

# **Connect 25: Nontraditional Student Engagement at Six Public Tennessee Board of Regents Universities; where we are and where we need to go.**

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The State of Tennessee is currently engaged in a comprehensive reform project that proposes to transform the public higher education system. The reform centers on changes to the academic, fiscal and administrative policies for each educational institution. The main focus of the reform policies addresses the need to provide new strategies to reach established goals for retention, persistence and graduation. This proposal can assist with the institutional goals of the (6) public universities in the state of Tennessee by helping to increase the level of student engagement of nontraditional students. Over time, this will also increase the persistence rate for upper division students and the degree completion rate for seniors and graduate students.

## Project Focus

Primarily, this initiative will attempt to identify key recommendations and findings that will provide institutional knowledge of what resources, strategies and policies may positively influence the overall rate of adult/nontraditional student engagement. This will be accomplished by focusing on four major components that together will help shape the direction for the future as it relates to increasing the engagement of nontraditional students with the eventual goal of positively influencing their degree completion and graduation rates.

### **Component 1:**

A brief review of the literature will be conducted to identify the best practices used to increase the engagement of nontraditional students. U.S. Colleges and Universities have historically focused much of their efforts and resources on students who range in ages from 18 -24. This is commonly referred to as the “traditional” age for college students.

According to Spanier (2001), nontraditional students aged 25 and older comprise 43% of all college students in the U.S. In a report produced by the U.S. Census Bureau (2008) and the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) 2009, enrollment projections for as early as 2017, show evidence that over 8 million college students are expected to be enrolled, that are classified as nontraditional students.

Between 2009 and 2019, NCES projects there will be a 28 percent increase in students aged 25 to 34 and a 22 percent increase in students aged 35 and above (Hussar & Bailey 2011).

This data indicates that there is a unique opportunity for colleges and universities to advance their goals related to increased student engagement, degree completion, and retention of nontraditional college students.

The Institute for Education Sciences (IES) National Center for Education Statistics clarified the definition of “nontraditional” students when it highlighted the research of Bean & Metzner (1994) and offered this explanation of the term, “most often age (especially being over the age of 24 has been the defining characteristic of this population. Age acts as surrogate variable that captures a large, heterogeneous population of adult learners who often have family and work responsibilities as well as other life circumstances that can interfere with the successful completion of educational objectives.”

Other variables commonly used to refer to nontraditional students relate to variables such as race, gender, residence on or off campus, level of employment, part time status, has dependents other than a spouse, is a single parent, lacks a standard H.S. diploma, is financially independent of parents and enrollment in non-degree occupational programs (Kim 2002).

The historical definition of a “nontraditional” student no longer references a minority among college students today. The term was originally used to describe students who tended to delay entry to college from high school, were not from typical socially dominant groups, or were often not full-time students learning in the classroom (Schuetze & Slowey 2002).

A summary of Vincent Tinto’s (1993) theory of why students leave school, includes a focus on: academic difficulties, the inability of individuals to resolve their educational and occupational goals, and their failure to become or remain incorporated in the intellectual and social life of the institution. Tinto's "Model of Institutional Departure" states that, “to persist, students need integration into formal (academic performance) and informal (faculty/staff interactions) academic systems and formal (extracurricular activities) and informal (peer-group interactions) social systems.”

Bean and Metzner’s (1985) research on Nontraditional Student Attrition advances the work of Spady (1970), Tinto (1975) and Pascarella (1980). Wylie (2005) presents a theoretical model of student attrition that integrates and extends the work of Tinto (1982) and Bean’s student attrition model (1980). Basically, Wylie presents convincing evidence that non-persistence decisions are a “short term cyclic process, where a student’s poor adjustments in academic and social self-worth results in a re-evaluation of and separation from their course participation.” Each time these academic and social self-concepts of the student result in a negative outcome, further re-evaluation of their academic course participation and results in an increase in course disengagement or separation which eventually leads to irregular attendance patterns and this process continues until dropout is the final outcome.

