

Non-Traditional students and Generation Z:

Catalysts for College Change

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ABSTRACT

There are two collegiate demographics which, although disparate on paper, are actively looking for similar things out of the college environment. Non-traditional students (the adult learners) and Generation Z are approaching higher education from different life experiences, yet the underlying message is the same: financial solvency, diversity in teaching techniques, hands-on availability. Prins, Kassab, and Campbell (2015) illustrate the rise of adult learners as a collegiate demographic. Vicki Trowler (2015) defines non-traditional students while Kimmel, Gaylor, and Hayes (2016) and Adam Panacci (2015) delve into their motivations. Elaina Loveland (2017) explains the motivations behind the newest cadre of traditional students: Generation Z.

After establishing a parallel of scholastic preference and motivation between these two groups, this paper explores how a variant of Vicki Alger's (2015) suggested collegiate funding changes and a more robust classroom options for students would satisfy the needs of both demographics.

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As the years continue, more and more adults are going back to school to complete a college education. Some have started before, while others have not encountered the College experience before. As these numbers continue to rise, the system of higher education needs to recognize the vastly different needs and demands from this section of society. Additionally, the focus and concerns placed upon colleges by the latest generation of students cannot be ignored. The similarities between these non-traditional students and the traditional just-graduated-high-school college applicant is becoming a widening crevasse between what students are requiring from their college, and what colleges are offering.

In their introduction, Prins, Kassab, and Campbell (2015), using 2012 statistics from the National Center for Education Statistics, adult learners are a steadily growing percentage of college attendees. “In 2011, 42% of undergraduates were 25 or older ... From 2000 to 2010 the adult college enrollment rate increased by 42% compared to 34% for younger students, and is projected to rise by 20% through 2020” (p. 71). As the percentage of enrollment swings to, and past, the balance of traditional and non-traditional students, colleges need to be more proactive to fulfilling the needs of both ends of the spectrum.

THE TRADITIONAL STUDENT

To understand the unique situations that a non-traditional student can encounter, a baseline reference needs to be established. For this, the category of traditional student needs to be defined and evaluated.

Per Vicki Trowler (2015):

These ‘traditional’ students are often understood in the UK higher education context to be native [residents], mostly white from broadly Christian traditions, fully able-bodied, middle or upper class, heterosexual young people whose parents attended higher education, directly transitioning from public or ‘decent’ state schools, with the requisite numbers and grades of Highers or A-levels, and without dependents or family responsibilities, studying full-time, forming a gendered distribution among the disciplines. (p. 299)

Thus, traditional students are first-time college attendees: having completed their High School education just prior to College admission. This age group then typically ranges from eighteen to twenty-two years old (for a four-year college degree). Financial Aid programs are based on the students’ parents tax information, provided that the student is listed as a dependent. The resulting class load for these students will typically fall under the hours where they had attended High School, with very little change in continuity of schedule. Some of these students may have some form of employment, but traditionally this employment is reserved for the quality of life expenditures and not for basic human needs.

The reasons for a traditional student to pursue college, as opposed to directly joining the workforce or even options such as military service, are varied. However, Kimmel, Gaylor, and Hayes (2016) show that a significant percentage of students are going to college simply from that action is expected of them by family and peers.

THE NON-TRADITIONAL STUDENT

The non-traditional Student, by its very definition, is not someone from the above category. These students are adult learners: some with children, some with their own residence and financial responsibilities, some with employment, some with prior college experience, and

some with a combination of the above. The resulting Venn diagram from the above combinations does not result in a bull's eye for higher learning institutions to focus on as a magic bullet approach.

As put forward by Vicki Trowler (2015):

This suggests that 'non-traditional' students possess at least one of the following characteristics: international or immigrant students; minority ethnic or religious-affiliated students; students with disabilities; working class students; lesbian, gay, trans- or bisexual students, or students questioning their sexual identity; mature students, or students returning to higher education after early departure; first-in-family students; students with vocational or other qualifications; student parents and students with caring responsibilities; part-time students, or students registered for full-time study but working too; students choosing to study in a discipline in which their gender has historically been underrepresented. (p. 299)

The nuclear family for a non-traditional student ranges from the single student with no dependents to having a full family with spouse and children to account for. These students, especially those who have kids, have a sizable commitment of time and money needed to be focused solely on basic human needs: food and shelter, transportation, and care of those nuclear family members. Those students who are married or have a partner whom can assist with taking care of the time and expense budgets do have a slight advantage, but "more than one-half of adult learners [support] at least one child". (Prins, Kassab, & Campbell p. 82)

