

2022

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### Recommended Citation

Andzik, Natalie R.; Conderman, Gregory; Walker, David A.; and Koehler, Kristen (2022) "Navigating an Undergraduate Teacher Licensure Program as a Non-Traditional Student," *Mid-Western Educational Researcher*. Vol. 34: Iss. 4, Article 4.

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## Navigating an Undergraduate Teacher Licensure Program as a Non-Traditional Student

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*Nearly eight million “non-traditional” students face adversity beyond financial instability, childcare, or full or part-time work when seeking teacher licensure. They must manage logging clinical hours in schools far from home, feel isolated in cohorts of 18–20-year-olds, and sometimes lack support and flexibility from their professors and advisors. We surveyed non-traditional, undergraduate, teacher licensure candidates at a large midwestern university to better understand current attending students' demographics and determine if any relationship(s) existed between variables related to logistical decisions, supports received, or barriers faced/encountered. We summarized findings from 53 participants and offered suggestions to university administrators, professors, and staff to support the growing population of non-traditional teacher candidates.*

*Keywords: non-traditional student, undergraduate, teacher licensure*

### Introduction

Millions of non-traditional college students nationwide are an essential and growing fabric of the university student population. Approximately 7.5 million (38%) of students attending college are considered non-traditional by most definitions (National Center for Educational Statistics, (NCES, 2021); that is, they are 25 years or older. Further, the number of non-traditional students over 25 in higher education is expected to rise at least 5% (i.e., 3.3 million) between 2017 and 2028 (NCES). As noted by Kenner and Weinerman (2011), part of this growth involves three main groups of students who comprise this growing number of adult learners. These include (a) workers who have lost their jobs because of economic issues and who require coursework to refresh their entry level collegiate skills, (b) veterans returning from international conflicts who delayed their education to serve in the armed forces and, (c) adults who have just completed the General Educational Development (GED) test and are moving onto higher education classes. Career changes and divorce are additional reasons for the rise in non-traditional students nationwide (Henson, 2014).

Although researchers agree that the number of non-traditional students has been on the rise since the mid 1980s, one challenge in researching this population is the definition used by researchers (Remenick, 2019). Researchers typically classify non-traditional college students as those over 24 who enroll in college for the first time in several years after completing secondary education (Henson, 2014). In addition to delayed enrollment, researchers from the Department of

Education, Institute of Education Sciences (2011) have included family responsibilities, financial independence, and employment circumstances when classifying non-traditional students. The extent to which a student is non-traditional is determined by the number of these characteristics they possess. If they are employed, do not rely on others for financial support, have dependent children, and have been out of high school for several years, they are considered highly non-traditional. If they delay college enrollment but rely on parental support and have no family obligations, they are considered minimally non-traditional (Henson, 2014). Students over 25 usually have at least four non-traditional factors: financial independence, full-time employment, dependents, and part-time enrollment. Therefore, many older students fall into the highly non-traditional category, which places them at significant risk of not completing their degree (Chen et al., 2020).

Regardless of the definition or characteristics used, non-traditional students are an important community of learners on college campuses. Recognition of non-traditional students in higher education is important because it promotes an awareness of unique issues relevant to them, such as balancing multiple responsibilities at school, work, and home (Bohl et al., 2017). Indeed, university leaders now must consider the services and needs of their non-traditional students.

Admittedly, differences exist between traditional and non-traditional students. Typically, traditional students enter higher education at 18 and directly from high school. Alternatively, traditional students may seek to ease the transition to a four-year institution after continuously attending a technical or community college between two and four years (Laing, et al., 2005). Generally, transitioning to college is smoother for traditional students as their mindset is already centered on a full-time school schedule. Most traditional students move to campus and use university services such as entertainment, health care, and dining (Adams & Corbett, 2010).

