to go back to school.



Not all of the older Americans who choose to go back to school are doing so to enrich their lives, though. Unfortunately, many are finding that the return to school is a financial necessity. Many older Americans are being forced to retire early, downsized in company efforts to reduce costs, or were gainfully employed in industries that are now located elsewhere on the globe. These folks are discovering that they don't have enough stockpiled financial resources to sustain stable futures, so the need to learn new skills, retool technology knowledge, or simply become more marketable in the new world economy becomes apparent.

Regardless of the reasons that older Americans choose to attend college, it can have many benefits. "Education can be a boost to the brain, invigorating the individual, and creating a thirst that was dormant for years." (Narushima, 2008) It can be very healthy to use the brain, lending possible improvements to body circulation and memory functions. Furthermore, just the act of going to class and socializing with others in a new environment can be beneficial, saving people from the boring routines many feel they can get stuck in. College can be a place for older students to make new friends, as many institutions have programs that are designed for "seasoned" pupils. College classrooms can be a place where younger students can learn from the considerable life experiences of their elder classmates. But these experiences can take place in other places than just colleges and universities. Many options can compete with traditional brick and mortar universities for older students. One such option is the free university. Usually community based and not always without cost as the name suggests, "Free universities are defined as organizations that offer non credit classes to the general public in which anyone can teach and anyone can learn. Most free universities do not exercise control over students, instructors, or course content." (Draves, 1980) This provides an option that many might find more comforting and assessable than traditional higher learning institutions.

So we have seen the benefits that older students can gain from the university experience, and we also know that there are some forms of consumable education that are competing with universities for this particular demographic. So what do institutions need to do to make sure that they can attract and retain these “lifelong learners”? It’s simple: identify the needs of this group and meet them.

There are many barriers to an older person pursuing an education at a college or university, but focus here will be on three in particular. First, is the ability to physically be able to access classes. This means transportation to and from the students home, Many communities have low cost transportation available to older members of the community. Administrators need to be able to identify these providers and partner with them, offering the student safe and affordable transportation to and from class. Once on campus, attention needs to be paid to accessibility to facilities. Elevator buildings should be used when scheduling classes with a significant senior population. Also, proximity to restroom facilities should be considered as well. It needs to be the administration’s goal to make the student as comfortable as possible.

The second major need of older students who are attending classes in college is the technology gap. Older students need to be able to use computers to access so many of the features of a modern education. But many were not exposed to the PC early in life, so to many older students, the computer may very well be a foreign concept. Classes should be offered to small groups of affected students so that they might get the training that they need to succeed in a university setting. Since much of getting to know how to use a computer is just “doing it,” students need to be encouraged and provided with the “face time” and resources to play around with computers in a setting and at a pace with which they feel comfortable. They should be afforded many opportunities to ask questions so they might be able to bridge the technology gap.

Third, older learners sometimes will be prohibited from entering college simply by the cost. With the rising cost of healthcare, including insurance and prescription drugs, and many seniors on a fixed income, finding money for tuition, books and other supplies can be a daunting task. Communities with large numbers of seasoned students need to work together with institutions to identify populations that might be served by free or reduced tuition programs. In fact, many colleges do this with flying colors. Especially in Florida, where seniors may take up to 9 credit hours (audit only) per semester at nearly every public school in the state. Assistance is even available for books and lab fees.

It has been shown, then, that many populations comprise the group we refer to “non traditional students.” While the needs and experience of these groups varies greatly, they are all equally entitled to the same access to higher learning institutions that the general public enjoys. All of the members of the non-traditional group can make profound contributions to any university community. Challenges associated not only with this group, but with any group that requires the administration to “think outside the box” should be encouraged to flock to higher learning in great numbers. This will insure a richer more valuable experience for all parties involved.

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