The reasons for non-traditional students to pursue a college degree are more varied than the traditional student. According to Kimmel, Gaylor, and Hayes (2016), this ranges from the altruistic search for more knowledge to opening more doors in their field of choice (including

opening doors into a new field). Apart from the altruistic search for knowledge, each of these reasons reduces to a lowest common denominator of being able to better one's income, environment, and/or professional experience (Adam Panacci 2015). With that denominator established, Panacci (2015) brings to light that these non-traditional students are also more inclined to learn in more varied styles than the rote method established during grade school (para. 27-32). Panacci (2015) also, referencing the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning's 2000 executive summary, "CAEL includes the lecture-based approach in the 'traditions and practices that prove ill-suited for adults' and identifies it as one of the 'facile assumptions' of higher education. CAEL argues that adult students are best served when faculty do 'not limit themselves to the traditional role of lecturer in the classroom'." (para. 33)

For example, Panacci (2015) covers how non-traditional students can have a significant preference for hands-on learning, and for their instructors to make more concrete connections from what is being taught to the subject's real-world applications (para. 35-36). Compound this with the fact that non-traditional students, by the above definition, have typically been removed from a scholastic environment for an extended period. Given that the educational process is not static and un-evolving, the learning processes that these non-traditional students may have fostered in their past may not be completely coordinated with the tools utilized by the educational systems of the present.

COSTS OF EDUCATION

The costs of education range from campus to campus across the United States. These costs can be broken down into five categories: educational, room & board, associated, ancillary, and opportunity costs. Educational costs are the simplest to evaluate, for they are the flat bill issued by the institution to enroll and take classes, including a fee rate that may vary from

college to college (Robin Farmer 2015). Room & board costs are dependent upon the student themselves: colleges typically have a food and housing system available, yet most non-traditional students already have their own residence (the cost of maintaining that residence will vary depending on the individual situation). Associated costs are expenditures directly resultant of student enrollment: books, lab and material fees, transportation costs, and general supplies. With many non-traditional students commuting to college, this then includes the cost of operating their vehicle (gas, insurance, maintenance) and parking. Ancillary costs are the discretionary expenses accrued while being a student: purchasing meals or beverages on campus, purchasing supplementary material for college, or memberships/donations regarding collegiate groups and activities.

Opportunity costs, however, are something typically focused upon when an adult learner is contemplating to pursue higher education - these are gains that are lost by committing to higher education. Some outliers exist, however holding both full-time employment (forty plus hours a week) and full-time student status (typically twelve to eighteen credit hours a school segment) is considered counterproductive by both the professional and scholastic environments. As succinctly stated by Kerri Anne Renzulli and Kim Clark (2017): “Experts recommend limiting work to 12 hours a week” (p. 121).

It also must be questioned that over the four-year period required for a Bachelor’s Degree, what professional income and job advancement was not available due to reserving that time for higher education compared to the financial investment in college? Additionally, opportunity costs associated with attaining a college degree are budgetary items that are required due to school enrollment: child care is a primary example of this, and was noted as “the most

significant barrier for students 35+ was the lack of funds for childcare coverage for their children while in class” by Kimmel, et al. (2016)

It is well worth noting that Prins, et al. (2015) detail the scheduling (and thus highlighting the opportunity cost) of a non-traditional Student pursuing a college degree in perspective:

Although the majority of FAFSA applicants planned on full-time study, adult learners were considerably less likely to do so than younger students: 79% of rural and 74% of urban adult learners planned full-time status versus 97% of rural and 95% of urban students under 24. Conversely, adult learners were more likely to plan on enrolling halftime (19% rural, 23% urban) than traditional-age students (3% to 4%). About 2% of rural and urban adult learners planned on attending less than half-time, compared to less than 1% of younger students. (p. 75)

PAYING FOR COLLEGE

With the time and financial budgets of students being finite, even while the costs of education continue to rise, Vicki Alger (2015) has a novel proposal to increase the competitiveness of colleges and reducing the financial burden on students:

Instead of funneling hundreds of billions of dollars annually to public institutions that face no consequences for out-of-control price increases, we could provide the money directly to students as performance grants.

To qualify for these grants, students would have to demonstrate genuine financial need and complete their chosen degree programs as stipulated. Otherwise, their grants would convert into loans that must be repaid.

