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## Non-Traditional Students at Public Regional Universities: A Case Study

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## Non-Traditional Students at Public Regional Universities: A Case Study

### Cover Page Footnote

The author wishes to thank students from a Spring 2017 Senior Seminar class who worked tirelessly to collect, analyze and present the data on which this report is based. Much of the credit goes to them.

# Non-Traditional Students at State Comprehensive Universities: A Case Study

Lizabeth Zack

University of South Carolina Upstate

In the popular mindset, the traditional college student is the 18-22 year old, financially dependent on his or her parents, and living and going to school full-time on a four-year residential college campus. The reality, however, is that a large and growing portion of college students do not fit that profile. According to the Center for Postsecondary and Economic Success, approximately half of students are considered independent in some way: about 40% of undergraduate students are over 25, more than a quarter are employed full-time, and 26% are parents (*Yesterday's*, 2015).<sup>1</sup> The National Center for Education Statistics, the research arm of the Department of Education, found that only 26% of undergraduates fit the traditional student model, while another study contends that 15 million undergraduates, or 85%, could be considered non-traditional in some way (Aud et al., 2010; Radford, Cominole, & Skomsvold, 2015; Soares, 2013, p. 6). These trends are likely to continue as enrollment increases among those over 25 will persist in outpacing those of younger students in coming years. Many have already concluded that the so-called non-traditionals are the new normal on American college campuses.

Among non-traditional students pursuing bachelor's degrees, most enroll at state comprehensive universities (SCUs), those public four-year institutions primarily geared toward serving undergraduates and the surrounding community (Schneider & Deane, 2015, p. 30).<sup>2</sup> Higher education experts and researchers tend to pay more attention to elite schools and flagship universities, institutions where non-traditional students are less likely to enroll. While the federal government gathers some national-level and institutional-level data on non-traditional students, research is much more limited on the characteristics and experiences of non-

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<sup>1</sup> According to a U.S. Department of Education report, 51.3% of undergraduates were considered "independent" in 2011-12 (Radford, Cominole, & Skomsvold, 2015).

<sup>2</sup> The term state comprehensive university (SCU) aligns with that defined by Henderson (2009) as "a four-year institution with a wide range of undergraduate programs funded by a state" (p. 5). SCUs often have master's programs, other applied graduate programs, and are often part of a statewide system. The term overlaps, but does not coincide fully, with those used by other relevant higher education associations, agencies, and ranking systems. The intent here is to highlight one general type of higher education institution: the public universities and colleges serving primarily undergraduates who live within the region, often commute, and pursue a mix of Arts and Sciences and professional degrees. This type would include both the baccalaureate college and master's colleges and universities in the Carnegie classification system (Center for Postsecondary Research, 2015). The *US News and World Report* College Rankings, which is based on the Carnegie categories, refers to these institutions as regional universities and regional colleges ("Best Colleges", 2017). The university utilized in this case study would be considered a baccalaureate college by Carnegie and regional college by *U.S. News & World Report*.

traditional students enrolled at different types of four-year public universities. Nor is this type of college student—the working parent commuting to class at the nearby regional public campus—represented in the popular culture, whether in the movies, press coverage, or in the frenzied preoccupation with college rankings (Casselmann, 2016; Mellow, 2017). In other words, society has yet to catch up to these important higher education trends.

This article, based on survey data collected from non-traditional students at the University of South Carolina Upstate, addresses the gap in our understanding about non-traditional students enrolled at state comprehensive universities and attempts to answer questions about who they are, what makes them non-traditional, and how they experience college life. The article begins with an overview of college student population trends nationwide and then profiles the non-traditional student population on this one campus. The report concludes with a discussion of the potential broader implications for non-traditional students and other SCUs.

### **The Non-Traditional Student Population**

The term non-traditional has no precise, singular definition, but higher education institutions and relevant agencies and organizations, including the federal government, tend to classify students as such when they show one or more of the following characteristics:

- Delays enrolling in secondary education programs rather than entering directly out of high school
- Is older than the traditional college age student (18-21)
- Attends part-time for part or all of the academic year
- Works full-time while enrolled in school
- Is financially independent
- Has family responsibilities (spouse and/or children)

While many higher education institutions tend to rely on the simple binary categories of traditional and non-traditional in classifying their students, the U.S. Department of Education defines non-traditional students on a continuum from “minimally non-traditional” to “highly non-traditional” based on the number of criteria students meet (Choy, 2002). Non-traditional students are those who meet at least one of the above criteria; the more criteria a student meets, the more non-traditional he or she is. This means that a large majority of undergraduate students enrolled in America’s colleges and universities—approximately 70-75%—are to some degree non-traditional (Aud et al., 2010; Choy, 2002; Radford, Cominole, & Skomsvold, 2015). Given those proportions, higher education officials often criticize the term non-traditional as marginalizing and ineffective at representing college students, thus prompting them to adopt other terms such as post-traditional to designate the growing number of students who fall outside the increasingly outdated traditional student model (Soares, 2013).

A pioneering study about adult learners by Cross (1981) helped integrate the concept of non-traditional into the language of higher education and brought

awareness to this new student population. By the late 1970s, after the public university system in the United States had expanded in the post-World War II era and had begun enrolling new types of students, including women, veterans, and members of the working-class, these non-traditional learners were becoming an important presence on college campuses (Soares, 2013). Broad social and economic forces of the last few decades, such as an aging and diversifying population, the rapid pace of technological change, and shifting demands of the global economy, have helped push the increasing numbers of non-traditional students toward the pursuit of higher education credentials (Ross-Gordon, 2011). Most observers see no abatement of these trends and project that non-traditional student growth will continue to outpace that among traditional students (Attewell & Lavin, 2012; Ross-Gordon, 2011; Soares, 2013).

