

Christine Marlow, Ph.D.

Identifying the Problems and Needs of Nontraditional Students at Your Institution

The author suggests campuses conduct their own studies of nontraditional students, presents one such study, and offers recommendations to student personnel administrators.

THE NONTRADITIONAL STUDENT

Most discussions of nontraditional students are prefaced by a statement containing statistics on the rapid increase of these students on campus. For example, the Carnegie Council on Policy Studies in Higher Education (1980) predicts a 23% decline in the traditional college bound groups of 18-24 year-olds by 1997, and that by the year 2000, 50% of students will be age 22 and older. Accompanying this trend is the anticipation that many institutions will find themselves competing as vigorously for older, or *nontraditional*, students as they do now for younger *traditional* ones. Colleges and universities recognize that in order to compete successfully in the enrollment arena, they need to know more about the adults they hope to attract and about the adults already enrolled in their institutions. As one result of this recognition there has, in recent years, been numerous research studies examining the problems of the nontraditional student, and describing the development of special programs catering to the needs of this portion of the student body.

That nontraditional students have particular needs and problems has been the conclusion of several studies (Kuh & Sturgis, 1980; Lance, Lourie, & Mayo, 1979; Richter-Antion, 1986). Others have concluded that nontraditional women students experience problems different from those of their male counterparts (Beckman-Smallwood, 1980; Huston-Hoburg & Strange, 1986) and that competition can exist between family life and the pursuit of education for many women (Baruch, Barrett, & Rivers, 1979; Brodzinski, 1980; Gerson, 1985; Hooper,

1979; Kirk & Dorfman, 1983; Roehl & Okun, 1984). Based on these and other findings, specialized programs for nontraditional students, and in particular for reentry women, have been developing at a rapid rate (DiBona & Golter, 1983; McGraw 1982; Surdam & Glass, 1982; Swift, Mills, & Colvin, 1986; Wheaton & Robinson, 1983). Many appear to be effective and to be providing essential services. But how does the student personnel administrator determine if these programs are needed and appropriate for a particular campus?

THE "TYPICAL" NONTRADITIONAL STUDENT

One difficulty in answering the question above lies with the problem of defining the "typical" nontraditional student. On examining the literature, several problems of definition become apparent. First, some researchers have discussed the diversity of the group labeled *nontraditional*. Suchinsky (1982) points out that among nontraditional women students, there are several types—the displaced homemaker, the empty nest mother, the blue collar wife—all with different problems and service needs. In recognition of this diversity, studies have begun to examine the needs of different types of nontraditional students; for example, female single parents (Hooper & March, 1980), displaced homemakers (Swift, Mills, & Colvin, 1986), and students in the 55-75 age bracket (Dewey, 1980).

A second problem is that regardless of this diversity, it should be possible to obtain a general picture of the needs of this segment of the student body; yet there is a lack of studies that have samples drawn from a number of different campuses and that are of adequate size. Thus, generalizations are limited. As Spratt (1984) states, "What do you seek on campus? Ask that question to a random sample of thirty-seven adults at thirty-seven post secondary institutions across the country and you probably would get thirty-seven different answers. Ask the same question to 137 adult students at 137 campuses and the answers may show some duplication. Ask 1,137 adults at 1,137 campuses and the answers will begin to reveal clear-cut patterns of needs and interest" (p. 4). To date, research in this area has not resulted in clear-cut patterns.

A final problem in identifying the typical nontraditional student is that some researchers have suggested that the characteristics of this population are changing, particularly for women. Wilson, Barrick, Prochaska-Cue, & Gappa (1987), for example, indicate that for nontraditional women students family problems do not overshadow their college experiences to the extent once supposed, and their aspirations are similar to their male counterparts.

After looking at many of the studies that have been completed, administrators are wary about assuming that the student problems and needs identified are similar to those experienced by their own students. With these notions of a student body that is diverse and changing rapidly, and the difficulties of capturing a clear image of the typical nontraditional student, I recommend that administrators conduct studies of their own nontraditional students. This article describes the method used for conducting one such study at a Southwestern state university and makes recommendations for completing this kind of study at other institutions.

IMPLEMENTING A STUDY

Financial Support

The first question when the topic of a research study, however modest, is raised, is "Who pays?" The budget of the study described here was under \$200

These funds were provided jointly by the Department of Social Work and the Division of Student Affairs. The budget was kept at a minimum in part by involving students in design of the instrument, collection of data, and assistance with the analysis. The students were enrolled in a social work research methods class and received credit for their participation. Supervision of the students and direction of the project was provided by the instructor of the course. All students involved were nontraditional and had expressed an interest in the study. The budget also included funds for paper, copying, and postage.

