



# When the Exception Becomes the Norm: The Rise of Nontraditional Students in Higher Education

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## Introduction

Nontraditional students—students who are often older, not coming directly from high school, or have job and family responsibilities, etc.—now constitute the majority of college students. These students have significantly different needs from those of traditional students, but most institutions are still not built to support them.

At a time when higher education is facing significant challenges—rising tuition, stagnant enrollment, precarious funding, and a growing cynicism about its worth—it is crucial that more attention be paid to nontraditional students. Board members must recognize who these students are and how to attract, enroll, and retain them if they hope to help their institutions survive and thrive.

Most institutions of higher education (IHEs) face stagnant or declining enrollment. Concurrently, they are seeing increasing enrollment of nontraditional students. For over a decade, the majority of students at two- and four-year institutions have not been first-time, full-time students.<sup>1</sup> The growth of nontraditional students has been driven by several factors, including changes in the economy, employers requiring new skills, a desire for more or better career advancement, changes in personal status (e.g., marriage, divorce, children becoming school-age), more online and more flexible options, and new recruitment strategies by colleges and universities.

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Board members must develop a new way of thinking to best support their institutions and these learners. Typically, when administrators and board members think about how to serve students, they have in mind those 18–22-year-olds whose whole reality—living, eating, attending classes, and often working—is on campus. What is needed is a paradigm shift, in which higher-education leaders recognize that the goal is to serve *people*—often adults, living off-campus, taking care of families, and working—for whom education is not their sole focus.

Today’s college students are often older and have work experience as well as more outside-of-school responsibilities.<sup>2</sup> These students have a different set of needs and expectations from universities. Addressing those needs is primarily an issue of culture and institutional policy, not public policy. Starting from that premise, board members can begin to focus on whether their institution is poised to recognize the needs of this student population and survive into the future.

This brief uses the term “nontraditional student,” but it is important to note that, as this population has grown, advocacy organizations, researchers, and institutions have started to refer to this group with a variety of different terms, such as “today’s students,” “post-traditional students,” or “adult students.” This reflects the start of a necessary culture change, which recognizes that the “nontraditional” student is, in fact, now the norm rather than the exception.

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## Who Are Today’s Students?

Designing policies to support nontraditional students requires understanding who these students are. There is no universally accepted definition of nontraditional student; institutions, board members, policymakers, and faculty often have different definitions of this student population.

Nontraditional students are commonly defined (including by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) at the U.S. Department of Education)<sup>3</sup> by the following factors:

- Age over 24 years of age
- Delayed enrollment in higher education from high school
- Part-time attendance for at least a portion of the academic year
- Financial independence
- Level of employment
- Family obligations
- Off-campus residence
- Pursuit of nondegree programs and certifications

In 2023, Higher Learning Advocates (HLA)—an organization that was focused on nontraditional students, or in their terminology, “today’s students”—provided significant information about this student population in an analysis of the National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS).<sup>4</sup> According to their work:<sup>5</sup> More than half of all students are first-generation students;<sup>6</sup> 42% identify as a race other than white<sup>7</sup>; and 3 out of 10 have a primary language other than English.



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Additionally, HLA noted that 2 out of 10 have some type of disability,<sup>8</sup> 34% are 25 or older, and 18% have dependent children. Nearly 80% of students work and 30% of them work full time. 44% are financially independent from their parents.

The Postsecondary National Policy Institute (PNPI), the premier professional development provider for congressional staff working on postsecondary issues, developed a fact sheet about nontraditional students,<sup>9</sup> whom it calls “post-traditional students.” It describes how they access higher education, what services they use, and their outcomes. According to its analysis, nontraditional students are more likely to attend public institutions than private ones and are overrepresented in the for-profit sector. These students are less likely to earn a bachelor’s degree after six years but more likely to earn an associate’s degree than their traditional peers. A much higher percentage of post-traditional students do not receive any type of certification after six years (61.6%), compared with traditional students (41.5%).<sup>10</sup>

Another robust source of information about nontraditional students is the Trellis Student Financial Wellness Survey (SFWS).<sup>11</sup> The most recent survey found that “almost half (45 percent) of working students attending 2-year institutions considered themselves to be ‘workers attending school’ rather than ‘students who work.’” In addition, “parenting students and working students typically have significant time obligations that can reduce the amount of time available for classes and studying. Twenty-three percent of parenting students said they had missed at least one day of class due to lack of childcare, and 25 percent of working students had missed at least one day of class due to conflicts with their job.”<sup>12</sup>

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## Why Do Institutions Need Nontraditional Students?