In contrast, non-traditional students often have families or spouses, full-time jobs, and mortgages. Therefore, returning to school often requires more planning and lifestyle reassessment than it does for traditional students. Also, non-traditional students typically do not participate in or use campus services (e.g., meals, housing, health care) in the same ways as traditional students as they often have support systems outside the university system (Adams & Corbett, 2010). Non-traditional students tend to be more diverse than younger students in their expectations of the college or university and their motivations for attending (Newbold et al., 2010).

These challenges are experienced by those seeking teaching licensure, which was the population addressed by our study. Teacher licensure candidates also experience unique issues such as clinical and student teaching experiences, which may be located a considerable distance from home and family, additional fees for background checks, state licensure tests, and other required assessments, and required courses which must be completed in a specific sequence, or which require completion of prerequisite courses or tests. Our literature review did not yield any studies addressing this subgroup and their unique situations. We were especially interested in this subgroup as we observed an increase in nontraditional students in our College of Education over the last few years. Several students shared challenges they experienced due to our university, college, or department policies or procedures. Therefore, to better understand these needs and challenges, our study focused only on students from our institution.

## Perceptions and Characteristics of Non-traditional Students

Several researchers have further analyzed the perceptions and characteristics of non-traditional students in higher education institutions. These factors provide essential information to guide college administrators and faculty in reviewing or developing policies and practices for this growing college population. This section will highlight studies that provide information about the profile of non-traditional students.

Adams and Corbett (2010) maintained that 10% of their student population identified as non-traditional, and about half felt academically unprepared. Non-traditional students had more difficulty with course workload, especially keeping up with assignments, readings, and in-class lectures. This might be attributed to the fewer study and technology skills and lack of current background knowledge for some classes compared to traditional students (Henson, 2014). Further, non-traditional students are likely to have a gap in their educational development process before starting their post-secondary education (Kenner & Weinerman, 2011). However, because they are more committed to their education than their traditional peers, they often devote more time and effort toward their learning to succeed (Adams & Corbett, 2010).

Additional factors distinguish non-traditional students from traditional students. About 40% of non-traditional students in the Adams and Corbett study reported spending six or more hours a week preparing and studying for their classes, which was considerably more than reported by traditional students. They were also less active in campus activities when compared to traditional students. These findings were shared by Forbus et al. (2011), who discovered that significantly more non-traditional students were married, commuted to college, were less interested and less involved in the social aspects of college, and worked more hours each week when compared to traditional students. Admittedly, adjusting to additional needs for studying and commuting combined with working and having family commitments creates a different college experience for non-traditional students (Tilley, 2014).

Motivational-related characteristics of nontraditional students also distinguish them from traditional students. Johnson et al. (2016) investigated differences between traditional and non-traditional students' self-determination, attributions, expectancy values, and motivational variables that best predict students' academic achievement. Non-traditional students reported higher self-efficacy, teacher academic support, identified regulation, intrinsic regulation, and the attributions of strategy, interest, and teacher influence than traditional students. These results suggested that the two groups experienced and pursued academic work with different motivations. Ability attributions and cost value predicted higher grade point averages (GPAs) for traditional students, while self-efficacy and peer personal support predicted non-traditional students' GPAs. These researchers emphasized that these two different predictive models for traditional and non-traditional students' academic achievement have important implications for college personnel. Similarly, Warden and Myers (2017) discovered that motivation, self-efficacy, and the need for the cognitive challenge were most closely related to GPAs for non-traditional students.

Non-traditional students also experience and use different coping skills than traditional students. Forbus et al. (2011) found that non-traditional students expressed more stress related to family,

school, and work issues. They reported using active stress management methods (e.g., putting things in a broader perspective, organizing, prioritizing) more frequently than traditional students. Specifically, being married or being a parent often produce stress by creating situations that require adjustment (Newbold et al., 2010). Hart (2003) found that non-traditional students have limited financial resources, likely related to the cost of raising a family and the nature of part-time or low-wage jobs. Non-traditional students also experience academic stress, perhaps caused by adjusting to unfamiliar requirements and requests to complete projects that they may not perceive as meaningful (Njumbwa, 2008). Understanding student stress is important because, without the proper tools to deal with stress, students tend to be unsuccessful in coursework and may drop out of college (Henson, 2014).

