



Engaging the “New” Traditional Student at Community Colleges

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Introduction

Historically in higher education, traditional students are the bright-eyed, 18-year-old high school graduates who—with financial support from Mom and Dad—enroll in a four-year college where they reside full-time in an ivy-laden dormitory and graduate in four to five years.



Non-traditional students have been considered those who are over the age of 24 and share one or more additional characteristics; they wait after high school to enroll in post-secondary education, attend college part-time while working full-time, have dependents who are not their spouse or partner, are financially independent from their parents for purposes of financial aid, and oftentimes, have completed their high school degree through a certificate or GED program.

When 74 percent of students share at least one of the characteristics that are typically considered “non-traditional,” we need to change the way we’re thinking about these students.

This is particularly true at community colleges where the average age of an incoming student is 29 years old and two-thirds attend part-time.¹

¹ <http://www.aacc.nche.edu/AboutCC/Trends/Pages/studentsatcommunitycolleges.aspx>

Who are new traditionals?

The non-traditional student of yesterday is the new traditional student of today. Historically, non-traditional students have at least one (but usually many) of the following characteristics:

- Older than 24
- Did not enroll in college within one year after high school
- Works full-time while attending a higher education institution part-time
- Attained a high school degree in a non-traditional manner (e.g. GED or certificate of completion)
- Has dependents other than a spouse/partner
- Is a single caregiver
- Is financially independent from parents for purposes of financial aid

74%
**of historically non-traditional
students have at least one of
these characteristics**

—
meaning, non-traditional is not so non-traditional

Source: Ruffalo Noel Levitz, Adult E-Expectations Report, 2016

New traditionalists and the community college landscape



Enrollment levels at community colleges are declining, retention numbers are falling, and as a result, revenues are suffering at 2-year institutions across the country.

Enrollment has dropped at public 2-year institutions by 9.6 percent from 2013-2016.² Of students who matriculate at a community college in the fall, 25 percent won't be there in the spring.³

Only 39 percent of community college attendees receive a degree within six years.⁴



Nurturing prospects early and often, and keeping them on-track to graduation once they matriculate matters tremendously to the bottom line.

If institutions do not consider the unique traits, circumstances, motivations, and needs of the new traditionalists and adjust their marketing, recruitment, and retention efforts accordingly, they will lose out on key opportunities to serve almost 75 percent of the market.



² http://www.aacc.nche.edu/Publications/datapoints/Documents/DataPointsVol15_No3_final.pdf

³ <http://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/Community-College-FAQs.html>

⁴ <https://nscresearchcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/SignatureReport8.pdf>

A look at the community college student population

The American Association of Community Colleges reports that community college students share the following characteristics:

- Represent the most student-parents of all higher education sectors
- 69 percent of students work
- 64 percent attend part-time
- Thirty-six percent are first-generation college students
- One in three have family incomes near or below the poverty line
- Only 2 percent receive Federal Work Study aid, compared with 25 percent at private 4-year colleges
- Financially independent from parents for purposes of financial aid

How new traditional approach higher ed differently



More likely to take longer to make a decision on where to enroll



Choice to enroll is a cost-benefit decision, not an emotional one



Juggle multiple roles; are often workers first, students second



Do not approach higher ed with the same enthusiasm as younger students



May be more easily intimidated by the enrollment process



May need more support and touchpoints from your campus

New traditionals and technology: how to reach them

In order to more successfully engage, recruit, and retain the new traditionals, higher education institutions need to rethink their traditional approaches and tools. The following tips are based on findings from the 2016 *Ruffalo Noel Levitz Adult E-Expectations Report* and the 2015 *Ruffalo Noel Levitz E-Expectations Report*.

Mobile-friendly websites and online applications matter a lot.

More than **75 percent** of new traditionals viewed college websites from a smartphone.

And research shows that **64 percent** of students complete at least some part of their college applications on a mobile device.

Text messaging is a largely untapped resource.

70 percent of study participants pursuing an associate's degree told Ruffalo Noel Levitz they would allow a college or university to send him/her text messages. Yet, only **34 percent** has ever actually received a text message from a higher education institution.



New traditionals and technology: how to reach them

Email is far from dead.