At most IHEs, maintaining enrollment is an ongoing challenge that is expected to worsen over time. The postsecondary student population is expected to shrink for the foreseeable future. With minor fluctuations, the birthrate in the U.S. has been declining since 2015.<sup>13</sup> Although the population is growing in the South and the West,<sup>14</sup> the affinity for attending college in those regions is lower than it is in the Northeast. As Nathan Grawe of *Econofact* explains, regional institutions—schools ranked outside the top 100—are expected to see the greatest losses in traditional-age students,<sup>15</sup> with two-year regional schools expected to lose 12% of traditional-age enrollments and four-year schools expected to lose 11%. Furthermore, according to Grawe, “because these schools rely heavily on local residents for student pools, losses will be concentrated in the northeastern portion of the country.” Ivy League and other highly selective universities are expected to maintain enrollments or possibly see slight increases.<sup>16</sup>

During the pandemic, enrollments changed in unexpected ways. In previous economic downturns, IHEs saw enrollment increases as unemployed individuals sought education to improve their economic prospects. But during the pandemic, enrollment declined, recovering only in 2023.<sup>17</sup>

Despite the stabilization, or even slight improvement, in enrollment in the last year, higher education still faces an enrollment cliff. As Jon Boeckstedt notes in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*:

The basis of most of our foresight comes from federal data and from data produced by the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education. Both data sets generally show the same thing: The number of public high-school graduates is expected to



peak in about 2025 or 2026 and then fall off. The commission says 3.5 million in 2025; federal data say 3.4 million in 2026. Then, both data sets agree, we'll see a steady decline as far out as the projections go.<sup>18</sup>

Although there has been an increase in the number of nontraditional students, most nontraditional students drop out of college before earning a degree or credential, which affects an institution's enrollment and revenue numbers. According to the National Student Clearinghouse, the "Some College, No Credential" (SCNC) population, is quite large, comprising "41.9 million students, 36.8 million of whom are between the ages of 18 and 64."<sup>19</sup>

SCNC students and those who have never attempted any postsecondary education are growing more skeptical about the value of a college degree. A recent survey conducted by HCM Strategists and EDGE Research found that many non-enrolled 18–30-year-olds thought that college was too expensive and not worth the money that it costs to attend. While 77% of this population finds on-the-job training an excellent or good value, only 57% find a four-year college degree an excellent or good value. Although these respondents saw college as a possible means to a better job and economic success, they wanted more clear-cut guarantees from higher education.<sup>20</sup> If a college cannot guarantee these outcomes, they don't believe that it is worth the money *and the time* it takes to earn a degree.

According to a recently released study from Gallup and the Lumina Foundation, confidence in higher education has been dropping for the past two decades, "across all demographics—including gender, age, political affiliation."<sup>21</sup> Those who lack confidence today are primarily concerned about schools "pushing political agendas, not teaching relevant skills, and being overly expensive."<sup>22</sup> Similarly, in a recent survey from the Pew Research Center, nearly half of respondents did not believe that a college degree is as important as it was 20 years ago. This is largely due to improving economic circumstances for those without degrees and the rising tuition costs and debt incurred to earn a degree.<sup>23</sup>

If an institution is going to survive, it must actively and aggressively recruit a wide variety of students. As noted above, nontraditional students are becoming an ever larger—and now majority—portion of the student population. Administrators and board members need to attract and retain more students who do not fit the traditional mold of higher education by providing an educational product that meets the needs of this changing student population.

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## What Do Nontraditional Students Need?

Institutions of all types (four-year, two-year, public, and private) are already filled with nontraditional students. These institutions risk losing these students if they are treated like typical 18–24-year-old residential students. All institutions (save perhaps for the most highly selective institutions) could benefit from pursuing a variety of strategies, alongside the traditional educational model, to support these students.

Board members should regularly explore issues surrounding nontraditional students with their administrators. They must also stay informed about the trends, challenges, and needs of this growing portion of their student body. This understanding will enable them to guide their institutions in addressing these changes. The most important areas to consider are financial aid and debt relief, flexibility, directed supports, support for working students, recognition of previous education or work skills, and connection to services.