Another study area involves how non-traditional students persist and what supports they find helpful to continue through graduation. This is an important line of research because one of the challenges for non-traditional students is a high attrition rate (Kenner & Weinerman, 2011). Although graduation data are available from numerous sources, the parameters used to define graduation cohorts do not apply to most institutions with an adult student majority, and graduation rates depend on the database (Miller, 2014). However, the best estimates are that non-traditional students have dramatically lower graduation rates than traditional students (Markle, 2015). For example, more than one-third of non-traditional students in Markel's study considered withdrawing from school due to challenges with dealing with finances or managing their day-to-day responsibilities.

An early study from Ely (1997) discovered that faculty play a critical role in connecting non-traditional students to the campus environment and that non-traditional students prefer curricula that incorporate active and collaborative learning approaches, which influence persistence. More recently, Clark (2012) noted that non-traditional students emphasized that a sense of belonging and encouraging relationships mattered. Their connections with faculty, staff, and student peers encouraged them to persist through obstacles. Students also reported that their self-confidence grew through the sense of belonging, shared struggle, diversity, and supportive relationships. Additionally, Bohl et al. (2017) reported that non-traditional students reported faculty flexibility and approachability as a primary source of support in their success.

Interestingly, Pontes and Pontes (2012) found that online coursework eliminates differences between non-traditional and traditional students in dropout rates or future enrollment gaps. Similarly, the most meaningful differences between traditional and non-traditional students were eliminated in Tilley's study involving students taking online courses (Tilley, 2014). Non-traditional students who participated looked much more like students considered non-traditional in prior studies (Tilley).

In summary, non-traditional students have unique profiles and unique circumstances. Typically defined by their age but also by life events such as work, family, and financial obligations, non-traditional students are on the rise in institutions of higher learning. Despite the gap in their education, which results in challenges with study and technology skills, they often are more serious about their school-work, intrinsically motivated to succeed, and use active coping skills to address stress. Even so, their graduation rates are lower when compared to the traditional student body.

We intended to explore and hopefully codify non-traditional students' experiences navigating an undergraduate program regarding how they may address logistical decisions, support services, and barriers faced/encountered. Given these focal points, specific research questions included: 1) What demographic tendencies do non-traditional students represent?; 2) What, if any, relationship(s) exists between variables of study that address non-traditional students' logistical decisions?; 3) What, if any, relationship exists between variables of study that manage non-traditional students' supports received; and 4) What, if any, relationship exists between variables of study that negotiate non-traditional students' barriers faced/encountered?

### **Method**

To better understand the experiences of non-traditional pre-service teachers, the first and fourth authors developed a survey. The first author is an associate professor in her university's Special and Early Education Department. She has been working with non-traditional students in higher education for seven years. The fourth author was a non-traditional pre-service teacher candidate.

### **Survey Development**

After reviewing the literature, the authors developed questions about their experience with this student population. They created an initial survey draft survey that was then revised in an iterative process by the expert panel, which included two non-traditional students and an administrator in higher education. The team members edited the survey as they saw fit and then shared it with the team. After each member of the team's edits were taken into consideration, a draft was agreed upon. Two non-traditional students completed the survey to test its sensitivity, reliability, and ease of use. With feedback from the testers, the survey was again revised into its final draft (see Appendix A).

The survey included eight demographic questions (e.g., years completed at the university, previous experience, family and marital status), seven questions about logistical decisions related to why they chose their university (e.g., how many units did you transfer?, why did you choose this university?), four questions about supports they have received (e.g., are professors available to you?), three questions about barriers that they have faced, and one question about suggestions for the university, college, or department.

