

**The Non-Traditional Student
Enrolled Full-Time in Art School**

Sarah Kathryn O'Brien

2021

THE NON-TRADITIONAL STUDENT ENROLLED FULL-TIME IN ART SCHOOL

A Thesis

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By

Sarah Kathryn O'Brien
Rhode Island School of Design
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Approved by:

Advisor

Dr. Paul A. Sproll

Professor, Head Department of Teaching + Learning in Art + Design

Reader

Professor Nancy Friese

Department Teaching + Learning in Art + Design

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ABSTRACT

The unique needs, experiences, and contributions to the classroom of non-traditional students enrolled in a full-time undergraduate art program have been under-addressed in academic research. In this thesis, the author surveys existing research and reports on a series of surveys and some follow-up interviews conducted with both students and their professors. This thesis aims to identify the unique circumstances of non-traditional students in higher education and particularly in art school. The author identifies specific opportunities for fruitful continued research and application.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

While there is considerable research surrounding the non-traditional, age 25 and older, student in higher education there is a dearth related to the full-time non-traditional undergraduate student enrolled at an art and design school. This thesis seeks to investigate what is an area that has received scant attention through a review of existing literature and through a series of interviews with non-traditional students and faculty at Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) combined with the insights of this author who was also a non-traditional undergraduate student.

Background & Setting

To give a better understanding of the enrollment of non-traditional students over the age of 25 in full-time undergraduate programs were explored. Census data, as well as data from RISD, was examined to show how RISD fits into the larger trends of 4-year full-time programs in the US as a whole.

Year	US Census	RISD
2010	18.53%	3.14%
2011	17.24%	2.89%
2012	16.64%	2.74%
2013	17.43%	2.59%
2014	16.59%	1.99%
2015	16.17%	2.33%
2016	14.80%	2.45%
2017	14.41%	2.38%
2018	14.99%	1.81%
2019	14.17%	1.64%
2020	--	1.79%

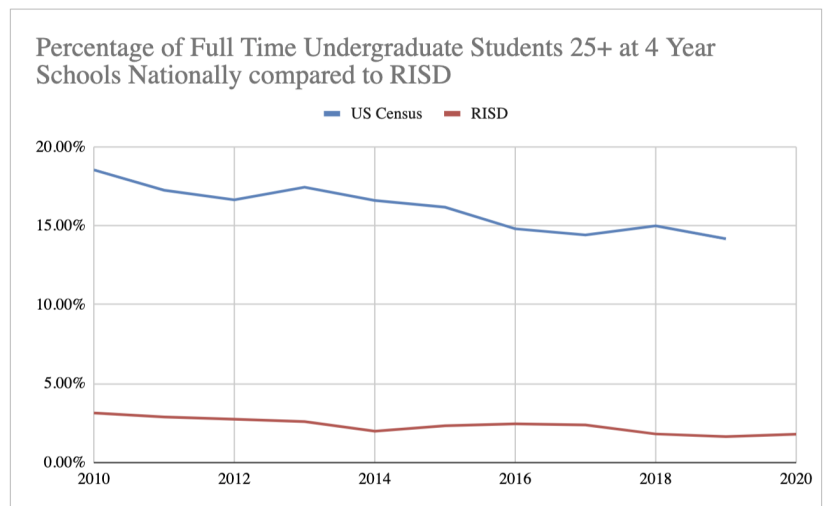


Table 1: Percentage of enrolled students over 25 in a full-time graduate program

Age	Fall 2010	Fall 2011	Fall 2012	Fall 2013	Fall 2014	Fall 2015	Fall 2016	Fall 2017	Fall 2018	Fall 2019	Fall 2020
unknown	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
under 18	25	32	29	26	25	25	24	28	24	25	27
18-19	760	766	778	760	797	794	807	783	815	825	716
20-21	845	880	840	867	877	846	839	871	861	852	732
22-24	280	237	270	300	275	302	280	247	257	273	230
25-29	52	49	41	41	26	37	40	42	25	25	20
30-34	7	6	11	8	10	7	6	4	9	6	6
35+	3	2	2	3	4	3	3	1	2	2	5
Total	1975	1972	1971	2005	2014	2014	1999	1976	1993	2008	1736
25+	62	57	54	52	40	47	49	47	36	33	31

Table 2: RISD Undergraduate Enrollment by Age, Year

Census Data - School Enrollment

(Numbers in thousands. Civilian noninstitutionalized population)