Non-traditional students share important common characteristics that set them apart from traditional students, including where and how they enroll as undergraduates. While they are similar to traditional students in that a majority of them attend public institutions (both two- and four-year), non-traditional students are less likely to attend private non-profit four-year schools and much more likely to enroll at private for-profit universities and community colleges (Radford, Cominole, & Skomsvold, 2015, pp. 9, 57). Among undergraduates at public institutions, non-traditional students are more likely than their traditional counterparts to attend two-year institutions and collect associates degrees and almost half as likely as traditional students to pursue a bachelor's degree at a four-year institution (Radford, Cominole, & Skomsvold, 2015, p. 57). Non-traditional students are also much more likely to go to school part-time (Radford, Cominole, & Skomsvold, 2015, pp. 10, 38).<sup>3</sup> Only 11% of full-time undergraduates at public four-year institutions are 25 years and older (McFarland et al., 2017, p. 48).

Another key feature distinguishing non-traditional students from other college students is the experience of trying to balance other life roles, such as worker, spouse, parent, and community member, while attending school, roles that can be both assets, as potential social support and life experience, and challenges in allocating time and energy for academic activities (Bowl, 2001; Branscomb, 2007; Brooks, 2012; Estes, 2011; Ricco, Sabet, & Clough, 2009; Ross-Gordon, 2011). In part because of these competing demands, non-traditional students' lives are often misaligned with the traditional university structure, with its rigid semester format and 9-5 business hours, and an extra-curricular campus culture that caters to students living on or near the campus. Other common barriers include rusty basic skills, financial dependence on low-paying jobs, lack of good information about labor markets opportunities, lack of child care support, the plodding path to completion, and little time and flexibility (Cahalan, Lacireno-Paquet, & Silva, 1998; Deggs, 2011; Giancola, Grawitch, & Borchert, 2009; Kasworm, 2008; Miller, Gault, & Thorman, 2011; Nilsen & Strahley, 2010; Pelletier, 2010; Pusser

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<sup>3</sup> While 60% of full-time students are traditional, about 66% of part-timers are non-traditional (Radford, Cominole, & Skomsvold, 2015, pp. 10, 38).

et al., 2007; Ritt, 2008; Soares, 2013). Studies also point to a different style of learning among non-traditional students, one that is self-directed, internally motivated, grounded in a store of life experience, open to critical reflection, and geared toward practical application (Ross-Gordon, 2011, pp. 5-6).

While sharing some characteristics, non-traditional students also represent a diverse group, encompassing a wide-range of individuals who vary in terms of gender, race, income, and family and professional status, as well as their educational needs, the life stages they occupy, and the group identities they possess. As Louis Soares (2013) of the American Council on Education notes, “they are single mothers, immigrants, veterans, and at-risk younger people looking for a second chance” (p. 2). A stay-at-home mother who returns for a degree when her children reach high school age may have little in common with the 24-year-old veteran in terms of life experiences and the challenges they face in pursuing a degree.

In addition to highlighting the diversity across the non-traditional student population, researchers have also focused attention on some of the subgroups within the population such as student-parents and veterans. According to the Institute for Women’s Policy Research, nearly five million college students are raising dependent children, up from about three million in the mid-1990s (Gault, Reichlin, Reynolds, & Froehner, 2014). Many of these student parents struggle with competing roles and finding reliable, affordable child care, a college campus service that has been in decline in the last ten years (Eckerson, Talbourdet, & Reichlin, 2016; Estes, 2011; Goldrick-Rab, 2010; Ricco, Sabet, & Clough, 2009). As a result of U.S. military operations in Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere over the last fifteen years, the number of college students who are veterans or in the military reserves has also expanded. The difficulties associated with transitioning back into civilian life, including life on a college campus, often set them apart from the larger student population and require institutions to offer new services (Queen, Lewis, & Ralph, 2014; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010).

In the end, research shows, non-traditional students are much more likely than traditional students to leave school without completing a program or degree (Berker, Horn, & Carroll, 2003; Choy, 2002; Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2005). This is the case at community colleges, where the portion of non-traditional students is even higher, as well as at four-year universities. One study of students at four year institutions found that non-traditional students with more than one risk factor had a completion rate of less than 15% compared with 57% for traditional students (Berker, Horn, & Carroll, 2003; Soares, 2013). Among non-traditional students, those who work full-time and go to school part-time are especially at risk of leaving without a degree (Berker, Horn, & Carroll, 2003).

Along with the risk factors, researchers have also identified sources of support and services with a significant positive effect on the development, persistence, and success of non-traditional students. Some research suggests that informal sources of support, for example from particular instructors or peer groups, improve students’ ability to cope with the stress associated with combining multiple roles

(Bruns, 2004; Branscomb, 2007). Targeting services and programs to certain subgroups such as student-parents or student-veterans often helps those students overcome barriers and stay enrolled (Borsari, 2017; Gault, Milli, & Cruse, 2018). More comprehensive approaches, such as educating and empowering student services staff to design and deliver a package of services (e.g., orientation, advising, career counseling, financial aid) geared toward the unique experiences and needs of non-traditional students, sometimes called one-stop approaches, have also been linked to their success (Miller Brown, 2002, p. 72).

