

**An Integrative Framework:
Meeting the Needs of the New-Traditional Student¹**

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Purpose Statement

The purpose of this paper is to present an integrated framework that depicts the institution's role in supporting the success of the adult college student. The role institutions of higher education have in retaining and supporting students has shifted. Most colleges and universities no longer think of student success and retention in terms of an "individual deficit model" where the responsibility for success is placed on individual student shortcomings but instead as a sense of responsibility to the individual from the institution (Tinto, 1987, 1993). This has changed how many universities and colleges view their roles to include social interaction and connection with the institution as key to retention and student success (Tinto, 1993; Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt, & Assoc., 2005; Gardner, 1987, 2003; Maldonado, et al., 2005).

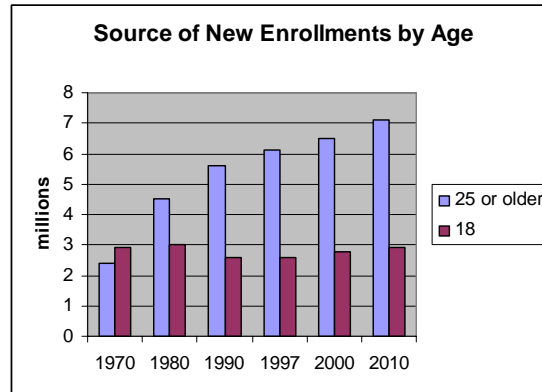
Universities of the 21st century have a new majority in the non-

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traditional student. Today, the non-traditional student represents 73% of all undergraduate students (CAEL, 2005), making this group the New-Traditional Student. This is a very diverse group, and a student is labeled as New-Traditional when one or more of the following qualities are met. First, the student has responsibility for the care of another, such as a child or elderly relative. Second, the student is employed more than 20 hours per week. Third, the student is over the age of 25 (this alone represents more than 45% of New-Traditional Students). Fourth, the student is independent of parents. Finally, the student has a delay between high school and college attendance. Despite the increasing New-Traditional Student population, the research predominantly focuses on the First Year Experience (FYE) as it relates to the traditional college student. There remains a paucity of theories that can assist colleges and universities to better understand this new majority population. There is a vast difference in the traditional first year student and the New-Traditional Student in his or her first year of attendance.

Adult students over the age of 25 are where the new enrollment growth is, and where it is expected to remain. In spite of the statistics (Figure 1), much of public higher education has allowed itself to become trapped by remaining unresponsive to the needs of the New-Traditional Student. Public institutions have already sustained tremendous enrollment losses to private counterparts; this will continue unless our institutions embrace this change in demographics.

Figure 1: New Enrollments

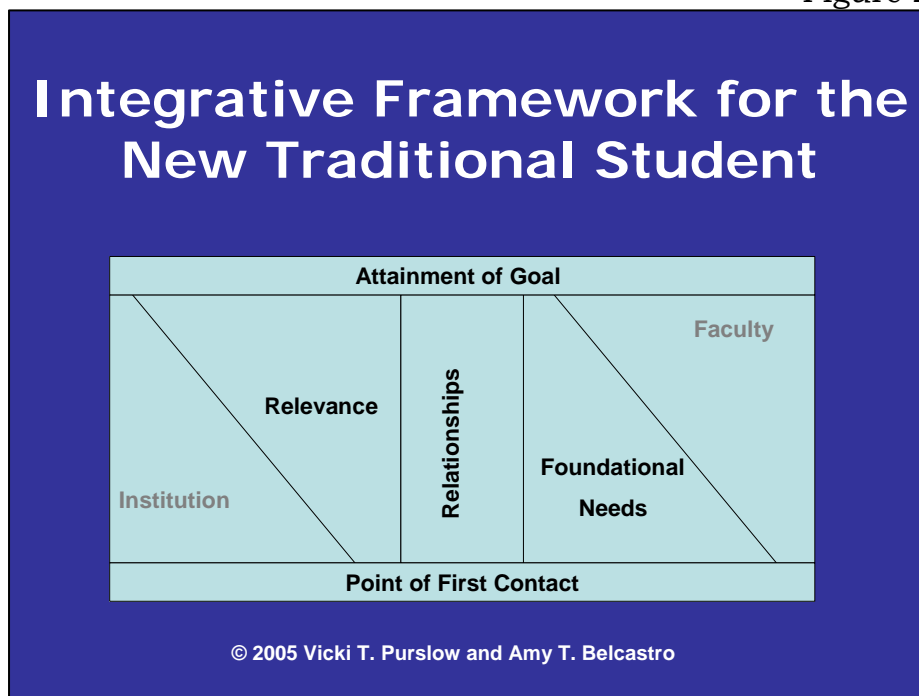


(CAEL, 2005)

The Framework

The framework has three components: relationships, foundational needs, and relevance. Students, particularly our New-Traditional Students, must have all three, and each must be sustained throughout the entire time the New-Traditional Student is working towards the goal of degree completion.

