

Creating a New Future: Recruiting and Retaining Nontraditional Students

Debra Meyers, Victoria Berling, and Kevin J. Corcoran

Abstract

As stewards of our regions, Coalition of Urban and Metropolitan Universities (CUMU) institutions have a special responsibility to enhance the educational attainment in our communities. In this paper, we present the rationale for engaging with nontraditional students, taking into account the complexity of their identities. Although we acknowledge the barriers to access and success, we present results of a student survey of adult learners at Northern Kentucky University which highlights their needs and preferences. We also focus on follow-up evaluation of efforts to enhance convenience and access for students. Further, we emphasize efforts to build programs that serve nontraditional students and provide clarity of expectations (for both faculty and students) in existing programs.

Since its founding in 1989, the Coalition of Urban and Metropolitan Universities (CUMU) has been committed to the growth and vitality of urban regions. As “stewards of place,” CUMU institutions are called to serve their regions in many ways. None is more central to our mission than producing skilled graduates. With the Lumina Foundation setting a goal of 60 percent of the U.S. adult population earning a college degree (associate or bachelor’s degree; Lumina 2011), as well as demographic changes in the American population, it is imperative that our institutions focus on the needs of *nontraditional* students to bridge the gap from today’s 39 percent with a college degree. While focusing primarily on our experience at Northern Kentucky University, we present key challenges to the development of a thriving program, results of a student survey, and the development of programs that align with student needs and best practices.

Understanding “Nontraditional Students”

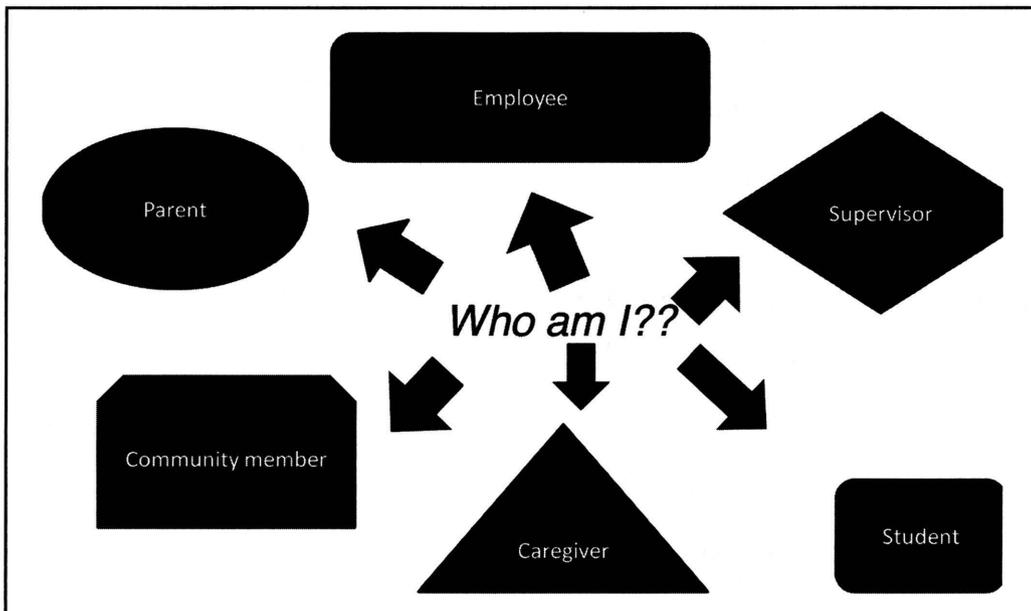
The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES 2002) lists the following seven characteristics that identify a student as nontraditional:

- Delays enrollment (does not enter postsecondary education in the same calendar year that he or she finished high school);
- Attends part time for at least part of the academic year;
- Works full time (thirty-five hours or more per week) while enrolled;

- Is considered financially independent for purposes of determining eligibility for financial aid;
- Has dependents other than a spouse (usually children, but sometimes others);
- Is a single parent (either not married or married but separated and has dependents);
- Does not have a high school diploma (completed high school with a GED or other high school completion certificate or did not finish high school) (NCES 2002).

Typically, however, age is used as a proxy for the other six characteristics, and with good reason. Age tends to correlate with the remaining characteristics and is among the most easily assessed. However, the remaining qualities highlight the many facets of the identities of our students; for example, the data from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) with graduating students in 2009 indicates that 43 percent were working at least thirty hours per week. In thinking about increasing access, we propose that we consider the *complexity of an individual's identity* rather than age or whether characteristics are “traditional” or not. These students are balancing multiple roles—parent, employee, caretaker, active member of the community, etc. This contrasts with students whose primary identity is as student. Figure 1 presents a visual portrayal of many of the aspects of the complexity (Corcoran and Derwin 2011). Note that these many pieces do not fit easily with one another, much like our students’ various roles.

