

SUPPORTING NON-TRADITIONAL AT-RISK STUDENTS

Tackling Retention Challenges
in Higher Education

SUPPORTING AT-RISK NON-TRADITIONAL STUDENTS

Competition for students continues to intensify for colleges and universities — and along with it, the importance of strategic recruitment and retention practices. Non-traditional students are a key population for schools, representing one of the fastest-growing segments within higher education. In fact, the number of non-traditional students is projected to increase more than twice as fast as traditional students from 2012 to 2022, according to the CLASP Center for Postsecondary and Economic Success.

In our previous study, “Achieving Success for Non-traditional Students,” Barnes & Noble College investigated the foundation of the non-traditional student journey. More than 1,000 traditional students and nearly 800 non-traditional students participated in our survey, offering insights into their experiences and perspectives on higher education — and how they differ.

The study defined non-traditional students as fitting one or more of the following criteria: 25+ years old, first-generation (parents/siblings did not attend), veteran, re-entry student (non-consecutive enrollment), distance learning or online works full-time (35+ hours/week), has dependents or holds a GED or other nonstandard high school diploma. They also share a unique set of challenges and needs on their path to academic success.

In the course of the study, we identified a group of students within the non-traditional student population that merited a closer look: those potentially at risk of dropping out of school. We found that almost twice as many non-traditional students are at risk, compared to their traditional peers. And, as the number of non-traditional students increases, so will the number of at-risk students — creating a growing retention challenge for schools. We took a deep dive to learn more about non-traditional students who are at risk, looking at their characteristics, how to find them within the campus community, and ways to support them.

For the purposes of this report, non-traditional students “at risk” meet at least one of three conditions:

- A low sense of connection to school
- Low confidence in completing their program
- Negative feelings about current situation at school

At-risk non-traditional students feel differently than other non-traditional students about their college experience — from the very beginning of their journey. They are driven more by external motivations, and are less likely to attend to follow a passion.

Reaching out to these students, engaging them with existing services, and finding new ways to address unmet needs may help schools positively impact retention rates — and encourage a wider range of students to participate on campus, building a more robust, inclusive culture.

Only 37 percent of at-risk students feel confident they will be able to accomplish their goals, compared to 69 percent of those not at-risk.



The Barnes & Noble College InsightsSM platform regularly engages its network of more than 15,000 students, parents, faculty and alumni to better understand the thinking, behaviors and expectations of current and future college students. The efforts have resulted in generational research studies on topics such as millennials and careers, and Gen Z and their expectations of learning.

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SHARED BEHAVIORS AND PERCEPTIONS

Understanding at-risk non-traditional students is critical to providing the right support and bolstering successful outcomes. These students share four primary characteristics — and a number of related behaviors and perceptions.

AT-RISK NON-TRADITIONAL STUDENTS TOLD US ...

THEY ARE LESS INVOLVED AT SCHOOL

At-risk non-traditional students tend to use school services and resources at a lower rate than non-traditional students not at risk, including personal assistance from professors, tutoring and health services.

At-risk non-traditional students participate less in extracurricular activities



At-risk non-traditional students spend less time on campus per week outside of class



*median hours

THEY EXPERIENCE LOW LEVELS OF ACADEMIC SUPPORT

- Less than half of at-risk non-traditional students:
- Believe that faculty are available to help when they need it
 - Feel that they have a good relationship with their academic advisor
 - Were satisfied with their experiences when they used tutoring services and/or academic advising

Fewer at-risk non-traditional students feel supported by their school as a whole



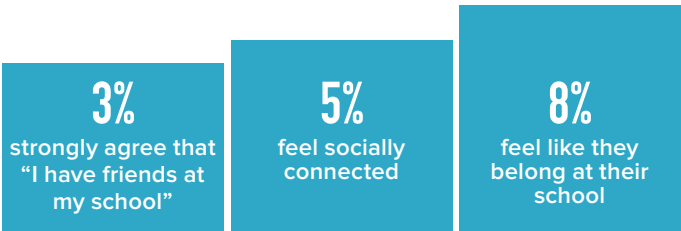
THEY HAVE LOW LEVELS OF SOCIAL SUPPORT

At-risk non-traditional students are less likely to engage with their peers and develop relationships than non-traditional students not at risk.

Fewer at-risk non-traditional students feel supported by their peers



At-risk non-traditional students are disengaged:



THEY RATE THEIR OVERALL EMOTIONAL WELL-BEING AS LOW

Forty percent of at-risk non-traditional students say that their emotional well-being is a challenge.

Fewer at-risk non-traditional students feel "happy" at school



At-risk non-traditional students were candid about their emotional state:



AT-RISK NON-TRADITIONAL STUDENTS

IDENTIFYING AT-RISK NON-TRADITIONAL STUDENTS

Proactively identifying and working with these students yields many benefits — but finding the non-traditional students who are at risk is not as simple as might be expected. For example, the following attributes are **not** associated with a higher likelihood of being at risk:

- Gender
- Race
- Household income
- Age
- Major
- Financial impact on choice of school, program or number of credit hours
- Financial impact on time dedicated to academic work

Work-life balance might seem to correlate with being at risk. According to survey data, maintaining this balance does present a challenge for some students who are at risk, but not at a rate significantly different than other non-traditional students.

Non-traditional students in the following categories show significantly higher rates of being at risk:



No extracurricular activities



Minimal time on campus



Paying for school independently



Had a negative experience with a school support system or service


These students may have used campus services such as health/mental health, academic advising and tutoring, and financial aid. **However, of the non-traditional students surveyed who had used such services, they had lower satisfaction rates for their experiences than their peers who are not at risk.** Schools have an opportunity to re-engage students who have used these services, turn a negative experience into a positive, and provide additional tools and resources.

OVERCOMING CHALLENGES

Based on our findings, Barnes & Noble College developed an initial list of **five ways** schools can provide support to at-risk non-traditional students and address key needs.

- 1. Identify and then seek feedback on campus services from at-risk non-traditional students.** Some of these students may not be aware of services, and they will require education. But, especially for those who have used services and came away with a negative perception, starting a dialogue with them may uncover opportunities for updates and improvements.
- 2. Help them build connections and relationships on campus.** At-risk students need to feel like they belong on campus, and that other students are sharing some of the same experiences. But, they may not know how to connect with their peers. Events and activities bringing these students together can help foster those relationships.
- 3. Be persistent and consistent in communications.** It may take more time to reach at-risk non-traditional students and get them engaged with services and activities on campus. Finding a way to get in front of them regularly and using the communications channels they prefer is key.
- 4. Think broader with career counseling support.** At-risk non-traditional students may feel disconnected from the benefits their education can bring them. Working with them to break through negative feelings and define goals and opportunities may serve as a powerful motivator.
- 5. Educate students on affordable materials/learning solutions.** It is particularly important that at-risk non-traditional students find the right support that they can access in the places and times that work best for them. As a population that spends less time on campus and is less engaged with their peers, they may find digital learning tools and online solutions valuable, for example.

As the non-traditional student presence grows on campus, there also will be more students at risk. Colleges and universities that accelerate their retention and support initiatives to this population will be better positioned to meet their school's goals and help all students achieve success, however they define it.



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