

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 388 207

HE 028 751

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 TITLE Traditional versus Non-Traditional Graduating Seniors' Perceptions of a Comprehensive State University Learning Environment.
 PUB DATE 29 Sep 95
 NOTE 23p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Northern Rocky Mountain Educational Research Association (13th, Jackson, WY, September 29, 1995).
 PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)
 EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
 DESCRIPTORS Age Differences; *College Students; *Educational Attitudes; *Educational Experience; Educational Resources; Expectation; Higher Education; *Nontraditional Students; *Satisfaction; State Universities; Student Attitudes
 IDENTIFIERS *University of Wisconsin Superior

ABSTRACT

This study examined the perception of post-secondary education held by traditional and non-traditional graduating seniors from a small, rural comprehensive public university. A 132-item questionnaire was randomly administered to 126 seniors at the University of Wisconsin-Superior, with 98 of the students indicating that they were under 30 years of age and 28 indicating that they were over 30 years of age. The questionnaire was designed to identify the effectiveness of the institution's strategic plan to increase expectations for student learning, improve student support services, and experiment with new approaches to learning and teaching. The questionnaire focused on student perceptions of academic resources, academic expectations, and overall university experience. The results indicated that there were not significant differences between traditional and non-traditional students with respect to their perceptions of post-secondary education. An appendix provides seven data tables. Contains seven references. (MDM)

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Running head: Traditional v. Non-traditional Student Perceptions

**Traditional versus Non-traditional Graduating Seniors' Perceptions
of a Comprehensive State University Learning Environment**

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Presented to:

Northern Rocky Mountain Educational Research Association

13th Annual Meeting

Jackson, Wyoming

September 29, 1995

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Abstract

The perception of a post-secondary learning environment held by traditional and non-traditional graduating seniors from a small, rural based comprehensive public university was investigated. A 13½ item questionnaire was randomly administered to 126 graduating seniors at an Institution of Higher Education (IHE) (i.e. University of Wisconsin-Superior) during the final semester of attendance in the Spring of 1991, 1992, and 1993. Instrumentation was partially organized by the three dependent measures of: (1) Academic Resources; (2) Academic Expectations; and, (3) Overall University Experience. Data were treated for differences using the *t*-test for independent samples based upon traditional and non-traditional student status. The results indicated that there were no significant differences within or between the dependent variables based upon traditional or non-traditional student status. The findings were incongruent with an accepted notion of practice purporting that IHE's must provide differential institutional treatment and service to traditional and non-traditional university students as essential factors for retention, successful matriculation, and eventual graduation.

Traditional versus Non-traditional Graduating Seniors' Perceptions of a Comprehensive State University Learning Environment

With the emergence of program audit models as the standard for determining an institution of higher education's (IHE) credibility to external administrative and funding entities, the significance of the perceptions of student stakeholders is often a determining factor as to institutional flourish or famine. State governments, always the prime benefactors of public IHE's, have been incapable of settling on higher education priorities with respect to finance and prosperity. Additionally, the recent political trend of shifting state educational resources from higher to public K-12 education has caused an even more so downward spiral. State governments are now more than ever using tuition pricing to offset increased state deficits as a direct result of purported property tax reductions that has student stakeholders questioning the true value of post-secondary education as tuition and fees increase while quality teaching and learning environments decrease.

It has become a political reality and financial necessity for IHE's to nurture positive and responsive learning environments for students as endemic to self survival in an era of management during decline. That econometric mindset held by state governments on the surface appeared to conform nicely to local IHE effectiveness in meeting student access, choice, and satisfaction goals - albeit often contorted. Thus, public IHE's

have a keen interest -real or perceived- in the effects of learning environment upon enrollment.

That notion was essential for small, rural based public comprehensive universities such as the University of Wisconsin-Superior (UW-S). Leslie and Brinkman (1989) found by neo-meta-analysis of over 50 empirical investigations of higher education that sociological variables were the most potent (e.g. social class and parental education) associated with attendance and matriculation. Such assumed even greater significance when an IHE (i.e. UW-S) was located in the most rural as well as poorest region of a state. Furthermore, sociological expectations of an IHE's service region populace continued to be anchored in high quality teaching and learning environments delivered in a small IHE setting that remained exclusively recognized as a "teacher's college," despite institutional public relations promoting such as a "comprehensive institution." Yet, regional constituencies continued to view small, rural based IHE's as places of pragmatic teaching and learning without need of a liberal education in providing meaningful connection to one's daily life. As Goodlad (1990) noted, "those traits are far afield from those associated with higher education and the professorship" (p.71.).