Figure 1. Sample components of the complex identity of an individual balancing multiple roles.



This complexity of identity—with the student role often in the periphery, as it is in Figure 1—leads many students to make decisions along multiple dimensions. They look for more than simply “the best” school, program, or course. Reality dictates that they must also consider convenience and marketability of the academic programs and the accessibility of both administrative and student services. For example, NKU’s NSSE results indicate that more than 60 percent of the graduating students who completed an online course reported convenience as the primary factor in their decision to take a course online. Our academic programs must recognize this array of responsibilities and stressors, while not sacrificing academic rigor, if we are to successfully provide both access and success.

Barriers

Many of the barriers to successfully serving these students involve faculty concerns about the dilution of quality. Weller (2002) notes there is broad belief that online education is a threat to academic rigor—a belief echoed on many campuses. However, well before web-based courses, Gilley and Hawkes (1989) found a perception that efforts to include nontraditional students involved compromising academic rigor.

Being responsive to the needs of a student body may require faculty flexibility in scheduling, resulting in courses offered in different modalities or at times faculty are unaccustomed to teaching. A recent internal report at the University of Missouri highlights the reaction of a segment of the faculty:

[Some] faculty members felt that persons wanting to return to undergraduate education in mid-life had already had their chance and would dilute the student body. They felt that persons seeking graduate education should be willing to make the sacrifices needed to become traditional students as that is the *correct* way to learn. These faculty members saw nontraditional teaching assignments as *impositions* which are inconsistent with their views of university teaching (emphasis added; MU in the Evening Program Committee 2009, p. 2).

Parsing this statement, it includes three major assertions (some stated directly, others indirectly) from a significant enough subset of faculty to be included in this report: 1) older students *dilute* the student body (and, they *should* have completed their undergraduate education when they were younger); 2) graduate education is about sacrifices, and face-to-face daytime classes are the *correct* way to learn; 3) a significant minority of faculty expect their teaching assignments to meet *their* needs for convenience (rather than the students’ needs). One would hope that these views are isolated, though experience suggests that faculty attitudes such as these are a recurring challenge.

Why Should We Care?

At the core of the identity of each CUMU institution is the commitment to “the enhancement of social capital and cultural enrichment, the improvement of schools and educational outcomes, and the preparation of globally connected, action-oriented

civic leaders” (CUMU 2009). Carnevale and Rose (2011) argue that the underproduction of individuals with college degrees over the past thirty years has contributed significantly to income inequality in the United States. They go on to highlight the economic impact of a realistically more educated populace on national GDP of \$500 billion by 2025.

Putting aside questions of our obligation to our communities and our nation, and our assertions of commitments to life-long learning, there are practical reasons that require every one of our institutions to serve nontraditional students. From 1995 to 2008, the number of high school graduates in the United States has increased by 32 percent, suggesting that the “flow” of traditional-aged students has continued to gush (Hussar and Bailey 2011). However, Hussar and Bailey also quickly note that the number of high school graduates is likely to *decline* by 3 percent between 2008 and 2020. In a recent presentation, Merisotis (2011) noted that forty million adults have begun, but not completed college. Unless our institutional plans involve reduction in enrollments, they must include strategies to increase our adult enrollments.

One Institution’s Efforts

The remainder of this paper describes one institution’s efforts to serve a broad array of students. Of particular note are our efforts to understand the needs and preferences of nontraditional students, the development of academically rigorous programs that address personal and professional preferences while also maximizing the utility of credits already earned, and explicitness of expectations.

Northern Kentucky University (NKU) is located in a suburban setting, seven miles from downtown Cincinnati in a region of nearly two million people. In 2008, the Kentucky Council for Postsecondary Education (CPE) launched a statewide “Kentucky Adult Learner Initiative” to encourage all public postsecondary institutions to identify and address the unique needs of adult learners. Through the initiative, NKU received funding to conduct the Adult Learning Focused Institution (ALFI) Inventory. The ALFI, developed by the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL), is a two-step process that includes a review of policies and procedures impacting adult learners by an internal committee of faculty and staff, and administration of the Noel-Levitz Adult Learner Inventory (Noel Levitz 2006) to current adult students. The internal review identified several weaknesses that were confirmed through the student survey. The survey results proved to be particularly enlightening.

