

 LEADING STRATEGIES

In Their Own Words: What Nontraditional Students Need from For-Profit Schools

By Kris MacDonald

The number of nontraditional students in U.S. higher education is growing significantly, especially at for-profit postsecondary institutions given their shorter programs and career training. Yet these students have vastly different needs than their traditional-aged counterparts. A mixed-methods study of practical nursing students (n=36) enrolled in an eighteen-month face-to-face proprietary college in the northeastern United States (known in this study as Stethoscope School of Health) revealed a plethora of items and services that students identified as aids to their persistence and success. Childcare services, transitional courses both into and out of the program, transportation assistance, and the library being open late at night and on weekends were the top recommendations of study participants. This article explains the background and methodology of the study and focuses on what nontraditional students themselves state they need to persist and succeed at a proprietary postsecondary school.

Often, beginning a new career requires furthering one's education. Career seekers typically have been in the work force for several years in order to remain independent or raise families. Because these adults need further education to reach their new life goals, they often look for short, flexible academic programs that will help them earn a degree and enter the workforce quickly; this is how proprietary higher education becomes so appealing. It is expected that by 2019, non-

traditional students will account for 86 percent of all students enrolled in higher education (Bell 2012). Nearly 75 percent of all students enrolled at for-profit schools are nontraditional students (Ross-Gordon 2011): Due to demographics or life circumstances, they may have different needs than do college students between the ages of eighteen and 24 years. Even though proprietary schools attract so many nontraditional students, there is very little literature investigating what these students

feel they need from these schools in order to persist and succeed. A mixed-methods study was conducted in spring 2017 to learn about these students' struggles, identify factors that would help them succeed, and provide recommendations that ultimately would help them as well as the for-profit industry.

Nontraditional Students

To be considered nontraditional, a student must meet at least one of seven criteria: more than 24 years old, independent, out of school for at least a year, have dependents, work, first in family to attend college, single parent (National Center for Education Statistics 2016a). Other characteristics (though not defining criteria) of nontraditional students are that they are predominantly female, have a General Education Development (GED) degree rather than a high school diploma, and are from groups historically underrepresented in higher education (Deming, Goldin and Katz 2013). Seventy-four percent of all undergraduate postsecondary students exhibit at least one nontraditional trait, and that number has increased slightly since 1995 (NCES 2015). Twenty-four percent of all enrolled students exhibit at least four of these characteristics, 48 percent live independently, and nearly 30 percent have children (NCES 2015). Of all postsecondary students enrolled in undergraduate programs, 87 percent attend for-profit four-year schools, and 71 percent attend for-profit schools that offer programs that are two years in duration (at most) (NCES 2015). The fields of study nontraditional students pursue most include computer technology, general studies, business, engineering, physical sciences, social sciences, customer service, and construction; the most popular field for nontraditional students is healthcare, with an average of 30 percent enrolled in such programs (NCES 2015).

Proprietary Schools

According to the National Association for College Admission Counseling (2005), for-profit postsecondary schools are unlike any other sector of higher education because they are run by corporations, business people, stakeholders, or investors solely to make a profit. The schools generate profits only through their students and

their tuition, private loans, GI Bills, and Pell Grants; the institutions do not receive state or federal funding as private and public schools do (Bennett, Lucchesi and Vedder 2010). According to the National Conference of State Legislatures (2013), gross revenues—nearly \$40 billion nationwide in 2009–10—are then channeled back into the school to pay for instructors, supplies, facilities, and monthly expenditures. Though this may seem like a considerable profit margin, only approximately \$3,000 is spent to educate each student nationwide—which includes facilities, amenities, teacher-contact time, and supplies—as compared to the \$7,000 and \$15,000 spent per student per year at public and private institutions, respectively (O'Malley 2012). Nearly 20 percent of the 43 percent of nationwide gross revenues these schools make is spent on marketing and recruiting new students, and only 17 percent is spent on instruction (Hayes 2012). Despite for-profit institutions' higher tuition rates, nontraditional students often choose to enroll at these schools because of their shorter, flexible programs, minimal enrollment requirements, online options, variety of locations, vocationally focused majors, and year-round enrollment (National Conference of State Legislatures 2013, NEA 2004). As of 2014, 1.3 million students were enrolled at proprietary schools—a 217 percent increase over a fourteen-year period (NCES 2016c).

