Chapter 69
Blended Instruction:
Helping Meet Some Academic Challenges for Nontraditional Higher Education Students

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ABSTRACT

Universities and colleges offering degrees at the associate and bachelor's levels are facing many changes such as the ages of their student populations, the degrees being sought, amount of time dedicated to university studies, and the technology applied toward these educational pursuits. As more and more nontraditional-age students pursue degrees of higher education, universities are being required to reflect on the special characteristics and needs of these students and to make adjustments in their course scheduling as well as many of their student-support related services. In addition to offering evening and weekend courses for the nontraditional, part-time student, many universities are examining and introducing additional delivery modes for their course offerings. Online course delivery has made paramount changes in the operations within the halls of colleges and universities, but blended or hybrid courses are also finding success both for the college/university student populations and many institutions of higher education.

INTRODUCTION

Higher education enrollments in the United States tend to fluctuate based on various factors within our society especially for the nontraditional student. Factors such as work schedules, family responsibilities, and financial obligations often take precedence over higher education for this group. However, a downturn within the national economy tends to have a positive impact on higher education enrollments for nontraditional students also. According to The Chronicle of Higher Education Almanac 2012, not only are enrollments increasing despite higher tuition costs, but the makeup of today's student population is changing as well. University populations have typically been made up of 18-22 years olds who are usually dependent upon parents, scholarships, and other financial aid options to help provide the resources

for their education. Whereas, the minority group of the university or higher education population has previously been made up of students over the age of 22 who are independent, and often providing financial resources for their own family members (The Chronicle of Higher Education Almanac, 2012). These older students have normally been labeled as the non-traditional student, but the age range for these students lacks consensus. Goldman (2012) indicates that a nontraditional student is one who has at least one of the following characteristics when enrolling the first time as a college student: has financial independence, is over age of 25, delayed college entry, works full time, enrolls as a part-time student, has dependents, is a single parent, and/or did not graduate from high school with a diploma. Since the nontraditional student population has most recently been on the increase, institutions of higher education have a responsibility to address the needs of this significant component of their student body.

This chapter will look at enrollment trends for higher education students, and specifically address the unique characteristics and fundamental differences of the nontraditional student populations, and how the schools are working to meet those various needs.

Specifically, blended learning options for higher education and nontraditional students will be addressed. Corporate mergers are commonplace in today's business world, and the blending of course delivery methods has also joined the ranks of popular mergers. Many universities are rapidly making changes to their course delivery modes and merging the delivery of an academic course using face-to-face instruction and online components which is finding favor with many arenas. By offering flexible options to meet the needs of a growing student population, the universities may find increased enrollments, retention, and graduates.

The higher education challenges which have arisen due to the changes in student populations are many, but this chapter will include some details and ideas related to the following topics such as characteristics of the nontraditional student, challenges nontraditional students face, characteristics of online students in general, graduation rates of traditional and nontraditional students, distance and online learning history, characteristics of blended/hybrid instruction, best practices for online/blended instruction, Mayadas' Five Pillars of Quality Online Learning, and Student impressions of blended instruction

Universities and colleges across the nation are motivated to increase enrollments, but the urgency also includes retaining the students and supporting them as they pursue their degrees and graduate. With today's economy imposing its own changes to our student population, it is imperative that educational institutions find alternate avenues to provide students with options that will accommodate their work life, family life, and college life.

American College Testing (ACT) conducts studies to determine the status of today's college students and their readiness for higher education. Retention efforts are also included in these reports, and in the 2012 report the highest rated retention practices reported were academic advising centers, increased number of academic advisors, advising interventions, comprehensive learning assistance centers/labs, and supplemental instruction (ACT, 2012).

Change, improvement, and retention are three words which administrators will continue to focus on as the needs of the nontraditional students become more evident and are addressed. Many states are now basing their funding for higher education on graduation rates rather than enrollment figures alone. By helping these students be successful and have positive academic experiences, the retention and graduation rates for nontraditional students should improve significantly.

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