**Financial aid and debt relief:** Financial aid and debt relief are undoubtedly essential needs for most nontraditional students. Because nontraditional students are often independent of their parents or have lower income, finding ways to fund their education is vital. All students, especially nontraditional students, should be encouraged to fill out the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), which is used for a variety of financial aid purposes. In addition to determining students' eligibility for the federal Pell Grant and subsidized student loan programs, FAFSA is used to secure unsubsidized loans and to provide funding through the Federal Work Study program, as well as from state- and institutional-level aid programs. The information can also be used to help students identify other types of assistance for which they might be eligible.

HCM and EDGE's research shows that potential students recognize that they may have to take on debt to finance their education. They are willing to do so if they have a reasonable guarantee of success in college, which is more likely if programs are closely aligned with regional economic needs, if students are given assistance in determining which courses to pursue (so as not to waste time), and if shorter-duration programs are offered.

Debt relief is another key issue for this population. Given the political environment, broad-scale federal debt relief is unlikely, so board members should be exploring issues of affordability with their administrations. Smaller or shorter-term credentials are more affordable; local businesses may form partnerships with institutions that cover all, or a portion, of the tuition for their employees; or institutions may offer scholarships or other types of arrangements, such as income-share agreements to potential students.

**Flexibility:** Many nontraditional students are looking for educational options that will improve their earnings potential while allowing them the flexibility to fit learning into their already-busy lives. This is why these students are more likely to enroll in community colleges and for-profit programs, where programs are typically shorter and more flexible.

Four-year institutions that offer this sort of flexibility and support, such as Arizona State University and Southern New Hampshire University,<sup>24</sup> have seen massive growth in enrollment from nontraditional students due to this flexibility.

Nontraditional students want educational opportunities to fit into their lives, not vice versa. They need classes scheduled around their work and family obligations. They need easy-to-access courses—on public transportation routes, in various locations around town, or online (which is particularly attractive for these students).<sup>25</sup> They need free or cheap parking. Faculty office hours and other opportunities for engagement should be scheduled on nights and weekends.

Stackable credentials—a series of credentials that can stand alone or be “stacked” to equal a degree—is a growing trend at colleges across the country. By implementing stackable credential programs, colleges can support nontraditional students who need more flexibility and can reap benefits for the institutions themselves. According to RAND, stackable credentials have helped students increase their income, and a growing number of these students are returning to school to stack additional credentials and earn degrees.<sup>26</sup>

### **Arizona State University**

Arizona State University (ASU) grew its student population in a few key ways. The Board of Regents limited the physical campuses to three but allowed the online student population to grow significantly (it is now more than 30,000). The institution sought specific partnerships, the most well-known of which is the partnership with Starbucks. Starbucks employees are offered free online bachelor's degrees. ASU makes itself relevant by providing an online tool that matches students' interests with potential careers.



**Directed supports:** After debt relief, the best way to help potential nontraditional students—defined here as 18–30-year-olds with some or no postsecondary education—is to provide them with access to experts to help navigate the college experience. These students would greatly benefit from expert advice on how to choose the right classes, what steps to take to graduate on time, how

### **Southern New Hampshire University**

At Southern New Hampshire University (SNHU), leadership recognized that they had two types of students: those who wanted the traditional experience; and adults who were looking to improve their quality of life. The latter needed information about financial aid and credit transfers in real time, which required a fundamental reorientation of how the institution operates. SNHU invested heavily in technology and hired much of its senior leadership from outside academia, with several coming from the technology and customer-service sectors. All online students are assigned a personal advisor who stays with them throughout their time at the institution. The institution began focusing on customer service that was responsive in minutes, not days or weeks, and is exploring what tasks can be completed by artificial intelligence.

to figure out which career paths are most aligned with their skills and interests, and how to best pursue that career after graduation.<sup>27</sup>

Nontraditional students are often isolated from the campus community. Because many have family and work obligations, they are often not able to engage with their classmates in the same ways as traditional students. They are less likely to receive information—and to have important information reinforced—in dorms, food halls, or student centers and study labs. Finding ways to engage these students where they are (through employers or other community organizations) is important to

communicating effectively with them and making them feel an important part of the college community.