### **State Comprehensive Universities**

While the picture of the non-traditional student population as a whole is becoming clearer, less is known about non-traditional students at different types of institutions, including those enrolled at SCUs. Much of the national-level data on non-traditional undergraduates is limited to reporting on students at four-year schools, making it difficult to understand the distribution of non-traditional students across the different types of four-year public institutions (public liberal arts, research, and regional comprehensive) and how their demographics and experiences compare. Among the studies of non-traditional students, many are in fact based on data collected at SCUs, but the studies themselves do not focus on the institutional context as a factor distinguishing them from other non-traditional students.<sup>4</sup>

SCUs play a large and important role in educating people in the United States. They enroll a large portion of students attending public universities in the United States. According to higher education researchers Schneider & Deane (2015), almost 70% of all students enrolled in public four-year schools attend a state comprehensive university. Regional colleges and universities are more likely to provide direct benefits to the region since most of their students remain there after graduation. They are in a strong position to facilitate degree completion and help meet the outsized demand for more college-educated workers. Yet, the SCU receives little attention from researchers, policy makers, and the public (Henderson, 2009). They lack the status of the research flagship campuses and the elite liberal arts colleges, as well as the athletic accolades to win media attention and public loyalty. Even among higher education researchers, little scholarship exists on this type of institution—on the students who attend, the faculty who teach there, and how those institutions function.

There is good reason to believe that non-traditional students pursuing four-year degrees disproportionately enroll at SCUs. Research suggests that SCUs

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<sup>4</sup> In terms of the proportions of non-traditional students at different types of institutions, about 11% of full-time students at four-year public universities and 23% of full-time students at two-year public universities are 25 and older, while at private for-profit colleges, 69% of full-time students at four-year schools and 53% at two-year schools are 25+ (McFarland et al., 2017, p. 48). According to another source, about 25% of students at four-year colleges are 25+, while about 30% of undergraduates overall are traditional (i.e., fulltime students, degree seeking, at a residential four-year college) (Casselmann, 2016).

educate a majority of undergraduates over 25 and that non-traditional students make up a larger portion of the student body at comprehensive universities than they do at larger flagship campuses (Schneider & Deane, 2015, p. 30; Soares 2013). Historically, these institutions opened their doors to the adult learners who entered the expanding higher education system after the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century; today, they incorporate service to non-traditional students as part of their mission (Henderson, 2009). Faculty who teach at these lesser-known regional campuses affirm that their students have often taken “some long, hard roads from high school to college...” (Olwell, 2011, p. 1). The common features of SCUs—service to a designated region, lower selectivity, and affordability—likely make them appealing to adults who did not follow a traditional path to college.

Given the important role of SCUs in educating college students in the United States and the role they play for non-traditional students pursuing bachelor’s degrees, a study of non-traditional students at SCUs stands to make an important contribution to our understanding of predominant features of the current higher education landscape.

### **Data and Methods**

As a way of improving our understanding of non-traditional students at SCUs, this study focused on the student population enrolled at one SCU campus in a rapidly expanding metropolitan region in the Southeastern United States. The university enrolls approximately 6000 students, most of whom are undergraduates pursuing bachelor’s degrees in Business, Nursing, Education, and various disciplines in Arts and Sciences. The university also offers a few Masters-level programs. According to university data, about 23% of the undergraduate student population is considered non-traditional (“Data on,” 2017).<sup>5</sup>

For the purposes of this study, non-traditional refers to any student enrolled in at least one course and who meets at least one of the following criteria: older (25+), returning to school after five years, veteran, married, parent, or working full-time. As indicated above, these characteristics are commonly recognized among researchers and higher education officials. It is also the definition used by the Non-Traditional Student Services office on the university campus (Non-Traditional Students, 2017). Similar to the system of classification used by the U.S. Department of Education, this study also calculates the number of criteria students meet and categorizes them as slightly non-traditional (meeting one criterion), moderately non-traditional (two or three criteria), very non-traditional (four or more criteria).

The main source of data for this study is a survey conducted during the spring semester of 2017. The sample of respondents was drawn from students enrolled in senior-level courses in 11 undergraduate degree programs from the four schools

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<sup>5</sup> This figure was offered by the Office of Institutional Effectiveness and Compliance (“Data on”, 2017). The OIEC counted as non-traditional students who were 25 and older, veterans, or not single.



(Business, Education, Nursing, Arts and Sciences).<sup>6</sup> Senior-level students were sampled for two reasons. First, a large majority of the non-traditional students identified by the OIEC were concentrated in the junior and senior level.<sup>7</sup> This approach helped ensure a large and diverse enough sample of non-traditional students to be able to identify patterns among them. Secondly, focusing on seniors was also a way of assessing some of the common circumstances associated with success given that these students were near completion of a degree. Only face-to-face courses were chosen, excluding those offered on-line, in order to maximize the response rate.<sup>8</sup>

The survey questions were designed to identify non-traditional students by asking respondents to select from the criteria outlined in the above definition. Other questions captured basic demographic and academic status information, which was then analyzed using simple descriptive statistics. A series of open-ended questions asked students for information about their motivations, sources of support, and barriers encountered while enrolled. These textual answers were coded according to a list of common themes. Finally, students were asked about their awareness (yes or no), use (yes or no), and evaluation (positive, negative, neutral) of campus services. The survey was conducted in person during class time with the permission of the instructor. The survey was voluntary and precautions were taken to protect privacy and confidentiality. The sample eventually included 187 student respondents.

## Results

The first set of findings highlight some of the demographic characteristics of the students identified as non-traditional on this campus. These results help provide a picture of who these non-traditional students are and how they compare with the larger campus population and, to some degree, with broader student trends across the country.