Specifically, a link to the online survey was emailed to 4,460 undergraduate students enrolled in fall 2008. All students aged twenty-three or older as of May 1, 2008, were invited to participate. The ALFI committee selected this birth date to capture students who had been out of high school for five or more years by fall 2008. The committee recognized that age captured only one of the seven characteristics of nontraditional learners as described by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), although—as noted previously—it is a reasonable research proxy for the other factors; however, date-of-birth was the only variable consistently captured in student records,

and therefore, the committee used it to invite students to participate in the survey. A total of 801 students or 18 percent of invited students completed the survey.

The Noel-Levitz instrument contained sixty-seven standard statements, and the NKU committee added ten statements of particular interest. Students are asked to rate on a scale of one to seven (with seven being the highest score) how important each statement was to them. On fifty-five of the statements, students also were asked to rate on a scale of one to seven how satisfied they were with how NKU has met their expectations. Table 1 details the eleven items rated as most important to adult students at NKU and their satisfaction with the institution for each.

Table 1. Results of Noel-Levitz Student Survey (Fall 2008)

Item	Importance (scale of 1 to 7)	Satisfaction (scale of 1 to 7)	Gap between Importance and Satisfaction
NKU makes it possible for working students to continue their education through flexible scheduling options.	6.69	4.95	1.74
This institution explains what is needed for me to complete my program here.	6.64	5.49	1.15
My program allows me to pace my studies to fit my life and work schedules.	6.59	5.13	1.46
Sufficient course offerings within my program of study are available each term.	6.56	4.68	1.88
My studies are closely related to my life and work goals.	6.55	5.66	0.89
I have a clear understanding of what I'm expected to learn in my classes.	6.54	5.74	0.80
Availability of program I wanted as factor in decision to enroll	6.54	n/a	n/a
Advisors are knowledgeable about requirements for courses and programs of interest to me.	6.53	5.41	1.12
Convenient time and place for classes as factor in decision to enroll	6.50	n/a	n/a
My instructors provide timely feedback about my academic progress.	6.47	5.34	1.13
I receive timely responses to my requests for help and information.	6.47	5.52	0.95

As shown in Table 1, adult students most desired flexible scheduling options, a clear understanding of requirements for program completion, programs that fit within their work-life schedules, and sufficient course offerings to achieve their academic goals. They wanted their academic studies to align with their work-life goals and to clearly understand the learning expectations in each course. Knowledgeable advisors and timely feedback from both instructors and the institution were rated as important to them. They noted the availability of their desired program of study and convenient times and locations of courses as important factors in their decision to enroll at NKU.

Interestingly, adult students at NKU did not suggest that they wanted their programs of study to be “easy.” On the contrary, they rated highly the importance of learning experiences that challenged them to think beyond their current understanding. In this regard, they did not appear to uphold the oft-held stereotype that adult students expect a “watered-down” curriculum.

Table 2 identifies the ten items with the biggest gap between importance and satisfaction. Of the eleven items rated as most important to adults, NKU most closely met their expectations in the alignment of their studies to their life-work goals and the clear understanding of course expectations of learning. The biggest gap among the top eleven items was in course offerings, followed closely by the availability of flexible options for degree completion.

Among all fifty-five items contained in the survey, the biggest overall gap between student importance and satisfaction was in the area of credit for prior learning. Students rated the importance of credit for learning derived from previous life-work experiences as 6.11 on a seven-point scale, and their satisfaction with NKU on that item as a 4.07 on a seven-point scale, resulting in a gap between importance and satisfaction of 2.04. The importance of credit for prior learning to adult students was confirmed in another campus-supplied item: “This institution has clear and reasonable policies about credit for prior learning.” Students rated that item as 6.15 in importance and 4.63 in satisfaction, a gap of 1.52.

There also were significant gaps in their expectations and satisfaction regarding billing and financial assistance. Students rate the item “I receive adequate information about sources of financial assistance available to me” as a 6.08 in importance and 4.35 in satisfaction, resulting in a 1.73 gap. Similarly, the item “Billing for tuition and fees is tailored to meet my specific needs” was rated as a 6.18 in importance and 4.61 in satisfaction, resulting in a gap of 1.57. Two other items ranked in the top ten in terms of gaps between importance and satisfaction. They were “This institution offers strategies to help me cope with the multiple pressures of home, work, and my studies” (gap between importance and satisfaction of 1.65) and “I am able to choose course delivery that fits my life and work schedules” (gap between importance and satisfaction of 1.46).