**Support for working students:** Research shows that students who work part-time (no more than 20 hours a week) have better academic outcomes than students who work more than 20 hours a week.<sup>28</sup> However, most nontraditional students must work more 20 hours, so it is incumbent on institutions to find ways to “minimize the harm and maximize the benefits” of working by making on-campus and career-connected work available.<sup>29</sup> To address the needs of these students, institutions can partner with employers to develop coursework and degree paths that have clearly identified skills needed for professional success and that provide students with opportunities through internships or work-study to demonstrate the skills they are learning in a real-life work setting.

**Recognition of previous education or work skills:** Prospective nontraditional students seek faster ways to earn degrees. They are also looking for a clear through-line from education to a better-paying job. Institutions can accomplish this while still giving students a quality degree by offering prior learning assessments or competency-based education.

Prior learning assessment (PLA) is a tool designed to allow institutions to assess and give students credit for skills and learning that students may have developed prior to starting their current program. A recent landscape study by the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education looked at students who received prior learning credit and those who did not at 72 institutions. They found “strong evidence that receiving credit for prior learning improves student outcomes including higher completion rates (receiving PLA credit increased the likelihood of an adult student’s completion by more than 17 percent) and shorter time to degree (adult students saved on average 9–14 months of time).”<sup>30</sup>



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When assessing prior learning, it is important to ensure that educational quality is not sacrificed. After decades of research, the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) developed a set of standards for high-quality PLA systems. These standards “align with institutional accreditors’ standards and policy guidance, particularly with respect to: requiring documentation/evidence of learning in order to award credit, involving faculty in the process, and providing transparency.”<sup>31</sup>

A separate concept, often paired with PLA, is competency-based education (CBE), which awards credit to students based on evidence of skills they have developed, rather than based on how much time a student spends in a particular course. CBE often aligns skills directly with urgent industry needs. Institutions like Western Governors University have seen success with this approach, which helps address student concerns about relevancy and the time needed to earn a degree. The nationwide Competency-Based Education Network (C-BEN) has been working for several years on developing effective, high-quality competency-based approaches.<sup>32</sup> Although this area may seem daunting for board members and administrators to explore, the REL Midwest Career Readiness Research Alliance, funded by the U.S. Department of Education’s Institute of Education Sciences, provides a useful starting point for institutions interested in exploring CBE on their campuses.<sup>33</sup>

### **Western Governors University**

As an institution that provides a CBE experience, Western Governors University credits this approach with its success. WGU measures that impact in a variety of ways: looking at the number of students and graduates; student surveys (both NSSE and through a partnership with Gallup); and by surveying employers about the skill level of their graduates. According to its data, it currently serves 175,983 students in 50 states, 96% of students say that they would choose WGU again, and students report an average increase of \$22,000 in income after attending.

**Connection to services:** Because nontraditional students have other priorities, they often need access to services that are different from those of direct-from-high-school students. For example, according to the HLA analysis cited above, nontraditional students who are single mothers are more likely to need access to means-tested benefits such as SNAP and WIC. The Center on Education and the Workforce at Georgetown University recommends that institutions coordinate with local employers to provide working students with “convenient learning options; child care; affordable transportation options; employment partnership agreements; access to healthcare insurance; paid sick, maternity, and paternity leave; financial literacy and wealth building information and retirement and investment options; and tuition assistance.”<sup>34</sup> Board members should have a clear understanding not only of whether their institutions are providing these types of services but also of how well utilized they are; evidence shows that, even when students have access to such things as food pantries or mental-health services, many students who might need them do not take advantage of them at the levels that one would expect.<sup>35</sup>



## Recommendations and Resources for Board Members

As board members engage with their administrations regarding these students, several recommendations and resources should be considered.

**Data, data, data:** Board members should ask several questions about their nontraditional populations and, importantly, how the institution monitors this population. To design effective strategies for increasing and supporting nontraditional students, it is essential to have clear, actionable data about them.

- Board members should ask their administration about the student population at their IHE or system. How many nontraditional students are served? What characteristics are counted as nontraditional? How are nontraditional students defined on campus?
- After board members understand who is actually on their campus (and whom their institutions are trying to enroll), it is important to understand how their institutions think about these students. What do we call these students? Nontraditional or something else (e.g., post-traditional, adult students)? It is valuable to break them into further categories (e.g., student parents, part-time students, working students) because the support needed will vary by characteristic.
- Board members should ask about which supports are already offered by the institution to nontraditional students. E.g., what is the school already doing in terms of alternative credentials, off-site courses, child care, counseling, and night and weekend courses?
- What type of data is the institution or system collecting? And are the data disaggregated by whatever characteristics the institution uses to define “nontraditional”? What data-collection instruments are used? How does the nontraditional population compare with that in national or state trends?