## Component 2:

The second section of this research project involves the acquisition of the most recent archival data from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) that has been stored for each of the six TBR public universities. The data will be retrieved and disaggregated in order to provide information on the profile of nontraditional students at the specified campuses: (Austin Peay University, East Tennessee State University, Middle Tennessee State University, Tennessee State University, Tennessee Tech University, and University of Memphis).

The specific data that will be collected and reviewed comes from the College Student Report version (NSSE 2013). Each of the most recent annual reports from the six public universities in the TBR system will be examined and summarized.

The demographic profile of students who were included in the sample for this analysis are included below (see figure 1). Nearly half (49%) of the students were classified as “traditional”. They were between the ages of 18-24 years old. Approximately twenty six percent were classified as “nontraditional” or “adult”. They were 25 years or older. The majority of the students were female for both groups. The total sample was 64% female. The racial profile of the sample size was similar to the percentages for female participants. Students who self-identified as “white” comprised 67% of the total sample. The second largest sub-group of students were “Black” students (18%). The other student groups had the following percentages: Other race (7%); Unknown race (4%); and Hispanics (2%). With regard to academic class level, seniors had the largest numbers of students completing the survey. Both traditional seniors and adult seniors had an equal percentage of students (39%).

### 2013-14 NSSE Results by Age & Racial Group-TBR Public Universities

	Adult	Traditional	Unknown	Total
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,664</b>	<b>3,101</b>	<b>1,510</b>	<b>6,275</b>
<b>Gender</b>				
Male	597	1,107	531	2,235
Female	1,067	1,994	979	4,040
<b>Race</b>				
Black	342	482	336	1,160
Hispanic	47	68	45	160
White	1,071	2,186	962	4,219

<b>Other Race</b>	<b>95</b>	<b>245</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>440</b>
<b>Unknown Race</b>	<b>109</b>	<b>120</b>	<b>67</b>	<b>296</b>
<b>Class</b>				
<b>Freshmen</b>	<b>179</b>	<b>1,578</b>	<b>677</b>	<b>2,434</b>
<b>Senior</b>	<b>1,458</b>	<b>1,468</b>	<b>786</b>	<b>3,712</b>
<b>Other Class</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>55</b>	<b>47</b>	<b>129</b>
<b>Status</b>				
<b>Full-time</b>	<b>1,000</b>	<b>2,862</b>	<b>1,262</b>	<b>5,124</b>
<b>Part-time</b>	<b>664</b>	<b>239</b>	<b>248</b>	<b>1,151</b>

The questionnaire has 107 items contained within 28 questions. We analyzed 44 questions that we deemed indicative of reflecting student engagement. Only a sample of selected questions will be presented. The survey takes about 15 minutes to complete and is randomly distributed to freshmen and seniors at each institution. Institutions typically achieve a 30% response rate on the average. Each of the responses to the questions examined were related to four broad themes and ten indicators of engagement (see figure 2).

**FIGURE 2**

**4 Broad Themes**

**Academic Challenge**

**Learning with Peers**

**Experiences with Faculty**

**10 Engagement Indicators**

**Higher-Order Learning**

**Reflective & Integrative Learning**

**Learning Strategies**

**Quantitative Reasoning**

**Collaborative Learning**

**Discussions with Diverse Others**

**Student-Faculty Interaction**

**Effective Teaching Practices**

## Campus Environment

## Quality of Interactions

## Supportive Environment

Taken from, "A Fresh Look at Annual Student Engagement: NSSE 2013 Annual Survey of Results.

The summary of the findings that were found to be statistically significant for adult students are listed below. Each item listed was statistically significant at a standard deviation of 2.0 or above.

### **SUMMARY OF FINDINGS FOR ADULT /NONTRADITIONAL STUDENTS**

Do not plan to hold a formal leadership role in a student organization at higher rates than traditional students

Do not plan to participate in a learning community or other formal programs with groups of students taking 2 or more classes together

Do not plan to do a study abroad

Do not plan to work with faculty on research project

See quality of interactions with advisors as excellent at higher rates than traditional students

Feel less support to manage non-academic responsibilities

Attend campus events less often

Study more hours in 7 day week = > 16 hours preparing for class

Did not have a job for pay on campus at higher rates

Participated in extracurricular activities (organizations, frats, SGA) less than traditional students

Worked for pay off campus at higher rates

70% of adult students spend less than 10 hours a week socializing & relaxing with friends

Spent more hours providing care for dependents

**(Overall, adults students appear to be less engaged in the campus environment outside the classroom.)**

Additionally, adult students had more favorable ratings of the quality of their interactions than did traditional students.

