

## **SECTION IV**

### **NONTRADITIONAL STUDENTS**

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Nontraditional students are defined as those students 25 years of age or above, in comparison to the traditional-age student pool, which consists of individuals 18-24 years of age. Demographic projections showed that after the rapid increases in educational participation from 1955 until 1970 and the slower growth during the 1970s, "the prime college population will decline greatly as the baby boom children are replaced by those smaller cohorts born after 1965."<sup>91</sup> This decline will continue until the mid-1990s. Awareness of this changing environment has spurred a burgeoning body of literature related to the college choice decisions of nontraditional students.

In the context of a rapidly changing economic environment, where skills may have become obsolete, education has become a lifelong process rather than a one-time investment. In order to remain competitive in the labor market, individuals may enter or re-enter higher education at times other than the traditional opportunity window immediately after high school graduation. Also, irrespective of an individual's educational attainment, where the labor market is tight the opportunity cost of entering higher education is lower. Attempts to increase the educational attainment of Ohio Appalachia's population should not neglect students outside the traditional age group.

This section of the report commences with a brief examination of the demographic changes behind the decreased size of the traditional-age student population. This examination is followed by a review of the literature on nontraditional student participation, with an emphasis on the different requirements of the group. Finally, the responses to the survey of nontraditional students in Ohio Appalachia are examined, in particular to determine the barriers that inhibited their earlier educational participation and the factors that led to their return to education.

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<sup>91</sup>Harriet Fishlow, *A Demographic Overview of Postsecondary Education* (Washington, DC: National Commission on Student Financial Assistance, 1982), i, ERIC, ED 228935.

## DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGE

Bishop and Van Dyk observe that "the heightened interest in adult students is ... a pragmatic response to the hope that in the 1980s nontraditional students will fill the classrooms that are emptied by the contraction of the 18 to 24 age cohort.<sup>2</sup> Those classrooms will need not only to have been filled during the 1980s, but through into the present decade as "the low point years of the 18 to 24 year old population will be in the early to middle 1990s."<sup>93</sup>

Even by the year 2000, however, it is predicted that the body of traditional age students will not have returned to its twentieth century peak attained in 1981.<sup>94</sup> The composition of this potential student body will also have changed significantly, with larger proportions of black and hispanic members, groups which have not traditionally enrolled in higher education at very high rates. It appears that colleges will need to cater to a different type of student body however they choose to fill the demographically-induced enrollment declines.

The maintenance of peak enrollment rates requires that demographic losses are offset by increases in participation rates. Nontraditional student groups are a potential source of increased enrollment. However, there are limits to the extent to which nontraditional students can fill the enrollment gap created as a result of demographic shifts. In the last decade of this century, the 25 to 34 year old age cohort, which typically comprised the majority of nontraditional students, will contract in size by 16 percent. In addition,

substantial increases in participation rates for this group do not appear probable, although as with younger students, improved economic circumstances with a consequent increase in the rate of return to higher education or further training ... could have some effect.<sup>95</sup>

Women have typically comprised a large proportion of the nontraditional student body. The proportion of women is, however, likely to decline in the future: "the market for 'returning' women will shrink as fewer will have left in the first place."<sup>96</sup>

Much of the research on nontraditional students has focused on the possibility of increased enrollments compensating for declining numbers of traditional-age students. The emphasis of this section, however, is twofold: first, individuals who did not go directly to college from high school can offer insight into the factors that led to this decision; second, increased educational access for

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<sup>93</sup>John Bishop and Jane Van Dyk, "Can Adults be Hooked on College? Some Determinants of Adult College Attendance," *Journal of Higher Education* XLVIII (Jan./Feb. 1977): 40.

<sup>94</sup>Fishlow, ii.

<sup>95</sup>*Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>96</sup>*Ibid.*, 8.

nontraditional students could play an important role in the revitalization of the Ohio Appalachia region.

