POST-TRADITIONAL STUDENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Traditional students (students between the ages of 17–24, who attend four-year colleges and live on campus) make up 15% of the undergraduate population. The remaining 85% of students are considered “post-traditional”[i] 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

- In 2017, post-traditional (ages 25 or older) students were 39.8% of enrollment in all degree-granting postsecondary institutions.
  - Post-traditional males were 16.1% of all postsecondary enrollment and 37.1% of all male enrollment.
  - Post-traditional females were 23.8% of all postsecondary enrollment and 42.0% of all female enrollment.
- Full-time post-traditional (ages 25 or older) students are overrepresented in private institutions, except for four-year private non-profit institutions.
  - Post-traditional students make up 9% of public four-year institutions, 13% of private non-profit four-year institutions, and 21% of public two-year institutions.
  - Private for-profit four-year institutions have the most post-traditional student representation at 66%.
  - Private for-profit two-year institutions have 54% enrollment of post-traditional students and private non-profit two-year institutions have 58% enrollment of post-traditional students.
- Part-time post-traditional students (ages 25 or older) are overrepresented in all institution types except two-year and four-year public institutions.
  - Post-traditional students make up 37% of public two-year institutions and 40% of public four-year institutions.
  - Post-traditional students make up 59% of enrollment at private non-profit four-year institutions, 65% at private non-profit two-year institutions, 67% at private for-profit two-year institutions, and 82% at private for-profit four-year institutions.
- Overall, post-traditional students are more likely to enroll at two-year public institutions.
  - Fifty-one percent of students with dependents enroll at two-year institutions.
  - Forty-seven percent of students aged 24 to 39 attend a two-year institution and 52% of students 40 and older attend two-year institutions.
  - Forty-one percent of students who work full-time attend two-year institutions.
- While enrollment at public two-year institutions is the most common option for post-traditional students, we also see high enrollment at for-profit institutions.
  - One-third of unmarried students with children attend for-profit institutions.
  - Eighteen percent of students aged 24 to 29, 23% of students aged 30 to 39, 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, with 33% attending part-time and for part of the year.

- The older a student is, the more likely they are 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 degree as opposed to a bachelor’s degree.

STUDENT PARENTS

- Post-traditional students are more likely to have dependents.
  - Twenty-six percent 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 student parents.
  - Seventy-seven percent 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. Forty-seven percent of Black female students are parents, as well as 39% of American Indian/Alaska Native female students, 32% of Latina female students, and 29% of white female students.

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, 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. ACE, January 2013.


[1] 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-added” 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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