### **Survey Distribution and Data Collection**

After obtaining university Institutional Review Board approval, the survey was hosted on the online platform, Qualtrics, and a link to the survey was included in a recruitment email. The recruitment email was sent directly to all enrolled students at one midwestern university who were 25 years of age or older and seeking teacher licensure. In addition, recruitment fliers were hung in all common spaces in campus buildings housing teacher licensure programs. All recruitment materials also encouraged students to forward the link to peers they knew might be eligible to participate. To incentivize participation, \$5 was offered to anyone who completed the survey.

## Sample

The survey was sent via university email to all non-traditional teacher licensure-seeking students within a midwestern University. The exact number of students who were sent the email was unknown based on the automated nature of the bulk email system, and many emails were likely sent to ineligible students. However, an accessible population of 199 students were eligible to take the survey at the time of dissemination, and approximately 27% of students completed the survey. Fifty-three eligible non-traditional pre-service teacher candidates responded to and completed the survey, and each was included in the analysis. Included responses had to meet the following inclusion criteria: the respondent had to (a) consent to participate and allow their answers to be reported, (b) acknowledge that they were seeking teaching licensure, (c) indicate that they took at least two years off between graduating high school and entering their university, and (d) complete the entire survey.

## Data Analysis

Using the software program Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (v. 26.0), we employed descriptive statistics to summarize various sample-based demographic results predicated on participant demographic frequencies and percentages (i.e., research question 1). Additionally, we conducted correlation analyses (i.e., Pearson correlation coefficients) to discern possible inferential results based on the relationships, directionality, and strength of relationships between variables of study (i.e., research questions 2–4). A qualitative inquiry was used to determine common response patterns among participants among open-ended questions. Each response was reviewed, coded into common responses, and summarized based on the themes or focus of each response. For example, “what positive experiences have you had as a non-traditional student?” responses were organized into categories such as nothing positive to report, supportive peers, professors, and being in a flexible and understanding environment. These data were reported as a summary based on the responses provided, without bias.

## Results

### Descriptive Statistics: Demographics

For the sample of 53 non-traditional student participants in this research study, research question 1 addressed potential demographic tendencies and summarizations. The average age of the non-traditional student participants was 36 years, ranging between 25 and 52 years. This sample comprised primarily female participants (n = 43 or 81%) with fewer male participants (n = 10 or 19%). In terms of ethnicity, Caucasian individuals made-up 83% (n = 44), Other = 13% (n = 7), and African American = 4% (n = 2). Marital status was equally split within these two main categories: Married = 45% (n = 24) and Never Married = 45% (n = 24), with Prefer not to Answer = 6% (n = 3), Divorced = 2% (n = 1), and Separated = 2% (n = 1). The household income of participants skewed toward the lower end of the financial range in which: < \$10,000 = 17% (n = 9), \$10,000 - \$19,999 = 13% (n = 7), \$20,000 - \$29,999 = 9% (n = 5), \$30,000 - \$39,999 = 8% (n = 4), \$40,000 - \$49,999 = 6% (n = 3), \$50,000 - \$59,999 = 4% (n = 2), \$60,000 - \$69,999 = 11% (n = 6), \$70,000 - \$79,999 = 4% (n = 2), \$80,000 - \$89,999 = 8% (n = 4),

\$90,000 - \$99,999 = 8% (n = 4), \$100,000 - \$149,999 = 9% (n = 5), and >\$150,000 = 4% (n = 2).

The number of years taken between high school and enrollment in the university indicated a large gap where 9+ years was the majority within this group: 2 years = 13% (n = 7), 3 years = 4% (n = 2), 4 years = 6% (n = 3), 5 years = 6% (n = 3), 6 years = 6% (n = 3), 7 years = 8% (n = 4), 8 years = 6% (n = 3), and 9+ years = 53% (n = 28). Responses to post-high school coursework taken indicated that most classes were taken at a community college/technical college, with courses taken at a 4-year college in the state where this study was conducted = 25% (n = 13), courses taken at a community or technical college = 68% (n = 36), and courses taken at a 4-year college outside of the state where this study was conducted = 8% (n = 4). Lastly, participants tended to work more hours outside of their university (> 20 hours/week), where no job = 23% (n = 12), job < 10 hours per week = 15% (n = 8), job 10 to 20 hours per week = 9% (n = 5), job > 20 to 30 hours per week = 30% (n = 16), and job > 30 hours per week = 23% (n = 12).

