

Real Majority

in Higher Education Today

BY PATRICIA A. MCGUIRE

YVONNE IS A TYPICAL COLLEGE STUDENT IN 2010.

She's working on a paper due in her American Fiction course. She has to finish some reading for her Gender Communication course, and has a nagging worry about passing Statistics. She turns away from her computer to help her son, a second-grader, with his spelling homework, and then is distracted by her pre-school daughter's insistence that she give equal



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TAKEAWAYS

- 1 U.S. Department of Education studies reveal that, by various measures, almost 75 percent of college students today are "non-traditional."
- 2 Most conversation in government and policy circles, however, still assumes nearly all students are full-time, traditional undergraduates.
- 3 Rather than relying on traditional metrics such as four- or six-year graduation rates, it would be better for boards and institutional leaders to draft specific plans for assessing educational outcomes for non-traditional students across a set of learning objectives tailored to workforce skills.

time to her crayon drawing. Yvonne also remembers that she promised her boss that she'd be at work early the next day to help prepare an important contract presentation. Yvonne, a single parent, knows that her collegiate studies are a good example for her children, but she feels stressed about balancing all of the many demands on her time and energy—being a good mother, successful student, and productive worker.

Yvonne is fictional, but this composite mirrors the characteristics of a majority of students at my institution, Trinity Washington University, as well as those at many other public and private campuses around the country.

U.S. Department of Education studies reveal that, by various measures, almost 75 percent of college students today are “non-traditional”—in that they are paying for college themselves and not relying on parents (more than 51 percent of college students are “independent” financially); are attending college part-time (about 48 percent of college students); are delaying when they start college after high school (about 46 percent); are commuting rather than residing on campus (about 80 percent); are holding full-time jobs while working on their degrees; or are supporting children and other dependents.

While the “non-traditional” label used to refer mostly to students beyond the 18-to-22 age range (about 40 percent of college students are older than 22), the phrase now connotes students of all ages who are progressing through school with a market basket of courses taken at various institutions over a period of years, in both full-time and part-time programs.

In fact, the “traditional” college student of days gone by—a full-time, 18-to-22-year-old undergraduate living on campus, supported by parents, and expected to complete a baccalaureate degree within four years—is a distinct minority. Fewer than 25 percent of all undergraduates fit that description today! Trinity and some other campuses no longer use the “non-traditional” label, nor do they separate “adult” students from other students, since all students are adults and virtually

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all students work in full-time or part-time jobs. For the purposes of this article, “non-traditional,” “adult,” and “working” students are used interchangeably to describe the large majority of students who do not fit the typical collegiate stereotype.

Nontraditional students have gone to college in increasingly large numbers since the first G.I. Bill in 1944 supported veterans who needed retooling to enter the postwar economy. Public policy has long supported the presence of adult students in higher education as a means to achieve national economic goals through a more skilled workforce. Yet, most of the conversation in government and policy circles today about higher-education goals still assumes that nearly all college students are full-time, traditional undergraduates. Vocabulary reveals these deeply entrenched biases: Policymakers and pundits still refer to “college kids,” as if emancipated minors were the majority of postsecondary students. The phrase “four-year college” is often used in reference to institutions that offer baccalaureate and higher degrees, to distinguish them from the “two-year” model of the community college. In fact, “two-year” or “four-year” institutional references are as outmoded as *in loco parentis* rules.

Students attend college on vastly different timetables than those dated yardsticks that measure success accord-

ing to the amount of time spent in one place (the original school of enrollment), rather than the knowledge and skills acquired through a sequence of study that may involve courses taken at several different institutions over a period of years. Graduation rates, as currently measured, do not accurately reflect the actual attainment of degrees, since students who complete degrees after transferring or stopping out are not counted.

The stubborn insistence on time-based measurements has serious implications for assessment of institutional quality, often with negative consequences for older, working students who become marginalized because they do not fit the traditional measures of success. Our workforce needs are broader than the simple statistics of degrees awarded on a particular timetable; employers need real knowledge and skills, not simply credentials.

