

Student Motivation – Traditional vs. Nontraditional College Students

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Traditional-aged college undergraduate students are typically between the ages of 18 and 23 years and pursue their college education immediately after graduating from high school. Nontraditional undergraduate students tend to be older than 24 years in age or have taken time off from pursuing higher education. Many nontraditional students have reported having parental responsibilities, mortgages, or career responsibilities. Despite these perceived challenges, the nontraditional student population has tripled in size since the 1970's and is projected to continue growing steadily in the coming years.

Many of the characteristics that are associated with nontraditional students are perceived by the general public as being maladaptive to higher education. Stereotypes of nontraditional students include perceptions that they are slow learners, lazy, and too distracted by their work or family responsibilities. These stereotypes would suggest that nontraditional students are unfit for college and experience lower achievement. However, research concerning nontraditional student populations consistently report that nontraditional students have higher grade-point-averages, utilize adaptive coping strategies when faced with challenges, and are more likely to pursue adaptive motives in

educational environments (Johnson et al., 2016; Johnson & Kestler, 2013; Johnson & Nussbaum, 2012).

Specifically, nontraditional students report lower “social comparison” goals, where the motives would be to strive for top grades and outperform others. Similarly, nontraditional students report lower “emotion-oriented coping,” where one focuses on their emotions when faced with challenges, as opposed to focusing on problem-solving. This is not to say that nontraditional students are not competitive or unemotional, but the findings suggests that they regulate their emotions and motivations in a manner that helps them focus more on academic tasks.

The consistencies reported in the research on these two student groups is not all “doom and gloom” for traditional students, or meant to classify traditional students as being somehow inferior to nontraditional students. In fact, it makes a great deal of sense that traditional students endorse “social comparison” goals to a greater degree than nontraditional students based on their psychosocial stage, and the adaptiveness of some “social comparison” goals being beneficial in competitive environments (such as large enrollment courses that grade on a “curve”). Traditional students are likely to be transitioning between late adolescence and emerging adulthood, when aspects of one’s “identity” are still being explored and when students may be competing for the best grades to be in a better position to land desirable employment. Nontraditional students’ motives however, are simply different. Due to age or life experiences, the decision to return or enter higher education for nontraditional students is not an easy one. Thus, if

they are going to return or enter higher education, it is more likely that they are covering their own tuition, and sacrificing time away from job or familial responsibilities. So, because of what is at stake for nontraditional students, they enter college settings with more specific focuses, motives, and, perhaps due to experiencing challenges that traditional students may not have yet faced, nontraditional students endorse more focused coping strategies.

Factors that predict higher academic achievement for traditional and nontraditional students also differ and can perhaps be harnessed to improve academic experiences for both populations. Johnson et al. (2016) reported that traditional students' academic achievement tends to be higher when "cost" (lost opportunities and time) is low; and that nontraditional students' academic achievement tends to be higher when they perceive that their classmates care about their learning. Although intervention studies have yet to be conducted, it is hypothesized that strategies that could enhance college experiences may include reducing "costs" for traditional students and increasing peer support/interactions for nontraditional students.

By no means am I suggesting that student services be reduced for either traditional or nontraditional students. Both would benefit from robust student services programming. However, due to motivational differences between the two groups, I believe that nontraditional students especially would benefit from increased opportunities to socially interact with other college peers (by way of student clubs and organizations, study groups, and learning communities). Similarly, I believe that traditional students my

benefit from programs that elevate the “value” of higher education as a way to combat or reduce the “cost” of feeling like a course or topic is a waste of students’ time. I am also optimistic that institutions of higher education would benefit from enhancing experiences for both traditional and nontraditional students. With increased social engagement, nontraditional students could serve as studious models for traditional students, and traditional students could find more value and meaning with opportunities to energize and interact with nontraditional students.

References

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