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The Importance of Understanding and Integrating the Backgrounds of Nontraditional Students in an Online Learning Environment

Timothy Thornton
Athens State University
United States

Abstract

The purpose of this article is to highlight the importance of understanding the backgrounds of nontraditional students. Understanding their backgrounds is especially crucial in online learning environments because of the large variance in knowledge, skills, and experiences. The article argues that by understanding the backgrounds of nontraditional students both institutions and faculty can develop programs and learning environments specifically based upon their specific needs. The article presents several strategies that both institutions and faculty can use to capitalize on these backgrounds as well as address any deficiencies. For institutions, a greater understanding of the backgrounds of nontraditional students will allow for the creation of inclusive learning environments that are supportive and flexible. For faculty, a greater understanding of the backgrounds of nontraditional students will allow them to develop online learning environments that incorporate their backgrounds and provide safety measures to ensure all student issues, weaknesses, and concerns are properly addressed.

Keywords: Nontraditional students, backgrounds, support, inclusive, flexibility

Nontraditional students are an ever-growing population in higher education. This growing student population possesses a unique set of characteristics, backgrounds, and experiences. All of these traits vary greatly from traditional students. Unfortunately for nontraditional students, higher education institutions have typically been designed around the needs and characteristics of traditional students and thus nontraditional students have frequently been overlooked and underserved (Colvin, 2013). These institutions often fail to adequately provide for nontraditional students because they fail to consider their backgrounds and experiences.

The purpose of this article is to emphasize the need for higher education institutions to develop and implement strategies specifically tailored to nontraditional students. In doing so, it is paramount that institutions understand the backgrounds of their nontraditional student population. Several strategies are presented in this article that can be used to maximize the strengths nontraditional students bring to the classroom.

Nontraditional Students' Backgrounds

Numerous definitions of nontraditional students exist. The most commonly referenced definition of a nontraditional student was developed by NCES (2002, pg 26) who defined a nontraditional student as anyone who:

- Delays enrollment
- Attends part-time for at least part of the academic year
- Works full-time (35 hours or more per week) while enrolled
- Considered financially independent
- Has dependents other than a spouse
- A single parent
- Does not possess a high school diploma

There are also several additional characteristics associated with nontraditional students. One of the most defining characteristics is age, which Jinkens (2009) defined as 24 years or older. Nontraditional students made a conscious decision in returning to school and are often financially responsible for their education. Due to these factors, they often possess a high level of motivation (Adams & Corbett, 2010). These students are self-directed learners who view learning as inherently joyful (Carlan, 2001). They likely possess a wealth of academic, career, and life experiences. Nontraditional students are also more likely to be married, a commuter, and uninvolved in on-campus activities. Finally, they need to be able to balance family, academics, and work (Compton & Schock, 2000). To be classified as a nontraditional student, one only needs to identify with at least one of the aforementioned characteristics.

Need to Understand Nontraditional Students' Backgrounds

Nontraditional students bring a wealth of knowledge and experiences with them when they return to school. According to Kenner and Weinerman (2011), these prior experiences can either aid or hinder their academic success and emphasized the need to understand nontraditional students and how they differ from traditional students. On one hand, these experiences can add value to the classroom and serve as an excellent resource for classmates (Scott & Lewis, 2012). On the other hand, past failures or academic struggles can lead to negative perceptions of higher education and self-efficacy issues.

There are numerous reasons why it is imperative to understand the backgrounds of nontraditional students. This begins with their initial classification as “nontraditional”. Nontraditional students are often classified as “nontraditional” based more on what they are not rather than what they are (Trowler, 2015) or simply because they do not meet the characteristics of being “traditional”. This leads to an amalgam of traits that do not apply to all nontraditional students and can vary greatly from one student to another, making it problematic for institutions to clearly understand their needs.

Nontraditional students encompass a diverse set of characteristics and backgrounds. This makes it troublesome to effectively establish a comprehensive assortment of methods that addresses a broad range of students (Leonard, 2002). This collection of students can be very diverse in their backgrounds, experiences, and level of preparedness (Devlin, 2010). They also possess a diverse set of motivations and expectations for returning (Compton, Cox, Laanan, 2006). By understanding the backgrounds and of nontraditional students, institutions are better able to identify their learning needs and styles. This knowledge can then be used by faculty to develop online instruction that incorporates these needs.

