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## Defining students as nontraditional is inaccurate and damaging (essay)

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After spending 15 years in college and university administration, mainly at two-year colleges, and the past two years as a faculty member in a community college leadership doctoral program, I have become increasingly frustrated by the perpetuation of what I refer to as the myth of the nontraditional student.

All too frequently in my career, a graduating student has come to me to express appreciation for helping them to make it to that achievement, indicating that they did not think that they would be successful because they knew they “were not supposed to be in college.” They are the students our educational systems deem “nontraditional.” They are adults, they are part-time students, they have had jobs, some have had children, some have been caring for elderly parents. Basically, by not being aged 18 to 24 and a full-time student, these “nontraditional” students have entered college thinking they do not belong.

The shocking thing to me has been that these “nontraditional” students have made up the vast majority of those attending their institution. Further, nearly half of the undergraduate students in the American higher education system can be categorized as nontraditional. The [National Center for Education Statistics](#) [1] shows large increases in the enrollment of students that have typically been characterized as nontraditional because their demographic makeup identifies them as an atypical college student. Yet the message that these students are the outsiders is persistent and causes much psychological distress and self-doubt.

Those of us who work in higher education should realize that there no longer is a nontraditional student or, at the very least, we need to revise the definition of what constitutes one. Further, the continued and frequent labeling of the majority of our college students as nontraditional is a form of othering that adversely impacts these students’ ability to successfully persist in many of our educational settings.

Referring to our students as nontraditional puts them at a starting line behind other college enrollees -- not only in their sense of self but also in the minds of fellow students, faculty members, administrators and policy makers. Using such language basically says, “We are going out on a limb by letting you attend college because this place is not really designed for you, and you really should not be here.”

What's more, that statement might be true simply because many of our institutions, programs and traditions are *not* made for these students -- and this is a problem. Our institutions, programs and traditions are the problem, not the students. We must do better.

The nontraditional narrative is stunningly pervasive in higher education circles. To think about students in any alternate way is to go against the very fabric of the system of education that has been built in our country. However, we know that "traditional" college students are less and less frequently the ones that are entering the doors of many (and I would argue, most) of our institutions.

Some would argue that as educators we should simply re-evaluate our understanding of who makes up the conceptualized traditional college student. However, that is not enough. We must remove any designation of our students that would perpetuate a divide between who belongs in college, for whom college is designed and for whom college success is an option. And we must reframe our educational system for those students and address a variety of other aspects of it as we aim to meet the all too frequently proposed completion agendas. Those areas include: developmental education, student services, course scheduling, definitions of success and more.

In fact, most of the students to whom I am referring attend colleges and universities that might easily be labeled nontraditional themselves or somehow othered in the institutional hierarchy of American higher education. The elite, traditional institutions of our higher education system, the Ivy League, the land grant, the research intensive and the like continue to enroll high numbers of traditional college students, while the nontraditional ones are relegated to our teaching colleges, community colleges and the oft-criticized for-profit institutions. That further denigrates the students that cannot access traditional institutions because their demographic characteristics do not match those of the students for whom such institutions were designed hundreds of years ago. Creating institutions for these individuals that are underfunded (community colleges) or overcharging (for-profit) is not providing equal education for our populace. While I believe in the power of diverse institutional options, I do not believe in relegating students to certain institutions because of their demographic makeup.

We must think differently about whom our system of higher education serves and then drill that down to the institutional level. For example, many policy makers and educational think tanks focus only on four-year research institutions and the students they serve when making broad higher education reforms. That only offers a glimpse into a small percentage of the students actually enrolled in higher education in our country. They need a broader understanding of the actual student body of our nation, as a whole.

At the institutional level, we should check our assumptions about whom we are serving, as well as whom we should or could be serving. We must not assume to know our demographics but rather examine our programs, services and curricula to be sure they are appropriate for all students -- not just the ones that fit into an antiquated idea of traditional. Further, our developmental programs are designed to help traditional students in many ways but, in fact, those are not the students enrolling in the majority of developmental courses. How can we rethink developmental education for the actual student in the classroom and simultaneously stop blaming our failure to successfully remediate students on the lack of preparation in high school?

To be clear, I do not have all of the answers for how we accomplish the reframing and reconsideration of our system of higher education. There are many players and many thoughtful conversations to be had. But we can start with a discussion that comes from recognizing the inadequacy of the “nontraditional” label -- for only through recognizing the problem can we find new paths. And so I present to you a challenge and call for debate on the floor.

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