Selected Characteristics	Four-year college		Total
	1st year	2nd or higher	
All Students - Oct 2019	2,377	7,878	10,255
25-34 years old	98	1,271	1,369
35+	147	595	742
Full time students	2,100	6,569	8,669
25-34 years old	38	836	874
35+	71	283	354
All Students - October 2018	2,447	8,109	10,556
25-34 years old	177	1,327	1,504
35+	124	615	739
Full time students	2,140	6,827	8,967
25-34 years old	94	838	932
35+	59	353	412
All Students - October 2017	2,383	7,935	10,318
25-34 years old	137	1,270	1,407
35+	117	684	801
Full time students	2,141	6,505	8,646
25-34 years old	88	776	864
35+	61	321	382
All Students - October 2016	2,615	8,535	11,150
25-34 years old	191	1,394	1,585
35+	143	773	916
Full time students	2,247	7,088	9,335
25-34 years old	98	854	952
35+	53	377	430
All Students October 2015	2,292	8,424	10,716
25-34 years old	207	1,451	1,658
35+	144	772	916
Full time students	1,989	6,878	8,867
25-34 years old	125	841	966
35+	61	407	468
All Students October 2014	2,488	8,168	10,656
25-34 years old	162	1,302	1,464
35+	166	879	1,045
Full time students	2,196	6,840	9,036
25-34 years old	92	892	984
35+	69	446	515
All Students October 2013	2,388	8,080	10,468
25-34 years old	210	1,381	1,591
35+	127	830	957
Full time students	2,044	6,587	8,631
25-34 years old	114	959	1,073
35+	38	393	431
All Students October 2012	2,274	8,066	10,340
25-34 years old	233	1,345	1,578
35+	163	741	904
Full time students	1,958	6,649	8,607
25-34 years old	139	905	1,044
35+	77	311	388
All Students October 2011	2,374	8,546	10,920
25-34 years old	228	1,555	1,783
35+	141	821	962
Full time Students	2,093	6,929	9,022
25-34 years old	151	935	1,086
35+	77	392	469
All Students October 2010	2,593	7,857	10,450
25-34 years old	276	1,466	1,742
35+	211	875	1,086
Full Time Students	2,133	6,352	8,485
25-34 years old	140	881	1,021
35+	92	459	551

Table 3: Census Data - School Enrollment, by age, enrollment status

Methodology

Research of existing journals for applicable articles was done first on the RISD Library Fleet Database and The Education Resources Information Center (ERIC) database. Search terms used were adult(s), mature, older, mixed-age or non-traditional age, or non-traditional.

Subsequent research was done in the centric databases for The Journal of Education, Research in Higher Education, The Review of Higher Education, NASPA Journal, Journal of College Development, Community College Journal of Research and Practice, and the Community College Review.

Culled articles were further examined to see if their focus was on non-traditional students and if so it was further reviewed and grouped into categories. The categories that emerged were: returning women, retirees, business and non-traditional students, catch up for older students, differences in traditional and non-traditional community college students.

It became clear that none of the traditional methods of exploration would provide clear strong insights on their own. I would have to build a web of insights by combining threads from multiple sources and means. While there is a good amount of research on the non-traditional student in undergraduate programs, it focuses primarily on community colleges and traditional 4-year programs with little to no research that focused on full-time only art and design programs.

The student survey questions were carefully crafted after a review of existing research. This was not designed to produce quantifiable data but an inquiry that allows us to gain insights to shape areas of focus for continued research. The survey established an understanding of the background of the student, their reasons for choosing RISD, and their experiences and perspective that might uniquely correlate to them being older students. Faculty surveys were designed to try to ascertain their perspective on having non-traditional students in the classroom.

Distributing surveys proved to be a challenge. Initially, a staff member at RISD had run a query so that it could determine the number of non-traditional students currently enrolled. However, they were not permitted to disclose specific information and directed me towards the office of Enrollment. Privacy laws precluded sharing of the names of students so the author worked through word of mouth, sending out emails to classmates asking for their assistance in identifying non-traditional students. This is how the list of recipients was developed.

Scope & Limitations

In conducting a review of the literature related to this thesis topic the author limited their research to publications accessible through the RISD Fleet Library and Education Resources Information Center (ERIC) search engines. It should be of note that initial research was broader and went back as far as 1990 in the hopes that research relating more directly to the topic of this paper might emerge but when that exercise did not prove fruitful, the in-depth review of journal entries was limited to 2010 to the present day.

The survey distribution was limited to faculty and students in RISD's undergraduate program and the author recognizes that because of the narrow focus of this and the small sample size the findings, while of great interest, are not generalizable to other institutions. However, despite this, the author argues that at the very least they provide meaningful insights for future research. It is also of note that these surveys were conducted in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic and it was particularly difficult to get responses from students and faculty.

