

ENROLLMENT MANAGER

VOLUME 20, ISSUE 4

OCTOBER 1, 2024

THE IMPORTANCE OF INVESTING IN NONTRADITIONAL STUDENTS

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As higher education's long-anticipated undergraduate enrollment cliff approaches, a parallel reality is also coming into focus: non-traditional students are attending college with increasing frequency.

According to the [National Student Clearinghouse Research Center](#), graduate student enrollment was up 3% nationwide in Spring 2024 compared to the prior year, which is an even higher rate than the undergraduate enrollment gain of 2.5% over the same period.

This data is great news for admissions departments who are equipped to satisfy the needs of graduate students. But if your office isn't aware of how these students' academic and support challenges differ from those of traditional undergrads, now is the time to zero in on what activates and motivates nontraditional learners.

What Do We Mean When We Say a Student Is "Non-Traditional"?

[The National Center for Education Statistics](#) officially defines a nontraditional student as someone who is:

- At least 23 years old
- Attending a postsecondary institution at any time other than directly after having graduated from high school
- Financially independent from their parents, employed full-time, or having dependents other than their spouse (this includes parents and family caregivers)

[The Lumina Foundation](#) estimates 37% of today's college students are age 25 or older, 40% are working full-time, and 24% have children or other dependents. That's a significant percentage of learners who don't match the mental picture many of us may have when we think "college student," but they're also some of the most engaged and determined students you'll find.

Why Do Non-Traditional Students Typically Choose to Enroll?

While undergraduates tend to view college as an opportunity to explore possibilities, try new things, and determine what direction they want their life to take, nontraditional students approach higher education from a much different perspective.

Often, they enroll due to professional needs or desires, such as required

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Legacy Admissions

California becomes the second state to ban legacy preferences at both public and private colleges and universities.

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THE IMPORTANCE OF INVESTING IN NONTRADITIONAL

certifications, professional development, executive management programs that will enable them to earn a higher salary, or degrees that will qualify them to switch careers altogether.

Other nontraditional students enroll because they want to dive deeply into a topic or field, they feel very passionate about, and they now have the time and effort to invest in a pursuit that they may not have been able to give their full attention to at the age of 18.

Regardless of their motivation, it's likely that both professionally focused and personally driven nontraditional students will need many of the same supports from your institution in order to succeed.

What Assistance Do Non-Traditional Students Typically Need?

Because so many nontraditional students are already serving many different roles in their lives — as parents, caregivers, employees, managers, and sometimes even employers or chief executives — they often face serious challenges that can prevent them from thriving academically, or even from enrolling altogether.

When speaking with nontraditional students, be sure to address their most frequent concerns, which may include:

- **Scheduling flexibility:** Are your courses offered at nontraditional times, like evenings and weekends? Are they available online or in a hybrid format? Is the full syllabus available at the beginning of the course, so those who can work ahead can do so?
- **Transportation:** Is your institution easily accessible by public transit? Do you offer student shuttles or park-and-ride options? Is parking easily accessible for commuters, and is it located near the classrooms they'll need for their program?
- **Childcare:** Does your institution offer childcare services for students who are also parents? Do you partner with any local nonprofits or other

service providers who can help connect student-parents with affordable childcare alternatives?

- **Social disconnect:** What support options are available for nontraditional students who may feel isolated from their classmates due to their age or life stage? How can your counselors or student ambassadors help them acclimate to their campus or online experience?
- **Instructor empathy:** How do the professors at your institution work with nontraditional students to understand their situation and provide flexible options for concerns like academic assistance, deadline extensions, emergency absences, etc.?
- **Digital divide:** If an older or less tech-savvy student needs help managing the digital or online aspects of a course, who can they turn to for help? (As a bonus, if your school has a program that partners nontraditional or tech-challenged students with those who have great IT skills, that can also help improve the social connectivity for both groups.)

By ensuring that your institution is taking the full range of nontraditional students' needs into account, you'll be better prepared to attract and engage with this fast-growing segment of the student population. Their challenges and goals may not match your typical new student profile, but by enrolling them in pursuit of their personal and professional goals, you'll also ensure that your institution will continue to grow and thrive long after the enrollment cliff has passed.

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MAKE THE RIGHT CHOICE WHEN HIRING YOUR ENROLLMENT MANAGEMENT LEADER

John W. Dysart
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The Dysart Group

Selecting the right individual to lead enrollment management at your institution is a critical decision. It helps to understand the important considerations when making a hiring decision for this vital position

Experience Matters

Obviously, it is always preferable to select a candidate with experience. Experience, by itself, is preferable. The type of experience matters as well.

An individual who previously held the same or similar title is good.

An individual who seeks to move up from a lesser position, such as a Director of Admission, can be just as valuable.

Many leaders focus on generic experience and title. Equally, if not more important, is the type of institution where the candidate worked. Someone from a highly selective college or university may not be the best fit for a struggling, small, private institution. An individual with experience at a community college may not be the best fit for a large, four-year public institution. Market conditions, available resources, financial strength and admission standards vary significantly by institution type. Be cautious when considering a candidate from a dissimilar college or university.

Do Your Research

Experience is terrific, but outcomes are an even better measure. Candidates may have significant experience in enrollment management, but outcomes trump generic experience. Take the time and do some research on outcomes at the previous institutions for your candidates.

Admission results are public information for most colleges and university. You can identify application counts,

acceptance rates and yield rates for most institutions over the last 20 years or so.

Consider which candidates have been able to grow their application pools.

Consider which candidates have acceptance rates greater than 70% (unless your institution is highly selective).

Evaluate yield rates and final new student enrollment numbers during the time your candidates were in charge.

Be wary of candidates with declining application pools, low acceptance rates and declining new student enrollment numbers.

Evaluate the financial need of newly enrolled students by reviewing Federal Pell Grant eligibility percentages and consider the average amount spent in institutional aid to see if these numbers are in line with your own.

Compare the diversity of the student body at previous institutions to your own.

Mission Fit

Ensure that successful candidates have worked at institutions with similar missions or demonstrate a passion for your mission.

Research Assistance

The selection of your chief enrollment officer is such an important decision for any college or university. It can be a difficult process as many institutional leaders are not familiar with the basics of enrollment management and are even more are baffled by financial aid regulations and strategies.

- Utilize a professional in the Admissions Office to help your leadership team evaluate past performance at previous institutions.
- Rely on one of your financial aid professionals to help evaluate financial aid strategies and tactics and discount rates.

Identifying candidates with pertinent experience, mission fit and successful outcomes at previous institutions will result in hires that will serve you well.

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THE DYSART GROUP is a higher education consulting firm specializing in enrollment management. We have provided consultation services to more than 250 colleges and universities throughout the United States with extraordinary results.

We have worked collaboratively with colleges and universities to significantly grow enrollment. Our institution-specific recommendations have helped increase the number of admission applications as much as three-fold. Improved communication strategies and new tracking metrics have resulted in higher folder completion rates and increased the number of students accepted for admission. New student enrollments have grown by as much as 70% in a single cycle while discount rates have been controlled. Proven strategies have increased retention rates by as much as 7% in one year.

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