### **Inferential Statistics: Correlations**

Pearson correlational coefficients were conducted based on variables from the survey clustered around the focal points for research questions 2–4 (i.e., non-traditional students' logistical decisions, supports received, barriers faced).

For research question 2, logistical decision results indicated that there was a statistically significant relationship between non-traditional student participants' age and their decision to enroll in the university for a career change ( $r = .646, p < .05; r^2 = .42$ ). This statistically significant correlation was moderately strong in magnitude and had a positive relationship with a large effect size ( $r^2 = .42$ ), where 42% of the variance in enrolling in college for a career change was accounted for by having participant age paired with it or the converse in this bivariate relationship (Cohen, 1988). As non-traditional students' age increased, they were more apt to enroll in the university to enact a career change. Furthermore, in this area of inquiry for research question 2, a statistically significant, moderate, and positive relationship with a -large effect size between marital status and enrolling in the university for a career change ( $r = .538, p < .05, r^2 = .29$ ) was found. Thus, with non-traditional students' marital status in the categories of "Never Married" or "Married," they tended to enroll in the university for a career change.

For research question 3 or services received, a statistically significant, moderate, and positive result with a large effect size was indicated between the familiarity of services offered by the university for non-traditional students and actual use of the services offered by the university to non-traditional students ( $r = .526, p < .05, r^2 = .28$ ). The more familiar non-traditional students were with the services offered to them, the more frequently they tended to use such services.

Lastly, for research question 4 or barriers faced, a statistically significant, small, and positive relationship with a moderate effect size was noted between household income and the number of hours per week worked while enrolled at the university ( $r = .287, p < .05, r^2 = .08$ ). That is, non-traditional students who worked more hours per week and had a lower income tended to enroll at the university.



## Qualitative Analysis

When asked if any professors had made special accommodations for them given their non-traditional status, 11 participants (20%) responded and reported that they received either extensions or flexible deadlines. One participant stated they were given an alternate assignment based on their extensive experience in the field. Ten participants (18%) responded about how their traditional peers treated them differently. The majority mentioned feeling respected or even treated as the “dad” of the cohort. Seven participants (13%) responded when asked if professors treated them differently. The typical response among these participants was that they felt a stronger connection with their professors because of their age. Unfortunately, four participants noted they felt that some of their professors treated them as though they had “nothing but school to do...” and felt like they were just expected to figure things out independently. When asked about their advising experience, responses differed among the seven (13%) responses. Some felt their advising was exceptional, while others exclaimed how their advisor “sucked.”

When asked what positive experiences they have had as a non-traditional student, 50 (94%) participants responded. Fewer than 10 participants indicated there was nothing positive to share. The overwhelming majority had positive experiences, such as being around supportive peers, professors, and a flexible and understanding environment. A few participants noted that it was easier on them as they were older and wiser, and others commented that it was refreshing learning to be a teacher with their children. When asked the opposite question related to any struggles they faced as a non-traditional student, the most common response was related to time and not having enough of it. Several students added that the schedule, location of clinical placements, and class times were challenging to balance with work, life, children, and other responsibilities.

Finally, nearly all participants shared ideas when asked about suggestions they may have for the university or their specific program regarding how non-traditional students can be better supported. The most compelling sentiment was that professors and administrators should consider the various demands non-traditional students have that traditional students do not. For example, participants noted childcare, commuting, and sustaining employment. Suggestions to combat these barriers included offering more online coursework, flexible scheduling, extra credit, and more clinical placement options (e.g., closer to their homes).