Low Success Rates

While students enroll at for-profit schools for a variety of reasons, their outcomes are not better than those of their traditional counterparts. Despite high enrollment rates, the attrition rates are staggering: After six years of enrollment (though most programs range from nine months to four years in duration), only 22 percent of nontraditional students at for-profit schools have graduated, and 65 percent of full-time students have dropped out (Morgan 2017, Sears 2017). Nontraditional students enrolled in two-year programs also have lower success rates (approximately 31 percent of students graduate) than traditional students in four-year programs (Stockwell 2014). Not only are retention rates lower, but there is no current method that postsecondary institutions

utilize to report solely on nontraditional student populations. Institutions that receive federal aid are only required to report on traditional students; this requirement does not include proprietary institutions, so no adequate data exist for the approximately 65 percent of students (and more) who are nontraditional and enrolled at proprietary schools (Stockwell 2014).

Closing Schools

High attrition rates and a lack of reliable data have led to many proprietary schools—including ITT Technical Institute and Corinthian Colleges—closing completely; the University of Phoenix, DeVry University, and McCann School of Business have had to close many locations (Deruy 2017). The University of Phoenix, once one of the leading for-profit institutions in the country, lost 50 percent of its enrollment since 2014, leading to 115 campuses closing and 800 employees being laid off (Lam 2015). Between 2014 and 2015, the nation's largest for-profit company, Corinthian Colleges—which at its peak had 120 locations and was worth \$1.4 billion—closed all of its locations due to attrition; stranded thousands of students in the midst of their programs; and filed for bankruptcy. When proprietary schools close locations or shut down completely, students are left with non-transferable credits, incomplete degrees, and thousands of dollars in loan debt (Flaherty 2015, Nasiripour 2015).

Purpose and Significance

Although this study is applicable to any type of post-secondary institution, it was necessary to conduct it at a for-profit institution given that this sector enrolls the highest number of nontraditional students and has high attrition rates. In addition, first-hand research on nontraditional students has been limited to community colleges, non-profits, and traditional colleges, so this study shed light on nontraditional students in a sector of higher education about which little literature exists. Considering the staggering gap between enrollment and graduation rates, this mixed-methods case study at Stethoscope School of Health sought to determine, through students' own words, what struggles nontraditional students encounter that potentially jeopardize

their success and how to overcome them. Few studies to date have examined nontraditional students at proprietary institutions; those that have typically have compared that population to another and have only examined graduation rates.

Research Questions

Guided by the following research questions, this mixed-methods exploratory case study sought to discover what nontraditional learners at for-profit postsecondary institutions feel they need to graduate:

- How do nontraditional students differ from traditional college student populations?
- What obstacles do adult learners at for-profit schools feel compromise their ability to persist to graduation?
- What role, if any, do faculty at for-profit institutions play in nontraditional students' motivation to stay in school?
- What programs, if any, can for-profit schools offer their students to help them succeed?

This article focuses on the final research question, which explored what nontraditional students themselves stated would help them succeed at a for-profit institution.

Research Methods

This researcher used a mixed-methods case study research approach that was designed to collect data from multiple perspectives in two phases: The first was the collection of quantitative data from a larger sample size; this was followed by a second phase of qualitative data collection to elaborate on the quantitative findings, discover information that was not included in the survey tool, and probe more deeply into student perspectives. This method enabled the researcher to validate and triangulate the data and receive more in-depth answers to the research questions than one method alone would have provided (Bulsara 2016; Russ-Eft and Preskill 2009). For example, participants noted that their lack of self-confidence affected them in the classroom. This sentiment was echoed and elaborated upon during the

interviews, substantiating data collected in the first phase of the study.