**How Non-Traditional?** Of the 187 students surveyed, 84 selected at least one of the criteria (25 years or older, parent, veteran, returning to school after five years, work full-time, or married) needed to be considered as non-traditional. These 84 non-traditional students constituted 45% of the students surveyed, a figure that is much higher than the 24% cited by the university's OIEC ("Data on", 2017) The results are closer to, but still higher than, the figure of approximately 40% indicated by the Non-Traditional Student Services office webpage (Non-Traditional students,

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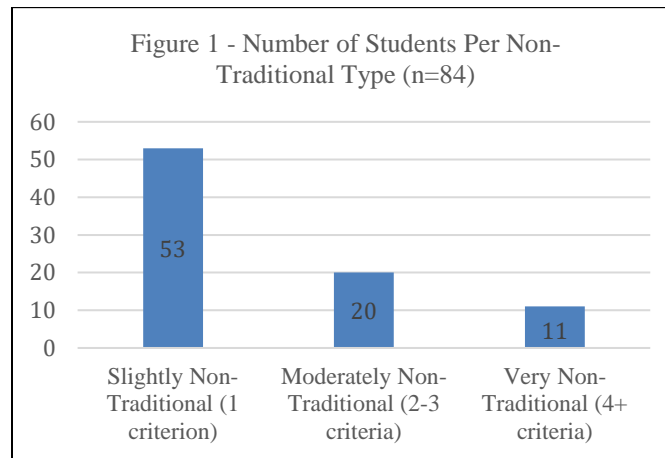
<sup>6</sup> The sample included students in 15 senior seminar-style courses from 11 different degree programs (Business, Nursing, Education, Exercise Science, Psychology, History, Informatics, English, Biology, Interdisciplinary Studies, and Criminal Justice).

<sup>7</sup> It is unclear why so many non-traditional students were concentrated at the junior and senior level, but it is possible that many of them are transfer students.

<sup>8</sup> It is not the purview of this research paper, but it is important to note that the higher education landscape has shifted a great deal due to the increase in on-line degree programs and on-line colleges where many non-traditional students are also enrolled, so sampling only from a population of students in face-to-face courses is a limit of this research.

2017). The higher percentage may be the result of sampling error in that respondents were exclusively drawn from senior-level courses where non-traditional students appear to be disproportionately concentrated. It may also be that the university's system for counting non-traditional students, including the criteria they use, do not fully capture this student population.

Among the 84 students identified as non-traditional, they varied in the number of criteria selected and thus fell along the spectrum from slightly non-traditional to very non-traditional (Figure 1).



A clear majority, or 63%, were slightly non-traditional in that they selected one criterion; another quarter were moderately non-traditional (2-3 criteria); and a small minority were very non-traditional (4 or more criteria).

A profile of this group of non-traditional students using each individual criterion would have the following features:

- 43% - older adults (25 and over)
- 60% - full-time workers
- 20% - parents
- 24% - married
- 21% - returning to school after five years
- 10% - veterans

Of course, many of the non-traditional students exhibited a combination of features. About 31% of the non-traditional students had some family responsibilities (either a parent, married, or both). And about 7% fit the classic image of the non-traditional student as someone older with work and family responsibilities.

**Work Status, Age, and Family Responsibility.** Given that it is common to distinguish non-traditional from traditional students because they work, attend to family, and are older, it is important to discuss the findings about work status, age, and family responsibility.

Among the 84 non-traditional students, a majority (60%) indicated that they worked full-time, which was the most common single criterion among them. While

a clear majority met this criterion, a large minority (40%) either worked part-time or did not work at all. Interestingly, among these full-time worker students, about 80% of them were *under* the age of 25 and many were *without* family responsibilities (neither married nor with children). As a result, a majority (62%) of them were slightly non-traditional, meaning that their full-time work status is what makes them non-traditional. The vast majority of these full-time workers were also enrolled as full-time students. Even though employed full-time, about 30% of these full-time workers live in households with an income of less than \$25,000. Focusing closely on the criterion of work status reveals a non-traditional student profile—a younger, full-time worker without family responsibilities—that looks quite different from the more stereotypical older adult with family and work responsibilities.

Focusing on the age criterion also generates interesting results. In this study, a majority of non-traditional students surveyed (56%) was actually *under* the age of 25. While age ranged from 19 to 78 years old among the 84 non-traditional students, the most frequent age was 22 years and 40% were between 22 and 24. The main reason those under 25 were non-traditional is that they worked full-time, as many non-traditional students do. Of the 47 students under 25, 79% were non-traditional because they worked full-time, while small percentages were non-traditional because they were parents, veterans, married, or returning to school. Thus, most of those under-25 were slightly non-traditional in that they selected only one criterion (full-time work), while 17% were moderately non-traditional. These data reinforce the point above about a non-traditional student profile that differs noticeably from the students on the other side of 25.

Less than half of the non-traditional students (43%) were 25 years or older. About a third (33%) of these older adult students worked full-time and a higher percentage of them (42%) were either married or a parent.<sup>9</sup> Compared to the younger non-traditional students, these students were less likely to work full-time and more likely to be married or a parent. Among this older group, 42% were returning to school after five years. These features combined to make them more non-traditional than the younger group with 64% of them categorized as either moderately or very non-traditional. This group, thus, tended to resemble the classic non-traditional student as older and managing a mix of work and family responsibilities.