## Discussion

The primary purpose of this study was to learn about the characteristics of non-traditional undergraduate teacher licensure candidates at our university. This student population has not been recently studied at our university, and we believe that survey results may guide administrators toward developing helpful services, programs, or policies for this growing student population.

Our non-traditional teacher education candidates tended to be in their mid-30s, experienced a nine-year gap from previous studies, were female, Caucasian, worked outside of the home, transferred from a community college, and represented the lower economic range. About half

identified as married and half identified as never married. Overall, these characteristics are like those described in previous reports (Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, 2011) and generally fall within the “highly non-traditional” classification, as noted by Hensen (2014). It is not surprising that most respondents were Caucasian females, given the geographic location of the study was in a predominantly Caucasian geographic area and the sizeable elementary education, early childhood, and special education programs offered at our university, which attract more females than males.

One unique feature of this study was the focus on non-traditional undergraduate candidates seeking teacher licensure. Teacher licensure programs are unique as they include specialized general education requirements, frequent health and criminal background checks, required field experiences, a semester for the culminating student teaching experience, and various program and state assessments and applications required for teacher licensure. All the teacher education programs at our university are fully accredited, which means they have met rigorous standards for initial teacher licensure, as evidenced by an external review process (CAEP, 2020). Being “out of step” with these requirements can delay graduation and increase college costs. Further, many courses have prerequisites, must be taken with a corequisite, or are offered only once a year.

Therefore, non-traditional students must be vigilant about communicating regularly with their academic advisor by sharing their needs and wants while also noting deadlines, costs, and required meetings that may interfere with work and family responsibilities. For example, our clinical program coordinators arrange field experience and student teaching placements one year in advance and attempt to place candidates for these required experiences within an hour of their homes. Even so, such placements are not guaranteed, and commutes to field experiences and a semester-long student teaching experience pose unique challenges for single parents, those without transportation, those who are employed, or those with dependent children. Admittedly, navigating these teacher licensure requirements can challenge all students, but they may pose additional and unique issues for non-traditional students. Therefore, faculty and staff in teacher education programs need to be transparent about such policies, provide information about them frequently and in multiple venues, and develop proactive systems to minimize cost and error and improve graduation rates for non-traditional students. Several participants wrote comments on their survey that they experienced issues with academic advising that delayed their plans, and others noted appreciation for the excellent advising they received.

As two-thirds of our non-traditional students are transfer students from community colleges or technical schools, recruitment efforts and accurate academic advising begin at these institutions. Gist et al. (2019) emphasized that recruitment efforts for non-traditional teacher education students can include adult members of the local school and geographic community, such as paraprofessionals, school cafeteria workers, crossing and security guards, parents, community activists, and religious leaders. These individuals may be interested in becoming a teacher and would consider a career change if support was available.

Similarly, all students considering transferring should be able to plan their entire academic program, anticipate costs, understand course loads, and adjust personal and family commitments accordingly. Articulation agreements establish equivalent courses that will be transferred from

community colleges into the university and help advise those continuing their education to a four-year institution. Ongoing communication among community college and four-year academic advisors is necessary due to frequent changes and requirements in state teaching licensure requirements. Dual enrollment options offer community college students a unique opportunity to simultaneously take courses at both institutions.

One promising initiative our Deans have recently taken is offering two of our teacher licensure programs (elementary and special education) entirely at two local partner community colleges—sufficient enrollment in these two programs supported this partnership. Traditional and nontraditional students attending those community colleges can complete their four-year teaching degrees without commuting to a local university. Clinical and student teaching sites have also been arranged in collaboration with new local school partners for these students. These opportunities especially support non-traditional students by providing a seamless transition to their four-year institution and reducing time and cost barriers. Ongoing research will help discern these new programs' effects (and challenges).

