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Search Periodicals

Search

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

### [Overview](#)

[From the Editor: The Equity Imperative in Higher Education](#)

[The Time Is Now: Committing to Equity and Inclusive Excellence](#)

[Five Principles for Enacting Equity by Design](#)

[The Power of Intentionality: Cal State Fullerton's Strategic Approach to Ensuring Equity](#)

[Marginalized Majority: Nontraditional Students and the Equity Imperative](#)

[A Framework for Understanding Latino/a Cultural Wealth](#)

[Faculty Development for Educational Equity](#)

[Creating a Welcoming Environment for Veterans in Higher Education](#)

[Traversing Divides: Service Learning in the Writing Center](#)

[Transforming Remediation: An Essential Part of Campus Equity Efforts](#)

[Developing an Intersectional Framework for Racially Inclusive LGBTQ Programming](#)

# Marginalized Majority: Nontraditional Students and the Equity Imperative

By: David Scobey

*What we need is an undergraduate program that gives us the tools and the space to connect our studies, work lives, aspirations, communities, and public values, a program that provides us with emotional support, assistance in academic navigation, healthier relationships between the student body and the administration, and builds student community.*

—Garnetta Gonzalez

For more than a century and a half, the struggle for equity has been central to the history of US higher education. Its leaders have asserted the importance—and the social benefit—of making the academy more inclusive, focusing especially on the imperative to admit those from marginalized groups into the power, privileges, and pleasures of academic life. The founding of women's and coeducational colleges, the proliferation of public universities and community colleges, the growth of minority-serving institutions and of affirmative-action policies in majority institutions—these are all milestones in that struggle. Its success has been both remarkable and radically incomplete.

All the more fitting, then, that the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) has focused in its centennial year on the imperative for equity in higher education. At a time of global integration, economic restructuring, educational turmoil, and civic exhaustion, nothing could be more urgent. As argued in the AAC&U publication *America's Unmet Promise* (Witham et al. 2015), the growth of ethnic, racial, and socioeconomic inequality—occurring just as nonwhite, nonaffluent youth are emerging as the majority of high school graduates—compels us to expand access not merely to college credentials, but to great, engaged, transformative learning.

For just the same reasons, and with the same sense of urgency, I want to argue that our vision of equity needs to expand as well: to engage another group of students whose lives and needs too often go unrecognized. Indeed, being unrecognized is at the heart of their struggle. I'm referring to nontraditional college students.

### The Nontraditional Majority

Census and survey data make it clear: nontraditional undergraduates have since the 1990s constituted the majority of American college students. Half of US undergraduates are financially independent of their parental households (NCES 2015, 6). Some two-fifths are older than twenty-four (NCES 2013). A majority of college students are employed at least twenty hours a week, and more than a third work full time (Baum 2010, 5). Nearly half are enrolled part time. Indeed,

demographers estimate that only some 26 percent of college students fit the conventional profile of a recent high school graduate who is financially dependent and enrolled full time in a two- or four-year institution. That is almost exactly the same proportion as undergraduates who are parents (NCES 2015, 6).

As such data suggest, “nontraditional” is an omnibus label that blends a range of different markers: age, employment, educational status, family responsibilities.<sup>1</sup> More importantly, it comprises an extraordinary diversity of personal stories and educational pathways. The Iraq War veteran, the displaced factory worker, the former prisoner, the office administrator who needs her degree to break a glass ceiling, the thirty-something parent with a part-time job, the twenty-three-year-old food server who was unready for the pressures and freedoms of college at age eighteen—such students do not share some core experience or unitary identity. They come to college with widely divergent levels of preparation. What they do tend to share, and what differentiates them from the diversity of traditional college students, is the challenge of fitting their studies within a complex ecology of family responsibilities, community roles, and employment and economic pressures.

