



## Chapter Seven

# Serving Non-Traditional Students

By Nina Mulé Lyons

### Defining the Non-Traditional Student

The term “non-traditional” has been used on college campuses for at least the past 20 years. Normally, it describes the more mature learners at any given institution. The National Center for Education Statistics says on its Web site that anyone who is not coming to your institution directly after graduating from high school or who is not a full-time student is considered “non-traditional.” However, here is what the NCES offers as a more complete working definition (Horn 1996):

- A non-traditional student is one who:
- Does not enter college directly after high school graduation
  - Attends college on a part-time basis
  - Works full-time while enrolled
  - Is categorized as financially independent by the school’s financial aid department
  - Has dependent children or is a single parent
  - Has completed high school with a certification or GED

After completing additional extensive studies of students nationwide, the NCES came to the following conclusions with regard to the 1999-2000 school year:

- 73 percent of all undergraduate students met at least one of these criteria
- 28 percent were highly non-traditional (having three or more of the characteristics)
- 28 percent were moderately non-traditional (having two or more of the characteristics)

If we review this data and consider only the moderate and highly non-traditional students, they represent more than half (56%) of our student population. Clearly, this means that the once non-traditional minority now most likely constitutes the majority.

The figures cited above are an aggregate of all the colleges in the United States that the NCES surveyed. Your percentage may be lower or higher. Nonetheless, this is a trend that is surely to continue as baby boomers age and enter college at mid or even later in life.

Given that this population is on our campuses and growing, how do we begin to meet the challenge of programming for it? Actually, a fairly simple process including assessment, programming and follow-up can be very effective.

## Discovering Who Is on Your Campus

Assessment helps you learn who is actually on your campus—who it is you need to serve. The assessment phase is at the core of good program planning, and at the heart of assessment are demographics. Don't let the word scare you. Exploring demographics doesn't mean you have to invent your own survey or initiate extensive research. Normally, there are plenty of good resources at your institution that can provide the demographic information you need:

■ **Institutional Research Department:** You can be fairly confident there are good quality statistics available that show who is attending your school. Ask your institutional research department for copies of reports they routinely generate. In addition, your campus Web site may contain much of what you need to know. However, questions you need to ask include:

- When does the part-time population attend?
- Do you have a heavy day part-time population?
- What is the “mean age” of the students at your campus?

It will also be important to find out what “types” of non-traditional students are enrolled at your school.

- Do you have distance learners? Are they ever on campus?
- What is the male/female ratio and the general make up of the student population at your school?

This information will help you to assess how many non-traditional students you have on campus and what their interests may be. For example, if you find that many students are married and have children, then family programs may be successful for you.

The main negative aspect of using institutional research information is there is often a “time lag” involved, meaning the data may be a year or two old and won't reflect the current year or semester. However, this data is still valuable since it will give you a fairly accurate starting

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point in understanding who you serve. For more up-to-the-minute information, you may want to consult with your admissions office.

■ **Admissions Office:** Your admissions office is normally responsible for keeping track of enrollment patterns. A conversation with your admissions dean may give you some very up-to-date information. Ask questions that will help you understand who you are serving and when they are on campus. Ask how many commuter students are enrolled or whether you have distance learners who are sometimes

on campus. Keep in mind the kind of information you will need to do the best possible job.

## Determining What Students Want

Is there ever a more important but elusive question in campus activities programming than, “What do they want?” There are three major ways to get the information you need to answer this question. You may want to try at least two of them simultaneously.

**1. Pen and Pencil Survey:** Ask students open-ended questions in an attempt to determine your programming direction. Include questions such as:

- What interests you?
- When do you have free time to enjoy on-campus programs?
- What do you do in your spare time?
- What kinds of workshops would help you in your studies or personal life?

Such surveys can sometimes yield new and exciting directions for you. However, much of the information you get may not give you a complete picture of what students want. Don't be surprised if you offer something that ranked high in the survey, but turned out to not be popular when offered. If this happens, try offering the program at different times and promote it in different locations or via alternate methods. It sometimes takes more than one try to get the right combination of time and program.

**2. Trial and error:** If you find your student population is weighted toward those with young children, you may want to offer a “family night” with a children's entertainer. Or, if students tell you they have little time for recreation, you may want to purchase tickets to cultural or sporting events in the area on several nights. Listen to your students, then formulate what you think will work. Offer it on a small scale

at first. If it is a hit, do it again. This is true for all programming, but for reaching the non-traditional segment, it is very important.

**3. Talking to people, including other programming boards, or conducting focus groups:** This kind of communication can give you some insight into the minds and concerns of your non-traditional population. It is also a good idea to have a non-traditional or evening programming board working with you on events—in addition to providing valuable assistance in developing programming, it will help you with word-of-mouth promotion.

It is challenging to get members of a non-traditional population together for events, so don't be discouraged. Just consider that they are attending school while raising families, working and fulfilling other obligations. Schedules are tight and free time is limited. However, everyone needs recreational time, and you may be able to provide some very valuable options for members of this group. Thinking "out of the box" has become cliché, but it really works when it comes to serving this population. Take time to talk with these students about their lives and find out what their frustrations are. Do they need time management assistance? Do they need to figure out how to simultaneously deal with the demands of young children and aging parents? Through campus programs, you might be able to help, even if that means offering only a temporary distraction now and then.