Phase I

To begin this study, a 73-question quantitative survey was designed by utilizing and adapting questions from several other higher education surveys, including the National Center for Education Statistics, the University of Colorado, and the National Alliance for Partnerships in Equity. The final twelve questions did not appear in any other survey instrument but rather were created from the researcher's tacit knowledge and experiences with this student demographic. Questions were related to students' previous education, families, income, parents' education levels, personal fears and obstacles to learning, as well as the school itself. Prior to proctoring the actual survey instrument, it was pretested twice, first on thirteen students and then on another ten students. The pretesting resulted in important information about items that needed to be included or clarified and how long the survey took to complete. This feedback resulted in seventeen changes to the survey instrument before its actual distribution, thereby strengthening its reliability and validity. In order to receive the most completed surveys as quickly as possible and avoid technological conflicts, the survey was administered on paper to the 36 students in the population sample in a large classroom. The surveys were pre-numbered and included instructions that were rewritten on the board while a faculty member watched the students take the survey and collected the completed ones. No one refused to complete the survey. The data collected were input into IBM SPSS Statistics Version 24 software for analysis.

Phase II

As students finished the quantitative surveys, they were given a recruitment flyer inviting them to be interviewed for one hour. Twenty students signed up for interviews; all were contacted, but only sixteen scheduled interviews. The interviews were conducted over a three-day period in a private conference room at the school. After explaining the informed consent policy and reminding them that the interviews were being recorded, students

provided their survey numbers so they could be used to connect demographic data. A semi-structured interview technique was used; nearly twenty questions were prepared in advance and were asked in an informal and conversational atmosphere. Participants laughed, yelled, and even cried during their responses. None stopped the interview at any point; some even called it "therapeutic." Following the data collection, all sixteen hours of interviews were transcribed and memoed, which enabled themes to be identified. This led to open codings which were broken down further and entered into a codebook that enabled the researcher to create a frequency matrix in Microsoft Excel for each code.

Site Description

This study site was one of 42 locations within the corporation and only offers allied health-related majors. The highest degree offered is an associate's degree, though diploma and certification programs are also offered. Recently, the school converted to a hybrid curriculum such that courses in the major core are completed on campus while general education courses are completed online. Because of open enrollment, student headcount fluctuates monthly. In November 2016, 260 students were enrolled at this campus—72 in the LPN program. By June 2017, enrollment had dropped and remained at 230 students. The corporation president states that enrollment at all 42 sites collectively has decreased 35 percent since 2010 (NCES 2016b). The LPN program at Stethoscope School of Health, which lasts eighteen months, costs nearly \$40,000 in its entirety (NCES 2016b). In 2017, this campus reported an overall retention rate of 83 percent and an overall graduation rate (for all programs) of 56 percent (NCES 2016b).

Study Population

The sample size for this study was 36 students enrolled in the face-to-face licensed practical nursing program. Those enrolled in the hybrid program were excluded because their curriculum and schedules were entirely different from those in the face-to-face program. The program, culminating in an associate's degree, lasts eighteen months and is the second-longest program on

the campus; it thus provided a more robust sample size because it was one of the largest populations of students who are on campus for nearly two years. In addition, unlike the other allied health programs at this location, students must undergo admissions testing to qualify for the LPN program.

Results

Participants had been in the program for nine, twelve, eighteen, or twenty-four months when data were collected in spring 2017. Only 6 percent of those in the LPN program were male, and the average student age was 26 years. In comparison, 46 percent of the remaining 230 students on campus were older than 25 years, and only 23 of the entire campus population were men. Overall, this study revealed differences between nontraditional and traditional students' academic and support needs while enrolled in higher education. Participants named very specific programmatic and school changes that would better enable them to succeed at Stethoscope School of Health. These topics emerged naturally in response to the open-ended question of what would have helped the students during their education. (See qualitative results in Tables 1 and 2.)

Programmatic Changes

When it came to the structure of the LPN program, the 36 study participants offered a plethora of ideas as to improvements that could be made to help them succeed. Even though participants commented on lengthening the program, receiving their schedules earlier, and utilizing more appropriate textbooks (*i.e.* made for LPNs, not RNs), the biggest changes students proposed were

adding a variety of transitional and remedial courses to aid their readjustment to the classroom and from the classroom into the career they were preparing to enter, as well as differentiated instruction—*e.g.*, when teachers change the way they deliver information so as to meet the needs of different types of learners or those at different comprehension levels. As one student (Aimee) said:

Everyone coming in here needs some kind of help before they start. Some people have those deficits, they don't want to get the help for it, so they end up staying back or leaving completely. And I've seen this happen to a bunch of them.