Thesis Structure

The thesis is structured as several chapters. Chapter 1 provides the Introduction, Methodology, Scope & Limitation, and this Thesis Structure. Chapter 2 is Background where the

author provides the autobiographical context for the interest in this exploration. Chapter 3 is the Literature Review. Although there is little research that draws a direct line to this area of focus there is a rich amount to provide a foundation of understanding as we shift our focus to full-time art school students. Chapter 4 provides a deep dive analysis of the survey responses, follow-up conversations, and the insights gleaned from those responses. Chapter 5 connects the key findings from the literature review to the insights gained from the surveys, identifies commonalities and differences, and establishes a select number of observations based on the thesis investigation concerning the non-traditional student enrolled at art school that the author argues warrants consideration and indeed subsequent research.

CHAPTER 2

MY JOURNEY WITH ART & DESIGN

I am a non-traditional student who was 26 when I enrolled in an undergraduate program for the first time. I remember making a conscious effort to fit in. To not rock the boat because this place wasn't intended for me, it was designed for 18-year-olds. I've often looked back on those times and can see how there were ways my experience was improved because of the skills I already had, and ways that my education suffered because I had different needs that weren't being addressed and I'm curious how that plays out for other non-traditional students and their professors. In hindsight, I'm surprised how long it took me to find art school. One of my earliest memories is of playing with clay. It was a family lesson in the basement of the Art Institute of Chicago. I don't remember what we made or where it went but I remember being happy because my father was getting messy and having fun with Mom and me. It was the first time I remember him having fun with something I liked. I think it's only a coincidence that almost 40 years later I've just completed my MFA in ceramics but what is not a coincidence is that I grew up in a family that valued education, but more importantly exploration and passion.

Both my parents have winding career trajectories and were non-traditional students. My mother was a professional violinist, then completed her undergraduate education at 35 when she started work as a CPA, then a lawyer, and I might add an excellent chef and very talented artist. My father was a Marine in Vietnam and on his return completed his undergraduate program at 25. He then finished a law degree and started work as a district attorney, then a corporate attorney, and spent the last 20 years of his professional career leading mid-sized companies. In his retirement, he is an active student at the University of Minnesota taking classes each semester in art history or studio art, an area he previously never focused on. This is the environment I

grew up in. A home where I was always encouraged to do what I loved and that, *“There’s always room at the top!”* Dinner table conversation was never dumbed down for the youngest in the small family of three. They joked that I could pass the Bar Exam at 11. We talked about the why of how people think and process data. I was in a family of curious seekers. For some that may have been the recipe to find a passion early and then be given the tools and opportunity to develop it. For me, it’s been an interesting ride but has ended up perhaps even more winding than my parents’ journeys. My creative side was always encouraged, my mom proudly wore the spool necklaces I made and professionally framed my thanksgiving themed drawings for her office. In the summers, art camp was a given. And weekend art classes at the local university were part of my middle school world. But looking back at that environment I wonder why it took such a circuitous path for me to get to art school.

It took me a long time to figure out the difference between the excitement of being good at something and the passion you find when you’re doing something you love. I also loved to dwell on my weaknesses. Origami was my earliest frustration. When I was three, I was handed an origami book intended for someone well beyond my years. It was something my father had brought back from a business trip. I remember just being plain confused by the book with the foreign code, but I kept going back to it because it was something I thought I was supposed to understand. And finally, I did. It became what I was known for. It was chosen to be my ‘ice-breaker’ when I moved to a new city and school in the third grade. “Why don’t you just teach the whole school to make an origami crane?” I remember teaching my class first, so they could help when we taught the whole school, but in hindsight, it seems like a lot.

But origami was my go-to outlet perhaps not because it was ‘creative’ but because it logically transformed things. A simple piece of paper became whatever you could imagine. One

year I folded our Christmas tree and ornaments. At age 11 it became my first commission when a local bookstore gave me \$200 in book credit in exchange for an origami Santa, sleigh, and reindeer for their front window. People called me the creative one, but I didn't understand it. I couldn't draw or paint 'well'. I could handle 3-D swiftly, taking over the making of Halloween costumes from my mother when I was about ten. But there was so much I couldn't do and didn't understand. I liked making jewelry and playing with clay but my eye never saw the results as in the same league as 'real' art.

Lots of reasons led me to not go straight to college but one of them was I couldn't figure out what I wanted to do with my life. I liked art but didn't think I was good enough and knew I could do law but didn't know if I cared enough, and you attend very different kinds of school-based on your choice. Instead, I drifted between jobs and careers, a temp job transformed into a full-time position at an architectural firm where I worked in the exhibit design department as Image and Content Researcher + Text Writer. I liked this job, my bosses were graphic designers and architects. It was my first exposure to the design world. It was a place where my brain thrived. I researched, wrote, and sourced imagery for museum exhibitions it was fun, but with an economic downturn came the need for a new job and another temp assignment turned into a full-time job, Director of Research for the St. Louis Symphony, this job did not fill my soul but it was interesting and it was amazing to hear live music all day long.