## Targeting Orientation

It is sometimes very helpful to provide separate orientation sessions for evening and weekend students. If you do, you will be able to provide your non-traditional students with more specific information to help them become more comfortable on campus. For example, offer an orientation session in the evening or on a Saturday. Such an event can serve as an "express orientation" for those who are not living in dorms and are taking classes on a part-time basis.

## Keeping Timing of Events in Mind

A high-quality program is of no value if offered when there are no students available to benefit from it. This is especially true when you are striving to serve the non-traditional population. Because these students more than likely take evening and weekend classes, it will be important to learn exactly when classes are offered, when breaks occur, and what kind of attendance patterns students follow.

Gathering some of this information may cause you to turn to some surprising sources. For example, you might want to talk to the facilities staff to find out when certain buildings are full to capacity and when they are empty. In addition, your security staff may be able to tell you whether certain nights of the week are busier than others. Ask them which evenings the parking lots are most full. Ask them when they notice large influxes of students on campus.

The time of day you schedule a program can make all the difference with respect to whether or not it reaches its intended audience. Here is an actual example of how timing can mean the difference between success and failure.

*The cafeteria staff at one institution decided to schedule evening food service hours to benefit working students attending evening classes. Classes were held from 6-9 pm and 7-10 pm on weeknights, so the cafeteria staff decided to open from 4-6:30 pm in the evening. However, they cancelled the evening serving hours after a semester, reporting that students weren't taking advantage of the hours and the cafeteria was losing money. However, student groups began selling snacks and beverages after the cafeteria discontinued its evening serving hours and were very successful.*

Why did the student groups succeed where the cafeteria had failed? They had a better understanding of student schedules. They realized that most students who work are in a rush to get to class and will grab something quickly before class when it is available. So, they sold food from 6 to 9 pm and experienced a rush of students before 7 pm and then again during the class break. Therefore, the cafeteria's loss became the student group's gain.

## Promoting Events for Non-Traditional Students

If you have conducted assessment, developed appropriate programs and scheduled them when students want them, promotion is easy. Just let people know via all usual publicity methods—posters, table tents, flyers and the like will get their attention. However, here are some ideas that that can help spread the word more effectively:

- Faculty can be an important ally in promoting events to non-traditional students, especially if you offer tickets in exchange for an announcement during class. In addition, if your program can be tied to class content, faculty will offer extra credit to students who attend. Make the connection with academics and you

will have an “instant” audience.

- Build flexibility into your programming. For example, you can offer subsidized tickets to campus or community events scheduled on more than one evening. This allows students to attend a play or sporting event at a time that is best suited for them. Make sure your promotion shows that you’re being flexible and students will be more willing to participate.
- Some older students may find it intimidating to attend an event where they expect the age of the average audience member to be about 20. Therefore, be sure to emphasize that the event you are sponsoring is designed especially for them. For example, let them know it is a “family” program and encourage them to bring a friend, spouse or other family members. Specifically state that this event is for the “non-traditional” student. Take extra steps to make these students feel comfortable.

## Programming for Non-Traditional Students: Quick and Practical Tips

In summary, here are some practical tips to help make programming for non-traditional students more successful:

- Offer family programs at times that are convenient for students with children and spouses. For example, offer “family movie nights” or family oriented holiday parties. Or, offer subsidized tickets to local ice shows or children’s plays. No matter whether you offer your own original programming or arrange discounts for students to attend community events, strive to provide opportunities that will entertain the student’s entire family.
- Offer more serious programming alternatives, such as workshops that deal with the “life stages” of older students. You may also explore workshops on financial planning, assisting with aging parents, or enhancing study skills for busy people. Anticipate your students’ needs and offer programming that meets those needs.
- Support student clubs as a way to help students help each other. The classroom can be a lonely place for the 45-year-old who finds themselves surrounded by 18-year-olds. Assist and encourage clubs that allow students with common needs and experiences to meet and

support each other. Such clubs give students a feeling of community. If you help students form bonds with each other, they are more likely to form bonds with your intuition, as well.

- Offer a flexible ticket series. Purchase tickets to local symphony, ballet or play performances or sporting events. Then, allow students to purchase subsidized tickets at a reduced price so they may attend an event with a friend or family member. This is a great perk for any non-traditional student. It also helps them have a measure of control over how they fit the event into their already busy schedule.
- Organize weekend trips, which may be a more attractive alternative for non-traditional students. Ski weekends, weekend shopping trips or just about any day trip can be very popular among mature students.
- Consider weekends and evenings as primary programming times when targeting non-traditional students. Also, choose music and other types of entertainment that will appeal to them. Jazz nights or coffeehouses featuring acoustic music are often more appealing to non-traditional students than a “battle of the bands” or other more youth-oriented programs.
- Promote events with the assistance of faculty and clearly state in your promotional materials that these events target a non-traditional crowd. For example, “Bring your family” or “Take a break from work and classes” are good statements to include in your publicity text. When students know programs are designed especially to meet their interests or needs, they are more likely to participate.
- Most importantly, when something doesn’t work, identify the reason it didn’t, make changes and keep trying until you succeed. When something does work, keep good records and rely on them when planning future programs.

In conclusion, it is important to realize that non-traditional students are becoming increasingly prevalent on most campuses. Taking the time to do a thorough programming needs assessment and making data-based decisions can set you on the course to successfully meeting non-traditional students’ needs.



## About the Author

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