In addition to data from individual campuses or systems, there are several excellent sources of data and research for board members to learn about nontraditional students and how their institutions can better support them.

- National Center for Education Statistics (NCES)<sup>36</sup> is the primary education statistical agency in the federal government and is housed within the U.S. Department of Education. It provides regular reporting on the condition of education in the U.S. to Congress and to the public, including in its report “Postsecondary Outcomes for Nontraditional and Traditional Undergraduate Students.”
- The National Student Clearinghouse (NSC)<sup>37</sup> is the best nongovernmental source of education and workforce data in the United States. It includes data from more than 3,500 colleges and universities and more than 21,000 high schools; it covers 97% of postsecondary students enrolled in public and private institutions and 74% of secondary students. Board members may access these data through their institutions if they are members of NSC. NSC publishes several reports for public use, including national and state enrollment trends, persistence and retention trends, and data about students with some college and no degree.



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- The Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce (CEW)<sup>38</sup> operates out of Georgetown's McCourt School of Public Policy and is widely regarded as one of the best national sources of research and analysis of education and workforce data.
- Postsecondary National Policy Institute (PNPI)<sup>39</sup> is the leading professional development provider for congressional staff working on postsecondary issues. It produces nonpartisan, data-driven reports and fact sheets on various issues, such as its report "Post-Traditional Students in Higher Education."
- Trellis Strategies<sup>40</sup> is an outgrowth of the Trellis Company, a Texas-based student-loan guarantor. It is a nonprofit agency with a research and consulting arm that has built massive data resources that help inform institutions' strategic enrollment and student support efforts.
- RAND's commentary, "How to Build Stackable Credentials,"<sup>41</sup> offers concrete steps that colleges (and states) can take to build stackable credentials. It points to several pieces of research that the organization has published about this issue.
- Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) has developed significant resources for boards and institutions looking to improve learning for adult students, including its "Mini Toolkit," which offers an excellent starting point for developing a robust, high-quality prior-learning program.<sup>42</sup>
- Today's Students Coalition,<sup>43</sup> formerly Higher Learning Advocates, is a leading advocacy organization focused on the needs of nontraditional students or, in its terms, "today's students."

**Marketing, enrollment, and engagement strategies:** To maintain and grow their enrollments, institutions need to enroll nontraditional students and retain them, once they are enrolled. Board members should understand how their institutions are reaching out to specific populations with differentiated strategies and implementing retention strategies designed for this student population.

Board members should ask about the recruitment and enrollment strategies that are in place to attract non-first-time, non-full-time students. According to the HCM and EDGE survey, potential nontraditional students receive information differently from the way that high schoolers on the direct-to-college path do. The latter group is at the "epicenter of higher education information, with school counselors (47%), their parents (44%), college websites (37%), and teachers (34%) as the top information channels." Non-enrollees, by contrast, "are no longer the target of higher education communications. Their primary sources of information are Google searches (39%), college websites (34%), social media (29%), and their peers (23%)." <sup>44</sup> Colleges and universities must design better communications strategies to market to this pool of potential students if they hope to attract these learners.

Nontraditional students require different retention strategies. Even within nontraditional populations, different students face different needs (first-generation vs. working students vs. parenting students). A new report from NSC shows that older students' persistence rates lag significantly behind those of younger students: "Younger entering students continue to persist and be retained at much higher rates than older starters. The persistence rate among fall 2022 starters 20 years or younger was 80.9 percent and the retention rate was 71.9 percent. In comparison the retention and persistence rates for students 21 through 24 and 25 and older did not exceed 50 percent." <sup>45</sup> Again, it is vital for board members to ask for data on this issue: What is our overall retention rate, and what is our retention rate of nontraditional students? Which nontraditional students are we losing? Are they leaving with debt? Have they at least earned a certificate? Are they withdrawing to go to work or to a different institution? Why did they leave?



