

The 'New' Nontra



ditional Students

A look at today's adult learners and what colleges can do to meet their unique needs.

By Shanell Leggins



It is becoming more and more common for adults to delay their education and enroll in college one or more years after they have graduated from high school. Typical reasons why a student starts later in life may include military deployment, a career change, lack of financial resources, and/or learning disabilities that hinder academic success. Because of the obstacles these nontraditional students face, it is crucial for them to research potential colleges to ensure the school they ultimately choose will provide them the necessary support.

And unlike in the past decade, colleges will soon need to recruit adult learners to make up for the loss of incoming freshmen straight out of high school. According to Emily Arnim from the Education Advisory Board (EAB) “between 2025 and 2029, the college-age population in the United States is expected to decline by nearly 15 percent due to the sharp drop in fertility rates following the Great Recession, and then drop another percentage point or two in the subsequent years.” This means around 100,000 fewer students will be attending college annually—a critical issue for colleges (loss of money) and for the economy due to a projected decline in the number of qualified workers available to fill specialized jobs that require degrees. Yet adult learners could help fill that gap.

There are three main types of adult learners: graduate and professional students, degree-completers, and neo-traditional students. Students are considered neo-traditional if they fall into any of the following subcategories: first-generation, parent-students, veterans, Pell-eligible, and those that have transfer credits

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from a previous institution. The label accounts for 71 percent of American college students and was coined by Stephen Handel, an executive director for The College Board and Eileen L. Stempel, an inaugural dean and professor of music at the UCLA Herb Alpert School of Music in their book, *Beyond Free College: Making Higher Education Work for 21st Century Students*.

TRANSFER STUDENTS AND DEGREE-COMPLETERS

When planning outreach to adult learners, many institutions focus largely on transfer students and degree-completers. Handel and Stempel argue that “(f)irst-time college students are far more likely to earn a baccalaureate degree if they begin college at a four-year institution, and not at a community college,” therefore, many colleges target students who already have some credits from their institution (degree-completers), or a previous school (transfer students). Unfortunately, there are policymakers and community college administrators who believe that a two-year degree or certificate is “enough” and should be the objective for

college students, but experts say this radical approach will create a culture that dissuades neo-traditional students from attending college at all.

In *Beyond Free College*, Handel and Stempel discuss that although there are specialized careers in the trades and some talented and lucky entrepreneurs who have found success without formal schooling past high school, most careers and advancements require at least a four-year degree. They say adults realize later in life that supporting a family is a priority and that education can be transformative. They value education and understand it can be the key to a middle- or upper-class lifestyle.

Dr. Royce Ann Collins, an associate professor for adult learning and leadership at Kansas State University, emphasized that adult learners need good information before they enroll. “...They need to understand the probability of completing the degree. They need to see the entire road map of courses; that means they know these courses will lead to a conclusion and that they will be offered on a solid timeframe,” she said. “They need to know how

this degree will improve their livelihood and career prospects. They need evidence of career paths and potential salaries.”

Recommendations on how colleges can increase degree completion include introducing challenging and rigorous courses in high school so when students enter college, they are comfortable and familiar with the type of coursework being assigned rather than failing or giving up and dropping out. More importantly, colleges should design evening classes to accommodate those that work a 9-to-5 job and provide child care on campus, so those with young children have the same learning opportunities as others.

Degree-completers don't have a degree and are starting their higher education for the first time, or starting again after previously “stopping out.” They are hard to recruit because of the outside factors that impact their ability to stay in school and complete their degree. According to the Lumina Foundation, 38 percent of students with outside financial, work, or family obligations leave within their first year. Unlike the graduate and professional students, priorities for degree-completers when being recruited are flexible class schedules, various financial supports, and child care offered on campus.

OTHER NONTRADITIONAL STUDENTS

Adults who don't begin right after high school and wait a year are called gap year students. These students delay schooling so they can better understand their own passions and interests, gain independence and life skills, follow a passion that may or may not lead to academia, and acquire a different perspective at the



local and/or international level, according to leaders at the Gap Year Association.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of gap year students has increased exponentially; students do not want to attend college in a fully remote or hybrid model because many don't feel as though they are getting their “money's worth” with this type of learning. Some are also apprehensive that they can't learn the necessary material and be successful without face-to-face interactions with professors. On the other hand, there are students that are taking a gap year, but also dabbling in a few college courses online to get them out of the way.

Sandy Storer, accredited gap year consultant and Gap Year Association board member, and Ethan Knight, Gap Year Association founder and executive

director, say that contrary to what many believe, gap year students are extremely focused when they begin college courses, switch their major less often, achieve higher GPAs compared to their peers, are more likely to graduate on time, and typically have some money saved up (from working during their gap year). Colleges and employers are recognizing the positive characteristics of gap year students and many plan to keep virtual learning as an option so students can work and take classes. They are also constructing communities for gap year students to interact and engage with each other and mentor one another. Even with these types of support, the biggest challenge these students face is the expense of college. Recruitment needs to stem from an affordability perspective, with assistance available to help

students apply and receive grants and scholarships, as well as map out a plan of how to make financial stressors manageable.

