Chapter 14

Non–Traditional Students in Higher Education:
Barriers and Strategies for Self–Directed Learning

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this qualitative study is to investigate the barriers that non-traditional students (defined as over 40) face in self-directing their own learning and the strategies they develop to succeed. First established are the main elements that define non-traditional students, and the critical role that self-directed learning plays in their complicated educational journey towards degree attainment. The author then analyzes firsthand accounts and triangulates the findings with seminal research, which confirm that institutional, situational, and dispositional barriers in higher education pose serious difficulties to non-traditional students. Among the strategies for self-directing their learning in order to mitigate barriers and achieve success are setting attainable goals, seeking support, staying informed, remaining positive and focused when challenged, and planning. The chapter concludes with recommendations for higher education administrators regarding policies and procedures relative to non-traditional students and diversity in 21st-century education.

INTRODUCTION

In line with the overall scope of *Accessibility and Diversity in the 21ˢᵗ Century University*, this chapter addresses the important topic of the barriers nontraditional students face in self-directing their learning and the strategies they develop to succeed, key elements of which are persistence and dedication to lifelong learning. It is important to note at the outset that the overall field of adult learning and education uses various terms, which in some cases overlap, to describe the characteristics of this population. Additionally, scholars and educational institutions themselves define non-traditional students in various

ways for statistical reports. For the purposes of this study, non-traditional students, sometimes termed "reentry students," are defined as mature students over 40 years old who have reentered universities to complete undergraduate and graduate degrees after a hiatus of 10–15 years from the classroom.

Approximately 60% of undergraduate college enrollees are traditional students (18–21 years old), and approximately 40% are older students (22–55 years old). Public universities have made steady advancement in their campus operations and student diversity based on an open access policy (Wardley, Belanger, & Leonard, 2013). For example, original university retention models created for traditional students were insufficient to capture adequately non-traditional students' concerns, but have since been modified to address these insufficiencies. However, according to Witkowsky, Mendez, Ogunbowo, Clayton, and Hernandez (2016), non-traditional students remain "one of the underserved student populations in higher education, and campus leaders have been inadequate in their response to supporting the increasing number of this group" (p. 30).

The chapter begins with a profile of non-traditional students whose lives are complicated by conflicting or disparate priorities, including familial and financial obligations which often take precedence over their roles as university students. Also established is self-directed learning as a critical skill for this population. According to Morris (2019), self-directed learning is broadly defined as the process by which students initiate their own learning with or without direct instruction; further, it constitutes a "critical competence that empowers adults to adapt accordingly to fluid and complex contextual change" (Morris, p. 1).

The chapter then focuses on a case study which explores the barriers to and strategies for self-directed learning to achieve academic goals. The research problem is important because very few firsthand accounts from non-traditional students focused on self-direction exist in the literature. As a researcher and educator of mainly non-traditional students, the author's interest is piqued by research centered on students from diverse social environments and who have varying educational abilities (see Figure 1). In the larger scholarly context, as Arjomandi, Seufert, Obrien, and Anwar (2018) determined, there is a dearth of exclusive studies on non-traditional students, including on the best ways for them to learn. Even as the numbers of non-traditional students increase, this population continues to face barriers to acquiring one of the most critical tools they need in order to succeed in college: strategies for self-directed learning (Sanchez, Rodriquez, & Martinez, 2019).

This chapter's objective is to show that higher education for adult learners is not a single-pronged platform, but rather, a tiered stage for self-direction. The chances for non-traditional students' success are increased in a post-secondary education system that emphasizes how they learn, as opposed to the length of time it takes to learn. The chapter concludes with a set of recommendations for helping non-traditional students to succeed in their journey towards engaging in self-directed learning and earning their higher education degrees.

BACKGROUND

Profile of the Non-Traditional Student

Adult education as an academic field emerged formally in the early 20th century with the establishment of the American Association for Adult Education (Given, 2000). Many scholars have written about the education of adult learners, sometimes termed re-entry, nontraditional, or mature students. Cross (1981),

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