Table 2. Items with Biggest Gap between Importance and Satisfaction

Item	Gap between Importance and Satisfaction	Importance (scale of 1 to 7)	Satisfaction (scale of 1 to 7)
I can receive credit for learning derived from my previous life and work experiences.	2.04	6.11	4.07
Sufficient course offerings within my program of study are available each term.	1.88	6.56	4.68
NKU makes it possible for working students to continue their education through flexible scheduling options.	1.74	6.69	4.95
I receive adequate information about sources of financial assistance available to me.	1.73	6.08	4.35
This institution offers strategies to help me cope with the multiple pressures of home, work, and my studies.	1.65	5.79	4.14
Staff are available to help me identify resources to help me pay for college.	1.61	5.86	4.25
Billing for tuition and fees is tailored to meet my specific needs.	1.57	6.18	4.61
This institution has clear and reasonable policies about credit for prior learning.	1.52	6.15	4.63
My program allows me to pace my studies to fit my life and work schedules.	1.46	6.59	5.13
I am able to choose course delivery that fits my life circumstances.	1.45	6.40	4.95

The Noel-Levitz Adult Learner Inventory also compares institutional results to the average scores of national benchmarks. The benchmarks are comprised of all institutions that have administered in ALFI within the prior three years. NKU was compared to forty-three institutions and scored lower in student satisfaction on fifty-five of the fifty-six standard items. On one item, “This institution uses technology on a regular basis to communicate with me,” NKU scored better than the benchmark institutions by 0.02. While this information initially was disconcerting, the ALFI committee noted that all but two of the benchmarks were small private institutions with long histories of offering adult-specific programs. The committee considered the comparison to these institutions to be confirmation that NKU had much work to do in terms of increasing in “adult friendliness” but did not put too much emphasis on the benchmark results due to the differences in institution type and mission.

When the ALFI was administered in fall 2008, NKU already had begun to address the unique needs of adults through online and hybrid programs. Three undergraduate degree programs were available online. Two were specific to healthcare: the Bachelor of Science degree in health science for allied health professionals and the registered nurse-to-Bachelor of Science in nursing for nurses. Approximately 110 students were enrolled in the two programs in fall 2008. One program of broader occupational interest also was available, the Bachelor of Arts degree in organizational leadership with 250 students in fall 2008. The available online programs reached a small fraction of the total adult population in fall 2008.

Similarly, NKU offered a hybrid program called the Program for Adult-Centered Education (PACE). Introduced in fall 2005, PACE provided a lock-step curriculum in eight-week sessions using a mix of face-to-face and online modalities. The program grew relatively quickly, serving 225 students through four degree options in fall 2008. Those options were an associate in integrative studies and bachelor degrees in integrative studies, organizational leadership, and computer information technology.

Spurred by the ALFI results, the state emphasis on adult learners, and the national data supporting the forecasted growth in enrollment from adults, NKU has grown purposefully online in their PACE offerings since 2008. As of fall 2011, eight undergraduate degree programs, two certificate programs, several minors, and more than twenty-two general-education courses can be completed online. In fall 2011, enrollment in fully online courses exceeded 6,000, and more than 600 undergraduate students were pursuing a fully online program of study. Surprisingly, even in the face of the continued economic downturn, students have continued to enroll in online courses despite the fact that these sections cost \$35 to \$45 more per credit hour than the same course offered face-to-face. It appears that the convenience offered by the online format outweighs concerns about the cost of education.

Similarly, by fall 2011, PACE had grown to more than 325 students pursuing eight degrees. Degree options included two associate and six bachelor programs. Further, PACE-like hybrid programs have been conducted onsite at several hospitals in greater Cincinnati for nurses and allied-health professionals.

NKU intentionally has supported instructional quality in the development of online and hybrid courses. Year-round workshops, including a week-long intensive summer faculty institute, focused on quality teaching in alternative delivery formats. Instructional designers have been hired to support course development in online and hybrid programs, and the university has developed a set of twenty-four quality guidelines for online development. These guidelines are based on the Quality Matters materials developed through the University of Maryland. In doing so, we continue to demonstrate our commitment to courses and programs that are both academically rigorous and pedagogically sound.

Further, the university has encouraged the use of technology to deliver a variety of student services. Many administrative offices have developed automated or online

procedures to eliminate or at least minimize the need for students to come to NKU for an array of student services ranging from enrollment to bill payment to advising. The university Academic Advising Resource Center even trained advisors to conduct advising appointments online using the synchronous meeting technology now available through NKU's course management system, Blackboard.