One day I looked around my apartment and realized that I had built my couch, my coffee table was shipped in from New York City because I couldn't find one I liked in St. Louis and I was still on the hunt for an acceptable toaster oven, and it all clicked - *Industrial Design*. I'm not sure where I heard the term but I certainly wasn't conscious of it as a career field until that moment. Normal people went out on a weekend and bought the best option, this was what made

me unique/weird/different. So at 26, I ended up at the University of Louisiana, Lafayette. My time there was varied, I had a teacher who told me I'd never get a job when I graduated because I couldn't draw. I had another who didn't appreciate design/ers outside of the world of transportation. But I also found great teachers who reached across departments to help me. An architecture professor got me an internship my first summer, an Interior Design professor became a great advisor on my projects. I felt particularly enamored of the cardboard chair assignment, making one each of my first 3 years and 2 being finalists in a national competition. But it was my senior year when I decided to make an independent project and enter an international competition that things really changed. I won. International press, money, and a trip to Chicago. When I told my professor he said, "Well, I guess this means you graduate." I was leaning into what I wanted and what I was good at and I was succeeding because of it, and my professor, honestly, seemed annoyed that he couldn't keep discounting me.

That press got me a job at an architectural firm as the Director of Products. Unfortunately, the economic depression of 2008 hit, and after 3 rounds of lay-offs, I finally got cut. I had gotten to design the storefronts for the Christian Louboutin stores for 2 seasons and created some custom furniture and then I was released from this amazing job into the unknown. Luckily, within six months, I found another job and became a designer at the Kohler Company, a global company with 5 billion dollars in annual sales.

Kohler was an entirely different world, a corporate behemoth where there was infighting between departments and an ever-changing understanding of our goals. That being said, I did well there. I had a great first supervisor who really helped me grow, and I brought some awesome products to market. By the end of my time there I was leading a creative team of 4 and was Lead Designer for Showering and Bathing. I built a team of people with different strengths

and weaknesses and we knew how to combine our talents to make the best products in the most productive way. I made sure to emphasize my own strengths and weaknesses, leading by example that we work as a team. One of my favorite parts of the job was the interns who came in all wide-eyed and thirsty for education in the real world. I loved helping them discover their unique strengths, most came from environments where they were expected to be good at everything, I helped them take a step back and find where their strengths and their passions overlapped. Showing them that is where the best work comes from.

This passion for teaching as well as the urge to further pursue my interest in ceramics brought me to the RISD where I started in the fall of 2018. The biggest shock to my system at RISD was that there were no constraints, no expectations of what I was going to work on, I had found my success by being given a series of constraints and designing the best solution I could around that. Now without guidance, I had to really figure out what I did. I spent a lot of time exploring materiality and observing the different ways my peers approached the medium. I was fascinated that we all thought about clay in such different ways. That observation along with the reasoning behind how I coached interns in my previous career led me to design a class for Wintersession that helped others focus on this.

Translating with Clay was a 3-credit class I designed to showcase both artist's strengths and weaknesses and to allow them to teach each other. Assignments combined the written word, 2-d work, and 3-d work. On the first day, I told the class that it wasn't my job to teach them, it was instead to create an environment in which they learn and that they would be learning more from each other than from me. Well, of course, the curriculum didn't go just as planned but we adapted and the work produced in the class was notably 'good'. A ceramics major actually asked someone why my class was producing better work than other classes when I didn't have

requirements. (ha!) There were requirements, just ones that differed from the typical assignments. This class helped spur my realization that I wanted to focus further on education and examine the different ways different people think and how we as teachers can help them on their journeys. This insight prompted my entry into the MA program in Art + Design Education immediately after finishing my MFA.

CHAPTER 3

LITERATURE REVIEW

Early in my review of related literature, I identified a research article that conducted a meta-analysis on the content of the major journals on the subject of the non-traditional student. Donaldson & Townsend (2007) in *Higher Education Journals' Discourse about Adult Undergraduate Students* explored studies focused on the non-traditional student. The authors examined seven academic journals published in the period 1990-2003 and used the following search keywords: adult(s), mature, older, mixed-age or non-traditional age, or non-traditional; to identify associated articles. Their research identified forty-one articles, which is slightly over 2% of the articles contained in those journals over those years.