The need for understanding the backgrounds of nontraditional students is heightened in an online program because many nontraditional students have never taken an online course and thus lack adequate technology skills or understanding (Lim, 2001), which may cause them to struggle academically (Kenner & Wiseman, 2011). The majority of online services are becoming the responsibility of the faculty, which can also present a challenge (Maguire 2005). Of concern for faculty is determining the level and frequency of interactions, as well as establishing an inclusive environment that addresses the complex communication and participation requirements (Miller & Lu, 2003).

Nontraditional Student Barriers

Nontraditional students encounter numerous barriers when returning to higher education. This is primarily due to a multitude of responsibilities and prior experiences. The theoretical framework used to address how students manage their multiple roles is referred to as role theory. According to the theory, individuals begin to develop their self-perceptions around these obligations (Kim, Sax, Lee & Hagedorn, 2010). They will learn different methods to cope with their multiple obligations and expectations (Turner, 1968) and will use these roles to arrange their priorities.

Barriers exist inside and outside the classroom. Within the classroom, nontraditional students often enter into a learning environment that has not been designed to accommodate them (Meyer, 2014) which can cause them to discontinue or become dissatisfied with the experience (Sims & Barnett, 2015). Nontraditional students at times feel a sense of isolation (Gonclaves & Trunk, 2014), which can be especially challenging in online learning environments.

Institutions are still developing frameworks and strategies to address the barriers nontraditional students face. Colvin (2013) noted that campus leaders have inadequately supported nontraditional students.

For many nontraditional students, it has been several years since they attended school. This hiatus tends to lead to the need to relearn study skills and a lack of confidence (Kimborough and Weaver, 1999). Adams and Corbett (2010) found that 50% of the nontraditional students included in their study felt unprepared for the general workload of college classes. Additionally, are severely lacking the technical skills necessary to navigate an online learning environment. Many of these students have never taken an online course, lack basic technology skills, or have limited access to the required technological resources (Goncalves & Trunk, 2014).

In addition to school obligations, nontraditional students also have work and family obligations leading to a high load of external demands (Yorke, 1999). These multiple roles can lead to time management issues which can be challenging for nontraditional students to overcome. Additionally, these roles limit nontraditional students' ability to focus primarily on school, which results in school not being the top priority for the majority of them. Family plays a prominent role in the life of nontraditional students and can either serve as an aid or hindrance depending on the level of support they receive.

Strategies

This article presents several different strategies that institutions and faculty can reference and utilize. These strategies not only address the backgrounds of nontraditional students but also provide opportunities to capitalize on the strengths they bring to the classroom.

- **Providing a flexible learning environment** - Nontraditional students prefer flexible learning environments (Ross-Gordon, 2011). Providing a flexible learning environment is critical because nontraditional students have multiple commitments and responsibilities outside of school (Gonclaves & Trunk, 2014) and have limited time to spend on school. According to Wlodkowski (2003), flexibility should be shown both by the institution and instructor. This could include flexible course schedules and sequencing, formats, methods of instruction, and a variety of assignment options. Online programs provide an excellent opportunity to create flexible schedules, content, and assignments.
- **Creating Individualized learning opportunities** - By creating individualized learning opportunities, instructors can tailor content to the specific backgrounds and interests of nontraditional students (Munro, 2011). This could include practicum courses where a student works closely with a faculty member on a specific topic of interest. This could also include developing individualized assignments that address multiple backgrounds and provide students the opportunity to incorporate prior experiences into their responses.
- **Faculty that understand the learning styles of nontraditional students** - It is important to have faculty who understand the different learning styles of nontraditional students (Wyatt, 2011). Following this approach allows educators to build upon the strengths of nontraditional students as well as provide opportunities to address and identify weaknesses (Kiely, Sandmann, & Truluck, 2004). Students would benefit from an orientation program that would initially identify their learning styles. Another option would be requiring nontraditional students to take a learning styles inventory and use the results to develop curricula specifically to those traits.
- **Developing an orientation program** - Many nontraditional students have been out of school for a while and are academically unprepared and have no idea where or how to begin. This is heightened in an online program where many nontraditional students have never taken an online course or may never step foot on campus. An orientation program that addresses what to expect and where to find relevant information would allow students to get re-acclimated. Barron (2014) recommended having students create a simple self-posted biography that includes their interests and motivations so that faculty and their classmates can get a better understanding of each student.
- **Creating inclusive learning environments** - Creating inclusive learning environments where nontraditional students receive the support necessary to fully assimilate is crucial (Witkowsky, Mendez, Ogunbowo, Clayton, & Hernandez, 2016). This belief was supported by Kenner and Weirnerman (2011) who noted the need to develop a curriculum that specifically addresses their needs because they traditionally struggle to integrate academically. An excellent approach to help ensure an inclusive environment is to give nontraditional students a voice. This could entail ensuring an open door policy, creating a nontraditional student organization, conducting interviews, or including a question and answer discussion section.