Distinctly set apart from the "flagship" and large public IHE's in a state, small, rural based IHE's have immense service region responsibility and even greater as well as extreme disproportionate fiscal margin for error. Sociological variables were a daily reality as opposed to biennial

lobbying rhetoric. Small, rural based regional public IHE's have literally been crippled by the loss of 50 student FTE whereas at the "flagship" or large public IHE's such amounts to possibly a few sections of a course. It was therefore for small, rural based IHE's an imposing institutional self-interest to evaluate the learning environment as perceived by its primary stakeholders, namely the students themselves. Hoyt (1982) affirmed this in a review of higher education evaluation designs that underscored the requisite principles of uniqueness and contextual interpretation for such.

Method

Setting A small, rural based public comprehensive state university (i.e. University of Wisconsin-Superior) located in the most geographically remote and socio-economically poorest region of a Midwestern state served as the setting for the study. The IHE was responsible for serving the higher education needs of the least densely populated region of the state consisting of over 3,000 square miles. The IHE was located approximately ten hours distance from its central system-wide administrative body with an undergraduate student enrollment of 2,123.

Participants A random sample of university students (n=126) graduating from the IHE during the three year period from 1990 to 1993 participated in the study. Participants were identified as being non-traditional and traditional students based on a self-reported chronological age of above or below thirty ($CA \pm 30$). Longitudinal participant percentage by traditional student status was 78% (n=98) and non-

traditional student status was 22% (n=28). Longitudinal participant percentage by gender was approximately: 56% female (n=72); and, 44% male (n=56). Participants represented a sufficient and normal sampling distribution within the setting for the study to control threat of Type I error and inverse power variance with β (Pagano, 1990).

Procedures A 132 item questionnaire was developed and confidentially administered to a random sample of 126 university students graduating from the IHE. Instrumentation was then longitudinally administered over a three year period in the spring of each year from 1990 to 1993.

Instrumentation A 132 item questionnaire was developed based upon adaptation of an institutional graduating student exit survey by five IHE standing committees. Instrumentation was designed to act as a dependent evaluation measure of the IHE learning environment. The evaluation data measures obtained from instrumentation were designed to identify the effectiveness of an institutional strategic plan (i.e. The Superior Plan) to: (1) increase expectations for student learning; (2) increase affective support for students; and, (3) experiment with new approaches to teaching and learning.

Participants were required to provide perceptive measures of the IHE with respect to the survey instrumentation which was organized into the four major categories of: (1) administrative and student services; (2) academic experience; (3) overall IHE experience; and, (4) student demographics. Administrative and student services measures were

identified by professional competence and personal support measures. Academic experience measures were identified by academic area responsiveness (e.g.) and faculty expectation level measures. Overall IHE experience measures were identified by various knowledge (e.g.), skill (e.g.), and behavior (e.g.) measures. Student demographics were identified by age, gender, living site, race, ethnicity, off-campus workload, and semestrial credit load.

Independent Variable The study identified one demographic index contained within the instrument as a dichotomous independent measure. Chronological age (CA) was used to separate participants into two non-equivalent groups of traditional and non-traditional students as distinguished by a self-reported CA below or above thirty.

Dependent Variables The study identified three assortments contained within the instrument as dependent measures. It included: (1) Academic resources; (2) Academic Expectations; and, (3) Overall University Experience. Within the three dependent variables there were fourteen (14) dependent measures (see tables 1-3).

Data Treatment The *t*-test for independent samples was selected based upon three assumptions of the populations. First, the observations in the two samples were independent of one another. Second, the two populations were approximately normally distributed relative to the IHE's sigma population. Third, the respective binary populations had equal variances. It was also necessary to permit the pooled variance of the populations to allow the larger sample to convey more power in

determining the mean as suggested by Gravetter & Wallnau (1992, p.268). Populations also had continuous distribution, ordinal measures, and independent samples allowing for simultaneous comparison among the dependent measures. Apriori alpha was established at $p \geq .05$. Further, all "not applicable" participant responses were statistically treated as a null value.

Results

Consistently throughout the three dependent measures there were no significant differences in perceptions of the learning environment held by traditional and non-traditional university students. For example, in one dependent variable, sigma mean difference was .0004 between the two populations. Despite likely and latent apriori held perceptions by IHE personnel that significant differences would have been present between traditional and non-traditional university students results overwhelmingly supported the retention of the null hypotheses (H_0).