To be sure, most traditional undergraduates also work for pay, and their families face enormous fiscal pressure to pay for college (Baum 2010, 5; Perna 2010). These stressors are especially corrosive for nonwhite and nonaffluent students, which is why changes in academic policy and institutional culture that nurture their full inclusion are so essential to the equity agenda. Yet in the main, traditional undergraduates of all classes and ethno-racial backgrounds organize their social life, their financial calculus, and their paid employment around a central role as students. For nontraditional students, that ecology is reversed: they must sustain their education in the face of a nexus of job, income, family, community, and (therefore) spatial and temporal constraints. They do so with the added emotional burden, shared almost universally across their differences, of having failed to follow the normative script of high-school-to-college that defines American notions of success. And they do so in an academy still largely designed for others. They are marginalized and often invisible.

So it should come as no surprise that they are much less likely to persist in and complete their studies. We are rightly concerned about the achievement gap for underserved traditional students, about their unequal access to high-impact practices that support success. The achievement gap for nontraditional students is equally if not more discouraging. One study found that baccalaureate students with at least two nontraditional demographic markers had a 15 percent graduation rate over six years—in contrast to 57 percent for traditional undergraduates (Kazis et al. 2007, 9). Facing job, family, housing, health care, transportation, or debt pressures, they run a high risk of falling behind academically, missing tuition payments, or stopping out. Any missed bus, child’s illness, or change in work schedule can precipitate a crisis (Matus-Grossman and Gooden 2002). And although much evidence shows that nontraditional students benefit from high-impact practices (CCCSE 2014), these generally require commitments of continuity and time that are difficult for them to sustain.

### **Expanding Equity**

All of which is reason enough to foreground these students in our national equity agenda. But there is more. For in recent years, educational and thought leaders have begun to focus on the nontraditional majority for quite different reasons. To tuition-driven institutions, they offer an untapped market. To employers and policymakers focused on workforce training, they represent a labor pool with which to close the “skills gap” in a dynamic economy (Kazis et al. 2007). And to national policymakers and funders, rightly concerned with languishing US graduation rates, nontraditional undergraduates are crucial to the completion agenda. To be sure, some completion advocates focus as much on the empowerment of nontraditional students as on metrics of degree attainment (Lumina Foundation 2013, 3–5). Yet others too often advance an overly instrumental understanding of these students’ needs and aspirations and an overly instrumental policy of placing them in narrow, accelerated programs (CCA 2011). Rarely do such initiatives emphasize the ethical and civic imperative of providing full participation and great learning for all.

What would it look like, then, to make equity and inclusive excellence core values in designing college opportunities for nontraditional students? Or conversely, what would the equity agenda look like if it foregrounded a focus on the nontraditional majority?

To a great extent, such an agenda would advance the values, strategies, and practices (grounded especially in a commitment to racial and class inclusion) that already characterize our equity work. This is not surprising: there is, after all, a higher proportion of students of color and working-class students among the nontraditional majority than among undergraduates as a whole (NCES 2015). As the AAC&U guide *Committing to Equity and Inclusive Excellence* details, many of the same questions and benchmarks that measure full participation for underserved but traditional undergraduates offer a roadmap for the support of nontraditional students (AAC&U 2015). And many practices that have enhanced the success of nonwhite and working-class “traditionals”—strong cohort communities, for instance, or project-based “signature work” (Finley and McNair 2013)—are also hallmarks of exemplary programs for nontraditional learners such as College Unbound and the Tacoma Program of The Evergreen State College.

AAC&U’s framing of inclusive excellence, in short, provides a rich starting point for an equity agenda for the nontraditional majority; indeed it is heartening that current AAC&U projects point toward a growing attention on such students.<sup>2</sup> Yet much remains to be done. For members of this new majority have their own distinctive needs, constraints, and assets. The social complexity of their lives and the emotional complexity that so often attends their return to school set them apart from traditional undergraduates of all classes and races. Thus some practices that build inclusive excellence for underrepresented traditional students (such as identity-based cocurricular programs on residential campuses) will not be effective for them. Other practices may be effective but insufficient by themselves: alongside strong mentoring and advising, for instance, nontraditional students need supports like on-campus childcare, transportation aid, and alternative scheduling of classes and office hours (Matus-Grossman and Gooden 2002). And still other high-impact practices will be effective only if they are recast with the lives and needs of nontraditional students in mind. Rather than being placed in internships and community

partnerships, for example, many will need experiential learning grounded in their existing work and community settings.