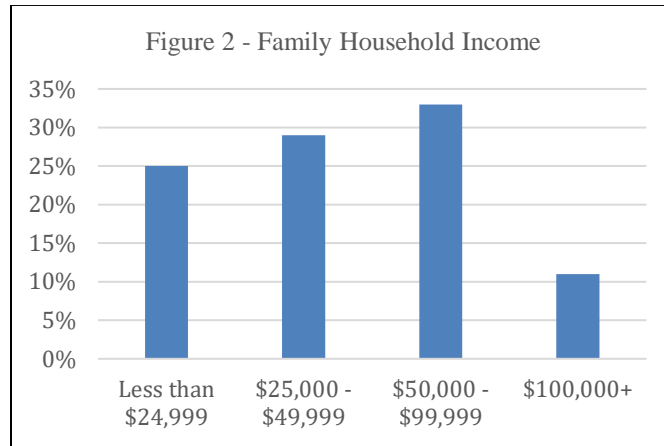
**Race, Gender, and Income.** In terms of other socio-demographic features, the non-traditional students surveyed reflect the demographics of the larger student population on campus. In terms of gender, about 62% of non-traditional students

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<sup>9</sup> As indicated above, about 31% of the overall population of non-traditional students had some family responsibilities (either a parent, married, or both). About 20% identified as parents and 24% as married. Those who were both married and parents constituted 13% of non-traditional students. Of the 17 parents, 11 were married (65%) and 55% of the married students were also parents. Very few students were single parents. Student parents typically had one or two children with a little less than half of the student parents (47%) having young children (pre-school and/or elementary school age).

were female and 37% male. Also similar to the campus population, 56% of non-traditional students were white while 29% were African-American, although the sample had slightly more African-Americans and Hispanics than in the campus population overall. Among the younger non-traditional students who worked full-time, they had lower portions of women and whites compared to the campus population, while women and whites were overrepresented among the older non-traditional students.<sup>10</sup>

In terms of income, the non-traditional students surveyed came from households of wide-ranging income levels (see Figure 2). At the lower end, about a quarter of non-traditional students indicated having family household income of less than \$25,000, while 11% came from a household family income of \$100,000 or more. A slight majority (54%) were below \$50,000, which is close to the median household income in the United States; a larger majority (62%) would be considered working class or lower middle class.



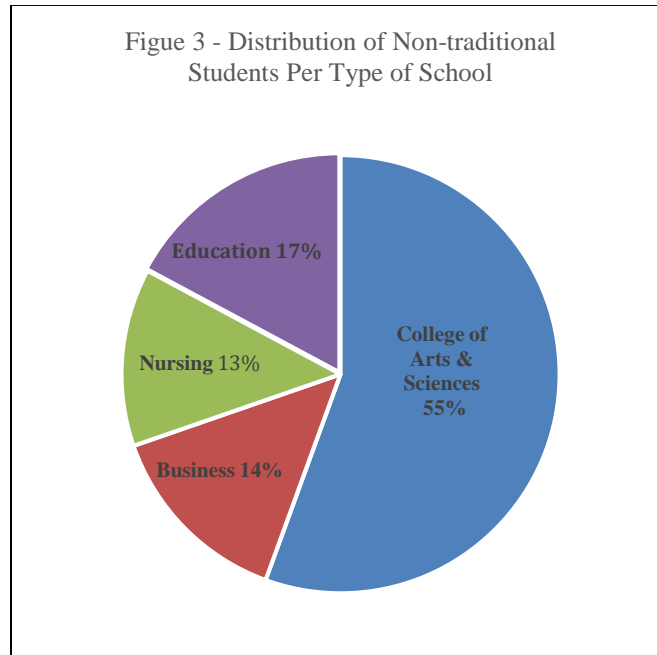
Again, some differences emerged between the two types of non-traditional students. About 60% of the younger non-traditional students who worked full-time came from households under \$50K. In fact, among those in households below \$25K, about three quarters are younger than 25 years of age and work full-time. A majority of the older more non-traditional students (53%) had household income over \$50K.

**Academic Status.** As to their academic status on campus, a large majority of non-traditional students (86%) was enrolled full-time. The small percentage of non-traditional students enrolled part-time is much lower than the data indicate for the overall non-traditional student population in the U.S. and lower than what is typical for older adult students at four-year public universities (McFarland et al., 2017, p.

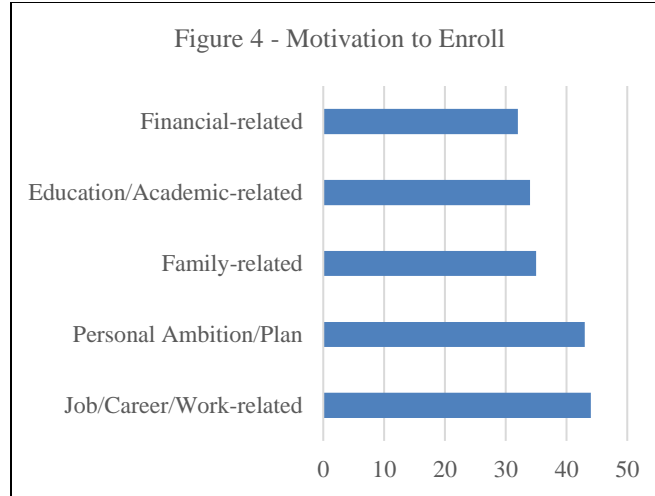
<sup>10</sup> According to survey data, among the younger group, about half were women, half were white, and about 60% came from households under \$50K. Among older more non-traditional students, 67% were female, 64% were white (64%), and a majority (53%) had household income over \$50K (The Visual, 2017).

249). Again, these findings may be the result of sampling seniors who are near completion whereas part-time older students might have dropped out earlier. It is nevertheless one of the most common characteristics among the students surveyed and thus correlates with non-traditional student completion and success.

In terms of the distribution of non-traditional students across different campus programs, a majority of those surveyed (55%) were enrolled in the College of Arts and Sciences. Smaller comparable numbers were enrolled in the professional schools (see Figure 3). A plurality of students (44%) had majors in the College of Arts and Sciences while the rest were distributed somewhat evenly across the professional schools. The most common majors were criminal justice, business, and nursing. Recall that students were surveyed on-site in the classroom, so the survey does not capture students enrolled in the on-line degree programs in nursing, criminal justice, and informatics.