Academic Resources Mean data indicated that both traditional and non-traditional university students rated the IHE Academic services almost exactly identical at 2.975 (see table 1). Resources were rated in a composite manner as good with the highest being Faculty Out-of-Class Assistance (3.151) and the lowest Media Resources (2.866). Faculty assistance to both populations results appeared to validate long held claims by small IHE's pertaining to their superiority and deliverance of

individualized instruction to university students regardless of student demographics.

Academic Expectations Mean data indicated that both traditional and non-traditional university students rated the IHE Academic Expectations rather equally at 2.218 (i.e. about right) and 2.444 (i.e. about right) respectively (see table 2). Overall academic expectations were rated in a composite manner as "about right" with the highest expectations in general education (2.523) and lowest expectations in elective coursework (2.176). Summatively academic expectations in all areas were rated as "about right" with an appropriate level of challenge.

Overall University Experience Mean data indicated that both traditional and non-traditional university students rated the IHE Overall University Experience slightly differently at 2.707 (i.e. fair) and 2.984 (i.e. good) respectively (see table 3). It was important to note, however, that the sigma mean difference was quite slight and not statistically significant. Overall university experiences were rated in a composite manner as good with the highest rated experiences being with faculty (3.150) by both populations and lowest rated experiences in academic offerings (2.615). Such results indicated both traditional and non-traditional student satisfaction with faculty and a noted desire for more experiences via greater academic offerings.

General Education versus Professional Education Neither traditional or non-traditional students rated any significant differences between the expectations of the general education and major field of

study programs (see tables 6 &7). Results appeared to indicate that both university student populations rated general and professional education programs as interdependent to one's overall goal to graduate. There appeared to not be present from a student perspective any difference in academic expectations between the general or professional education areas albeit it likely the faculty from each respective academic area possessed such among themselves which has a long established and quarrelsome history within academe. Those data suggest that any significant difference was not an academic reality but rather a rhetorical diatribe among academicians with no effect upon university students.

Traditional versus Non-traditional Students There were no significant composite differences between traditional and non-traditional university students in the areas of academic resources, academic expectations, and overall university experience ($t=1.229$, $df=26$) (see table 5). With respect to the learning environment, matriculated traditional and non-traditional university students hold no significant differences and were strikingly similar in their ratings of the university. There was, however, one small difference noted whereby non-traditional students rated the overall university experience higher than traditional students if one were to by all means liberally interpret those data ($t=1.833$, $p \geq .10$) for a modicum of significance between the populations

Discussion

There has been a long vocalized presupposition within IHE based student services that there were significant differences between traditional and non-traditional students within small comprehensive public universities. There were a plethora of literature too numerous to cite herein suggesting differential treatment for non-traditional students because of their "unique" post secondary educational needs ranging from support groups to academic credit for work experience. The results of the study were contrary to such literature and student services practice in that its findings were that university students were just that -university students undifferentiated in their rating of the university.

At the time small public IHE's were being decimated by core budget cuts and critical resource elimination, they could ill afford to expand unwarranted differential treatment and services to students absentia of legitimate knowledge in favor of existing conjecture. Results of the study indicated that small IHE's would have been more efficacious in resource allocation on a collective student basis as opposed to self-identified student differentiation basis. Special university student status and institutional recognition may have both fiscal and programmatic import on a large or "flagship" IHE. The data, however, suggested such consideration at a small IHE had no significant basis and may well likely served as a catalyst to undermine the mission of the IHE with respect to available resources, especially in a strained financial era.

Limitations of the Study The primary limitation of the study was related to the fact that design, method, and results were largely IHE specific (i.e. University of Wisconsin-Superior) and based upon an institutionally generated strategic plan. A secondary limitation was the rural and remote setting in a small state comprehensive public university. Such limitations, however, were not subject to internal validity threats nor Type I Error.

Implications of the Study The major implication of the study was nested in the fact that small IHE's do not have a significant need to provide differential treatment or student services for traditional and non-traditional university students. Both student populations had no significant difference in rating their academic resources, academic expectations, or overall university experience. At the most, small IHE's may need to continue existing differential treatment and services for non-traditional university students. At the least, small IHE's may reduce or eliminate existing differential treatment and services for non-traditional university students to free resources for central, collective student resources and programs.

