

Drexel University

School of Education

Research Brief no. 2

Will the Real Nontraditional Student Please Stand Up? An Integrative Literature Review

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Abstract

Institutions of higher education are prioritizing programming to support nontraditional students. Exactly which student populations comprise the nontraditional definition remains unclear. The purpose of this integrative literature review was twofold: reduce ambiguity on the definitions of two common categorization terms in higher education, traditional and nontraditional student, and clarify how research studies that studied nontraditional student populations also defined *traditional* student populations. Analysis of 54 publications identified as many as 11 determinants for nontraditional students, consistent disagreement on age determinants, and incongruence in how researchers define traditional and nontraditional students. Theory of Intersectionality frames the research questions, analysis, and discussion.

The purpose of this integrative literature review was twofold: reduce ambiguity on the definitions of two common categorization terms in higher education, traditional and nontraditional student, and clarify how research studies that studied nontraditional student populations defined *traditional* student populations. Institutions of higher education are constantly innovating to support non-traditional students both to expand reach into new demographics of students as well as provide the necessary support structures to springboard students to degree completion and successful careers. However, if the definitions of both categorizations are ambiguous to the extent that education leaders interpret the meaning of these characterizations irrespective of a consistent literature base, those leaders may be unintentionally harming certain segments of their student population. This literature review utilizes the Theory of Intersectionality as an analytical tool (Collins & Bilge, 2016) to assess if appropriate determinants are being utilized to support postsecondary students that do not match the traditional criteria of white affluent male undergraduates.

Literature Review

Theory of Intersectionality

The theory of intersectionality is a complex and interconnected network of perspective, activism, scholarship, and analysis that has been defined in part as the study “of how individuals are positioned through difference in gender, class, sexual orientation, ethnicity, national belonging,” socioeconomic status, and other ways (Ruel, Mills, & Thomas, 2018, p. 18). It is important to note that some intersectional scholars (Collins & Bilge, 2016; Shaffner, Mills, & Mills, 2019) believe the more appropriate approach is to leave intersectionality unattached to a formal definition that could restrict its contextualized application and analysis.

The history of intersectionality is traced through periods of sociocultural and socio-economic activism during the 1960s through 1980s (Collins & Bilge, 2016). No one author, activist, or scholar is considered the originator of intersectionality, though renowned intersectional scholars exist. Instead, the wealth of intersectionality literature was amassed over time through the work of countless scholars, activists, educators, sociologists, and community leaders. Crenshaw (1991, 2018) has written at length about the marginalization of black women through two distinct intersectional lenses: race and gender. She describes how processes of subordination include systematic categorizations. This is done, in part, by constructing categorization systems that other race, gender, socioeconomic status, disability, etc.: categorization systems like the binary traditional versus nontraditional student used to influence policy

and programming at institutions of higher education. Crenshaw wrote (1991) that “the particular values attached” to categorizations create “social hierarchies” and inequalities (p. 1297). In this integrative literature review, the theory of intersectionality will undergird the evaluation of the categorization of two common terms in higher education: traditional and non-traditional students.

Traditional Students

The Merriam-Webster dictionary (2019) defines traditional as being “handed down from age to age” or “adhering to past practices or established conventions.” Utilizing this definition, the term traditional student in U.S. university settings inherently refers to white, affluent (and often male) undergraduate students. The first institutions of higher education preceded the Civil War (1861-1865) by more than 100 years: Harvard College (later changed to Harvard University), the College of William and Mary, the Collegiate School (Yale University), the College of New Jersey (Princeton University), King’s College (Columbia University), the College of Rhode Island (Brown University), Queen’s College (Rutgers University), the College of Philadelphia (University of Pennsylvania), and Dartmouth College. Access to higher education, however, was severely limited for non-white students and most women well into the 20th century. Over 100 historically black colleges and universities were built, in part, to accommodate U.S. racial segregation policies. Ashmun Institute, now known as Lincoln University in suburban Philadelphia, was founded in 1854 as the first institute of postsecondary education for black men (The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education, n.d.). The U.S. Supreme Court decision *Brown v. Board of Education* desegregated schools in 1954, but it took nearly two decades for institutions of higher education to comply. Riots and protests from white students greeted the arrival of their black peers at institutions in Georgia, Mississippi, Alabama, and elsewhere throughout the 1960s. Legal challenges over discriminatory policies toward underrepresented student populations continue to this day.