Integrative Studies

Clearly, NKU has taken the adult learner needs and preferences seriously and has created several programs specifically addressing these needs. A bachelor's degree in integrative studies, for example, is available in the PACE format or a more traditional route, and it meets many of the needs and desires of our adult learners expressed in the surveys outlined previously, but it did not begin that way.

Nearly a decade ago, NKU identified a particular group of undergraduates in need of a "completer" degree for students who had accumulated a number of credits in multiple disciplines over an extended period of time. The original completer degree in the College of Arts and Science—Liberal Studies—was a hodge-podge of courses that met the most basic university requirements for graduation. The utilitarian program lacked curriculum-based goals and objectives as well as leadership to promote program improvement. Recognizing these shortcomings, in 2007, a program director with adult learner experience was named and steps were taken to provide students with a marketable degree.

The new completer degree program, renamed Integrative Studies, adopted the Association of American Colleges and Universities' (AAC&U) Liberal Education and America's Promise (LEAP) essential learning outcomes, high-impact educational practices, and authentic student learning assessments. The AAC&U's essential learning outcomes were created by college educators in response to both their desire to contribute to a more diverse democracy in the civil arena as well as meet the needs of employers in our expanding global economy. Many higher education campuses across the country employ the LEAP essential learning outcomes as a comprehensive and measurable structure to prepare twenty-first century students for "work, life, and citizenship" (AACU 2011).

The AAC&U essential learning outcomes:

- Knowledge of Human Cultures and the Physical and Natural World
 - ▶ Through study in the sciences and mathematics, social sciences, humanities, histories, languages, and the arts.
 - ▶ *Focused* by engagement with big questions, both contemporary and enduring.
- Intellectual and Practical Skills, including
 - ▶ Inquiry and analysis
 - ▶ Critical and creative thinking
 - ▶ Written and oral communication

- ▶ Quantitative literacy
 - ▶ Information literacy
 - ▶ Teamwork and problem-solving
 - ▶ *Practiced extensively*, across the curriculum, in the context of progressively more challenging problems, projects, and standards for performance.
- Personal and Social Responsibility, including
 - ▶ Civic knowledge and engagement—local and global
 - ▶ Intercultural knowledge and competence
 - ▶ Ethical reasoning and action
 - ▶ Foundations and skills for lifelong learning
 - ▶ *Anchored* through active involvement with diverse communities and real-world challenges.
- Integrative and Applied Learning, including
 - ▶ Synthesis and advanced accomplishment across general and specialized studies
 - ▶ *Demonstrated* through the application of knowledge, skills, and responsibilities to new settings and complex problems.

The new integrative studies program requires students to take courses in four different areas of concentration. Each area consists of four upper-division courses in a specific discipline. These areas of concentration address the first three AAC&U essential learning outcomes while the integrative studies capstone course, IST 494, targets outcome four. The capstone course that measures the program student learning outcomes is available online every semester to avoid scheduling conflicts particularly for students needing to graduate quickly. The online delivery is also an excellent vehicle for students to master new technology.

The online capstone course measures the student learning outcomes using several different assessment tools, including a research assignment. While the portfolio platforms vary from traditional to websites, students are required to select assignments from each of their areas of concentration to create a portfolio along with an extensive introductory narrative that asks students to reflect upon their integrative experience, what they have learned based upon the student learning outcomes, and how these skills and knowledge represent a cohesive and meaningful educational experience. Moreover, students must relate their educational experience to their future career goals. The final artifact included in the portfolio is an original, interdisciplinary research paper or project. This demonstrates their ability to integrate four disparate subject areas in a meaningful way and serves as the culminating/summative piece of the portfolio.

The portfolios provide a meaningful metric for student mastery of the learning outcomes as well as program review. The program allows many students to complete a degree that is valuable as a vehicle for personal and professional growth, and it holds value for potential employers. The reflection narrative component of the portfolio in

the capstone course provides both students and employers evidence to support this. In fact, many students use the narrative to construct employment or graduate school application cover letters. In sum, by focusing on competencies as measured by the AAC&U student learning outcomes reproduced previously, adult learners demonstrate mastery of the material and skills and can then move on to new challenges.

Clearly with the new integrative studies program and other adult learner focused programs, NKU has made significant progress addressing the needs of adult and nontraditional students since the initial ALFI results were disseminated in 2008. This progress was confirmed by a follow-up survey of PACE and online students that was conducted in fall 2010 (to be discussed later in this paper).

A Single Department's Experience—History and Geography

Building on the knowledge gained through the successful integrative studies program, NKU's History and Geography Department has begun to focus on competencies—as measured by the AAC&U student learning outcomes—for adult learners to demonstrate mastery of the material and skills as part of a new online program initiative. The competencies that would form the basis for the new program include the following:

I. Knowledge gained through:

- Addressing important questions, both contemporary and enduring in written work.
- Acquiring, synthesizing, and analyzing a sufficient volume of content to master the program of study.