## **RESEARCH ON NONTRADITIONAL STUDENTS**

The research on the college choice behavior of traditional-age students "does not appear particularly relevant to the choices made by older students."<sup>97</sup> Both their needs and the college choice decision processes may contrast with those of traditional-age students. Nontraditional students, in addition, are far from being a homogeneous group. Any desire to increase nontraditional access to higher education must therefore be informed by an understanding of those attributes unique to the various nontraditional student bodies.<sup>98</sup>

Paulsen, in a review of the relevant literature, lists characteristics of nontraditional students that are correlated with increased probability of attending college. These are as follows:

- the student is white,
- the student's occupational status is higher.
- the student's previous educational attainment is higher,
- the student's own income is greater,
- the student is at a younger age.
- the student is not married (significant for female students only).
- the student has fewer children under 18 years,
- the student is working full-time,
- the student is a veteran,
- the student has college-level educational aspirations,
- the student resides a short distance from college,
- the college's tuition is lower,
- the student is receiving financial assistance as either financial aid, veteran's benefits, or welfare,
- job market opportunities for noncollege graduates are poor,
- the job-market opportunities for college graduates are good, and
- the student is not in the armed services.<sup>99</sup>

These findings implicitly demonstrate the barriers to higher education for nontraditional students. Individuals less likely to enroll as nontraditional students, therefore, will tend to be nonwhite, of lower occupational status and prior educational attainment, older, of lower income, have more children under ten years of age, and so on.

In terms of policy variables that can be easily manipulated, it has been found that "adult students

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<sup>97</sup>Trudy H. Bers and Kerry Smith, "College Choice and the Nontraditional Student," *Community College Review* 15 (1987): 39-40.

<sup>98</sup>*Ibid.*, 132.

<sup>99</sup>Paulsen, 31-33.

are more responsive to tuition levels than are recent high school students."<sup>100</sup> Each dollar in tuition cuts will, thus, increase enrollment of nontraditional students at a faster rate than that of traditional-age students. Whether enrollment increases as a result of tuition cuts would be sufficient to make up for losses in average tuition revenue was not addressed by the study.

The nontraditional students examined by Bers and Smith "did not report engaging in any of the sequential search processes and decision activities suggested by the college choice literature."<sup>101</sup> Although this finding may partially be explained by the study's focus on community colleges, it nevertheless has important implications for the recruitment practices of educational institutions that are targeting nontraditional students. College choice decision models developed with traditional-age students in mind may not be relevant to nontraditional students.

Nontraditional students are a heterogeneous body, including many different age groups with diverse motivations for attending college. In relation to their motivations for entering higher education, Rogers, Gilleland, and Dixon propose a continuum of motivations ranging from the purely utilitarian--education as a direct investment in one's career, for example--to the non-utilitarian.<sup>102</sup> Adults exhibiting dissimilar motivations to return to education will respond differently to the colleges' various educational offerings, as well as the modes used to communicate the offerings. Changes in course offerings, timing of classes, and the types of promotional materials used may all influence the attractiveness of an educational institution to nontraditional students with needs different from those of the traditional-age student body.<sup>103</sup>

Kempner and Kinnick examine the proposition that there exists an opportunity window for participation in higher education.<sup>104</sup> Although there is evidence that we exist in an increasingly "age-irrelevant society," higher education remains largely locked into the constraints of age-appropriate behavior:

the data here indicate strongly that the odds of attaining at least a bachelor's degree favor the person who aspires to this level of educational attainment in high school and then enters postsecondary education on time.<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>100</sup>Bishop and Van Dyk, 53-54.

<sup>101</sup>Bers and Smith, 41.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 199.

<sup>103</sup>Mary E. Wolfgang and William D. Dowling, "Differences in Motivation of Adult and Younger Undergraduates," *Journal of Higher Education* 52 (1981): 645-46.

<sup>104</sup>Kempner and Kinnick, 535-647.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 544.

An opportunity window was found to exist immediately after high school graduation; "once missed, other mediating characteristics are needed to overcome this failed opportunity."<sup>106</sup> Even though there have been rises in nontraditional student participation, it remains important to open up new opportunity windows to increase the equitability of educational access for those who miss the opening immediately after high school.

Corman examined the increased enrollment of older students from a human capital model perspective, whereby "schooling is viewed as an investment undertaken if the present value of the stream of benefits exceeds the costs."<sup>107</sup> In the conventional specifications of this model, this increased enrollment appears to reflect either irrational investment behavior or education as a consumption rather than an investment good.<sup>108</sup> She concluded, however, that nontraditional students were indeed acting in an economically rational manner, mitigated by factors such as imperfect capital markets and the lack of depreciation of the value of education for certain groups.<sup>109</sup>

Corman's conclusions are perhaps of greatest relevance to the present study. The barriers she observed to immediate post-high school higher education are those that the present study aims to identify and suggest strategies to overcome.

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid., 546.

<sup>107</sup> Hope Corman, "Postsecondary Education Enrollment Responses by Recent High School Graduates and Older Adults," *Journal of Human Resources* 18 (Spring 1983): 250.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 248.