## **SUMMARY OF RATINGS FOR THE QUALITY OF INTERACTIONS FOR ADULT STUDENTS**

Adult students rated the quality of their interactions with Faculty more favorably than did traditional students

Adult students rated the quality of their interactions with Academic Advisors more favorably than did traditional students

Adult students rated the quality of their interactions with Student Services Staff (career services, student activities, housing, etc.) more favorably than did traditional students

Adult students rated the quality of their interactions with Other Administrative Staff and offices (Registrar, Financial Aid, etc.) than did traditional students

While the differences found for adult students are listed above, there were similarities found between how adult and traditional students rated these activities as important perceived the campus environment.

## **SUMMARY OF RATINGS FOR SIMILAR PERCEPTIONS BY ADULT AND TRADITIONAL STUDENTS**

Talking to people of a race or ethnicity other than your own

Talking to people from different economic backgrounds than your own

Talking to people of other religious beliefs other than your own

Talking to people of different political views other than your own

Completing a cumulative senior experience (i.e.: capstone course, SR project, thesis or comprehensive exam) Perceived quality of interaction with other students

Perceived emphasis by the institution to spend a large amount of time on studying & academic work

Perceived importance of attending events on important social, economic, and political issues

Number of hours involved in community service

Time spent commuting to campus

### **Component 3:**

The third section of this proposal involves a 15 item survey that was completed by the Chief Student Affairs Officers (CSAOs) or their designee, at each of the six public universities. The survey is an adapted and modified version of one developed by the *University Professional &*

*Continuing Education Association Center for Research and Consulting (2012), Measuring Nontraditional Student Success: An Imperative for Colleges & Universities, pp. 1-5. Inside-Track.*

A brief electronic survey examining each of the six institution's demographic profile, initiatives and beliefs about nontraditional students will be emailed to them. They will be asked to complete the survey in order to assess the current resources, outcomes and impressions of nontraditional student engagement on their individual campuses.

After the information that is collected, it will be summarized. Bar graphs and Pie chart summaries for Questions 3-15 will be presented. Question 1 and Question 2 provide information that will disclose to the reader the identity of the individual campus that completed the survey. The individual campus data will remain anonymous (see figure 3).

Figure 3-Measuring Nontraditional Student Success

#### SUMMARY OF FINDINGS FOR MEASURING NONTRADITIONAL STUDENT SUCCESS

Q3. The percentage of nontraditional students in the undergraduate student population at the 6 universities ranges between a low of 13% and a high of 42%

Q4. The total population of undergraduate students at the 6 universities ranges from 8,816 students to 23,881.

Q5. 66% of the public universities within the TBR system don't track retention rates for nontraditional students

Q6. Half of the universities disaggregate degree completion rates for nontraditional students

Q7. Current retention rates for nontraditional students at the 6 public universities ranges from 67% -83.5% for traditional students. Retention rates for nontraditional students at the 6 public universities ranges from 52%-73%

Q8. Degree completion rates for nontraditional students ranges from 19%-62%. Degree completion rates for traditional students ranges from 34%-59%

Q1. Institution				
Q2. Location				
Q3. % Nontraditional Undergraduate Students 2013-2014				
Q4. Total Population of Students 2013-2014				
Q5. Does your institution track retention rates for nontraditional students? <b>Yes/No</b>				
Q6. Does your institution usually disaggregate degree completion rates for nontraditional students? <b>Yes/No</b>				
Q7. What are your current retention rates for nontraditional students?				
Q8. What are your current degree completion rates for nontraditional students?				
Q9. At what stage is your institution in addressing the unique needs of nontraditional students? <b>Choose one:</b> 1=Not an issue for us 2=Beginning to explore the issue 3= Have some initial ideas about the needs and challenges 4= Have a detailed understanding of the needs and challenges				