First-Year Seminar (FYS) Course

The predominant programmatic request (made by 75 percent of participants in the qualitative and quantitative portions of the study) was to implement an FYS course. Because 80 percent of participants had been out of school for more than two years, they felt a course helping them ease back into academics rather than entering directly into academically challenging classes would be of great benefit. Students reported that they would want this course to teach them how to read and utilize a syllabus and offer test-taking tips as well as strategies for overcoming school-based anxieties, seeking accommodations for learning disabilities, and addressing language barriers. Jane commented:

When I started, I didn't understand what a syllabus was or how to work it for a long time, so that would be great to learn in the early classes. I would have absolutely no idea what was due because I couldn't find my syllabus or figure out how to work it. You gave us those deadline calendars, but I didn't even realize I had it. Then you helped me make

TABLE 1 ► Qualitative Results: Descriptive Data

	Range	SD	Minimum	Maximum	Mean
Age	30.00	8.89	19.00	49.00	30.59
High School Graduation Year	30.00	8.30	1986	2016	2005
Hours Worked per Week	48.00	13.04	12.00	60.00	30.33
Number of Children	5.00	1.30	1.00	6.00	2.04
Length of Commute (minutes)	122.00	27.36	1.00	123.00	30.49
Ages of Children (in years)	26.75	0.25	27.00	12.06	

TABLE 2 ► Qualitative Results: Frequency Data

	n	%
Gender		
Male	2	5.70
Female	33	94.30
High School Completion		
High School Diploma	28	77.80
GED	7	19.40
Homeschooled	1	2.80
Time Out of School		
Less than 1 Year	7	20.60
1– 5 Years	17	50.00
6 –10 Years	5	14.70
11–15 Years	3	8.80
16–20 Years	2	5.90
Work		
Yes	28	80.00
No	7	20.00
First-Generation Students		
Yes	14	38.90
No	22	61.10
Relatives Finished College		
Yes	18	60.00
No	12	40.00
Dad's Highest Education		
Less than High School	10	27.80
High School	11	30.60
Certification	8	22.20
Associate's Degree	2	5.60
Bachelor's Degree	2	5.60
Master's Degree	2	5.60
Doctorate	1	2.80
Mom's Highest Education		
Less than High School	6	16.70
High School	15	41.70
Certification	4	11.10
Associate's Degree	6	16.70
Bachelor's Degree	3	8.30
Master's Degree	2	5.60
Have Children		
Yes	23	65.70
No	12	34.30

TABLE 2 ► Qualitative Results: Frequency Data

	n	%
Household Income		
\$0–20,999	14	43.80
\$21,000–30,999	6	18.80
\$31,000–40,999	5	15.60
\$41,000–50,999	2	6.30
\$51,000–60,999	3	9.40
More than \$81,000	2	6.30
Personal Income		
\$0–20,999	27	75.00
\$21,000–30,999	6	16.70
\$31,000–40,999	2	5.60
More than \$81,000	1	2.80
Race		
White	29	80.60
Hispanic	4	11.10
Black	2	5.60
Other	2	5.60
Marital Status		
Single	17	47.20
Married	11	30.60
Separated	1	2.80
Divorced	2	5.60
Living with Partner	5	13.90
What Students Report They Want		
Campus Open Later	14	38.90
Program Organization	26	72.20
Support at School	26	72.20
Teacher Office Hours	26	72.20
Childcare Help	13	36.10
Transportation Help	15	41.70
Technology Tutoring	12	33.30
Transitional Skills Tutoring	27	75.00
First-Year Seminar Course	22	61.10
Career Development Course	26	72.20
Counselor on Campus	19	52.80
Peer Mentoring Program	18	50.00
Assigned Instructor Mentor	22	62.90
Extracurricular Activities	20	55.60
Central Place for Questions	28	77.80
Lost and Found	20	55.60
Clubs, Organizations, Sports	20	55.60
Places on Campus to Relax	30	83.30

one again last month with my other syllabus, and now I can do it myself and am organized. Those are tips and tricks I needed in the beginning.