<sup>109</sup> Corman, 248-49.

## **SURVEY ANALYSIS**

The final sample of nontraditional students consist of 164 individuals age 25 or above who attended high school in the Ohio Appalachian region and did not go on to college immediately after high school, but have now entered higher education. The sample is drawn from a number of higher educational institutions in the region that are members of the consortium (see appendix IV).

The final sample included proportionally more women than men. Of the 163 who specified their gender, 68.1 percent were female. This may have biased the results to some degree; a number of studies have reported significant gender differences in nontraditional students' participation.

## **INDIVIDUALS' ATTRIBUTES AND MOTIVATIONS**

### **Marital Status**

The majority of the respondents, 57.9 percent, are married, while 10.4 percent never married and 30.5 percent are divorced or separated. This contradicts the findings reported in Paulsen's literature review that female nontraditional students are more likely not to be married.<sup>111</sup>

### **Migration Out of Ohio Appalachia**

A much higher proportion of this sample than of the seniors wanted to, or thought they would, live in the Ohio Appalachia region for most of their lives. Only 13.3 percent of seniors expressed a desire to remain in the area, while 50.6 percent of older students expressed a similar aspiration. This is compounded by the more emphatic rejection of the possibility by the seniors. Older students' stronger desire to live in the area indicates that education is not generally being sought by them as an escape route from their present location. Thus, the skills they acquire are likely to remain within the region; whether they will find an outlet for their new skills is a separate question.

### **Full/Part-Time Attendance**

Nontraditional students tend to attend college part time at proportionally higher rates than traditional-age students.<sup>112</sup> It is therefore interesting to note that a larger portion of nontraditional students than seniors was attending fulltime, 78.0 percent as compared to 67.1 percent. The sample may be too small to be fully representative.

### **Preparedness for Higher**

In terms of their preparedness for higher education, 44.5 percent of nontraditional students felt themselves equipped, compared to 57.7 percent of seniors. However, 41.5 percent of the sample *did not* feel prepared, compared to only 15.3 percent of seniors. This could indicate two things: having been out of school for a period of time, the adults may feel less familiar with the educational environment and, therefore, tend to judge themselves as ill prepared; alternatively, it may be that they were indeed less well prepared while at high school.

### **Academic Achievement**

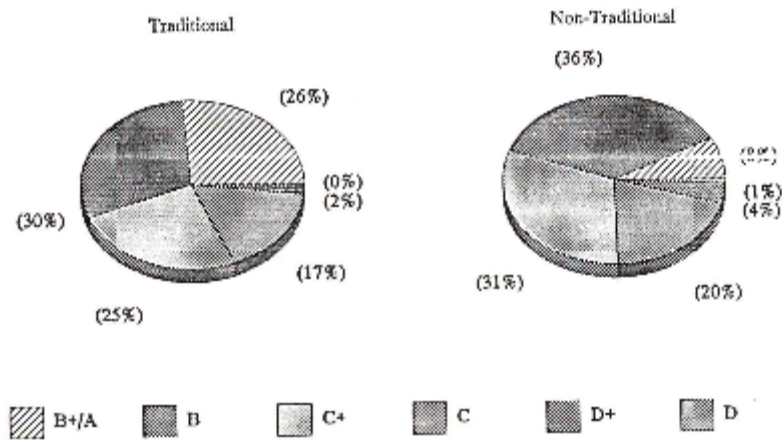
Academic achievement is reflected in the comparative high school GPAs of the two groups. The nontraditional student sample is more highly concentrated in the range 2.5-3.4 C + /B), while the seniors are more likely to have higher grades (figure IV.1).

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<sup>111</sup>Paulsen, 31-33

<sup>112</sup>Bishop and Van Dyk, 55.

FIGURE IV.1 HIGH SCHOOL GPA OF TRADITIONAL VS. NONTRADITIONAL STUDENTS



Source: Appalachian Access and Success College Survey 1991

## **FAMILIAL INFLUENCES**

In terms of parental encouragement, nontraditional students were less well served than the seniors. A lower proportion, 42.1 percent compared to 88.3 percent, answered that their parents had encouraged them; a higher proportion also claimed not to have received parental encouragement. This is perhaps not surprising given the evidence of the role of parental encouragement on higher education participation and the fact that this group chose not to enter college immediately upon high school graduation.