Consider the perspective of Catherine Meloy, president and CEO of Goodwill of Greater Washington and a former trustee at Trinity. She has made continuing education a specific performance goal for each of her staff members because, “Those people who have the desire to continue their learning experience are the same people who create a stronger, more innovative, more success-driven organization.” Noting that earning a degree is only one measure of success, Meloy says, “A degree is the personal accomplishment; the learning process is the advantage to the company.” (Continued on page 21)



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Meloy cites a member of her senior staff who earned a master's degree over a five-year period while working at Goodwill. "Throughout that five-year period he worked at Goodwill, while we did give minimal financial support, the organization generously gave him time 'off' (outside of personal leave) to achieve this degree. What that additional education brought to Goodwill during the five years was a 'state of the art' marketing department. Yes, he achieved his goal of the degree, ... but if he had never completed, Goodwill still would have been the recipient of a greater knowledge base with stronger positive outcomes for our organization." Meloy concludes, "A degree is a piece of paper ... but the desire to learn creates a lasting organization."

Trustees, many of whom are also corporate leaders in their communities like Catherine Meloy, often correlate their own business expectations for workforce development with the commitment of their universities to workforce education. Boards should expect their universities to

provide routine reports on institutional effectiveness in serving adult students, focusing especially on their programs that respond to workforce-development needs in collaboration with the local business community.

David Robertson, executive director of the Metropolitan Council of Governments for the Washington Region (which includes the major elected officials from D.C., Maryland, and Virginia), is currently directing a task force of Washington-area governmental, corporate, and educational leaders focusing on workforce development. Robertson observes, "Employers and employees have a mutual interest in promoting life-long learning, with higher education providing the foundation for the most promising career path. As an employer with evolving responsibilities to public officials, stakeholders, and funders, I know that workers who apply the life-long learning skills acquired through higher education provide a tremendous return on investment for our organization."

Yvonne, 31, didn't plan the current version of her college story. When she graduated from high school in 1995, she thought that she'd go straight through four years at the local state university where she first enrolled, then maybe go on to law school. But during her sophomore year, her parents divorced, and then her sister became critically ill. Yvonne decided to take a semester off to help her mother and sister. The semester soon became a year, and Yvonne went to work to help with the family expenses. She tried to find ways to keep up with her education, taking a couple of courses at a local community college and experimenting with some online courses through one of the big proprietary universities. She found that she could earn credits in various ways while she took care of her family's needs. Time passed, two children came along, and then her boyfriend left. After Yvonne's sister passed away and her mother found a new beau, Yvonne decided to start out on her own once again, this time

with two children, a new job as an administrative assistant, and about 60 college credits on various college and university transcripts.

Yvonne does not know this, but she is considered to be “a dropout” according to the conventional measures of student persistence toward degrees.

“Graduation rates” as a measure of institutional performance is a phrase at the core of debates about higher-education policy today. Few people who cite these rates realize how limited the data sets are that form the basis for this measure.

The U.S. Department of Education collects institutional data in the annual IPEDS (Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System) reports. The graduation-rate data point tracks a cohort of full-time, first-time freshmen from their first year in an institution through the sixth year, asking the institution to report how many students who entered in the cohort (say, Fall 2002) remained at that institution and graduated in four, five, or six years. This methodology has these unfortunate effects:

- Students who leave the reporting institution and who transfer into another institution are considered “dropouts,” even if they complete their degrees within the four-, five- or six-year timeframe at another institution.

- Students who transfer into the reporting institution and who subsequently graduate are not counted anywhere in graduation rates. Since the majority of college students transfer at least once, this means that the majority of college students are not counted in any official graduation rates.

- Adult students, for the most part, are not counted anywhere in the graduation-rate calculations because they usually are not part of the “full-time, first-time” cohorts.

- Students who start full-time and then revert to part-time study often take longer than six years to complete degrees, but any degree-completers after the sixth year (“150 percent” of “normal” time, which is the four-year timeframe) are not counted.

- Women, the majority of all students

today and the driving force behind the rise in participation of older students in higher education, are more likely to be among those counted as “dropouts,” because they often stop out of the collegiate cycle for family reasons, returning to college when their children are older.

Boards need to understand the measurements that they and their institutions’ leaders (as well as government officials)

use to assess institutional accountability. Choosing the wrong yardsticks can hurt students. For example, the U.S. News & World Report rankings emphasize traditional retention and four-to-six-year graduation rates. Colleges and universities that emphasize improving rankings will enroll fewer students whose characteristics might lower these rates. These could include low-income students (disproportionately students of color who often have to take time out from school for financial or personal reasons); adult students with family responsibilities; or students with prior military service whose attendance patterns may extend well beyond six years.