**Motivations, Support, and Barriers.** When students were asked to describe their motivations to enroll in school, the most frequently cited reasons were related to their job or career aspirations, often to advance or change careers, and to their personal ambitions or drive (see Figure 4). Students wanted to “make more of myself” and to be “the first graduate in my family.” They were inspired a little less frequently by family-related reasons, often to better support their family. As one student wrote, “I grew up in a single parent home and wanted to better provide for my family.” They also highlighted the desire to increase their education and to improve their financial position.



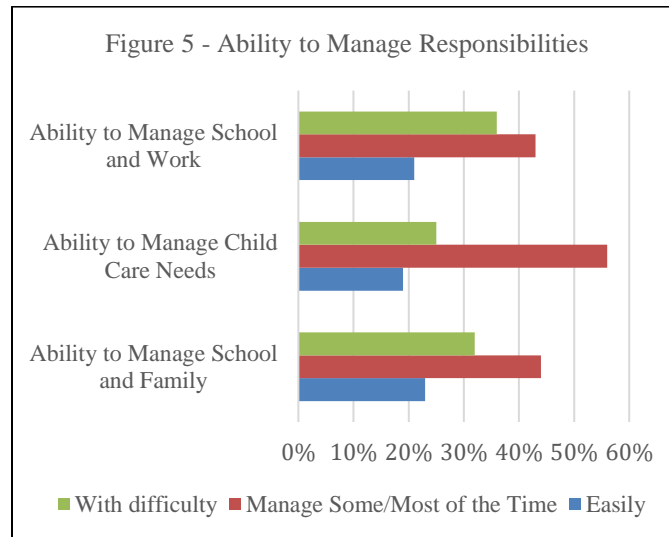
Asked about what motivated them to *stay* in school once they were enrolled, the most frequently cited reason was personal ambition, meaning they were intent on achieving their goal having started on it and having invested so much already. Several students wrote, “I wanted to finish what I started.” This rationale is not surprising given that the students surveyed were enrolled at the senior level and near completion of their degree. The next most important motivations were related to family and work. As one student said, “It is almost impossible to land a job without a degree.” Another listed “my husband, my family, my future children” as reasons for staying in school. Students also described different types of support on which they relied while pursuing their degrees. The most frequently cited support was “family” or particular family members. Less frequent was friends, and, third, students relied somewhat on university staff and faculty.

When asked about barriers, financial-related issues were cited most frequently by students.<sup>11</sup> At times, they focused on the “cost of school” while others pointed to inadequate resources. Answers often came in the form of a single word or short phrases such as “cost of school,” “financial aid,” or “money.” Other responses were more elaborate: “working pay is not enough to pay bills.” Other challenges were mentioned, such as limited time, family and work responsibilities, stress, health issues, and transportation, but they were cited less frequently. About 42% of students identified financial issues as the main barrier.

When asked how they covered school expenses, a large majority of students (77%) did so through a combination of methods that drew from earned income, parents, loans, and scholarships. When asked how *well* they managed to cover their expenses, about a quarter of students said they were able to “manage easily,” while a third often had difficulty (see Figure 5). This number is lower than the majority who identified financial barriers as threatening their ability to stay enrolled. This

<sup>11</sup> On the survey, students were asked to describe up to three barriers so many of the respondents wrote a list of three phrases, or single words. Each of them was counted as a discrete response so the number of responses is much higher than the number of respondents.

suggests that some of the 39% who said they were able to manage some or most of the time to cover their expenses still felt some financial hardship. It may point to sacrifices students made in other areas of their lives and/or the debt students took on to pay for school. It suggests that, even when students managed to cover their school expenses, staying in school was still difficult to do from a financial standpoint.



The second most frequently cited barrier was time, which was mentioned by 25% of students. Some described the barrier this way: “the challenge of full-time enrollment and employment” and “time constraints with work and being a mother.” For these non-traditional students, they were attempting to balance the demands of being enrolled in school full-time with either full-time work or family responsibilities, or both. When asked how they managed those competing demands on their time, most often they described different ways of enforcing “strict time management/prioritizing,” such as “do school work whenever I’m not at work.” Less frequent but still common were answers suggesting they sacrificed something, such as sleep or studying while at work. The question about supports may also apply here insofar as students are relying primarily on family and friends to help them manage the competing pressures on their time. When asked to rate their *ability* to manage the time constraints, a pattern emerged that was similar to their ability to manage financial pressures (see Figure 5). Approximately 25-35% had difficulty managing school and other responsibilities, whether child care, family, or work. About a fifth were able to manage easily, and 45-55% managed some or most of the time.

**Use of Campus Services.** On the survey, students were asked to rate their awareness of, use of, and overall experience with a variety of campus services (see Table 1). A very high percentage of non-traditional students surveyed (at least 80%) were aware of most of these campus services. Students were much less aware of

Veterans Services (54%) and Non-Traditional Student Services (61%), the two programs most oriented to serving non-traditional students.

