

## **Student Choice Award: Academic**

"How Do Past Events Affect One's Future in Academia?"

By Matthew Billings

When starting college, most students are coming directly from the summer after they graduate high school; these are known as traditional students. Those who do not come directly from high school, but instead come years later or have responsibilities restricting full-time attendance are considered non-traditional students. Dr. Marcus Lee Johnson, a professor at the University of Cincinnati, defines traditional-aged students as “college undergraduate students are typically between the ages of 18 and 23 years and pursue their college education immediately after graduating from high school.” It is thought of that non-traditional students are usually people who are older than the rest of their class and are coming back to school later than everyone else, who usually come within a year or two of getting their high school diploma. The biggest difference between the two types of students is time: time spent out in the world, getting real world experiences and connections the traditional student misses out on due to going straight back to school after getting their diploma. The question that this research project is focusing on is, how do past experiences impact the success of non-traditional students?

During this study I did research about what young adults do after high school and before going to college. While it is most common to take the summer in between to get what's needed for school as well as pack up, other people decide to take a gap year or two before going back to school. These teenagers take more time to choose their colleges, work to help pay for things for when they do go, and get more real-world experience. While doing a gap year can be good for someone who is not quite ready for college, there can be some challenges to doing this. Young

adults who leave high school and go into the work force for a year or two do get skills that will help them in college; however, it does disconnect them from others their age. They end up going to the school they chose and end up feeling different than all the other students. These students are older than others in their grade, they have a hard time interacting with others who have not had the same experiences they have had, and some even have a hard time adjusting to classes due to being away from them for so long. “Due to age or life experiences, the decision to return or enter higher education for nontraditional students is not an easy one. Thus, if they are going to return or enter higher education, it is more likely that they are covering their own tuition, and sacrificing time away from job or familial responsibilities” (Johnson). There are good and bad things to doing a gap year between schools; however, it is important to evaluate all of the factors before deciding to do one.

Two things that often come hand in hand when researching non-traditional students is community and online colleges. Those who finish high school and then go to work for a living sometimes end up going back to school online or at a community college. When coming back to school after many years of being away, it can be difficult to try and understand the other students due to the age gap. One of the biggest challenges, however, is trouble balancing all of their responsibilities, with school, work, family, and social life. Due to community and online college being part-time, it is just one more thing to add to your schedule instead of focusing only on that one thing. Time management is something all students must learn, not just those who are in college full time. However, there are some benefits to this type of schooling; for example, you are able to work more at a job to help pay for school, you can get a degree in less than 4 years, and you don't have to worry about housing fees.

While a good amount of benefits connects to non-traditional students attending online college, there are some challenges that they must face as well. Financial struggles, family obligations, juggling careers, and self-confidence issues are just some of the many challenges that the non-traditional student faces when doing college online. While time management is something everyone struggles with, the non-traditional student has an even harder time with this due to the greater amount of responsibilities they have. Scholarship opportunities are available to those attending college online; while this may seem good and take their mind off some of the stress, one has to think about the successfulness that the classes have at fully enlightening its students. When working on schoolwork only online and not getting to work in class with peers, these non-traditional students face challenges they wouldn't have from taking in person classes.

When graduating high school, it is normal to feel unsure about what you want to do in life. For some, what they end up deciding to do is join the military. Advertising as well as recruiters do tell the targeted audience how to earn a degree while in the military. However, for most people they end up not doing this due to the stress and schedule being bad enough without having to throw schoolwork on top of it all. When discharged from the military and back with civilians, some decide to learn a trade or even attend university. Victor Villanueva was one of these veterans who decided to try his hand in academia and ended up becoming a professor himself. However, going from the military, rejoining society, and trying to go back to school is incredibly difficult. Shou Oikawa, a veteran in the United States Marine Corps, gives an inside look on what this process is like in his article: "Coming from an environment where brawn solves all problems and where life is regimented, I found it difficult to adapt to academia and an unstructured routine."