Nontraditional Students

Bean and Metzner’s (1985) seminal piece on nontraditional students conveyed the challenges associated with dichotomizing the categorization of postsecondary students. “Due to ... heterogeneity it is very difficult to develop a profile of a typical nontraditional student” (1985, p. 488). The authors attributed three primary characteristics to traditional students: they reside on campus, are 18-24 years old, and attend college full time. If a student does not meet one or more of those characteristics, Bean and Metzner (1985) argue, they may be considered non-traditional. The key to understanding the differences between students in each category, they wrote, is contextualizing the extent, intensity and duration of interactions with faculty members and peers.

The U.S. Department of Education defined the non-traditional student as meeting one of seven characteristics: delayed enrollment into college, part-time enrollment, financially independent, working a full-time job while enrolled, claimed dependents other than a spouse, identified as a single parent, or lacked a high school diploma (Horn & Carroll, 1996). This definition does not address multiple characterizations that are sometimes associated with the term non-traditional student: veterans, students with disabilities, college athletes, racial or ethnic minorities, gender identities, sexual identities, socioeconomic status, or first-generation student, thus adding to the uncertainty of the categorization. Separate from the discussion of *who* should be included under the non-traditional umbrella term is a debate of *why* the term is being used at all.

This literature review sought to answer two research questions:

- 1) Which determinants are utilized to identify nontraditional students in the literature, and 2) How do research studies on nontraditional student populations define *traditional* students?

Methods

This integrative literature review utilized “both experimental and non-experimental research in order to understand more fully a phenomenon of concern” (Booth, Sutton, & Papaioannou, 2016, p. 24). Quantitative, qualitative, multi-modal and mixed peer-reviewed studies from the EBSCOHost database from January 1995 to July 31 2019 were reviewed. They were filtered to include peer reviewed, English

language publications whose samples were a) U.S. based, and b) inclusive of nontraditional students. The time frame was selected to coincide with the U.S. Department of Education’s publication of definitions for nontraditional students (Horn & Carroll, 1996). Searches were conducted utilizing the following keyword searches:

- “nontraditional student” OR “non-traditional student” in all text
- “higher education” OR “college” OR “community college” in abstracts

The initial search returned 647 journal articles, of which 105 were duplicates. The titles, abstracts, and keywords of the remaining 542 articles were reviewed for inclusion. Of those, 389 were excluded for not meeting inclusion criteria. The remaining 153 articles were downloaded and stored for a full-text review. Analysis is ongoing. At the time of publication, 77 of 153 articles were reviewed and analyzed. Of those 77, 23 were rejected upon closer examination for not meeting inclusion criteria. The remaining 54 of 77 were analyzed and comprise the results of this report. A total of 76 publications await analysis. Definitions of traditional and nontraditional student, including citations, were logged for each publication. Publications were also coded for the determinants they associated with traditional and nontraditional students, including but not limited to age, gender, race, or whether they were online students.

Results

A total of 54 articles were analyzed for this literature review. The author utilized an intersectional approach for coding and analysis, meaning the researcher factored not only how traditional and nontraditional students were defined, but also how they were *not* defined. Ongoing analysis seeks to answer two research questions: 1) which determinants are utilized to identify nontraditional students in the literature, and 2) how do research studies on nontraditional student populations define *traditional* students?

RQ1

Analysis showed disagreement for the age determinant of nontraditional students. The most common determinants were 25 years or older (37%, n=20) or not identified (33%, n=18). For a complete list of ages, see Table 1. Analysis revealed 11 different determinants for nontraditional students, led by parent (50%, n=27), caretaker (48%, n=26), and full-time employment (21, n=39%). For a complete list of determinant frequencies, see Table 2.