The parents of nontraditional students had, on average, a much lower level of education than those of the seniors. While 38.6 percent of seniors' mothers were educated above twelfth grade, only 13.6 percent of nontraditional students mothers were as highly educated. Similarly, while 39.6 percent of seniors' fathers had an education beyond twelfth grade, only 18 Percent of nontraditional students fathers were educated to this level. Although the two sample groups are not strictly comparable, these findings can tentatively be read as confirmation that parental education is correlated with educational aspirations and achievement.

## INSTITUTIONAL INFLUENCES

### High School Curriculum

The feeling of unpreparedness for higher education exhibited by the nontraditional students could be a function of the type of high school curriculum followed. A lower proportion, 30.5 percent compared to 56.7 percent, of nontraditional students than seniors followed a college preparatory track in high school. They were also slightly more likely to have followed a vocational education curriculum, 18.3 percent against 10.5 percent, and more likely to have followed a general curriculum, 50.0 percent compared to 24.4 percent.

Their opinion of the job high school had done in promoting higher education was significantly lower than that of the seniors. Only 15.9 percent of the sample rated the high school as "good," compared to 42.8 percent of seniors. Similarly, 37.2 percent rated their high school's performance as poor, compared to only 9.6 percent of seniors giving the same rating.

First, it must be remembered that the college students have a reference point not available to seniors who have yet to experience college life. It may be that having been out of school, the relevant skills they previously possessed have been lost, suggesting a need for some type of return-to-study program to help nontraditional students in the transition back into education. Second, the feeling that their high schools did not do a good job of promoting higher education would in part explain why the nontraditional students missed the post-high school opportunity.

A much smaller group of college students than seniors believed their high school had given them sufficient information on financial aid. Only 18.6 percent of college students compared to 70.2 percent of seniors answered yes to this question and more than twice as many college students as seniors answered no. Again, this finding may in part be because the college students have first-hand knowledge of the costs of being in college, while seniors are merely making estimates of future costs. It could also be that seniors are better able to recall the information, having recently received it. This says nothing, however, about the accuracy of the information received.

A higher proportion of seniors, 59.0 percent, believed that their high school had given them sufficient information on careers requiring training. In comparison, only 22.6 percent of college students felt they had received sufficient information, and twice as many college students as seniors felt this had not been the case. Experience in the labor market, or more general life experience, once more gives the nontraditional student a reference point from which to make a judgement about the validity and quantity of information received in high school. Obviously, the seniors do not have firsthand access to this knowledge. There may be a role here for bringing recently graduated high school students back into their high schools to share their post-graduation experiences and knowledge. The small age disparity between the audience and the presenter would increase the credibility of the source.

These results are not surprising given that the group, by virtue of their having returned to education, may well be in the process of attempting to rectify skill deficiencies that have become apparent since graduation from high school. This explanation is, of course, predicated on the assumption that their motivation for attending college is utilitarian. Previous citations have shown that it would be fallacious to generalize this assumption. However, goal-oriented motivations, such as the desire for increased income or a "better" job, do account to a significant extent for nontraditional students' motivations to return to education.<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> For example see Rogers, Gilleland and Dixon, 206.

## **BARRIERS AND INFLUENCES**

### **Influences**

The most frequently cited influences on the decision of nontraditional students to return to college were parents, peers/friends, and other relatives, in descending order. It is rather surprising that parents were still regarded as a major influence; the literature would not lead one to expect this to be the case for nontraditional students.

Perhaps more instructive, however, is that 51 individuals, 31.1 percent of the sample, cited "self" as their greatest influence. Among the seniors, only 11.3 percent of the sample were similarly self-motivated. This is suggestive of a high degree of motivation for older students. The least commonly cited influences for college students were teachers, college representatives, and employers.

### **Barriers**

The most important barriers to enrollment were--in descending order--lack of finances, lack of information about financial aid, poor self-image, and lack of information on college educational programs. Poor self-image was mentioned by a third of the sample, which is contradicted, somewhat, by lack of ability being mentioned by only 18.3 percent of the sample. Both economic barriers and informational needs are possible points of intervention to increase access to education.

In line with the above findings, financial aid availability is one of the most important factors considered when choosing a college. Its median ranking was first place, and it was mentioned by 59.8 percent of the sample. College location and program offerings were cited as important factors by more respondents, 67.1 percent and 78.7 percent of the sample respectively, but the median ranking was second place. The reputation of the college was considered important by 40.2 percent of respondents.

The barriers and influences reported were remarkably similar to those reported by seniors. Some of the responses were contradictory to some of the literature on nontraditional student college choice behavior, but this could be a function of the small sample size.