	1990-2003	
	Total Articles	Adult Focused
The Journal of Higher Education	372	5
Research in Higher Education	478	3
The Review of Higher Education	292	1
General Higher Education Journals	1142	9
NASPA Journal	424	9
Journal of College (Student) Development	759	5
Student Focused Journals	1183	14
Community College Journal of Research and Practice	607	11
Community College Review	287	7
Community College Journals	894	18
		2.01%

Table 4: Donaldson & Townsend (2007) Survey of Educational Journals

I applied these 1990-2003 parameters to the same journals for the years 2010-2020 twelve articles were identified, which showed a notable decline from 2.01% to .65% in the subject area.

	2010-2020	
	Total Articles	Adult focused
The Journal of Higher Education	352	1
Research in Higher Education	426	3
The Review of Higher Education	265	1
General Higher Education Journals	1043	5
NASPA Journal	340	0
Journal of College (Student) Development	675	1
Student Focused Journals	1015	1
Community College Journal of Research and Practice	736	5
Community College Review	181	1
Community College Journals	917	6
		0.65%

Table 5: 2021 Survey of Educational Journals using the same parameters as Donaldson & Townsend (2007)

In the article “*Dedicated to Their Degrees: Adult Transfer Students in Engineering Baccalaureate Programs,*” which focused on non-traditional students that had transferred into four-year undergraduate engineering programs the authors stated:

We found students were motivated to pursue engineering programs because of the perceived prestige associated with becoming an engineer and because of their personal curiosity in solving problems and understanding how things work. The participants further demonstrated their motivation for learning through their high postbaccalaureate aspirations, which included pursuing graduate school. To achieve academic and vocational success, students strategically developed peer relationships and selectively participated in engagement opportunities with the greatest professional or academic benefits. (Allen & Zhang, 2015)

Although focused in a different field, these insights may also apply to non-traditional students spurred to pursue art and design programs. They may have a similar motivation, aspiration, and strategy to achieve success within their respective fields.

In the Johnson & Nussbaum (2012) article *Achievement Goals and Coping Strategies: Identifying the Traditional/Nontraditional Students Who Use Them*, the authors found that “Overall, the nontraditional-clustered students had higher averages for age, GPA, mastery-approach goals, performance-approach goals, and task-oriented coping” (p. 48). This finding serves as a helpful reminder that the skills of the non-traditional student are different from that of the traditional student and that their needs in the classroom may vary as well. Griffin (2019) continued the acknowledgment of differing skills in *Psychosocial Techniques Used in the Classroom* by focusing on teaching non-traditional students’ skills that helped them catch up with newer teaching/learning methods that were introduced after older students had completed their high school education.

The education technique of service-learning was documented in Largent (2013). Mainly practiced in the community college environment, the benefits of service-learning transferred to non-traditional students as well as traditional students with an emphasis that reflective writing exercises post-service activity proved to be exceptionally helpful in helping them connect to their classwork.

A topic that kept coming up in discussions as I explored the topic of this thesis was what do you consider a non-traditional student. Kim (2010) explored this area specifically in *Redefining Nontraditional Students: Exploring the Self-Perceptions of Community College Students*.

While research that categorizes students by age is a practical way to study a unique population within community colleges, this approach may not be the most preferred way to examine the complexities of community college students. This study focused on community college students' self-perceptions of their primary roles as students,

employees, and parents, thereby offering an alternative to utilizing predefined categories in order to distinguish between groups (e.g., based on age). (p.402)

Age combined with gender, along with age-restricted to an even tighter parameter serves as the focus for additional research.

The specific issues of adult women in college were addressed in two articles. In *Exploring the Persistence*, Cox and Ebbers (2010) focused their attention on adult women enrolled part-time in community college, trying to better understand the drivers that helped them persist. This theme was extended into a university setting with "*Starting from Ground Zero: Constraints and Experiences of Adult Women Returning to College*", which found that a sense of community was a great driver.

They were seeking a social community in addition to the academic one. Social community was highly desired but often arose when they discussed ways in which the institution did not meet their needs. The age difference between the women and traditional students, a lack of study/social space for adult students, and the scattered nature and frenetic pace of the adult students' busy lives resulted in their having few opportunities to gather. Still, they sought support from what we came to call a "community of women," in particular, their fellow women adult students. (Deutsch & Schmertz, 2011, p.496)

Although both articles focus on gender it is a notable insight that social community is so important and should be kept in mind for non-traditional students as a whole and not just female non-traditional students. There has been a shift in the non-traditional student population on the far end of the age range as Baby Boomers retire as Cruce (2011) states:

Over the next decade, Baby Boomers will be reaching retirement age in large numbers and the U.S. will be undergoing one of the most significant demographic shifts in its history. This demographic shift has important implications for the role of higher education as a provider of lifelong learning and for the changing composition of postsecondary institutions. (p. 611)

The positive shift enrollment is almost exclusively on a part-time basis. I have found that much of the quantitative research on non-traditional students focuses on the business of education. Rosenberg (2016), for instance, explores the transfer intent of students from 2 to 4-year programs focusing on age as a quantifier and their ‘transfer capital’. And Titus (2011) examines how to maximize adult enrollment in state schools to potentially improve comparative rankings between states.

