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Our University: Nontraditional Students

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Our University: Nontraditional Students

Fourth in a series of who our students are and how they perform.

<http://walterwendler.wordpress.com/>.

The title of an anthology of stories by and about nontraditional students compiled by Donna S. Talarico may say it best, and may say it all:

Kids, have you seen my backpack...?

For most of our national history college students were young, recent graduates of high schools or prep schools, usually men, entering professional or pre-professional fields of study, more often than not living in dormitories, attending class five days a week, possibly having a part-time job, and expecting to complete a baccalaureate degree in four, maybe five, years.

But that has changed markedly in the last fifty years and, predictability, vanished.

Many studies suggest that 70% of students in tertiary education don't fit the old mold. They delay enrollment for a year or more after high school, attend part-time, work 35 hours per week or more, are considered financially independent, have dependents other than a spouse, may be a single parent, and do not have a high school diploma but a GED, if any credential at all.

Our world is changing.

In a *USA Today* story from June 4, 2010, this self-description of a nontraditional student is offered by Dennis Medina: *"When I was employed by the corrections office, I started taking college classes, but money got tight, and life got in the way. When I moved to the Boston Police Department, I realized that without a college degree I couldn't further my career... I have court during the day, and then I have my regular shift which is 4 p.m. to midnight. I also have family obligations. I live with my wife, two sons and a daughter and my grandson . . ."*

Our world is changing.

According to a study in the *College Student Journal*, younger students want the university to be an extension of high school: funny professors and a good deal of social activity.

Mature students, breadwinners, veterans, many of whom enlist in military service specifically for the benefit of a nearly free college education expect more real world preparation from courses: more rigor, intensity, and seriousness. These groups represent growing populations on campus. Their concerns cross lines of gender, age, race, and ethnicity.

Our world is changing.

According to an August 2008 posting on the *america.gov* website, nontraditional students bring new, valuable perspectives to the campus that enrich the academic life of the university.

A study by the Minnesota Office of Higher Education from January 2007 found that over 60% of students in Minnesota were nontraditional. This tracks very closely the findings of the National

Center for Education Statistics. Unsurprisingly, community colleges had the largest number of nontraditional students: almost 80%.

Working while studying is also a growing phenomenon. Eighty-three percent of college students in Minnesota work. While working can have a positive impact on academic performance, nearly half of the nontraditional students in Minnesota, 47%, felt the impact was negative. Some of this dissatisfaction may be caused by the need to work longer hours than traditional student jobs. The pressures of family life that many nontraditional students face only add to the stress.

Institutions are responding by offering more evening and weekend classes to accommodate the multifaceted life of the nontraditional students, and developing online course offerings even at institutions that may not grant online degrees.

In a National Public Radio interview of August 24, 2010, Neal Conan, host of Talk of the Nation arrived at the core of the issue in a discussion with a number of nontraditional students, *“There's no such thing as a typical college student anymore. Most have to take classes part-time - almost half, rather, take classes part-time. A third work full-time. More than a quarter have dependents of their own”*.

To serve all constituents and our nation well, universities must be responsive to the needs of our students who don't fit our preconceptions.