

# Perceived Barriers To Degree Completion And Characteristics Of Nontraditional Students

Rebecca Lauren Miller, M.A.

Department of Education, Fontbonne University

## Abstract

This action research aimed to examine the barriers to degree completion identified by the faculty, staff, and students of a university. This study was conducted using a purposive survey. A disconnect in the barriers to degree completion identified by students, and by faculty and staff was discovered.

## Introduction

The student bodies at universities are changing. In 2011, 74% of students at two- and four-year colleges were nontraditional students, and that percentage continues to steadily rise (Bohl, Haak, & Shrestha, 2017). As the population of nontraditional students trends upward, it is necessary to support this unique group of students and identify their needs. Nontraditional students face many barriers in their path to degree completion. These barriers can be internal and external. There are two major definitions of nontraditional students, one was written by Horn (1996), and the other synthesized by MacDonald (2017). Adult learners are more likely to have a gap in their education and learning skills depending on the amount of time since they graduated high school, received a GED, or enrolled in college for the first time (Kenner & Weinermann, 2011). Many resources at universities are focused on helping these students succeed and close this gap in their education. One tool in supporting this has been developmental education. Nontraditional students have more than double the attrition rate compared to their traditional peers (Bohl, Haak, & Shrestha, 2017; Goncalves & Trunk, 2014). A study by Goncalves & Trunk found that 38% of nontraditional students leave within their first year (2014). Some of the challenges identified by nontraditional students include difficulties adjusting to an academic routine, balancing school and family life, and not receiving appropriate support from their university (Bohl, Haak, & Shrestha, 2017). This can be difficult as most nontraditional students fill not only the role of student, but of caregiver, partner, parent and employee (Thompson-Ebanks, 2017).

Students are considered nontraditional if they meet at least one of the following criteria: are at least 25 years old, attend school part-time, work full-time, are a veteran, have children, wait at least one year after high school before entering college, have a GED instead of a high school diploma, are a first-generation student (FGS), are enrolled in non-degree programs, or have reentered a college program (MacDonald, 2017).

## Methodology

The innovation in my research was that I surveyed not just the students of a university, but also the faculty and staff. This is important as all three groups take part in creating the culture of a university.

For this study I created my own surveys and survey questions. I created one survey for students, and one for faculty and staff.

For the student survey I asked them to state their greatest barrier to degree completion and then collected ethnographic data.

For the staff and faculty survey I first asked them to define a nontraditional student. This was done first so that they would have a nontraditional student in mind when answering the following question. For question two, faculty and staff completed a Likert 4 scale which asked them to rate the extent to which they felt a listed item affected student's degree completion. Finally, I collected ethnographic data, along with their position at the university.

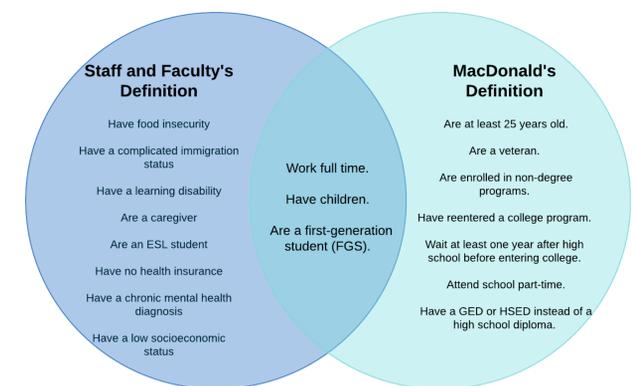
This research was practical action research, as this research aimed to address a problem in the higher education community (Burkholder et al., 2020). It was mixed methods. There was a phenomenological approach (Creswall, 2018).

## Results

When looking at the data for the student surveys, the majority of the students surveyed were traditional students and freshman. In their responses to "What are your greatest barriers to degree completion?" the majority of the students discussed intrinsic factors. These factors come from the student themselves; such as procrastination, passing classes, and whether or not they had chosen the correct major. When looking at the responses of the nontraditional students the themes that emerged as their greatest barriers were extrinsic. These factors were finances and balancing work, life, and school.

The faculty responses are summarized in the figure below.

Comparison of Faculty and Staff Survey's and MacDonald's Definition of Nontraditional Student



## Conclusion

There is a disconnect between the current definition of nontraditional student and what students, faculty, and staff think a nontraditional student is. In future research I would like to update the definition of nontraditional student created in 1996 by Horn. As the student bodies in our universities have changed immensely since 1996, it is time for the definition of what it means to be a nontraditional student to change as well.

## Acknowledgements

Thank you to my partner, my cohort and the faculty of the Ed.D. program.