Figure 2



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Foundational Needs

Foundational needs are the basic needs that will prevent students from entering and being successful in college. Maslow's "Hierarchy of Needs Theory" (1970) suggested that students cannot be concerned about issues of personal growth and learning until their basic needs for survival and safety are met. Foundational needs represent the supportive system that must be in place to meet the basic needs of our students, and are greater at the beginning of the process where the responsibility falls heavily, but not exclusively, on the institution. This requires a whole-institution reform in order to attract the New-Traditional Student.

Examples of foundational needs include: childcare, financial aid, scheduling options, offering of varying methods for delivery of instruction, safety, convenience, classroom discipline, flexible and available services, location and schedule. Consider the hours in which a student can tend to matters related to the purchase of a parking permit, meet with financial aid staff, or secure childcare. If offices close at or before 5:00pm, the institution is sending a strong message that it is not concerned about the student who is not enrolled in a day program. The student must be able to access the services as needed. If the needs of all students are to be considered then the services must always be available with access never wavering. For example, a New-Traditional Student must be able to purchase his or her text books, buy a parking pass, or access an advisor outside of the traditionally held hours.

Examples of best practices in the area of Foundational Needs can be seen in Figure 3.

Figure 3

Best Practices in Foundational Needs
All students have equal access to the institution’s resources.
Safety nets such as early warning systems are in place.
Gather and use data on New-Traditional Students to inform and evaluate improvement efforts.
Implement New-Traditional Student-centered services for students with adult responsibilities (could include call centers, non-daytime student services, and using technology to provide relevant and timely information)
Offer deferred payment options to students who use tuition reimbursement dollars that do not come until course completion.
Create a safe and healthy learning environment and curriculum.

While the foundational needs do not diminish during the student’s academic career, the student’s confidence grows with the ability to negotiate those needs with greater ease. The student becomes increasingly self-directed over time and their foundational needs of security and safety change to what Maslow would describe as the need for belonging and esteem.

Faculty play a greater role in meeting the foundational needs of the students until the basic needs are met and the students continue to move towards their goals. Faculty are responsible for ensuring a safe learning environment and curriculum for all students.

Relationships

The New-Traditional Students often have complex relationships that require time, effort and attention. In addition, they must now negotiate and invest in new relationships with academic peers, faculty and staff. Relationship is at the core of the framework and is consistent throughout the process. This

ability to develop new relationships, while modifying existing relationships with family and friends, is essential for student's success in higher education (Tinto, 1993; Kuh et. el, 2005; Gardner, 2003). The relationship begins with the first contact and continues after the attainment of the goal. Relationship refers to every interaction the student has; this must be positive and intentional on all fronts. Potential relationships between the institution and the prospective New-Traditional student occur between faculty and in many departments across the institution including Admissions, Marketing, Student Services, Financial Aid, Registrar, Book Store, Student Welfare, Maintenance, and Advising.

Relationships comprise a main pillar in the framework around which everything revolves. Initially the majority of the relationship is between the student and student services. This framework challenges colleges and universities to consider the role faculty should play in the recruitment and retention of students. For example, when students first contact the college to investigate a specific program it should be the faculty from that program make contact with student. As the students get closer to their degree attainment the role of the faculty increase.

Likewise, this framework challenges the institution to continue it relationship as the student get closer to their degree attainment by providing partnership and opportunities for community-based and service learning. Admittedly, relationships are dynamic, in a constant state of flux and require attention. While the framework would appear to suggest that the relationship

needed by the student is constant, it is constant in terms of the university's role and responsibility to the students. Suggested best practices in the area of Relationships appear in Figure 4.