II. Acquisition of intellectual and practical skills by:

- Demonstrating intellectual curiosity and critical engagement.
- Displaying a significant capacity for critical thinking, inquiry, and analysis.
- Exhibiting precision and clarity in reading, writing, and oral communication.
- Showing accomplished levels of research and information literacy skills used effectively and ethically.
- Reconciling disparate points of view in scholarly or creative work through written expression.

III. Increased awareness of personal and social responsibility by:

- Seeking ways to open paths to personal and social development.
- Refining an awareness of the world through study of heritage, institutions, work, identity, and applied skills.
- Creating an appreciation for lifelong learning and recognizing the skills that facilitate continuous learning processes fostering discovery and innovation.

IV. Increased capacity for integrated learning by:

- Creating written work that unites concepts and practices across multiple levels, disciplines, and settings.
- Applying discipline-based knowledge, skills, and abilities to new settings and increasingly complex problems.

NKU adopted this modified version of AAC&U's LEAP essential learning outcomes for the history program since research suggests that these outcomes align with employers' needs. The program's student learning outcomes will be measured and assessed in each eight-week online course using a variety of tools including critical thinking assignments, exams, and reflection pieces in order to collect formative data. The capstone course will provide a summative direct measure of outcomes with the completion of a research project or program portfolio. Senior surveys and course evaluations will provide indirect measures of student satisfaction levels, and employer surveys will generate data for continuous program improvements.

It goes without saying that there are barriers to full implementation of this initiative, similar to the ones expressed by the University of Missouri faculty. Perhaps most importantly, we are working to reduce the perceived threat of "cannibalizing" face-to-face enrollments as well as the fear that traditional classroom experiences were being eliminated. And while it is true that many traditional students take one or two of the new eight-week online courses, they quickly return to the traditional delivery modes often citing the writing and reading intensity of such courses. But perhaps as important as the realization that these courses are not *easier* than face-to-face courses is the lack of personal contact, funny jokes, and engaging stories that are central to the traditional history classroom learning experience.

Faculty also needed reassurance that the program would not require everyone to teach courses in the new eight-week online format. In fact, the eight-week online courses will be staffed only with faculty who understand the needs of adult learners. Moreover, faculty have been reassured that the new format would not replace the traditional program; rather, it taps a brand new audience that will increase the numbers of majors and student credit hour generation for the entire department

Survey Results

Specific surveys for PACE and students taking online courses or programs of study were developed in-house and administered during a three-week period in November–December 2010.

Of the 2,259 students enrolled in online undergraduate courses in fall 2010, 411 (18 percent) responded to the survey. Respondents were primarily white, female, and single, which is consistent with the general makeup of the university student body. Their ages ranged from eighteen to seventy-two with 29.78 as the mean. The vast majority (84 percent) worked with 46.6 percent working full time. Most (82.7 percent) lived within thirty miles of the main NKU campus. While students at all grade classifications responded, students with senior status (over ninety credit hours) represented 40 percent of the respondents. More than two-thirds of them reported having a grade point average exceeding 3.0 on a 4.0 scale.

When asked why they selected online courses, students selected three primary answers: 1) “online courses allow me to take courses on my own schedule”; 2) “online courses allow me to work independently”; and 3) “online courses save me money on travel and/or parking.” These responses confirm the importance of flexibility and scheduling convenience noted on the Noel-Levitz survey, while also highlighting a previously uncovered concern about the overall costs of higher education.

The vast majority also indicated they were satisfied with their online experience at NKU with 34.8 percent indicating they were “somewhat satisfied” and 45 percent indicating they were “very satisfied” with their online experience. When asked about engagement in their online courses, slightly more than half reported that their online courses were as engaging (39.9 percent) or even more engaging (12.5 percent) than their face-to-face courses. Only 9.7 percent reported that their online courses were not at all engaging.

To better understand factors affecting retention in online courses, the survey asked students if they had ever withdrawn from their online courses and if so, why. Only 16 percent reported that they had withdrawn. While some reported very specific reasons why they dropped (e.g., they didn’t like the course or instructor or felt the assignments were unclear), most cited issues involving the balance between work-family-life and school.