Many respondents identified as career changers seeking a more personally rewarding and stable career. Career changes are often associated with an eventual increase in financial resources such as salary and other benefits such as insurance and tenure. Over 50% of our respondents reported an income of under \$50,000, and 30% reported an income under \$20,000. These findings are consistent with those from Hart (2003), who noted that non-traditional students reported financial challenges. Our state's average entry-level teacher salary was \$45,997, ranging from \$40,154 to \$53,100 (Entry-level teacher salary in Illinois, 2021). The average teacher salary in our state was \$61,651, but the range typically falls between \$53,900 and \$71,204. Salary ranges vary widely depending on the school district and other factors, including education, endorsements, additional skills, and the number of years of full-time teaching experience (Teacher's salary in Illinois, 2021). Based on the demographics of our respondents, it appears that some participants will most likely be the sole income provider while others will supplement the household income. For some, if not most, a teaching position will improve the overall standard of living by providing a higher and more stable income for single people or spouses who do not work and contributing to a dual income for others.

Similarly, the participant's income level and current workload suggest a need for financial support for continuing studies. Our university provides a wide array of financial support for students, but most forms of financial aid, including most scholarships, are earmarked for full-time students. Family and work-related responsibilities make it difficult to attend full-time school to qualify for such resources. One participant noted: "It would be great if the university offered tuition assistance or support for non-traditional students with dependents. One major stress as a non-traditional student is working full time to continue to support my family while pursuing my degree. Onsite affordable daycare could also greatly support non-traditional students with young children." Offering flexible payment tuition plans, increasing options for sharing or leasing textbooks, and freezing tuition are additional ways to support all students financially. Our non-traditional students have also noted that online or hybrid courses reduce travel time and transportation costs, and they would appreciate "part-time" parking passes offered at a reduced rate.

Over 50% of the participants reported working 20 hours or more per week. A closer review of responses indicated that some of those experiences involve working with children and youth in educational, recreational, or other contexts. Honoring such experiences by granting field experience credit for them supports program progression and encourages non-traditional students to gain valuable experiences in their course of study. Learning skills on the job may help non-traditional students make connections to methods courses while providing authentic opportunities to practice methods and technologies. Standards-based systems for substituting prior (or existing) experiences for field experiences can include portfolios, self-evaluations, supervisor evaluations, and recordings of teaching, which are evaluated by teacher education faculty. Such experiences should also include opportunities for candidates to a) receive systematic feedback on their teaching and b) analyze, apply, and reflect upon the teaching context and the needs of students (Darling-Hammond, 2014). Further, innovative, collaborative programs between the school and university administrators (sometimes referred to as Grow Your Own programs) that support paraprofessionals to become licensed teachers who are then employed in their local schools have been successful in recruiting and retaining a diverse teaching faculty, especially in rural or hard-to-fill teaching contexts (Gist, Bianco, & Lynn, 2019). Similarly, alternative teacher licensure programs, which often provide a quicker path leading to the teaching profession, may be suitable for non-traditional students while addressing the nation's teaching shortage (Bowling & Ball, 2018).

Not surprisingly, we noted a positive correlation between student knowledge of university services and the use of those services. Our traditional students learn about university services as freshmen through orientation and advising meetings. Living in the residence halls and being on campus provides opportunities for students to learn about organizations and opportunities as well as the "hidden curriculum." For example, informal encounters allow traditional students to share information about professors, classes, and assignments. They share information and tips not found in any catalog or syllabus. Non-traditional students often do not have access to this information due to their living situation or their inactivity in campus activities or services (Adams & Corbett, 2010). Therefore, they may benefit from mentoring associated with these issues. Such mentoring is especially helpful for students representing at-risk groups, such as first-generation or minority students (Smith, 2013), and may provide the sense of belonging and personal connection that non-traditional students seek (Clark, 2012).