Figure 4

Best Practices in Relationships: Institution and Faculty Role
Acculturation experiences introduce New-Traditional Students to a sense of community.
Ensure the mission is inclusive of the New-Traditional Student.
Provide opportunity for students to work with faculty on activities both inside and outside of the classroom.
The enacted value and philosophy of the institution considers student learning and success for all learners, and traditional and New-Traditional Students.
Provide opportunities for community-based and service based learning.
Provide common learning communities.
Gather data and use data on the New-Traditional Student to inform and evaluate improvement efforts in student and academic affairs.
Conduct community base recruiting outside of high school college fairs with representative from various programs.
Make advising accessible and convenient to the New-Traditional Student.
Use admissions practices that address the personal needs and concerns of adults who are unaccustomed to viewing themselves in the traditional role of the student.

Relevance

Relevance for adult learners first requires that students have a clear purpose or real-world application for their learning (Knowles, 1998) and be provided time to reflect on that purpose (Mezirow, 1990). To do this learners must be provided the opportunity for “personal reflection and practical application, both through class-based active and collaborative learning activities and capstone projects and through learning experiences beyond the classroom, including internships, service learning, study abroad, and related

opportunities” (Kuh, et.al., 2005, p.287). Additionally, the value of a learner's experience holds an esteemed position in adult learning theory.

Ten years ago, 50% of enrollees were motivated by a career related issue; today, more than 85% of the New-Traditional Students are selecting a program because they need to enter, advance, or change their job or careers. A potential student is very unlikely to register for courses if relevancy is absent. As the student's skills and subject matter understanding increases, so to does the desire for relevancy and application. The role of faculty increases exponentially with regard to relevance, particularly in ensuring authentic learning and assessment, making curriculum connections in the community and goal-setting to provide a foundation for self-direction after the student completes his or her degree.

The implications for the institution are numerous, but must begin with the college or university embracing the change. For example, the degrees conferred must be responsive; fewer than 25% of New-Traditional Students major in the liberal arts. For liberal arts-based institutions, this will present a special challenge. Does this mean that institutions must abandon missions as liberal arts institutions? Certainly not, but the institution will need to give careful consideration in crafting its messages and developing the curricula so the potential student can clearly understand how it will be beneficial in meeting their personal and career goals.

The potential student's initial motivation to pursue a degree and enter into a program of higher education is driven by various reasons. The college or

university has a moral and ethical responsibility to ensure and encourage the successful completion of the degree. This must be supported by both faculty and staff in the various programs and departments within the institution. A positive, accessible and responsive relationship with the student, both in and out of the classroom are essential to high-quality learning experiences and the success and retention of the students (Kuh, 2005, pg. 207). Faculty will need to demonstrate that there are clear connections between that which is learned at the institution and the application of such to the student’s career goals; while the institution must establish a curriculum and assessment plan that connects academic and authentic experiences with opportunities through a thoughtful curriculum and community partnerships. Suggestions for additional best practices related to Relevance appear in Figure 5.

Figure 5

Best Practices in Relevance
Gather and use data on New-Traditional Students to inform and evaluate curriculum, policy and institutional improvement efforts.
Discuss career plans with faculty and advisors.
Provide authentic and relevant academic opportunities such as community based learning, service learning and internships.
Design curriculum that better integrates industry-based standards in related coursework.
Create competency-based curricular structures (as opposed to time in seats).
Provide professional development opportunities for faculty in adult learning theory and practice.
Offer prior learning assessment and challenge exams (reflects an institution’s respect for the incoming knowledge a student brings).

Conclusion

Our future success depends upon our ability to meet the needs of today’s students while looking forward to tomorrow’s students. It is hoped that the

framework will prove valuable in uncovering the institution's role as the prospective student experiences first contact with the institution through conferring of the degree. It has attempted to show the importance of the role of the institution and its faculty and staff. Most important, the model stresses the importance of relationships as the foundation upon which success is dependent.

As public higher education considers the implications of the framework, it may be helpful for institutions to consider three questions, each from the perspective of potential New-Traditional Students.

1. What are my foundational needs and how will they be met?
2. What relationships will support my goals?
3. Is the program relevant to my career goals?

It is our hope that this integrative framework would promote dialogue around the institution's philosophy and direction and engage the stakeholders in conversations that will set the context in which our New-Traditional Students live their lives while acknowledging both the possibilities and constraints that they experience in their daily lives.

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