Improving rankings by excluding certain kinds of students seems like a bad choice in a nation that is striving to increase collegiate attendance for all citizens. The better measure for boards and institutional leaders would be an institutionally specific plan for assessing outcomes for non-traditional students, using a set of learning objectives tailored

to students’ workforce knowledge, skills, and competencies. According to a 2006 survey of employers conducted by the Association of American Colleges and Universities, the knowledge objectives for educating the workforce are consistent with those of sound general education, with emphasis on building students’ skills in teamwork, oral and written communication, statistical ability, ethical reasoning, application of theory in practice through internships, organizational abilities, and creative problem-solving.

Yvonne considers herself lucky that she’s finally found a good match between her employer’s view of education and her university’s approach to adult education. Her last employer always gave her a hard time when she needed an occasional day off to study for an exam or complete a paper. Her current employer works with her to support her studies, including providing generous tuition benefits. Her current university is also a welcome change from the last place, where the faculty made it pretty clear that absences due to sick children or work demands were just unacceptable. There, she wound up dropping several courses because of faculty inflexibility, further delaying completion of her degree. She appreciates that her current university has adopted a strong course-management system, with “hybrid” course formats for many of her classes so that she can keep up with all of the coursework more easily, while cutting down on her commuting time. With all of these supports, she is confident that she will complete her degree in the next two years.

Adult learners can drive the change from time-in-place measures to indicators that reflect real educational results and the ensuing benefits for the nation’s workforce and society.



Boards that want their universities to excel in meeting local and national workforce-development goals should consider several characteristics that mark successful programs for adult students:

- *Convenience* is one of the key factors affecting adult students' choice of institutions and persistence in academic programs. This includes everything from the availability of courses at times when working students can take the courses to the amount of coursework available online.
- *Ease of registration* is an important factor for busy working students who find excessive bureaucracy a reason to go elsewhere. "One-stop-shopping," preferably with most procedures online, is vital to enrolling working students.
- *Transfer-of-credit* policies that assess credits from other institutions easily and quickly win high marks from adult students.
- *Experiential-learning credit* that gives working students an opportunity to earn credit for their professional experiences can also facilitate degree completion.
- *Availability of support services* (e.g., library hours, food service, learning-support services) at the times when working students are on campus (nights, weekends) is another significant factor in retention of this population.

• *Online services and instruction* are essential for busy adult students. A course-management system that permits students to pick up missed lectures, hand in assignments electronically, chat with the professor and classmates virtually, and obtain various kinds of services (tutoring, bill paying) electronically facilitates adult students' success.

What is the best measure of success for adult students? While degree-attainment remains an important measure of collegiate success, employers expect real learning, not just credentials. Barbara Lang, a trustee at Trinity, is president and CEO of the District of Columbia Chamber of Commerce, the largest business organization in the Washington region. A champion of workforce education at the university level, Lang stresses that business leaders emphasize the quality of learning: "While the formal degree is important, almost equally as important is continuing education. Our recent experience with the economic downturn has demonstrated a need for learning new skills in order for business to remain competitive in an environment where business models are rapidly changing—that includes the 'green' economy, the complex financial markets, new technologies, a global economy requiring foreign-language skills. All are examples

of continuing education needed in the workplace, but that may not require a four-year degree."

President Obama has challenged American higher education to provide access to postsecondary education for millions more Americans. This initiative will expand the range of learners attending most colleges, and it has the potential to transform the indicators of collegiate success. Adult learners can drive the change from time-in-place measures to indicators that reflect real educational results and the ensuing benefits for the nation's workforce and society.

The ultimate measure of success for higher education is not how many students earn degrees in a four-to-six-year timeframe, but rather, how many citizens are able to acquire the advanced knowledge, skills, values, and competencies necessary to ensure personal success and our national competitiveness in the challenging 21st century global economy we face. ■

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T'SHIP LINKS: Stephen M. Jordan, "The Demographic Imperative." March/April 2009. E. Gordon Gee, "An Investment in Student Diversity." March/April 2005.