<b>Service/Program</b>	<b>Percentage of NTS aware of the service</b>	<b>Percentage of NTS who have used the service</b>	<b>Percentage of NTS rating usage as 'positive'</b>
Enrollment Services (Admissions, Financial Aid, Registration)	<b>100</b>	<b>93</b>	<b>68</b>
Student Success (tutoring services, etc.)	<b>93</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>93</b>
Dining Services (cafeteria, other food services)	<b>98</b>	<b>70</b>	<b>69</b>
Student Life (Student government, student organizations, multicultural affairs)	<b>86</b>	<b>41</b>	<b>79</b>
Career Services	<b>87</b>	<b>42</b>	<b>89</b>
Distance Education (on-line courses and programs)	<b>86</b>	<b>64</b>	<b>78</b>
Greenville Campus	<b>89</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>78</b>
Veteran Student Services	<b>54</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>100</b>
Non-Traditional Student Services (luncheon, orientation, etc.)	<b>61</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>73</b>
Library Services	<b>99</b>	<b>86</b>	<b>89</b>
Information Technology Services	<b>94</b>	<b>62</b>	<b>83</b>
Counseling Services	<b>83</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>89</b>
Disability Services	<b>83</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>88</b>
Health Services	<b>91</b>	<b>52</b>	<b>75</b>
Wellness Center/Recreation	<b>94</b>	<b>63</b>	<b>92</b>

**Table 1. Use of Campus Services**

The degree to which students used these campus services varied widely. A high percentage of students used Enrollment (93%), Dining (70%), and Library (86%) services. Moderate portions of students utilized Student Life (41%), Career Center (42%), Distance Education (64%), IT (62%), Health (52%), and Wellness Center (63%). A much smaller share of students used Student Success (32%), Greenville campus (27%), Veterans (10%), Non-traditional student (13%), Counseling (21%), and Disability (10%) services. Other than the high levels of usage for Enrollment, Dining, and Library services, awareness of other campus services did not correspond to usage of those services. Again, the lowest rates of usage were the two targeted services, Non-Traditional Students Services (13%) and Veteran Student Services (11%). Given the assumption that non-traditional students



need greater flexibility in course offerings, it is interesting to note that *only* 65% of students surveyed had used distance education services.

When non-traditional students did use campus services and programs, a large percentage rated their experiences as positive (see Table 1). At least three-quarters of the students who used services related to Student Success, Student Life, Career, Distance Education, Greenville, Veterans, Library, ITS, Counseling, Disability, Health and Wellness rated their experience as positive. The lowest ratings were for enrollment services (68%) and dining services (69%).

Together, these findings about the demographic characteristics, experiences, academic status, and use of campus services among the sample of students surveyed in this study offer a clearer picture of the non-traditional student population attending this regional public university.

## Discussion

The findings raise a number of interesting points about the non-traditional student population at this one university, but also about non-traditional students and SCUs more generally.

First, the findings suggest that there are more non-traditional students than the university recognizes. As reported, about 45% of survey respondents were considered non-traditional in some way. This is a sizable minority of the sample, close to half of the total and higher than official university figures.<sup>12</sup> While sampling error may play some role, it is also likely that there are, simply, more non-traditional students on campus than university officials recognize. University researchers, in general, do not track students who work full-time and they only use age (25+), marital status, and veteran status when considering who is non-traditional so their count would not include students under 25 who work full-time. Recall that the majority of non-traditional students in the survey were actually below 25, most of whom worked full-time, and would thus escape data collection efforts. Adding in this category of student would naturally increase the overall non-traditional student population. If including full-time work status increases the number of non-traditional students at the senior level, it would likely do the same at other levels. Even if it did so to a lesser degree, it would still raise the total number of non-traditional students and potentially alter the overall distribution of traditional and non-traditional students enrolled at the university.

Second, the common experiences of non-traditional students at this university generally mirror those of non-traditional students more broadly. In addition to their role as full-time student, nearly all of the non-traditional students occupied at least one other relatively demanding role, either as spouse, parent, or full-time worker. Most were motivated by a combination of job/career advancement and personal drive, they were challenged by financial burdens and time constraints, and they

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<sup>12</sup> As indicated earlier, the figure is much higher than the 24% cited by the university's OIEC. The results are closer to, but still higher than, the figure of approximately 40% indicated by the Non-Traditional Student Services office ("Data on", 2017; Non-Traditional Students, 2017).

tended to rely on family and friends for support. All of these tendencies are found in the research on non-traditional students. The one feature that contradicted the literature was the high percentage of students who were enrolled full-time since many non-traditional students across the country are enrolled part-time. This could be due in part to the fact that part-timers dropped out along the way, leaving the full-timers to reach the end of their degree programs, something that does align with the weak completion rates of part-timers born out in current research. This same logic applies to parenthood and support system – single parents and those without family and friends to motivate them were underrepresented in this successful cohort of non-traditional students.

Third, the findings about the use of campus services, another commonality among the non-traditional students in this study, point to the weak relationship non-traditional students often have with their educational institutions. In this case, despite widespread awareness of those various services, most used no more than a few of those services including the ones explicitly designed for them. This may be because of their utilitarian approach to college where their only connection to campus life is when they come for class; time constraints and work obligations may preclude them from any additional involvement in campus life. It may also point to a shortcoming in those services in that they are not designed and delivered with the needs of non-traditional students in mind, as researchers have noted, or that they do not make non-traditional students aware of the benefits of utilizing those services (Miller Brown, 2002). Regardless of the reasons, weak usage of services means that the students are not developing relationships with the university community or forging a sense of attachment to the institution. This conclusion is reinforced by the finding that non-traditional students rely primarily on those outside of the university – mainly family and friends -- for motivation and support while pursuing their degrees. It is telling that few noted in the survey that they relied on faculty or staff for support. The reliance on private support in combination with the limited use of campus services suggests a group of students with little attachment to campus, weak ties and loyalty, not just during their education but also after they leave.

Finally, the findings highlight a striking diversity among the non-traditional students at this institution. This is especially the case in terms of what makes them non-traditional. These students varied a great deal in the degree to which they were non-traditional, spanning the spectrum from very non-traditional to slightly non-traditional. The most common feature making them non-traditional was that they worked full-time, yet a significant minority (40%) did not meet that criterion. A good portion had family responsibilities, as parents, spouses or both, but again not more than 31% possessed that characteristic. Even age (25+), the feature that often functions as a default indicator, did not prevail across the non-traditional student sample; instead, older students were in the minority. Thus, in terms of their demographic features, no clear, singular profile emerged to capture this important sector of the university's undergraduate student population.