### **Concluding Thoughts**

In closing, this study provided a glimpse into the demographics of non-traditional students in our teacher education program. Demographic profiles paralleled those from the existing literature concerning family, financial, and work responsibilities. However generalization of these findings to other areas or universities should be made with caution. These profiles provide a starting point for analyzing existing services for non-traditional students and considering efforts such as early recruitment, advising and mentoring programs, work experience credit, and flexible financing options. Further, our recent partnership with two local community colleges is a promising effort to support traditional and non-traditional students in completing their degrees close to home in a familiar environment. Innovative programs like this provide paths for all teacher candidates to meet their professional goals while reducing existing barriers successfully. This innovative approach resulted from listening to students, thinking creatively, and working collaboratively

with invested partners. We hope it is one of many new initiatives that can benefit all students in reaching their professional goals.

### **Author Note**

Natalie R Andzik is an associate professor in the Special and Early Education Department at Northern Illinois University. Her research interests coalesce around supporting practitioners to use evidence-based practices when supporting the unique needs of students with extensive support needs who also have complex communication needs.

Gregory Conderman is Professor Emeritus, Department of Special and Early Education, Northern Illinois University. His research interests are effective instructional methods for students with disabilities and co-teaching

David A. Walker is a Professor of Educational Technology, Research, and Assessment Department at Northern Illinois University. His research interests include quantitative research methods and statistics.

Kristen Koehler is now a general education teacher who is developing a program for K-5 students connecting STEAM concepts with agriculture.

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Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was obtained for this study.

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**Appendix A**

1. How old are you?
2. To which gender identity do you most identify?
3. Please describe your race.
4. What is your marital status?
5. Please describe your household income.
6. How many years did you take between graduating high school and entering XXX?
7. Did you complete any post-high school coursework before coming to XXX?
8. In what state did you complete coursework before entering XXX?
9. In what college/university did you complete your post-high school coursework?
10. How many semesters have you completed at XXX?
11. What was the main factor for the gap in time between your high school completion and your enrollment at XXX: Marriage/children, other family-related events, Work obligation, Vacation, time off, no work/school, did not know what you want to do, Health, Financial reasons?
12. Who do you live with?
13. Rank the following reasons for your enrollment in XXX?
14. Location, Cost, Length of Program, XXX reputation, Recruitment (e.g., online, flyer, visit), Scholarship provided, Friend/family member attend/attended, Other.
15. Did you consider another university besides XXX?
16. What university (universities) did you consider?
  
17. How many semester credits did you transfer to XXX?
18. Did you earn an associate degree prior to coming to XXX?
19. Are you coming to XXX for a career change?
20. What was your previous career?
21. How many years did you work in that field before entering XXX?
22. Do you still work in this profession?
23. What work experience do you have in the field of education?
24. How many hours per week are you working now (not including student teaching or field placements)?
25. How many children do you have?
26. How many miles is your commute to campus?
27. Are you responsible for anyone other than yourself (e.g., parent or family member, children)?
28. Are you familiar with any of the services XXX offers to non-traditional students?
29. Have you taken advantage of any non-traditional services offered by XXX?
30. Please describe what services for non-traditional students you have utilized.
31. What is your level of satisfaction with the services you have used for non-traditional students?
32. Have you been successful when working with an advisor regarding any unique needs related to being a non-traditional student (e.g., scheduling, placement locations, transportation, childcare)?
33. Do you have an XXX advisor or professor who is available to meet with you when you need help or additional support related to being a non-traditional student?

## NON-TRADITIONAL UNDERGRADUATES

34. Have any of your professors made special course accommodations related to your unique needs as a non-traditional student?
35. Do your classmates treat you any differently as a non-traditional student compared to how they treat your peers who are traditional students?
36. Do your professors treat you any differently as a non-traditional student compared to how they treat your peers who are traditional students?
37. Do your advisors treat you any differently as a non-traditional student compared to how they treat your peers who are traditional students?
38. What positive experiences have you had as a non-traditional student?
39. Please share any struggles you have had as a non-traditional student.
40. What suggestions do you have for the faculty, staff, and administration within your major regarding how non-traditional students are / or could be better supported?
41. What suggestions do you have for XXX regarding how non-traditional students are / or could be better supported?