Research Method

A systematic random sample (N = 256) was taken from all freshman and junior students 26 years and over who were registered at the university in Fall 1986. A questionnaire was designed in part by the nontraditional students in the research class, with suggestions from the president of the Returning Students Association, staff of the Division of Student Affairs, and the coordinators of the Advising Centers for each college. The questionnaire included items relating to demographic information, problems experienced by the students, and questions addressing service needs. The process included a mailing, follow-up telephone calls, and a second mailing. The final response rate was 57.4%.

The students were responsible for data entry and the initial computer analysis, under the direction of the class instructor. A description of the analysis and findings is not included here since this article concerns method and procedures rather than results.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations derive from this study and from the literature, and are made for student personnel administrators planning studies of their nontraditional students.

1. Involve nontraditional students in the study.

This has several benefits, including providing an effective way of stimulating their interest in research methodology. It also provides valuable suggestions for questionnaire items. For example, one of the students suggested adding the item *change of career due to a disability* as a possible response to the question, *Why are you pursuing a degree?* This was based on her personal experience. Another advantage to students' participation is cost savings, though it should be ensured that the students receive academic credit where appropriate. A final advantage is students' increased awareness that the university is concerned and interested in their problems and needs.

2. Use a valid instrument.

Mayes and McConatha (1982) suggest that studies employ the Mooney Problem Checklist. Although the Mooney Checklist was developed for use with traditional students, Mayes and McConatha indicate it has been used successfully in studies of nontraditional students (e.g., Lance, Lourie, & Mayo, 1979). Use of this instrument has the advantage of enabling some interesting comparisons with the results of other studies that have used it. Nevertheless, the instrument should be examined closely by nontraditional students on campus in order to ensure that questions are not omitted that are of importance to your students and your campus.

3. Select a random sample.

Random selection within a college population is relatively easy to accomplish. A list of enrolled students and their mailing addresses is accessible and cheap. Although randomization was not part of many of the studies cited in the literature review, it can significantly affect the credibility of findings and the strength of your argument for developing programs and services on campus.

4. Control for various factors in the analysis of data.

As discussed earlier, the nontraditional student population is diverse, and the diversity exists not only between campuses but within them. Consequently, in analyzing the data, it becomes critical to examine and identify the factors involved in this diversity, and to relate these factors to differing needs and problems. Based on previous research, there are indications that the following factors need to be identified.

□*Sex.* Although it has been suggested that some nontraditional women students' needs are not significantly different from men's, a comprehensive needs analysis by sex has not been completed recently. It seems safe to assume at this stage of our knowledge, that women do experience some needs different from men. For example, a recent study of married students indicated significant differences between the men and women in the degree of attitudinal, emotional, and functional support the students experienced from their spouses (Huston-Hoburg & Strange, 1986).

□*Marital and Parental Status.* Single parents may express very different needs than some other students (Danowski, 1983). Students with children would appear to have very different problems than their childless counterparts.

□*Ethnicity.* Little research has been done on the possible differences of needs expressed by various ethnic groups within the nontraditional student population. Most campuses are ethnically diverse, and it seems reasonable to expect that some differences in problems and needs would exist. The study by Henry (1985) found that black students expressed some very specific needs related to their ethnicity. For example, they wanted more black faculty, a support system with blacks, and administrative faculty and staff sensitive to black issues. In the study presented here, ethnicity was one of the factors examined—a comparison was undertaken between Hispanic and Anglo students. For those students with children, Hispanics were more likely to state that the availability of child care was a problem. In general, Hispanic students requested more services than Anglo students. They expressed a greater need for weekend classes, more help from instructors, more flexible admission and application procedures, and greater access to counseling.

□*Age.* Dewey (1980) has pointed out some of the special needs of retirement age students. With the age of students on campus increasing, this distinction in ages within the nontraditional student population may become even more critical in the future.

5. Actively disseminate the findings.

The dissemination of findings is a critical step in the development of future services and programs. A research report summarizing the findings should be discussed with and distributed to the pertinent administrative personnel and made available to all interested persons. The planning and implementation of

programs can then be directly related to the study's findings. The report from this article's study was presented to the central administration, and some of the results were used in a proposal for the development of a university day care center.

CONCLUSION

The number of nontraditional students will continue to increase on campuses nationwide. They are asking for and need new types of services. Studies of nontraditional students' needs on individual campuses can provide the student personnel administrator with a firm foundation for developing services and programs for this growing portion of the student population. Without such evidence, claims for services lack strength and can easily be dismissed as unsubstantiated, particularly in these times of dwindling budgets.

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