If anything, what emerged in the findings are *two types* of non-traditional students. First, there is the classic non-traditional student, the older adult with family and work responsibilities, those often referred to as adult learners, working professionals, or return-to-learn students. These are the non-traditional students who are moderately or very non-traditional, with a combination of work and family responsibilities. Clearly set apart from traditional students and much more visible on campus and to the institution, they stand out in classrooms dominated by younger, more traditional students. They are captured in the institutional statistics about “non-traditional students” since most data collection processes rely on the age criterion of 25+. They are featured in the “spotlights of non-traditional students” that appear in alumni materials and other platforms.<sup>13</sup> And, in general, they live up to the image of the non-traditional student in the popular imagination.

The second type of non-traditional student fits another profile, the 22-24 year old who works full-time while going to school, what might be called the younger-worker-student, or younger-student-worker—or what Carnevale, Smith, & Melton (2015) refer to as the “young working learner.” In contrast to the adult learner described above, these students do not stand apart as much from traditional students, especially since college students overall today are more likely to work.<sup>14</sup> Instead, they blend in with the larger traditional student population in the classroom and elsewhere on campus based on their age and appearance. Because of their age, they are aggregated with the larger traditional student population in university reports. In fact, this type of non-traditional student *better* represents the “average” student on campus. According to the university’s Common Data Set 2016-2017, the average age of full-time students is 22 and the average age of all students is 23.<sup>15</sup> It is even possible, given their age, that some of these younger worker-students started out as traditional students but moved into the non-traditional student category due to circumstances and an extension of their time in school. Because of these similarities with traditional students, this type of non-traditional student is harder to recognize and not well known to the university, and thus rendered somewhat invisible.

Actually, the younger worker student does not fit easily in either group. Despite fitting in with traditional students on some measures, they are unlikely to experience traditional college student life given the limits and pressures associated with working full-time while going to school full-time. At the same time, the younger-worker-student, many of whom are single and childless, may not share

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<sup>13</sup> The university’s Center for Undergraduate Research and Support (CURS) publishes a collection of papers from its annual research symposium. The published collection spotlights a few students each year, including a noteworthy non-traditional student.

<sup>14</sup> It may be that students across the campus, not simply those at the senior level, are working full-time. This would not be surprising given the national trend toward more college students working, many out of necessity in order to go to school (Carnevale, Smith, & Melton, 2015; Soares, 2013, p. 6). According to the CPES, about a third of all undergraduates work full-time (Yesterday’s, 2011).

<sup>15</sup> See the “Common Data Set 2016-17” produced by the Office of Institutional Effectiveness and Compliance (“Common Data Set”, 2017).

that much in common with the other non-traditional student group pursuing a second career and putting kids through school. In the end, these younger worker students are both traditional and non-traditional at the same time they are also marginal to both categories, falling somewhere in between the classic traditional and non-traditional student and straddling the presumably fixed line between them.

These findings about the diversity of non-traditional students at a state comprehensive university challenge basic assumptions about their identity and how they relate to the rest of the student population. The common assumption is two types of college students—traditional vs. non-traditional—with a clear line distinguishing them where students in each group conform to their respective type. The findings suggest that non-traditional students at state comprehensive universities actually fall along a continuum, varying from slightly to very non-traditional, rather than fitting a single type. If the slightly non-traditional/younger worker students occupy a position somewhere in between the more non-traditional students and the traditional students, and actually share some things in common with the traditional students, the findings also raise questions about the character of the traditional student population, especially in the degree to which they represent a similar type. The findings, then, raise additional questions about the character of the student population as a whole at SCUs. In fact, the results point to the possibility that *all* students fall along a spectrum from very traditional to very non-traditional with many in between, rather than fitting neatly into the simple binary distinction of traditional and non-traditional. If true, the reality of the student population at SCUs is likely at odds with the way those universities classify, and ultimately, understand their student population.

### **Conclusions**

The goal of this study was to gain a better understanding of non-traditional students at one university and, in doing so, shed some light on a little understood sector of the college student population—non-traditional students enrolled at SCUs. Using survey data, the picture of non-traditional students that emerged from this study challenges assumptions about the student population at this university—about how many are non-traditional, how they compare to traditional students, and how they relate to the larger campus community.

Though focused on a single case, the study has implications for other institutions serving non-traditional students, including the many SCUs across the country. It supports the assertion that these institutions do indeed serve a large and likely disproportionate part of the non-traditional student population in their respective regions, perhaps even more than is currently recognized. It suggests, generally, that the composition of the student population at SCUs may not match up well with the older systems of classifications used to recruit, educate, and serve them. Relying on old assumptions about traditional and non-traditional student types risks leaving SCUs with a fundamental misunderstanding of their existing student population. In fact, the results suggest that an important subset of non-traditional students – the younger worker student – is invisible to these institutions.

This study, thus, affirms the voices calling for a reconsideration of the term non-traditional and for a rethinking of the broader conceptual frameworks used to classify college students.

Without a good understanding of the student population, especially the growing portion of students who do not fit the traditional student model, SCUs risk falling short in educating, serving and recognizing them. This study highlighted some of the areas of misalignment between non-traditional students and the institutional infrastructure serving them. Most analysts conclude that much work needs to be done to improve the alignment between the growing number and needs of non-traditional students and the higher education institutions serving them. For institutions to make those changes, they need a clear understanding of who those students are, what their experiences are like while enrolled, and the range of initiatives offered on campus that may or may not serve those students well. It goes without saying that these issues have implications for recruitment, retention, and facilitation of degree completion, as well as how the university supports students and recognizes their success.

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