Conclusions The results of the study indicated the following deductive denouement for small, rural based IHE's:

1. There appeared to be no significant data suggesting the expansion of student services or differential academic treatment for non-traditional university students. There were, however, no significant data suggesting the elimination of such already in existence.

2. There appeared to be no significant data suggesting the expansion of student services or differential academic treatment for traditional students at the resource expense of non-traditional university students.

3. Results of the study suggested that small IHE's plan, implement, and evaluate academic programs for students on the basis of collective quality as opposed to differential treatment. Such should not, however, result in diminished individual attention by faculty to all students.

4. Data indicated that general and professional education faculty should not engage in discourse as to which of the two was more central to the IHE's mission. Results demonstrated that university students view both as interdependent to one's graduation with neither being more significant. Diatribe between the two faculties about institutional preeminence would likely have a negative significant impact upon the IHE's student retention and matriculation given those data insignificance.

5. IHE recognition and positive connoisseurship by its students required a collective real, not rhetorical, knowledge base that clearly articulated a theme, model, and outcomes for all students as opposed to "treatment" premised on ill defined student classification.

6. Small IHE's concerned about student perception of institutional cohesiveness and "user friendliness" may have been alerted to the insignificance of data as to a need for realignment of academic and

institutional resources that were more reflective of a collective rather than distinctive purpose.

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Table 1

Mean Ratings of Traditional and Non-traditional Students for IHE Academic Resources

IHE Resource	Traditional	Non-traditional	Overall
Library	2.936	2.985	2.960
Media Resources	3.063	2.669	2.866
Academic Computing	2.858	2.900	2.879
Academic Advising	2.987	2.887	2.937
Faculty In-class Assistance	2.897	3.213	3.055
Faculty Out-class Assistance	3.109	3.194	3.151
Sigma Mean	2.975	2.974	2.975

Note: Response rating scale values included:

4 = Excellent, exceptionally responsive to needs

3 = Good, very responsive to needs

2 = Fair, adequately responsive to needs

1 = Poor, minimally responsive to needs

0 = Absent, not at all responsive to needs

NA = Not Applicable

Table 2

Mean Ratings of Traditional and Non-traditional Students for IHE Academic Expectations

Area	Traditional	Non-traditional	Overall
General Education	2.347	2.699	2.523
Academic Major	2.189	2.402	2.295
Elective Coursework	2.119	2.233	2.176
Sigma Mean	2.218	2.444	2.331

Note: Response rating scale values included:

4 = Far too high, challenge impossible or almost impossible

3 = Somewhat too high, challenge too difficult

2 = About right, appropriate level of challenge

1 = Somewhat too low, modest challenge only

0 = Far too low, little or no challenge at all

NA = Not Applicable, not enough coursework completed to warrant response

Table 3

Mean Ratings of Traditional and Non-traditional Students for IHE Overall Quality
Experience

IHE Aspect	Traditional	Non-traditional	Overall
Major Program	2.850	3.013	2.931
Social Life	2.665	3.120	2.892
Academic Offerings	2.362	2.868	2.615
Faculty	3.034	3.266	3.150
Facilities	2.626	2.683	2.654
Sigma Mean	2.707	2.984	2.848

Note: Response rating scale values included:

4 = High Quality

3 = Good Quality

2 = Fair Quality

1 = Low Quality

NA = Not Applicable

Table 4

Mean Ratings of Traditional and Non-traditional Students for IHE Learning Environment

Environment	Traditional	Non-traditional	Overall
Academic Resources	2.975	2.974	2.975
Academic Expectations	2.218	2.444	2.331
Overall Experience	2.707	2.984	2.848
Sigma Mean	2.633	2.800	2.718

Table 5

Differences Between Traditional and Non-traditional Students for IHE Learning Environment

Environment	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	Critical Value $p \geq .05$
Academic Resources	.0034	5	2.015
Academic Expectations	1.489	4	2.132
Overall Experience	1.794	8	1.833*
Sigma	1.229	26	1.706

Note: * Significant at $p \geq .10$ with 1.533 critical value.

Table 6

Traditional Student Differences between General Education and Major Program of Study

Environment	M	t	df	Critical Value
General Education	2.347			
Major Program	2.189			
		.6200	2	.920

Table 7

Non-traditional Student Differences between General Education and Major Program of Study

Environment	M	t	df	Critical Value
General Education	2.699			
Major Program	2.402			
		.6726	2	.920