I discovered two articles published in domestic journals that reported on European studies. Gilardi (2011) focused on the non-traditional student in a commuter school in Italy, while Tieben (2019) explored the Non-completion, Transfer, and Dropout of Traditional and Non-traditional Students. Since the socio-economic characteristics differ notably between these countries and the U.S. these articles were not explored in depth. However, these articles identified using the parameters established by Donaldson and Townsend (2007) related to this thesis topic in only the broadest of terms. In hopes of identifying more articles of merit the authors’ search was widened to include all journals accessible published from 2010 forward. One study discussed the difficulties identifying non-traditional students due to privacy concerns so they took to identifying potential students by their use of the “ ‘non-traditional’ student lounge” (Adams & Corbett, 2010, p.14). This study compared the experiences, motivations, and expectations of non-traditional and traditional students within one university. The research, however, presented the authors with some unexpected findings. The study revealed that non-traditional students didn’t find the level of difficulty hard, but found the volume of work to be challenging, differing from the traditional students. The authors hypothesized that the non-traditional student would want online classes for flexibility but in reality, none did, preferring in-person or hybrid instructional modalities. Additionally, non-traditional students wanted some social engagement

on campus, 1-2 times a month, but most didn't want more or less than that (Adams & Corbett, 2010, p.23-25). A seemingly perfect match for my search parameters emerged when I found George (2020) article *Non-traditional Students and the Design Studio: Creating a Productive Learning Environment*. The author states:

Despite the many differences in the desires of a studio space between traditional and non-traditional students, the authors do not believe that programs need to reinvent the studio in order to accommodate non-traditional students. Of the thirty factors students were surveyed on, only four revealed a significant difference between traditional and non-traditional students. However, the four issues where these groups of students differ strike at some of the core elements of the studio environment. It is here that both groups of students have different desires for their studio experience that, while not mutually exclusive, pose a degree of polarity between several of the factors considered (p.33-34).

And although interesting to note the slight differences in preferences for traditional and non-traditional students in regards to studio workspace, it was an incredibly focused exploration of Landscape Architecture students that could arguably be translated throughout the school, but yet additionally, the insight only focused on the physical environment and the recommendation was to change nothing.

CHAPTER 4

SURVEY & SURVEY INSIGHTS

While the survey was distributed to a significant number of students and faculty, the response level was in all candor disappointing. Despite multiple pursuits for participants in the end my investigation centered on the responses from three undergraduate students and three members of faculty. To maintain their privacy, the students are identified as S1, S2, and S3. Interestingly, their answers to most survey questions were very different from each other. The faculty surveys, although they did have differentiation, were more universally in agreement and are identified as F1, F2, and F3.

Student Survey

The commonalities of the participants in the student survey are that they are all men in their 30's and are transfer students who entered as sophomores but had years more previous educational experience beyond freshman education. One has a BA, one an associate's degree in fine art, and another enough college and community college credits to potentially complete a BFA degree.

Before coming to RISD they worked in various fields including, military, special effects makeup, and engineering. The decision to pursue a BFA was also varied; S3 wanted an avenue to tell their story and saw art as a means to accomplish that; S2 realized that their non-art career made them miserable, and S1 wants to work as a college professor and therefore needed more education. For all the students the perception of RISD being one of the best was the major role in applying. One student applied, just to see if they could get in even though it wasn't their first choice and the other two saw it as a dream school.

When asked about their relationships with their fellow ‘traditional’ students all noted a difference or separation but their perceptions of what that was like differed greatly. S1 felt like the dynamic was that of an older sibling and saw himself as a mentor, S3 noted that there was very little in common with people who hadn’t experienced much life and also noted that the COVID-19 Pandemic precautions seemed to interfere with the development of friendships. Subject S2 did see the opportunity to build solid friendships, *“after a while, realizing how smart and thoughtful students are at RISD (most of them), I usually become good friends with most of them.”*

Some of the most divergent responses came from asking about how being an older student influenced their relationships with faculty. S1 hadn’t thought about it or noted a difference based on age whereas S2 compared their time in academia as a traditional student vs. a non-traditional student and discussed how much easier it is to build relationships when older, *“I feel like the “social” skills I’ve obtained from work helps me to approach professors with much ease.”* S3 called the dynamic negative and said, *“they are intimidated by me.”*

The effects in the classroom were also discussed in different ways. S1 again referenced COVID precautions as an obstacle, S3 enjoyed how he was able to discuss his experience working in a vast range of materials and S2 noted that he enjoyed taking a step back and learning from the perspectives of his younger classmates.