When veterans finish their life in the military and rejoin society, most have a hard time due to the difference between life both in and out. While in the military a very strict schedule and

regimen tells you exactly how to do things. There is a structure civilian life does not have; life outside the military is chaotic due to the lack of order. To those who were in the military, those who didn't serve just simply have no idea what it's like. Veterans get upset and angry because civilians do not know what it's like to dedicate and sacrifice your life to your country. If a veteran is wanting to go to college to try and get their degree, then I believe that colleges should have programs that can help these veterans get accustomed to life outside the military and inside school. Tom Tarantino of the Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America says, "if colleges are not prepared to help transition soldiers from combat you do run the risk of losing an entire generation" (*St. Louis Post-Dispatch*).

Those who see combat while deployed often suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which puts an intense amount of stress on the brain and their nerves. The stress of classes and assignments can add more pressure, which could make them get frustrated and even lash out. However, the military does give these veterans experience that can be greatly beneficial to their life in school. Giving real world experiences, learning about other cultures around the world, and gaining skills that while some may not be useful in everyday life (bomb defusing, tank operations, hand to hand combat, and so on), some skills are extremely useful. The military teaches team leadership skills, shows people how to handle stressful situations with calm and ease, and how to work well with others. When coming from the military, the success of these non-traditional students is highly impacted due to what they have gone through both on and off the battlefield.

When it comes to being a student at any kind of college, one common variable is given to Admissions by almost every college student: a high school diploma. However, when it comes to the non-traditional student, other methods of getting into college without a high school diploma exist. Many people are unable to finish high school, whether because of familial circumstances,

failing too many classes, or even lack of motivation. “More than 27 percent say that they leave school because they are failing too many classes. Nearly 26 percent report boredom as a contributing cause. About 26 percent also say that they dropped out to become caregivers, and more than 20 percent say that school simply wasn’t relevant to their lives” (learning-liftoff-staff).

While dropping out of high school and getting your GED later in life is thought to still get you into college, the requirement most colleges need in your application is standardized testing. The SAT is a pivotal part in the application process of most colleges, and while you can sign up to take it at any time, the best time to take it is during your high school years. Your teachers help you prepare for this important test, study sessions are available with your peers, and it feels normal because you’re taking it in the same room as other high schoolers. For a non-traditional student, however, not taking this test in high school can be more difficult. Having to study on your own time around your schedule and other responsibilities, not having others of your same age group to study with, less time to study, and feeling out of place when taking it due to the age differences between you and the others are all possible issues. While not required by some schools, the SAT is required and heavily important in most prestigious schools. This is just one more time that the past experiences (or lack thereof), affects the success of the non-traditional student. The best thing to do for these students is to hold study sessions and to take the test with people who are in the same boat: Ones who missed out on the chance to take the test at the most important time, but still want the chance to experience what they could have in the past.

If nontraditional students who didn’t graduate high school desire to further their education later in life, they must get a GED certificate or other high school equivalency diploma. Those people can be considered non-traditional students due to the experiences they missed out on. These people had to leave friends and teachers behind in order to stay afloat in life, or perhaps school

was just not for them at the time. Either way, these non-traditional students miss out on certain past experiences, (such as graduation, staying with people their age, and not having to worry about going back to school before going to college) that would greatly benefit them from being part of them.

One aspect of the non-traditional student becoming more and more common is that of single parents attending university while trying to maintain a job, all of course while being a parent. “According to an analysis by the Institute for Women's Policy Research (IWPR), 1 in 5 undergraduates in the U.S. — around 3.8 million students — has a dependent child. Nearly half of these students are single mothers” (“Going back to College as a Single Parent”). Having a child while trying to attend college is a very difficult task, especially for those who do not have a significant other who can help with their child. This is one example of the non-traditional student whose past experiences do not help them significantly. However, that is perfectly ok: these students are not going to college for themselves, but for their children, in hopes of having a better chance of giving them a good life. These are the kind of people who should be admired because their selfless acts fuel hope for the next generation.