Students also reported that they wanted help with time management and learning how to balance their personal lives with their new academic lives—aspects with which 81 percent of students reportedly struggled. Every student in the study reported that they wanted to identify their learning styles, which findings show would be best discovered during an FYS course before any other courses began. One participant, Kevin, had been out of school for nearly 20 years before returning to Stethoscope School of Health. During his interview, Kevin stated that he wanted an FYS course that would help him develop time management and study habits. Having been out of the classroom for so long, he did not know how he learned best; knowing that would have helped improve the efficacy and efficiency of how he studied. Another participant, Naima, had the same issue as Kevin. She said,

I would've loved to find out what did help me because I've always been an auditory learner, but I forgot that I was... I just wish we had a class where we could dedicate more time to those strategies rather than just the survey you gave us. It was at least something, but more would have helped me through the rest of the program so much more.

Other participants discussed needing assistance with note-taking skills, learning how to study, reading comprehension, and discovering the meta-message within a lecture or reading. Maria, who participates in campus work-study, was fortunate enough to have taken an FYS course at a school she'd attended previously but saw the impact that the lack of the FYS course had:

It would've been so much easier if we had an FYS course. In my first nursing class here, where I saw the masses leaving, I was very vocal in asking why fundamental things—how to read the book, how to study, how to put things in perspective when it comes to priorities for school, work, home—weren't given to us first so that we knew how to handle classes later. When I first started, there

were 22, and now there are six. We lost sixteen people in nine months. If there was a transitional class, those sixteen could have been saved or helped—maybe just made available if the person needs it with the person who taught the course.

Computer Course

The average age of the study participants was 30 years old, with the oldest person in the study being 49 years old. According to California State University Long Beach (2018), 39 percent of students reported that having a computer course at the beginning of the curriculum would have been instrumental in lowering their anxiety and helping them complete their academic assignments. Kevin, who is in his 40s, said,

I'm not good at computers because they weren't around when I was in school. Technology and I don't get along very well. But it's gotten better; I mean, you helped out with basic stuff that I didn't really understand, like how to navigate. I still have issues, mind you, but better.

Participants explained that they needed assistance learning basic computer skills such as utilizing Microsoft Word and flash drives, saving, printing, and general navigation skills along with basic terminology. Now more than ever before, technology is an integral part of every program—if not nearly every course—for assignments, testing, and even communication. Study participants stated that because technology was not fundamental in their everyday lives, many were intimidated by it. Almost half rated their typing skills and understanding of computers as poor, which they stated significantly affected their self-esteem and motivation.

Medical Terminology Course

This course was designed to be one-third of a portion of a class that students took in their first quarter. The other sections of the course began to take precedence, and the medical terminology part fell by the wayside. Rather than receive dedicated instruction on this topic, students reportedly received handouts with prefixes, suffixes, and root words, though learning how to ma-

nipulate those items proved vital in their future courses; this was true especially for the English language learners in the program, though they didn't receive explicit instruction. Maria, who speaks Spanish and had been out of the classroom for eight years at the time of the study, said,

For adult learners who haven't been in school in a long time, you may have no knowledge of the medical field. An easy thing like how to read a word—prefix, suffix—tells you a lot about it in the medical field. That one little class would make that nursing book so much easier for a lot of people.

Two-thirds of the students interviewed for this study felt that medical terminology being its own course would have been very helpful to them during the program.

Career Development Course

Participants also stressed the importance of helping them transition from the classroom into their careers. All had held a variety of jobs over the years, but 98 percent of them did not know how to prepare for a career by developing a formal resume, cover letter, and interview skills. Although Stethoscope School of Health does have a Career Services office to help students find employment, the course within the current program to prepare students for the job market is integrated with the licensing preparation course, which “obviously overshadows the job stuff,” as Tracy said. Like medical terminology, teaching students how to write a resume, interview, and obtain a job after graduation had been a small portion of one of the last classes in the LPN program, with the rest of the course dedicated to preparing students for the exit and licensing exams. But as pass rates for both tests began to decrease, the career development portion of the class was set aside in favor of the nursing portion of the course. More than 70 percent of students in this study wanted a specific course dedicated to career development. Paula was three months from graduating when interviews were conducted and said,

It's been years since I've been on an interview. Usually the jobs I've had I've had for a while, but to know how to in-

terview and fill out your resume and what can and can't go on there would be great. Even though we have clinical experience, can it go on there or not? I have a lot of questions about that as almost a senior and would love help with that.