The *Chronicle of Higher Education*'s "The Adult Student Guide" provides several strategies for institutions to encourage and support adult students, who constitute a significant portion of the nontraditional student population. This guide was developed in connection with a report based on interviews of more than 100 college leaders, researchers, policymakers, faculty, and students. It is an excellent resource for board members beginning to dive into the issue of nontraditional students, including a checklist on how to be "adult student-friendly." The guide provides suggestions on marketing, high-impact practices to engage adult students, career services for adult students (who are very focused on the practical outcome of their education), building networks with local employers, and building a welcoming campus environment.

Board members should ask whether their institutions use data from FAFSA and other sources to help nontraditional students identify their eligibility for federal means-tested benefits such as SNAP, subsidized health insurance, and broadband assistance. A GAO analysis of Department of Education data shows that almost 2 million at-risk students who are potentially eligible for SNAP did not report receiving benefits in 2016.<sup>46</sup> A survey conducted by HLA and the National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators indicates that "just over 25% of respondents are currently conducting direct outreach to students about any federal benefit programs with or without using FAFSA data, an additional 18% have plans to conduct outreach, but 43% do not and have no plans of doing so."<sup>47</sup> Connecting nontraditional students to these programs can help keep them from dropping out because of off-campus pressures.

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## Conclusion

The nontraditional student population is vital to the ongoing success of IHEs across the country. These students now represent a majority of the postsecondary students nationally. Indeed, given the coming enrollment cliff, schools will have to further increase enrollment of nontraditional students in order to survive and thrive.

In order to attract, retain, and ultimately graduate these students, institutions must understand who are the nontraditional students on their individual campuses and must identify their unique needs. Board members must engage with their administrations to understand how these students are viewed, what barriers exist for these students, and what plans are in place to dismantle those barriers on their campuses.



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## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), “Measuring ‘Traditional’ and ‘Nontraditional’ Student Success in IPEDS: Data Insights from the IPEDS Outcome Measures (OM) Survey Component,” *NCES Blog*, May 12, 2022.
- <sup>2</sup> Calculating the number of nontraditional students is challenging because of the variety of definitions used. Some estimates place the nontraditional population as high as 70% of all students. See, e.g., Lauren Remenick, “Services and Support for Nontraditional Students in Higher Education: A Historical Literature Review,” *Journal of Adult and Continuing Education* 25, no. 1 (May 2019).
- <sup>3</sup> See Laura J. Horn and C. Dennis Carroll, “Nontraditional Undergraduates,” NCES, November 1996.
- <sup>4</sup> NPSAS is funded by Congress and conducted by NCES. It is one of the most important surveys of students used widely by researchers and policymakers.
- <sup>5</sup> Julie Peller, “Today’s Students: A Fresh Look with New Data,” *United for Today’s Students*, Dec. 15, 2023.
- <sup>6</sup> Note that this number of first-generation students has been basically stable for many years. See Dick Startz, “First-Generation College Students Face Unique Challenges,” Brookings Institution, Apr. 25, 2022: “The first fact is that neither college-entering rates nor college-graduating rates for first-gen students have changed much in recent years... But note that they decreased drastically in the ‘90s—partially due to the increased bachelor’s attainment rate in the U.S. in the ‘60s and ‘70s—leading to more college-goers having at least one college-educated parent.”
- <sup>7</sup> America’s nonwhite population overall is similar to this higher education nonwhite population.
- <sup>8</sup> As noted, all of these data are based on NPSAS, which is self-reported. See also NCES, “Fast Facts: Students with Disabilities”: “In 2019–20, some 21 percent of undergraduates and 11 percent of postbaccalaureate students reported having a disability, defined as those who reported having deafness or serious difficulty hearing; blindness or serious difficulty seeing; serious difficulty concentrating, remembering, or making decisions because of a physical, mental, or emotional condition; or serious difficulty walking or climbing stairs.”
- <sup>9</sup> Postsecondary National Policy Institute (PNPI), “Post-Traditional Students in Higher Education,” updated March 2023.
- <sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>11</sup> The Student Financial Wellness Survey (SFWS) is a self-reported, nationwide, online survey documenting postsecondary students’ financial well-being and success indicators. Trellis Strategies designed and implemented SFWS starting in 2018. Since then, 3.1 million students have been surveyed at 263 institutions in 34 states.
- <sup>12</sup> Carla Fletcher, Allyson Cornett, and Bryan Ashton, “Student Financial Wellness Survey Report: Fall 2023,” Trellis Strategies, May 2024.