Q9. Most universities rated their institution as "having a detailed understanding of the needs and challenges of nontraditional students-66%

**Q10. Which initiatives do you have in place to address nontraditional student attrition? Choose one or more answers: Rate each one below (1=not doing, 2=beginning to explore, 3=piloting, 4=have fully implemented)**



**Q10.** Which initiatives do you have in place to address nontraditional student attrition? **Rate Each One Below (1-Not doing , 2- Beginning to explore , 3- Piloting 4- Have fully implemented)**

- Learning communities
- Faculty mentoring/coaching
- Extended new student orientation
- Academic tutoring
- Early alert/warning system
- Specialized advising/special counseling
- Increased # academic advisors/counselors

<p><b>Q11.</b> Which best describes your institutions view on how retention and degree completion rates for nontraditional students affect your accreditation review outcomes?  <b>Choose one or more answers:</b>  1. Our accrediting agencies are unlikely to review this area  2. They will review this area and we are confident we will meet expectations  3. They will review both of these areas and we are concerned we will not meet expectations  4. We are simply waiting to see if our accrediting agencies will evaluate retention and degree completion for nontraditional students  5. None of the above</p>				
<p><b>Q12.</b> Is there a specific percentage of your total university budget that is allocated for Nontraditional Students?  <b>Yes/No</b></p>				
<p><b>Q13.</b> If so, what is the percentage?</p>				
<p><b>Q14.</b> Do you have a special unit designed for Nontraditional Students?  <b>Yes or No</b></p>				
<p><b>Q15.</b> In what division or department are programs and services for Nontraditional Students located?  A. Student Affairs  B. Enrollment Management  C. Academic Affairs  D. Administration  E. Decentralized services/Multiple locations  F. Other _____</p>				

<b>Initiatives for Nontraditional Students</b>						
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Learning communities	1	1	4	1	2	1
Faculty mentoring/coaching	1	1	1	1	1	1
Extended new student orientation	2	1	1	1	1	1
Academic tutoring	4	4	4	4	4	4
Early alert/warning system	4	4	4	4	3	4
Specialized advising/special counseling	4	4	1	4	4	1
Increased # academic advisors/counselors	3	2	4	2	4	1

The most popular initiatives reported as being in place were: Faculty Mentoring/Coaching, Academic Tutoring, New Student Orientations and Early Alert Systems

Q11. Half of the campuses reported that their institutions will be rated by accrediting bodies on retention and degree completion for nontraditional students and that they will pass

Q12. Half of the campuses in the survey did not report having a specific percentage of their budget allocated for nontraditional students.

Q13. Those who did have special budgets reported it as being < 1%-3%

Q14. 83% of the campuses reported having a special unit designed to meet the needs of nontraditional students

Q15. The division designated for nontraditional students is Student Affairs-66%

**Component 4:**

The final section of this proposal will summarize the findings and recommendations from the literature, NSSE survey and the CSAO surveys. This information should enable TBR to review and assess its current practices and resources allocated to serve this significant student population that is often overlooked but is critical to the overall goal to increase undergraduate student engagement, retention, persistence and degree completion.

**Findings, Recommendations and Next Steps**

Have campus wide discussions on ways to understand and support the role of Adult/Nontraditional students in attaining degree attainment goals

Disaggregate, measure and track progress made among Adult learners at your institution

Reexamine State policies in light of how Adult learners needs can best be served

Create more flexible and integrated learning environments –i.e., online courses, extended hours, weekend degree programs, community based courses, competency based achievement, etc.

Develop and deliver comprehensive support services (eliminate the run around) and integrate community, college and federal resources. Integrate state education data and workforce data systems

Integrate federal, state & institutional grant programs eliminating financial aid gaps

Reassess the structure of delivery, award, and management of financial aid system programs

Have institutions define themselves by how well they serve Adult learners

Recognize and reward innovative ideas to serve Adult learners

Create and support multiple career pathways

Eliminate institutional complexity as a barrier to access

Leverage technology & social media to build a virtual community of engagement

Educate faculty and staff on the unique learning challenges and issues for Adult learners

Examine the multiple factors that affect student engagement at the individual, institutional, and environmental level

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