This is not only on the mind of seniors, however. Students said that from the moment they begin the LPN program, they are planning their futures and careers. To be successful, however, they must know both how to create a professional resume and portfolio and how to market themselves. Kathy, who was only halfway through the eighteen-month program, said:

You need something on the way out, too, to help you get a job. You have this education. You studied everything, you passed your tests, you're gonna [sic] pass your license, but you can't interview. You are scared to speak to people. How do you market yourself, write a resume? You need to get a job, and these are a part of the things that you need on the way out. You need those skills. You don't only need help transitioning into school but out of it, too. Everyone needs a little help here and there.

Nontraditional students not only need but also expect this help from their instructors so they can put their newly honed skills and education into practice.

Teaching Methodology

This study found that an instructor's pedagogical techniques and variety (or lack thereof) have a pivotal impact on nontraditional students. A teacher's ability to creatively and accurately disseminate information was salient for nontraditional students; for 86 percent of the participants who were interviewed, differentiated instruction accompanied by ancillary materials was vital. Eighty percent of interviewees stated that during their first six months in the program, they were provided structured notes written on the board, in Microsoft PowerPoint presentations, or both, and the instructor's lecture complemented and expanded upon the written material. As the program progressed, however, participants reported a drastic increase in self-teaching, presentation slides identical to the textbook, and a significant decrease in lecture materials such as hand-

outs, printed lecture slides, chapter outlines, and study guides. Dorothy said, “I need to learn differently than just teaching myself. Of course, there are different ways of learning and teaching, but when you go from good teachers giving you notes and interaction all the time to teachers that give you zero notes, it feels like a slap in the face.”

According to the current study, nontraditional students need more practical applications and real-world examples to bolster their understanding of course content. Participants reported that they also learn better through demonstrations, props, and hands-on practice than by simply reading their textbooks.

School-Wide Changes

In addition to changes to the degree program itself, study participants had clear expectations of the for-profit institution. If nontraditional students could receive institutional support for their lives outside as well as inside of school, then it would reduce absenteeism, stress, and negative self-talk, ultimately making student success inevitable (Bigger 2005).

Childcare

Of the 36 participants in this study, 78 percent had children and indicated that childcare was a significant issue; 34 percent reported their attendance being adversely affected by childcare issues. To address student attendance, daycare, and eligibility and scheduling issues, 36 percent of participants suggested that the proprietary school should offer on-site daycare services. Brenda said, “A daycare or after-school programs here at my school would be great for the long commuters. Then I can be productive and even stay and get work done, and [my kids] can be safe.” According to the Institute for Women’s Policy Research, only 33 percent of nontraditional students with children nationwide finish a college program within six years (Sykes, Cruse, and Gault 2016). They also spend approximately 40 percent of their monthly income on childcare (Sykes, Cruse, and Gault 2016). One LPN student had just given birth; when her daughter became ill, her lack of a support system required that she stay home with her. She missed so

many classes that she had to drop out of the program. She is not the only one who has missed class due to a sick child. Isabella said, “For my younger one, there were times when the sitter was sick and I couldn’t attend school because I couldn’t bring her.” Stacey agreed that having on-campus childcare would increase attendance; she said,

If you had daycare facilities available, you would have more students. I could come to school and my mind would be at ease, and it would be a comfort because if I had a quick break, I could go see them or have lunch with them, but I also know they are ok and safe and within walking distance. I wouldn’t have to worry about babysitters being sick, coming up with back-up plans if I have a test, or missing school to be with them if I can’t find other arrangements. Then, if I need to study, I can stay on campus a little longer because the child is being taken care of, and I wouldn’t be as stressed because I can focus for a few minutes. I could also drop them off and make it to clinicals on time—so early in the morning, when other daycares aren’t open.

All participants—even those without children and those with older children—agreed that offering on-site childcare would save nontraditional students money and decrease their stress, scheduling issues, and anxieties. When parents know their children are not only near but also safe, they are more relaxed and productive (Sykes, Cruse, and Gault 2016).

Transportation

Participants commuted as little as one minute and as long as more than two hours (each way) to school each day; the average commute was 30 minutes. Because the school is in the northern part of the United States and offers a shorter LPN program that is easier to access than other local RN programs, it attracts students from contiguous states who choose to commute because they cannot relocate. This area is also prone to snow from October through April. Study participants reported that the length of their commute, issues with their vehicles, and lack of gas money create unexpected but significant hurdles to attending class and clinicals—so much

so that 42 percent wanted some kind of transportation assistance. Penny said, “Some people don’t have cars or can’t afford the gas or the insurance or the maintenance or rely on someone around them to give them a ride but then can’t get to school because of it.” The most common recommendations were gas cards included in the program tuition, shuttles to clinical sites, and discounted bus passes. Another student suggested school buses.

