POSTSECONDARY NATIONAL POLICY INSTITUTE

POST-TRADITIONAL STUDENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, traditional students (students between the ages of 17-21, who attend four-year colleges and live on campus) make up nearly 15% of the undergraduate population. The remaining 85% of students are considered “post-traditional”[ii] and are a diverse group of adult learners, full-time employees, low-income students, students who commute to school and working parents. In general, post-traditional students have one or more of the following characteristics: they delay enrollment in college after high school, they attend part-time for at least part of an academic year, they work full time while also enrolled in school, they are financially independent or they have dependents (spouse and/or children).

ATTENDANCE INTENSITY AND ENROLLMENT BEHAVIOR

- Post-traditional students are more likely to enroll at two-year, public institutions.
  - 51% of students with dependents enroll at two-year institutions.
  - 47% of students aged 24 to 39 attend a two-year institution and 52% of students 40 and older attend two-year institutions.
  - 41% of students who work full-time attend two-year institutions.
- While enrollment at public two-year institutions is the most common option for these students, we also see high enrollments at for-profit institutions.
  - Nearly one third of unmarried students with children attend for-profit institutions.
  - 18% of students aged 24 to 29 attend for-profits, 23% aged 30 to 39 attend for-profits and 20% of students 40 and older attend for-profits.
  - Student parents account for 51% of all students at for-profit institutions.
- Post-traditional students enroll in college at a wide range of intensities from full-time full-year to part-time for part of the year, but 33% attend part-time and for part of the year.
  - The older a student is, the more likely he/she is to attend part-time, part-year; 31% of students aged 24 to 29 attend part-time, part-year and 39% of students 40 years old and above attend part-time, part-year.
- Post-traditional students are more likely to take advantage of online postsecondary options than their traditional student peers; 80% of students enrolled in online programs were 25 years old or older.
- Nearly half of post-traditional students leave community colleges (where most of these students enroll) after three years, without a degree. At four-year colleges, they complete at a rate of 15%.
- Most post-traditional students are pursuing an associate’s degree as opposed to a bachelor’s degree.

STUDENT PARENTS

- Post-traditional students are more likely to have dependents.
  - 26% of all postsecondary students in the U.S. are parents.
▪ Over half of students aged 30 to 39 had two or more dependents and just over 40% of students aged 40 and older had dependents.
▪ Any student with dependents is much more likely to be female; females make up 71% of all student parents and 79% of single parents.
▪ 77% of students with dependents are unmarried and 61% are married.
▪ In the postsecondary education system, women of color are the most likely to have dependent children. 47% of African-American female students are parents, 39% of Native American female students are parents, 32% of Latina female students are parents and 29% of white female students are parents.
▪ The majority of female student parents enrolled in college say that the activity taking up most of their time in any given week is child/dependent care, followed by work and, lastly, school.
▪ Student parents are less likely to complete their degree than non-parents. Of students who started a program in 2003–2004, only 33% left with a degree or certificate after six years.

**FINANCIAL BARRIERS**

▪ Post-traditional students are more likely to be low-income and require financial assistance.
  ▪ Over 50% of students aged 24 to 26, over 33% of students aged 30 to 39 and over a quarter of students aged 40 and older had an annual income of less than $20,000.
  ▪ Two thirds (66%) of unmarried student parents had an annual income of less than $20,000.
  ▪ The average age of Pell Grant recipients is 26 years old, a figure that has been steadily rising for the last two decades.
  ▪ Post-traditional students are more likely to have an expected family contribution of $0 and are more likely to have high levels of unmet financial need.
  ▪ Unmet need for students who are financially independent is over $5,000. For student parents, it is closer to $5,500.

**SOURCES**


[Post-Traditional Learners and the Transformation of Postsecondary Education](http://www.acenet.edu/ACE/). ACE, January 2013.


[i] While the U.S. Department of Education uses the term “non-traditional” many researchers prefer the term “post-traditional” since it recognizes these students for the “value-add” they bring to their colleges. For the purposes of this brief, non-traditional and post-traditional are used interchangeably as characteristics of both groups contain significant overlap.
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