“Currently, one in 10 college students in the United States is age 40 or older, according to the National Center for Education Statistics. By 2027, 3.3 million students will fall within this age group” (Bernhard). When it comes to the non-traditional student, the most common age group thought of is middle-aged, between 40-50 years old. People go back to school and get their degrees for many reasons; sadly, however, not all of them are happy reasons. Being unable to grow or be promoted is one of the biggest and most common reasons these non-traditional students of this age range go back to school. “The cost of education is also a major challenge for older adults when deciding to enroll in college. A quarter of students who are 40 and older have annual incomes of

less than \$20,000, according to a 2018 PNPI report” (Bernhard). However, being in the work force for most of their life does help them a little in the financial aspect due to having saved some of their money or having good enough credit to take out a loan. Their past experience of having to work on projects at work, team problem solving, and time management with tasks that need to be accomplished also help; these experiences is so helpful the percentage of successful graduation has grown by almost 10% over the last 4 years.

According to a study in first year experience courses, “students who may be described as non-traditional face challenges such as no familial history of college, limited social or academic support, and commitments such as employment, that demand time and energy off campus” (Cavote, et.al 479). No matter what we are doing, our past decisions affect the course of actions we are planning on taking and how we go about taking them. Unfortunately, there are a lot of traits of non-traditional students negatively associated with the student experience: poor communication, lower socio-economic status, minority status, older age at enrollment, and graduating from small high schools. These are just some of the many stigmas tied to the definition of non-traditional students, and, sadly, there have been no change in how these people are perceived. While there are negative things associated with the non-traditional student, some traits are also apparent in these people: persistence, wisdom, strength, patience, and determination. Those who have endured many hardships in life but still decide to return to school and try and make their future better are people we should aspire to be like when we face such challenges.

While many non-traditional students are middle-aged or in their mid-twenties, some decide to attend college when they are classified as senior citizens. An article by Lonnie Woods III states, “you can go back to school at any age, but older, non-traditional students face certain challenges that younger students often do not. For example, many non-traditional students struggle with

imposter syndrome, especially in a classroom where many of their peers do not look like them.” It is normal to doubt your skills from time to time if you are feeling down; however, imposter syndrome is something very serious many non-traditional students suffer from, and especially those who are much older in age.

A senior non-traditional student may face many challenges. Modern technology is one of the biggest factors simply because it is so new, and either they might not understand how to use it or even what it is. Luckily, due to their age, senior non-traditional students do have an advantage when starting college later in life. Their past experiences in the work force helps them with assignments, possibly knowing how to interact with the younger generation due to possibly having family members in that age group, and, depending on the class, they might know a lot about the subject due to possibly living through it. I believe that past experiences greatly benefit non-traditional students in this age group, simply because they have so much experience.

Being a non-traditional student can be rewarding in many ways; however, there is one specific aspect in which it is not beneficial. A big part of the school experience is either watching or being a part of sports at the school you are attending. For non-traditional students, most of them do not get to the option to even join in a sport they are interested in. “The NCAA gives you 5 years to compete in 4 seasons athletically, with the fifth year being a red-shirt year. A red-shirt year gives athletes the opportunity to sit out a year of competition (for reasons such as injury or competition for playing time) and still be allowed to compete in all four years athletically” (“Am I Too Old to Play College Sports”). Due to the choices the non-traditional student made in the past, (not attending right after high school), they miss out on the opportunity to represent their school on the court or field they love. For some, sports are one of the biggest things in their life and they would do or give anything to be part of their favorite team. This can be said about some of the



non-traditional students who attend university; they would give anything to part of their favorite team, and since they are unable to actually do that, then they would like to at least play the same sport. This way they get to experience what it's like playing a sport in front of a large amount of people, all the while representing a team they also love.

Past experiences can be thought of in a wide variety of ways; good, bad, happy, sad, or perhaps proud. However, one feeling too often seen hand-in-hand with one's past experiences is that of regret. We regret the things we have done and are not proud of, things we wish we could take back if we could. This is especially true for those who have committed crimes and have spent time in prison for their wrong choices. While it is possible for some to gain their high school GED or college degree while in prison, there is still a stigma that hinders some from being able to attend where they want to or even study what they want to. According to a study in 2019, "The most measurable manifestation of stigma is through acts of discrimination because it involves behavior rather than just cognition" (Evans, et.al. 293).