96 percent of new traditionals will open an email from a school they are interested in.

60 percent will open one from a school they know nothing about.

75 percent check their email from a smartphone at least once per day, so ensure that your subject lines are strong.

Chat is an opportunity to have a one-on-one conversation with prospects.

Currently, about one-fourth of 2-year degree prospects have used an online chat tool to connect with an institutional representative.



“The philosophy of ‘open the doors and they will come’ doesn’t work anymore at community colleges. Marketing must play a much larger role and we all have to leverage technology.

At DCCC, we still reach out by phone and email, but we’ve also moved towards chatting and texting because that’s where our students are.”

Fran Cubberley

VP of Enrollment Management

Delaware County Community College

Learn more about the Delaware County Community College story at:

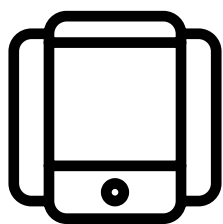
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Tips for Engagement

New traditionals are less motivated towards enrollment, partly because they have more responsibilities at work, at home, and financially.

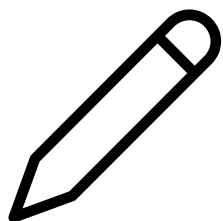
Because of their unique characteristics, they may be more vulnerable to challenges that affect their health, stress levels, and ability to persist to enrollment or graduation. The choice to return to school is often a stressful and frightening one. Therefore, the new traditionals need more cultivation and support.

In order to turn prospects into enrolled students, community colleges need to:



Keep it simple and accessible.

Long or complicated information requests, applications, and financial aid forms may intimidate new traditionals. Keep it simple, streamlined and easy to access. For example, students should not have to pinch and squeeze on their mobile phone to access information or fill out forms and their work should be automatically saved.



Provide plenty of personalization.

All students are individuals with unique needs and desires. As much as possible, they should be treated as such. Generic, bulk emails that are transactional don't work, nor do static websites that don't appeal to a wide diversity of interests and programs.



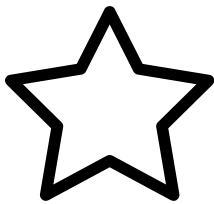
Nurture, nurture, nurture.

Research indicates that once a prospect visits a college website, they'll stay in the consideration phase for an average of two months, and for as many 18 months. For new traditionals, that phase can be even longer. Ensure you maintain personalized, touch points with these prospects for as long as it takes to convert.



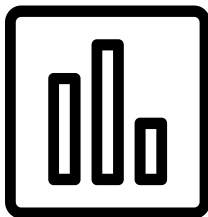
Appeal to “fit.”

Regardless of age, all students ask themselves if they will “fit in” at a particular institution. Community colleges need to approach their websites, social media, and outreach with that question in mind. For example, a single mother in her 40s is probably not going to see herself on a campus with a website that highlights athletics or doesn't easily provide the information important to her, such as scheduling and cost.



Focus on “high potential” prospects.

With many students to cater to over a longer cultivation period and the need to personalize and nurture new traditionals to be successful, it can be unrealistic to do so for every single prospect. Use the information you have on prospects to narrow down those who are most likely to enroll with strong supports and who are the best fit for your institution. Then, focus on them.



Measure and optimize.

Make sure that you are getting a return on your outreach and recruitment investments. See which campaigns and strategies have had the most impact and optimize those, while scaling back on those that are wasting resources.

How can we help?



Student-centric solutions for higher ed.

Prospective community college students are anything but traditional – which means you need a non-traditional solution for engaging them in meaningful ways. Our suite of recruitment solutions help colleges and universities engage with their best fit students and make it easy for them to apply through solutions designed with students in mind.

Engage Your Students

Our Recruitment Suite makes it easy to reach students where they are – and in the way they want to be communicated with. Send targeted emails and text messages through the CRM and engage with students in Schools App, a private, mobile social community.

Make it Easy to Apply

Our mobile-first Application makes it easy for students to complete their application from anywhere, on a mobile device or computer. The student-first interface allows students to stop and start the application and submit on any device when they're ready.

Track Progress

Track students as they progress through the enrollment funnel. See what interactions have taken place, what's left to complete in their application, and target best-fit students who may need extra support to cross the finish line and enroll.

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