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- 13 Brady E. Hamilton, Joyce A. Martin, and Michelle J. K. Osterman, “Births: Provisional Data for 2023,” *Vital Statistics Rapid Release* no. 35 (April 2024).
- 14 U.S. Census Bureau, “United States Population Growth by Region.”
- 15 Nathan Grawe, “Demographic Changes Pose Challenges for Higher Education,” *Econofact*, July 29, 2018.
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 Undergraduate enrollment grew 2.5% (+359,000) in spring 2024, marking the second consecutive semester of enrollment growth following years of decline during the pandemic. Gains occurred across all major sector groups, but the majority (55.7%) of this increase is due to community college growth (+200,000, +4.7% over spring 2023). See National Student Clearinghouse (NSC), “Current Term Enrollment Estimates.”
- 18 Jon Boeckenstedt, “Will Your College Survive the Demographic Cliff?” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Mar. 22, 2024.
- 19 NSC Research Center, “Some College, No Credential: A 2024 Snapshot for the Nation and the States,” June 2024.
- 20 HCM Strategists and EDGE Research, “Continuing to Explore the Exodus from Higher Education,” March 2024.
- 21 Jocelyn Gecker, “Is College Worth It? Poll Finds Only 36% of Americans Have Confidence in Higher Education,” Associated Press, July 8, 2024.
- 22 Jeffrey M. Jones, “U.S. Confidence in Higher Education Now Closely Divided,” Gallup, July 8, 2024.
- 23 Richard Fry, Dana Braga, and Kim Parker, “Is College Worth It? As Economic Outcomes for Young Adults with and Without Degrees Have Improved, Americans Hold Mixed Views on the Value of College,” Pew Research Center, May 23, 2024.
- 24 See Arizona State University, “ASU enrollment in the 21st Century”; Wikipedia, “Southern New Hampshire University.”
- 25 NCES, *Digest of Education Statistics 2022*, table 311.22: “Number and Percentage of Undergraduate Students Enrolled in Distance Education or Online Classes and Degree Programs, by Selected Characteristics: Selected Academic Years, 2003–04 Through 2019–20.”
- 26 Lindsay Daugherty et al., “How to Build Stackable Credentials,” RAND, Oct. 6, 2023.
- 27 HCM Strategists and EDGE Research, “Continuing to Explore the Exodus from Higher Education.”
- 28 Laura Perna and Taylor K. Odle, “Recognizing the Reality of Working College Students,” *Academe* 106, no. 1 (Winter 2020).
- 29 Ibid.
- 30 Patrick Lane and Sarah Leibrandt, “Recognizing Prior Learning in the 21st Century,” Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education, 2021.



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- <sup>31</sup> Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL), “CAEL’s Ten Quality Standards for Assessing Prior Learning” September 2023.
- <sup>32</sup> See Competency-Based Education Network, “About C-BEN.”
- <sup>33</sup> Institute of Education Sciences and REL Midwest Career Readiness Research Alliance, “Getting Started with Competency-Based Education.”
- <sup>34</sup> Anthony P. Carnevale et al., “Learning While Earning: The New Normal,” Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce (CEW), Oct. 28, 2015.
- <sup>35</sup> Fletcher, Cornett, and Ashton, “Student Financial Wellness Survey Report: Fall 2023.”
- <sup>36</sup> See NCES.
- <sup>37</sup> See NSC.
- <sup>38</sup> See CEW.
- <sup>39</sup> See PNPI.
- <sup>40</sup> See Trellis Strategies.
- <sup>41</sup> Daugherty et al., “How to Build Stackable Credentials.”
- <sup>42</sup> CAEL, “CAEL’s Ten Quality Standards for Assessing Prior Learning.”
- <sup>43</sup> See Today’s Students Coalition.
- <sup>44</sup> HCM Strategists and EDGE Research, “Continuing to Explore the Exodus from Higher Education.”
- <sup>45</sup> NSC Research Center, “Persistence and Retention: Fall 2022 Beginning Postsecondary Student Cohort,” June 27, 2024.
- <sup>46</sup> U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO), “Food Insecurity: Better Information Could Help Eligible College Students Access Federal Food Assistance Benefits,” GAO-19-95, December 2018.
- <sup>47</sup> Amy Ellen Duke-Benfield and Jill Desjean, “The Numbers Speak for Themselves: Using FAFSA Data to Secure Today’s Students’ Basic Needs,” HLA, Jan. 25, 2024.