Those who have done their time and tried to move on in life are still having to pay in some ways. Not only is the memory of their past actions always gnawing at the back of their mind so they will not forget, but the school system in which they are trying to better themselves is denying them access due because of the possibility of more crime on their campus. "A study comparing colleges that do and do not request criminal history information found no significant difference in their rates of crime on campus (Olszewska). Another study used college records and self-reports of behavior to show students with precollege misconduct were no more likely to engage in misconduct during college than students without precollege misconduct (Evans, et.al. 294). Some colleges would rather not accept the person and have what they think is no risk than to have someone who is trying to better themselves and rejoin society but pose a potential liability. While

it is 100% possible that you can go to college if you have a felony, some schools do a background check on those who apply. So not only is it important that you are transparent about everything in your past that may interfere, but also anything that may be going on that could hinder your chances of being accepted.

“Those with a criminal record may not be eligible to receive federal student aid or Pell Grants. If you are on probation or parole, you may still be eligible, depending on the offense. But there are still plenty of scholarship opportunities available for those with a record.” (“Can You Go To College with a Felony?”) The easiest way to get your degree if you are a convicted felon or have a record of crime in your past is online school. Since the schoolwork and classes are all done remotely, these non-traditional students no longer pose what most colleges see as ‘potential liability.’ The past actions of these non-traditional students affect their everyday lives constantly; however, online college is one way their past could not be a factor of success or failure. Not only is there a good chance those with a criminal record would be accepted to online college, but there is a financial benefit to choosing online college as well. Most online colleges are either more affordable than in-person schools or are even tuition free.

The best online majors for those with a criminal history are computer science, business, and one of the designing fields. While computer science can be considered a difficult degree, it has a wide range of jobs available, such as working in an IT department, coding, or even engineering. A design degree can help those with an artistic personality but have a hard time expressing it. They can find jobs such as graphic design, architecture, or web design. I do believe a business degree would be the most beneficial to those trying to have a career with a sustainable job. Those who get this degree can get a very wide range of job opportunities, from management, finance, and human resources to business analyst. You could even start your own business and be

an entrepreneur. Becoming an entrepreneur, while being difficult, has the opportunity to be extremely successful. Being your own boss, doing what you love, selling or doing things that could help others: these are the most sought-after qualities of entrepreneurship, and I believe those with a criminal history need these opportunities which can be easier to obtain if they get their degree.

One way we can end this treatment of specific non-traditional students is by asking what crime they committed and judging based off that information. Most of the time if you go to jail people don't really care what you did; they see all convicts as dangerous people. If someone who wants to attend college and their crime was a non-violent one, then the college should allow them to attend. While it is understandable that having a convicted murderer or someone who has hurt others on campus with other students can be concerning, I believe if a person who has paid for their crimes and are trying to better themselves through the school system should be given the chance. The university could conduct an interview with this person and make the decision based on that instead of just looking at a piece of paper. Because when we judge people solely on their past actions, then nothing will progress and a lot more people will always be closed off from the rest of the world. Everyone has things in their past they wish could just go away and be forgotten; because they can't is the best reason to push forward and be better.

While researching this topic I have learned quite a few things about how people are treated, as well as how difficult it is for some to try and simply go to school. The experiences non-traditional students face before going to college greatly influence the amount of success they have. Their past is part of them, whether it be good or bad. These students cannot forget where they came from and what they have accomplished in the past. The college they are trying to attend along with the other students who attend give either blunt or subtle hints they know of their past, whether it be through rejection, sly comments, praise, or even the work they are given. Past

experiences are something that everyone has, no matter if you are coming to college right after high school, after leaving the military, or even when you're bored at the age of 70 and decide to finally go for your degree. Non-traditional students cannot escape their past whether they want to or not, just like traditional students, so they should also get a chance to attend university without their past affecting their future.

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