The results of the PACE student survey were similar. Of the 329 students invited to complete the survey, 101 (30.7 percent) did. Respondents were primarily female (61.9 percent), married (64 percent), and employed full time (83 percent). Most (75 percent) supported dependents. Ages ranged from nineteen to sixty-one with thirty-nine as the median. Nearly 40 percent of them were seniors, and there was a nearly even distribution of freshmen, sophomores, and juniors. All but seven respondents lived within thirty miles of the campus they attended.

PACE students expressed even more satisfaction with NKU and their program than online students. A total of twenty-seven students (27.3 percent) described themselves as “somewhat satisfied,” and fifty-nine students (59.6 percent) described themselves as “very satisfied” with their PACE courses. Only one student described himself/herself as “very dissatisfied” with PACE.

As with the survey of students taking online courses, the PACE survey asked students if they had ever withdrawn from a PACE course, and twenty-one (20.8 percent) had. As with online students, several noted the conflict between work-life issues and their ability to complete their courses. Several of them specifically identified the intensive nature of the eight-week sessions as a challenge that forced them to withdraw from one or more class.

In open-ended questions, PACE students identified what they liked “best” and “least” about PACE. Major themes regarding the “best” features of the program included the convenience, flexibility, and compressed nature of the academic calendar. Students also liked the fact that classes were all housed in one building. Their least-favorite features largely dealt with tuition and fees. PACE classes include a tuition surcharge, and many students expressed dissatisfaction about paying more for the program. More of them complained about paying for parking.

Some students articulated concerns about the volume of work and/or the relevance of some assignments to their professional careers. Students particularly noted courses that were not adapted into the intensive format but rather appeared to be eight-week versions of courses developed for the traditional 16-week semester. Specific comments included (listed verbatim):

- Instructors whose curriculum is not adapted to the eight-week format. I get the feeling that a lot of instructors walk into class just thinking that they are going to shove sixteen weeks of material into eight.
- It seems like they try to take a sixteen-week course and cram it into eight weeks. Maybe it would be better if they tailored the class to an eight-week course.
- Some professors don’t take into account that we have seven to eight classes instead of sixteen. They forget we have full time jobs and even children.
- The amount of assignments in some classes has been overwhelming. It is more than challenging to work full time and try to take the eight-week classes. Often there is so much to do, I feel like I am not really learning.
- The amount of work that is given by the teachers. I understand that the courses are supposed to cover what a sixteen-week course does, but I feel that the teachers need to take into consideration that it is adults who work full time and have family responsibilities in the classes.

Since inception of PACE in 2005, NKU has offered stipends to faculty to redevelop their sixteen-week courses into the eight-week format. A variety of professional workshops about the course redesign process and the emphasis on learning outcomes have been and continue to be presented. However, not all faculty members who teach in PACE have chosen to take advantage of these offerings, and students participating in this survey seemed able to identify courses that had not been redeveloped to reflect the intensive nature of the program.

NKU has learned a great deal through experiences with adult learner focused programs, such as Integrative Studies and Organizational Leadership, using a variety of delivery methods. In order to improve the adult learning experience and meet their expectations, NKU has expanded its flexible scheduling options and clarified the learning expectations in each course. A recent expansion of eight-week PACE program offerings that target the adult learner audience is now being offered completely online. History, for instance, stepped into this arena last year with an area of concentration offered via eight-week online courses. These courses were so popular that the department will offer a major in this format next year.

Of course, there has been some resistance to this condensed format. One objection is the online format itself, despite a recent meta-analysis and review published by the Department of Education (2010) suggesting that online learning is as good as or slightly more effective than traditional instruction in a classroom setting. However, there are very few history major programs offered online across the country perhaps reflecting the adult learners' desire to take courses that "are closely related to my life and work goals." Yet, the overwhelming demand for the history eight-week online courses offered over the last year suggests that students are interested in such a major.

The primary objection, however, centers on the *condensed* format. Faculty have argued that condensing a traditional face-to-face sixteen-week course down to an eight-week online format cannot offer students identical experiences. This is true. An eight-week online course will never provide an identical experience to a sixteen-week face-to-face course. But given the needs of adult learners outlined previously, coupled with our experience offering a variety of adult learner programs at NKU, providing an identical experience was NOT a desirable goal.

Convincing faculty that the department should offer adult learners a unique learning environment and experience, however, would not be an easy task. The important discussion was initiated by pointing to the many successful condensed summer face-to-face course offerings that nearly all of the faculty have offered from time to time. Moreover, professors have offered different sections of the same history course, and they have not delivered the same experience to both sections. Topics, required readings, and assignments regularly vary from course to course and section to section in the history department. Besides, the data speaks for itself. Student evaluations reveal no statistically significant differences related to delivery modes and duration of courses.