Table 1. Frequencies for age determinants cited for nontraditional students (n=54)

Age Determinants	Frequency (Pct.)
21 years or older	2 (3.7%)
22+	2 (3.7%)
23+	2 (3.7%)
24+	9 (16.7%)
25+	20 (37.0%)
26+	1 (1.9%)
No age identified	18 (33%)

Table 2. Frequencies for non-age determinants cited for nontraditional students (n=54)

Non-age determinants	Frequency (Pct.)
First generation	7 (13%)
LGBTQ	6 (11%)
Race / Ethnicity	10 (19%)
Transfer	5 (9%)
Veteran	21 (39%)

Disability	3 (6%)
Caretaker	26 (48%)
Parent	27 (50%)
Employed	21 (39%)
Online learners	3 (6%)
Did not specify	7 (13%)

RQ2

Of the 54 publications analyzed for this report, 52% (n=28) studied nontraditional student populations without defining traditional students. Comparatively, 87% of publications (n=47) that studied nontraditional students also formally defined nontraditional students. This indicates a knowledge gap exists in the dichotomous approach to characterizing nontraditional students. Exemplars of definitions for traditional students included:

- Full time, postsecondary students between the ages of 18-24 (Monroe, 2006)
- Those entering college the same year they graduate high school (Pelletier, 2014)
- Primarily middle class and white (Levin et al., 2017)
- They were under 25 years of age, enrolled in college immediately after earning a high school diploma, dependent on parents and family members for financial support, and did not work during the school year (Mello, 2004)

Exemplars of definitions for nontraditional students included:

- Older, part-time, and commuter students (Lundberg, McIntire, & Creasman, 2008)
- Non-traditional age (25 years and older) (Myers & Mobley, 2004)
- Nontraditional students are often described as being at least 24 years old, having a family to support, or being employed full time (Mkhatshwa & Hoffman, 2019)
- A nontraditional student is different from a traditional student in that he or she is more likely to be married, have a child or children, be employed, or be an ethnic minority other than Asian (Min, 2019)

Discussion

Half of the 153 publications (n=77) have been analyzed for this literature review. Twenty-three were excluded, leaving 54 publications included so far in the analysis. The results indicate several emerging themes that will be important to track through the remainder of the review. The first theme is an incongruity in how research studies of U.S. based nontraditional students define both traditional and nontraditional students. More than half of the 54 publications did not define traditional student, which then infers that the term encompasses everyone that does not identify as nontraditional. However, analysis of definitions of nontraditional students show significant disagreement among determinants. The literature base clearly disagrees on determinants like race, ethnicity, gender, age, or socioeconomic status. The resulting incongruity serves underrepresented student populations poorly. For instance, modern Black students who start college immediately after high school and are financially dependent on their parents would be categorized as traditional by the current literature base. Yet, access to institutions of higher education was denied to Black men and women throughout much of the last two centuries. Black students often resist the traditional label because it whitewashes the oppressive experiences of their forebears. Additionally, if all non-white determinants are tossed into the nontraditional bucket, it dilutes the ability of administrators and staff to create targeted and supportive programming for student populations with

specific needs. Higher educators should resist dichotomous characterizations of student populations and work closely to build versatile support systems that understand the particular needs and of a diversifying body of students.

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Author Biography

Brian Delaney is a doctoral student in Educational Leadership and Learning Technologies, a Research Assistant in Drexel University's School of Education, and a Co-Founder of the Education, Learning, and Brain Sciences Research Collaborative. His research foci include journalism and mass communication education, online learning, educational technologies, Mind, Brain, and Education science, and andragogy. In February 2018, Delaney was selected Co-Editor of the Emerging Voices in Education Journal for a two-year term.

Delaney earned a master's degree in Higher Education Administration with a concentration in e-Learning Technologies and Instructional Design from Drexel in 2016. He earned a bachelor's degree in Journalism from Ithaca College in 2004 and was an award-winning journalist in newspapers and radio over a career of 16 years. He spent five years as an adjunct lecturer at the Ithaca College Park School of Communications, teaching introductory and investigative journalism courses and hosting workshops on interview strategies and leadership for student media organizations. Delaney spends his spare time with his wife Stefanie and their two children.