- **Providing opportunities for self-directed learning** - Providing nontraditional students with opportunities to identify important and relevant material on their own gives them ownership in the course. This could include research projects using outside resources or creating learning contracts in which students and faculty work together to develop assignments that blend prior experiences with the content.
- **Providing multiple delivery methods** - These opportunities could include using multiple resources and avenues for learning. Nontraditional students have different learning styles and multiple content delivery methods would address these different styles. For example, providing students multiple options to learn the content and display understanding including the use of textbooks, videos, lectures, outside resources, collaborations, and open-ended assignments.
- **Supportive institutions and faculty** - Blair (2010) noted that students are more likely to be successful if they believe that they are supported by faculty. Daloz (1999) adds to this by stating that the relationship between student and faculty member is one of the most impactful factors in a student's ability to persist. This is likely because, for many nontraditional students, faculty members are the only connection between them and the institution (Lester & Perinin, 2010). Developing a supportive environment is a continuous process and begins the instant a nontraditional student gets accepted into the program. Prioritizing early and regular contact with nontraditional students is an excellent option that can allow faculty to develop a rapport with them and effectively address any issues or concerns. This can be especially crucial in online programs where students may have frequent questions or technological issues.
- **Developing a strong sense of community** - Developing a strong sense of community can be extremely important in an online program where students do not get the opportunity to interact or meet in person. This can lead to a sense of isolation where nontraditional students feel as though they are the only student in the course. Active and collaborative engagement can help reduce the sense of isolation that can exist in an online course.
- **Cohorts** – Implementing a cohort system can connect online students as they journey through the program. One study accomplished this by using a cohort that allowed students to interact in a non-threatening environment where they were able to share ideas, ask questions and collaborate on assignments. Hoffman and Lance (2016) noted that nontraditional students appear to value the support of their classmates who are going through a similar experience.
- **Discussions** - The inclusion of discussions in online courses allows students to share and utilize their prior experiences as a resource. With discussions, students have the opportunity to learn from each other. Additionally, discussions provide realistic applications of the material, promote experiential learning, and increase participation and engagement levels (Chih-Yuan Sun & Rueda, 2012; Scott & Lewis, 2012).
- **Real-world application assignments** - To increase engagement, instructors can develop real-world assignments that incorporate nontraditional students' prior experiences. Donaldson and Graham (1999) noted that learning becomes meaningful when it can be connected to prior experiences, explores new methods of analyzing issues, transforms students' previous understandings, and can apply to real-life contexts. Supporting these findings was Gajewski and Mather (2015) who recommended employing active, collaborative, and interactive learning environments that are connected to the career-related roles and goals of adult learners.

Conclusion

Nontraditional students bring a unique set of characteristics and experiences with them when they return to the classroom. Institutions and faculty need to understand the backgrounds of nontraditional students to fully comprehend their needs and understand what makes them unique. This begins with the recognition that these students differ from traditional students and possess different needs. Based on these differences, this article identified several strategies that institutions and faculty can implement to not only recognize the backgrounds of nontraditional students but also utilize them to create a dynamic learning environment and experience. The goal is to create a safe and supportive learning environment in which nontraditional students can thrive.

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