When asked about what they wish they had known that may have affected their decision to enroll, S1 responded, *“It is very rigorous, to a fault in my opinion.”* and saw that rigor as a scheme to weight national school rankings. S2 focused on his fear and anxiety related to his decision to leave a successful (although unsatisfying) career and his age upon graduation as a potential negative for potential employers. S3 didn’t realize that the sculpture program had such

a strong performance emphasis and this was not something he was interested in. He discussed changing majors if possible.

One of the closing questions asked about recommendations for potential new non-traditional students and the responses are telling of how divergent the students are:

“Go to a school that offers atmosphere (not Rhode Island) as well as a dynamic syllabus. One where creativity is valued, cherished, and nurtured. Everyone has the ability to become technical, but not everyone has the ability to be interesting.” - S1

“I would love to say “follow your dream”. But be rational about your decisions. Think about financial aspects as well as sense of time.” - S2

“Keep your mouth closed, head down, pretend that you do not know anything because then they will love you!” - S3

Faculty Survey

The faculty survey also garnered 3 responses. For their privacy, the faculty are identified as F1, F2, and F3. F1 is a part-time teacher new to the field, F2 & F3 are full-time professors with 11+ years of experience. Each respondent answered ‘military’ when asked about their non-traditional students' background before art school, with ‘life,’ ‘work,’ and ‘lower-paying art-related work’ all mentioned once.

When asked to elaborate on the discernible differences between non-traditional students and more typical undergrads in their approach to class, F1 noted that they were different, more elaboration was provided by the full-time faculty:

“The non-traditional student doesn’t take being in school for granted. They are sometimes more serious about the endeavor, and less skilled at first at “being a student.” I find that refreshing. They are usually older and seem to fit less easily in the social life of their classmates (they seem to have well developed social lives beyond school).” - F2

“Non-traditional students are far more likely to adapt every assignment to address issues they feel deficient in their education thus far, rather than seeing them as an irrelevancy.

For example, an assignment to do a perspective study of a building will turn into a landscape or environmental study when addressed by a non-traditional student, but often be a bare-bones perspective exercise for a "normal" undergrad.” - F3

The faculty didn't find non-traditional students to have different expectations from classes than the expectations of traditional students but F3 did continue the discussion of how the non-traditional student approaches to class, *“they are more willing to ask questions, request discussions, and generally use my abilities more effectively than younger undergrads. While I try to engage younger students to the same degree, often they are too concerned with externals to commit as fully as non-traditional students.”*

The expectations faculty had of their students' performance did not differ between traditional and non-traditional students. *“I expect of myself that I will hold all expectations of the students' work the same”* (F2). One faculty member elaborated on the difference in the success of non-traditional students vs. traditional:

“My expectations are always sky-high for all my students. Many exceed them, and an absurdly high number of non-traditional students do, but that doesn't mean I change my expectations or behavior.” - F3

Seeming to summarize the general perception of faculty surveyed that non-traditional students tend to excel in the undergraduate program.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

First, I feel it is important to reiterate the acknowledgment of the small scale of these surveys and that the data derived from them is assuredly only qualitative. I view this as an inspiration point, a direction, for continued research. At first glance, it appeared that the respondents seem to be polarized in their perspectives and I wonder if that polarization reflects the state of non-traditional students as a whole or if, in this time and place of pandemic exhaustion (or other unidentified factors). It is important to note here that only students who had strong negative or positive thoughts wanted to take the time to complete the survey. In short, there was no middle ground, or did students without strongly positive or negative opinions just not respond? The survey results, combined with the anecdotal insights, both from my own perspective as a non-traditional undergrad, as an older graduate student witnessing other non-traditional students' undergraduate experiences, and conversations with students and faculty on the subject, guide some takeaways.

It is particularly noteworthy that while the faculty responses are across the board positive in regards to non-traditional students participating in undergraduate education, the students themselves have very polarized responses to life as a non-traditional undergraduate student. For the sake of this thesis that is a benefit as it provides insights into the diversity of reactions, but by percentage, it does not reflect my impressions of how non-traditional students have viewed the undergraduate experience as a whole.