The rise of the nontraditional majority calls us both to build on and to revise our notions of inclusive excellence. Indeed “inclusion”—a value forged in the struggle to open the gates of the traditional academy to underrepresented groups—may not be the fullest way to name the equity needs of such students. In the most literal sense, they are included: already present but often invisible in public universities, already visible but often underresourced in community colleges, foregrounded but exploited in for-profit institutions. They are included in ways that set them aside or set them up for failure.

### **A Design Imperative**

In short, the equity imperative has to comprise a design imperative as well. This will mean expanding and reshaping not only student services, but also the underlying infrastructures of academic institutions: offering alternatives to the conventional work week and the conventional semester, for instance, or opening community-based learning centers that supplement the set-apart geography of the traditional campus. It will mean creating degree programs and curricula that are both practical and reflective, streamlined and exploratory, avoiding both the narrow reductionism of targeted job training and the formless sprawl of the current cafeteria model. We will need new models of engaged pedagogy as well, expanding on the creativity that led to the development of high-impact practices on traditional campuses. Indeed we will need new research on precisely what high-impact practices and signature work should look like for nontraditional students.

Civic and community engagement represents a particularly important instance of this redesign work. In my experience, nontraditional undergraduates are just as hungry as their traditional peers to integrate their studies with social and community needs; their education benefits every bit as much from such integration. Yet they often lack the time and opportunity for the sort of sustained, unpaid community work that currently defines best practice in the civic engagement movement. At the same time, they often bring to their studies a depth of community, work, and political experience that may go unrecognized. We need to recast our models of public engagement to make community-based learning available to the nontraditional majority—and to make their own social capital available to both community partners and fellow students.

Finally, we will need to revise the accreditation and assessment practices that define and measure academic success, as well as the public policies that aim to foster it. Both nationally and within academic institutions, such practices and policies persistently marginalize nontraditional students. Graduation rates that count only first-time, full-time students; financial-aid policies that fail to support year-round study or nontuition expenses; accreditation rules that equate academic quality with seat time in the fifteen-week semester—all of these presume the norm of the traditional undergraduate and penalize those whose lives do not conform to it.

Yet, even before we design new services, new high-impact practices, and new policies, we need to do something more basic: see and listen. An equity agenda for nontraditional students must start by recognizing their lives and making

audible their voices. The epigraph to this essay quotes one such voice: Garnetta Gonzalez, a former dancer and bartender (and student of mine), now with a baccalaureate in clinical psychology, who testifies eloquently to her educational needs, challenges, and aspirations. Too often the voices of students like Garnetta go unheard, their lives ignored or instrumentalized. It's time to end that: to begin the work of developing policies, institutions, and cultures that—as with our commitment to underserved traditional students—offer great, engaged, transformative learning to all.

### Notes

1. The National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) disaggregates “nontraditional” status into seven factors: (1) financial independence, (2) having one or more dependents, (3) being a single caregiver, (4) lacking a traditional high school diploma, (5) delaying college enrollment at least a year after high school, (6) part-time enrollment, and (7) full-time employment. Each factor has specific criteria; full-time employment, for instance, is defined as at least thirty-five hours a week. Different students evidence varying factors and varying numbers of factors; NCES surveys measure both. Interestingly, the NCES does not use age as a nontraditional marker; other research treats students who are twenty-four or older as nontraditional. In this essay, I use both NCES factors and student age as criteria of nontraditional status.

2. One exciting example: AAC&U is working with the University of Wisconsin on a Lumina Foundation–funded project to integrate the values and learning outcomes expressed through AAC&U’s Liberal Education and America’s Promise (LEAP) initiative into the UW Flexible Option, a set of competency-based degrees targeting adult nontraditional students.

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