

Nontraditional Students as Undergraduate Researchers

A Handout for Mentors

Mentoring nontraditional undergraduate researchers requires an understanding of the unique backgrounds and experiences that these students bring to your research group/project.

What Characterizes a Nontraditional Student?

- Training and serving in the military
- Delaying postsecondary enrollment
- Actively supporting a family/dependents while going to school
 - Single parent of child/children
 - Caretaker of aging parents
- Being the first person in their family to go to college
- Holding a nontraditional high school diploma
- Holding a 2-year degree already
- Working a full-time job
- Being enrolled part-time in school
- Having and maintaining financial independence
- Speaking English as a second language

5 Helpful Tips for Working with Nontraditional Students

- **Timing of meetings** – Having a family/dependents means that evenings are often very busy and that last minute changes to meeting times are not feasible. It is also important to consider the unexpected circumstances that can interrupt the life a nontraditional student, such as the illness of a child, spouse, or parent. Think about scheduling important meetings earlier in the day and allowing schedule flexibility for nontraditional undergraduate researchers.
- **Location of meetings** – Many nontraditional students live off-campus, commute from a different city, or may not have parking accommodations that make it convenient to meet up on campus. When you schedule your research meetings, consider using a video or phone conferencing system with your undergraduate researchers or adjusting the meeting location to a place off-campus.
- **Explanation of project purpose and goals** – For students with specialized training or previous education or work experience, it is important to explain the overarching purpose of the research project and what role their tasks play in accomplishing those goals.
- **Emphasis on teamwork and leadership** – Nontraditional students make exceptional leaders and team players. They often have families, prior work experience, or specialized training, and they thrive when given ownership over a project.
- **Compensation and cost of participation** – For many nontraditional students, particularly in the summer, making money to support themselves and their families is their highest priority. Securing funding and finding ways to cut costs for your undergraduate researchers goes a long way toward involving and retaining nontraditional students in undergraduate research.

On-Campus Resources for Working with Nontraditional Students

- Veteran Resource and Support Center - <http://aggieveterans.tamu.edu>
- Transition Academic Programs - <https://tap.tamu.edu/default.aspx>
- Office for Diversity: Student Resources - <http://diversity.tamu.edu/Campus-Resources/Students>



Today's College Students Aren't Who You Think They Are

Popular culture tells us that college "kids" are recent high school graduates, living on campus, taking art history, drinking too much on weekends, and (hopefully) graduating four years later.

But these days [that narrative of the residential, collegiate experience is way off](#), says Alexandria Walton Radford, who heads up postsecondary education research at RTI International, a think tank in North Carolina. What we see on movie screens and news sites, she says, is skewed to match the perceptions of the elite: journalists, researchers, policymakers.

Today's college student is decidedly *nontraditional* — and has been for a while. "This isn't a new phenomenon," Radford says. "We've been looking at this since 1996."

So, what do we know about these "typical" college students of today?

Radford has done [a lot of research on this](#) and defines the nontraditional student as having one or more of the following characteristics:

- Financially independent from their parents
- Having a child or other dependent
- Being a single caregiver
- Lacking a traditional high school diploma
- Delaying postsecondary enrollment
- Attending school part time
- Being employed full time

Close to 74 percent of undergrads fall into one of these categories — and about a third have two or three. "I don't think people have got their heads wrapped around that yet," Radford says.

So here's a snapshot of the 17 million Americans enrolled in undergraduate higher education, according to numbers culled by the [National Center for Education Statistics](#).

- 1 in 5 is at least 30 years old
- About half are financially independent from their parents
- 1 in 4 is caring for a child
- 47 percent go to school part time at some point
- A quarter take a year off before starting school
- 2 out of 5 attend a two-year community college
- 44 percent have parents who never completed a bachelor's degree

As demographics shift, Radford argues, policy should follow.

It's vital that institutions look at the characteristics of their undergrad cohorts, she adds, to explore how to address their students' unique concerns.

Perhaps that means offering services like financial aid, advising or tutoring after-hours (instead of the typical 9 to 5). Maybe it means offering childcare for student-parents, or extra parking for commuters.

One thing for sure, says Radford, is that it's probably time to coin a new phrase for *nontraditional* students, considering they are the new normal.

The NPR Ed team will be covering the challenges and triumphs of today's higher ed students this year, as part of a new project called the Changing Face of College.

Source: <https://www.npr.org/sections/ed/2018/09/04/638561407/todays-college-students-arent-who-you-think-they-are>

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