Collins, with Kansas State, concurred and explained: “Adult learners are attracted by convenience, ease of access to education (which includes proximity to classes, access to information, and clear process for application), and financial feasibility. Adult learners need to be able to know they are not getting themselves in too much debt.”

A less publicized reason why someone would take a gap year is because of their academic struggles in high school. Cassidy McClellan, an honors student at Alabama A&M University, said nontraditional learners research colleges the same way that traditional learners do, but may have a roadblock that stops them from attending college right away: a learning disability.

It is imperative that colleges and universities understand learning disabilities and realize that not all students may have gotten the appropriate accommodations for standardized tests, affecting their scores. Colleges should also be willing to give accommodations without requiring excessive documentation, which could cause students to quit and give up the application process or to drop out. McClellan asserts: “Being able to receive accommodations from an institution is one of the most important components for nontraditional learners deciding to go to college. Accommodations place nontraditional learners on the same playing field as other students and allow them to excel in the classroom.”



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CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Schools have been able to accommodate more students than ever since the COVID-19 pandemic began and institutions worldwide shifted to remote/online learning. As a result, almost every single college and university has greater opportunities to persuade students to finish their degrees. But even though the pandemic did create learning opportunities for some, the shift to online learning also exacerbated inequities, particularly for students who lack access to technology or the internet.

On the postsecondary side, the pandemic in particular hindered

those who have limited financial resources and those who needed or wanted to transfer to a different institution. The transfer process became extremely difficult and sometimes impossible due to campuses and offices being shut down or run with fewer staff due to layoffs. Data from the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center show the decline in transfer enrollment was 3.8 times larger than the pre-pandemic rate of decline, and non-transfer enrollment decline was 3.6 times larger. A more shocking statistic from Stempel and Handel is that “...nearly 90 percent of students from the lowest income quartile will fail to graduate”—and that was pre-pandemic.

Federal organizations have realized that the cost of college impacts graduation rates, and legislators have instituted performance-based funding, but ironically, this widens the gap between students who are financially sound and those who are not. Experts agree that students from low socioeconomic households consistently perform worse, so the type of funding the government and some institutions put forth doesn't create equity. Colleges and universities need to keep all transfer students in mind and generate feasible pathways that set them up for success.

The notion of equity doesn't just apply to financial status, but also to other groups of people, such as veterans. Although the United States is not in the same situation we were in after WWII in terms of the number of soldiers coming home from war seeking a college education, there is still a large number of vets who are lower to middle class, possess few assets, and usually need to support a family. If we think back to 1945 when the war ended, the United States' current economic conditions are "just as dire, and the future of the middle class is no less threatened," say Handel and Stempel.

Conversely, the biggest benefit in education from the pandemic is the fact that those adults who physically couldn't return to school because of work or child care obligations are now able to take online classes. The University of Maryland, like many others, offers 90 percent of its classes online and was able to re-enroll 123 former students. A "simple" shift in the mode in which learning takes place is changing the lives of many. Eric Fotheringham, the director of strategic academic initiatives at the University of North Carolina made an excellent point in his

"How can colleges reach stopped-out students amid Covid-19" for Georgetown's *The Feed*: "If they're that close to finishing, and they didn't finish, there are a lot of other things happening in their lives that prevented them." Remote learning is the exact type of support needed for many students that rightfully prioritize their families and jobs.

Colleges and universities are taking advantage of online learning by organizing and launching programs that specifically target former students who have credits, but nothing to show for those credits. In 2018 in Louisiana alone there were 441,000 students with college credits but no degree. Handel and Stempel state that 36 million Americans have some credits, but no degree. This is disheartening not only for those students, but also for the companies and organizations that are lacking employment.

In addition to using online learning to persuade students to return, multiple schools award credits in specific areas based on work experience. One example is the University of Louisville (KY), which awards up to 48 credits for past work experience. A major factor in going back to school is price, and giving credits based on experience can save students thousands of dollars, an attractive option for an adult trying to finish their degree. Collins said that colleges should be lenient with accepting transfer credit to help save the incoming student money and to reward them for the work they have already completed. Several deans and scholars claim there are some colleges that require students to retake classes because a particular course must be completed at their school, but that is ludicrous. Staff and faculty should be accepting and supportive of

adult learners and understand how to support these students.

Another way schools are able to convince students to come back as adults is for colleges and universities to pair up with an educational coaching company. Companies, such as ReUp Education, work one-on-one with students. They assist in setting goals, creating a realistic return plan, anticipating obstacles and suggesting resolutions, and providing motivation. ReUp receives part of the students' tuition, so it is a win-win situation for the company and the colleges. Arnim believes that if an adult learner had the ability to complete a degree on their own, they wouldn't be an adult learner and would have started and finished a degree directly out of high school, so it is vital for them to have a mentor or guidance from someone else.

At the end of the day, regardless of how much effort and work colleges and universities invest into recruiting nontraditional students, there are always going to be some that either need to scale back their coursework or "stop out" for the first, second, or even third time. Instead of giving up on these students, schools need to map out a clear pathway for students to come back to school, take courses, and eventually complete a degree. Advisers and counselors can reach out to students who aren't enrolled, using kindness to create and maintain a sense of community and ensure students know the door is always open. Making it "easy" for students to return also relieves the stress and burdens of applying to colleges and universities. ▢

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