Counselor/Academic Advisor

This study found that most nontraditional students—especially first-generation students—do not have sufficient academic or emotional support outside of school. Nearly 50 percent of participants stated that they don’t have a support system at all, with 14 percent having said that they don’t have any friends; 14 percent reported inadequate support from parents, 23 percent reported the same about their partner or spouse, and 8 percent said they don’t get support from their friends. With little to no one in their lives to guide them emotionally or academically, 53 percent of participants recommended having an on-site counselor and academic advisor on campus. Currently, there are no academic support services. Students learn this either during the admissions process or from their program chair. Having a staff person to go to with questions as well as to talk with about personal concerns would greatly help nontraditional students persist. As Denise said,

Maybe we do need a counselor with an open-door policy because there is so much stress between all the information crammed into eighteen months, the money issues, and not having anyone to talk to builds up. During the program, LPNs learn about patient advocates, and many equated this concept with having a counselor. I wish the school had...a counselor who looks out for the students like a student advocate.

Because nontraditional students are balancing many roles—student, parent, coworker, provider, friend, caretaker—having an impartial resource to offer additional support would aid their persistence. Although many experience strong rapport with their instructors and feel they can speak with them, others do not have that

experience—or they find their instructors do not have time to meet with them.

Library Hours

Many of the participants in this study work as CNAs or aides in nursing homes or care facilities, often overnight or during evening shifts so they can attend classes during the day. At present, Stethoscope School of Health’s on-campus library—which is equipped with sixteen computers, two printers, a photocopier, WiFi, and four tables—is only open Monday through Thursday until 9 p.m. and on Fridays until 4 p.m. Forty percent of students in this study wanted the library to be open later than 9 p.m., and 81 percent—especially those who work late hours—wanted library access on the weekends. Students often cannot afford WiFi or have a busy household and prefer the quiet environment the library provides. For these reasons and more, 92 percent of participants believed that access to the library is vital to their success at school.

Discussion

Nontraditional students at this for-profit school were desperate for transitional courses, differentiated instruction, help with childcare and transportation, and access to school resources—including a counselor. With 80 percent of this population having been out of high school for more than a year, they craved courses that would help them acclimate to college, discover how they learn best, help them learn how to take notes, overcome test anxiety, and balance their home and school life. Participants’ average age was 30 years; because computers were not widely used in schools or homes until 1995, only those who were 23 or younger were accustomed to using them, supporting students’ desire for computer classes. Sixty-six percent of participants were parents, straining their ability to meet multiple responsibilities.

Nontraditional students typically are hard working and determined, whether because they either are finally pursuing their dreams or are trying to improve the lives of those they love. Many nontraditional students put their own dreams on hold while raising their families and change careers only later in life, when they feel

they have more time to focus on themselves. While proprietary schools offer shorter, more flexible programs with relatively quick entry to the workforce, this study shows that students who enroll at such institutions are not afforded the same resources that nontraditional students who attend private or public postsecondary institutions are. These findings show how important nontraditional students' emotional health is in relation to their persistence, performance in the classroom, and graduation. If proprietary institutions can help to re-

duce if not alleviate the stresses of their primary student audience, then student retention and success will be inevitable. Such requests may seem complex to fulfill, but study participants were willing to take on additional expenses as part of their tuition in exchange for the support they so desperately crave. If these schools could deliver on their students' requests, attendance, persistence, retention, and graduation rates would increase, resulting ultimately in higher enrollment and profits for this sector of higher education.

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About the Author



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Kris MacDonald, Ed.D., earned her B.A. in Communications/Journalism from Shippensburg University in 2005, her MEd in Secondary Education from the University of Scranton in 2011, and her Doctorate in Educational Leadership and Management in High Education from Drexel University in 2017. She has PA Teaching Certification in English for grades 7–12 plus CITI and QM certifications. Since 2011, she has worked in secondary and higher education with a

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