This underscores the central premise that with a focus on the student learning outcomes and requiring the same “deliverables” (graded student work), students will, in fact, leave the eight-week online courses with the same levels of knowledge and the same skills. When provided at the outset with a well-planned course in which all assignments, expectations, and assessment rubrics are clear and readily accessible, adult learners accomplish the work at their own pace often producing outstanding work. Working adults master the student learning outcomes without the repetition required of many younger less-focused students.

Conclusion

CUMU institutions are called to serve their regions in a number of ways. At our core, our greatest contribution is in the education of students who are prepared for life in our communities. In this paper, we’ve endeavored to highlight some of the challenges in taking up the call to serve nontraditional students. Doing so requires an ongoing process of balancing academic rigor with student access and convenience. This is a dynamic process that requires constant evaluation and recalibration. The skills needed to be successful will continue to evolve, the technology involved in “best practice” pedagogy will change, as will the source of life challenges faced by our students. Further, it will require the engagement and alignment of every aspect of our institutions—including administration, support services, faculty, and students—in the service of student access and success.

References

- Association of American Colleges and Universities. “Liberal Education and America’s Promise: Essential Learning Outcomes.” Accessed November 16, 2011. <http://www.aacu.org/leap/vision.cfm>.
- Carnevale, Anthony P., and Stephen J. Rose. 2011. *The Undereducated American*. Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce.
- Coalition of Urban and Metropolitan Universities. 2009. *21st Century Declaration of the Coalition of Urban and Metropolitan Universities*. CUMU.
- Corcoran, Kevin J., and Ellen B. Derwin. “It Doesn’t ‘Just Happen’: Institutional Alignment at Every Level Yields Optimal Online Learning.” Paper presented at Sloan-C International Conference on Online Learning, Orlando, FL, November 2011.
- Gilley, J. Wade, and Robert T. Hawkes. 1989. “Nontraditional Students: A Changing Student Body Redefines Community.” *Educational Record* 70 (3–4): 33–35.
- Hussar, William J., and Tabitha M. Bailey. 2011. *Projections of Education Statistics to 2020: Thirty-ninth Edition*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education.

Lumina Foundation. 2011. Accessed November 16, 2011.
http://www.luminafoundation.org/goal_2025.html.

Merisotis, Jamie. "The Difference Makers: Adult Students and Achieving Goal 2025." Keynote address at the annual meeting of the American Association for Adult and Continuing Education, Indianapolis, IN, November 2011.

MU in the Evening Program Committee. 2009. *Final Report and Recommendations*. Columbia, Missouri.

National Center for Education Statistics. 2002. "The Condition of Education: A Closer Look." Accessed November 16, 2011. <http://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/analysis/2002a-sa01.asp>.

Noel Levitz, Inc. 2006. "Adult Learner Inventory." Accessed November 27, 2011. <https://www.noellevitz.com/student-retention-solutions/satisfaction-priorities-assessments/adult-learner-inventory>.

Noel Levitz, Inc. 2008. "Attitudes of Incoming Adult Learners." In *2008 National Freshman Attitudes Report* (supplement). <https://www.noellevitz.com/NR/rdonlyres/81EE1CD1-4602-420B-B5EB-A96A3C0522B7/0/AdultAttitudes08.pdf>.

U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. 2002. *Nontraditional Undergraduates, NCES 2002–2012*. Susan Choy. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education.

Weller, Martin. 2002. *Delivering Learning on the Net: The Why, What, & How of Online Education*. NY: Routledge.

Author Information

Debra Meyers currently serves as assistant chair and graduate program director at Northern Kentucky University for the department of history and geography. She served as an administrator for the new general education program as well as director of integrative studies.

Victoria Berling is Executive Director of Educational Outreach at Northern Kentucky University. She has worked in the field of nontraditional education in a variety of positions since 1997.

Kevin J. Corcoran is a professor of psychological science at Northern Kentucky University. He has served as a department head (University of Cincinnati) and Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Northern Kentucky University.

Debra Meyers
Landrum Academic Center 4th floor
Northern Kentucky University
Highland Heights, Kentucky 41099
E-mail: meyersde@nku.edu
Telephone: 859-572-1482

Victoria Berling
270B Campbell Hall, Nunn Drive
Northern Kentucky University
Highland Heights, KY 41099
E-mail: berlingv1@nku.edu
Telephone: 859-392-2401

Kevin J. Corcoran
Department of Psychological Science
Northern Kentucky University
Highland Heights, KY 41099
E-mail: Corcorank1@nku.edu
Telephone: 859-572-7821