The responses of students S1 and S3 illustrate how unhappy they are with their experiences in school. In the survey and follow-up conversations, S1 expresses frustration, anger, and animosity towards both the faculty, and the curriculum of his chosen major. S1 seems

to exhibit a persecution complex, or just arrogance, (not a shrink!) by stating how the faculty doesn't like him and are jealous of his skills. He has disdain for the way his chosen major is taught and what skills are prioritized and is pursuing a change to a different major. S3 focuses his frustration on the school as a whole, the system. He sees everything as an adversarial relationship and does not like how the school prioritizes its educational dogma. Additionally, S3 has expressed, in follow-up conversations, particular disdain for most of the traditional students whom he sees as spoiled, sheltered, and naive to the real world.

The author suggests that a required day-long visit, pre-enrollment, shadowing a traditional student in the major of interest might alleviate the potential of these reactions in the future. The fundamental characteristic of the non-traditional student is their age, which can give them wisdom and experience and also, sometimes, makes them not amenable to the transformative process of undergraduate studies. They are people who are not discovering their identity of self in tandem with their art education in the same way as traditional students are. It takes a particular state of mind to leave a space where you may be an expert or at least have confidence in the needs of your everyday activities and enter a world where you stick out and it is your primary responsibility to be that of a learner. To leave the comforts of knowing and instead allow yourself to be vulnerable, especially when the comfort of sameness with peers is also removed. A visit to the school and spending, 'a day in the life' would allow non-traditional students to both determine if the focus of their chosen curriculum is what they are expecting and to give them a feel of what it's like being surrounded by much younger classmates who are also peers in this context.

It is clear that faculty enjoy having non-traditional students in their classroom and only speak well of the dynamic, and though not reflected in this limited survey, the majority of

non-traditional students also enjoy and benefit from the experience. It seems, an increase in non-traditional students, prepared for the obstacles of undergraduate life as an older adult, would be a benefit to all, institution, faculty, traditional students, and the non-traditional student.

APPENDIX

Student Survey

Your Name: *

Short answer text

Your (expected) age at graduation: *

Short answer text

Year *

- Freshman
- Sophomore
- Junior
- Senior
- 5th Year Senior
- Already Graduated

Are you a transfer student? *

- Yes
- No

If applicable, please list all previously attended colleges, years of attendance and major.

Long answer text

Tell me about what you did after high school and before coming to RISD. *

Long answer text
.....

Tell me about how you came to the decision to get a degree in Art/Design. *

Long answer text
.....

Tell me about why you chose to go to RISD. *

Long answer text
.....

In what ways, if at all, does being a non-traditional student influence the relationships you have with your classmates? Please elaborate. *

Long answer text
.....

In what ways, if at all, does being a non-traditional student influence the relationships you have with your faculty? Please elaborate. *

Long answer text
.....

In what ways, if at all, does being a non-traditional student influence the classroom dynamics? Please elaborate. *

Long answer text
.....

Is there something you wish you had known before you came to RISD that may have affected your decision to enroll? Please elaborate. *

Long answer text

In light of your experiences, what would your advice be to potential new non-traditional students? Please elaborate. *

Long answer text

Are you available for a follow-up if I have additional/clarifying questions? *

Yes

No

Do you have any suggested names of faculty to receive a survey request about having non-traditional students in their classroom?

Long answer text

Thank you for your time. If you have anything else you'd like to add please use the space below.

Long answer text

Faculty Survey:



Do you teach full-time or part-time. *

Full-Time

Part-Time

How long have you been teaching undergraduate classes? *

0-2 years

3-6 years

7-10 years

11+ years

What kinds of backgrounds have non-traditional students had prior to enrolling full time in an art undergrad program? *

Long answer text

Do you know of past or present non-traditional students that might be interested in answering the student survey? Please include names and email addresses.

Long answer text

Please rate the following statements and elaborate as needed.

Description (optional)

There are often discernible differences between non-traditional student(s) and a more typical undergrads in their approach to my class(es). *

Strongly Agree 1 2 3 4 5 Strongly Disagree

Please elaborate... (discernible differences) *

Long answer text
.....

Non-traditional student(s) have different expectations of your class compared to a more typical undergrad. *

Strongly Agree 1 2 3 4 5 Strongly Disagree

Please elaborate... (NT expectations) *

Long answer text
.....

The presence of non-traditional student(s) in my class has an impact on the learning of the more typical undergrad. *

Strongly Agree 1 2 3 4 5 Strongly Disagree

Please elaborate... (impact on learning of traditional students) *

Long answer text
.....

I have different expectations of non-traditional student(s) in a class compared to typical undergrads. *

Strongly Agree 1 2 3 4 5 Strongly Disagree

Please elaborate... (faculty expectations) *

Long answer text

Is it ok to contact you about the possibility of an interview? (Please provide preferred contact method if yes)

Short answer text

Thank you for your time!

Description (optional)

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