Schools, two- and four-year alike, would have to compete for students and their associated grant funding, and this competition would exert powerful pressure on the

schools to control costs, maintain high quality, and offer more generous institutional aid—or risk losing students to other institutions. (p. 6)

The caveat to this process is that any math determining “genuine financial need” (Alger p. 6) would require a drastic overhaul to account for the care and maintenance of one’s household and their nuclear family. Realistic cost offsets for children, transportation, and basic human needs (food, shelter, etc.), based on regional cost-of-living, must be factored into this new equation. Those who default on their schooling, as noted by Alger, would then be repaid over time as fixed-rate loans. Those who succeed, enter society without long-lasting or debilitating debt.

The removal of such a percent of government funding, at first glance, would seem like a debilitating blow to the venue of higher education. However, this money is not being removed from the pool – it is just being allocated and applied in a different manner. The direct result of this redirection and flow of funding would make three typically tepid statistics about a college become paramount for their success: student retention, student graduation rates, student recruitment. The more students who complete their schooling, the more income a college will see. The more students who choose to start and complete their education at the college, again, the more income the college will see. As those two statistics rise, the ability to recruit and bring in more new students will become even easier – again, continuing to fill a college’s coffers. What is taught and how it is taught would become as important as enrollment trends. With the increasing importance regarding the enrollment and retention of students, colleges will be actively competing against one another, instead of relying on geographical ease of access: stimulating growth and the educational process for both traditional and non-traditional students... and their respective schools. (Alger p. 6)

ENTER GENERATION Z

Earlier, it has been stated that the educational process is not static and un-evolving – however it would appear that these changes are not being applied in a timely fashion. While greater numbers of non-traditional students are enrolling in college, the latest generation is now entering the collegiate arena as traditional students. Elaina Loveland (2017) explains that “Generation Z students (born between 1995–2010) are entrepreneurial, desire practical skills with their education, and are concerned about the cost of college” (p. 36). Additionally, “When it comes to education, 72 percent say they want a more customized college experience in which colleges allow students to design their own course of study or major and 79 percent would like to integrate their higher education experience with employer internships. Eighty-one percent believe that college is crucial to starting a career”. (p. 36)

Loveland (2017) continues:

“Students want face-to-face interaction,” said [Meghan] Grace [Co-author of *Generation Z Goes to College*]. “Admission officers need to take the time to build a face-to-face relationship with prospective students.”

Jose Bowen, president of Goucher College in Baltimore, agreed. “Having a conversation is the best way to communicate with Generation Z,” he said. “We don’t want to talk at them. We want to have a conversation. Face-to-face interaction, while old school, has a lot of authenticity and influence. While this generation still opens emails, they often associate emails with something their parents do at work.” (p. 37)

The parallels between how this generation and non-traditional student approach college cannot be denied. Panacci (2015) concludes that “research consistently indicates that the development of many adult students is best supported when classroom learning is connected to

their career-related roles and goals and when active, collaborative, and interactive classroom approaches are employed”. (para. 39) Compare this to where Loveland (2017) interviewed the other co-author of *Generation Z Goes to College*, Corey Seemiller: “Generation Z students appreciate practical real life experience. ‘They want more hands-on application of in[sic] internships during the course of college,’ said Seemiller. ‘Many of them would be interested in a first-year internship or an entrepreneurship class as a general education option’.” (p. 36)

It is also worth noting that while using Trowler’s definition of non-traditional student, gender identity/presentation, and sexual orientation are listed. Even without quantitative numbers, same-sex marriage is legal in the United States of America as of the Supreme Court’s decision on June 26, 2015 (CNN 2015). Generation Z is the youngest generation of college students who are no longer hindered by law regarding choices of social or romantic interactions, further reinforcing that both the oldest and youngest collegiate generations are becoming critical influences on the higher education climate.

IF NOTHING CHANGES...

With these parallels, it is an undisputable fact that the current direction of colleges is counterproductive to the needs of a majority of its paying customers. The non-traditional students are looking for a more solvent way to achieve their goal of graduation while Gen Z’ers are wanting to make sure that the goal is achievable and reasonable. Both groups are requesting more than just rote lecture and process.

Without fulfilling the need for better financial and educational solvency of their students, colleges are denying themselves two core demographics while losing out on the growth (and profit) gained from a more competitive environment. However, considering the age gap, maybe colleges shouldn’t be surprised that they are hearing the same thing twice: those Gen Z

traditional students just starting up college might very well be the Gen X non-traditional students' children.

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