

# Teaching Tip Tuesday

## Non-Traditional Students

One of the largest markets in higher education involves non-traditional students. Although there are many definitions of non-traditional, we will focus on those students who are returning to their education after a hiatus of multiple years. Up to 67% of non-traditional students drop out before completing their degrees. Review the following to familiarize yourself with this body of students. Understanding them and their concerns allows instructors to adopt more inclusive practices that help adult learners to succeed.

- **Reasons for returning to school**

Non-traditional students are usually seeking new training that will allow them to develop meaningful careers and increase their income, or to change their career focus. Regardless of the specific reasons, non-trad students tend to focus more on the “real world” applications of knowledge. Consider using case studies that tap into their lived experience and relate core concepts to workplace applications.

- **Many non-trad students have families and full-time jobs**

These factors are often listed as the largest barriers to successful degree completion for non-traditional students. Because of these commitments, non-trad students may be more concerned with course time commitment, work load, and attendance flexibility than are traditional students. Consider your attendance policies and the time of day your class meets. These students may not have the flexibility to complete additional work and extra credit assignments. Keep in mind that “after-hours” extracurricular opportunities may not be accessible to this population.

- **Learning hiatus may translate to skill gaps**

If you don't use a skill, you're likely to lose that skill. For many non-trad students, the learning hiatus could mean that skills in math or writing are rusty. This can lead to feelings of anxiety and unworthiness. Instructors may consider beginning upper level classes with low-stakes refresher activities, providing guidance on where students can obtain remediation if needed.

- **May lack knowledge of university resources**

Depending on their pathway to UWSP, non-traditional students may have missed some of the standard programs (dorm programming, orientation, clubs and student organizations) whereby students learn about resources and opportunities on campus. Don't assume that students are familiar with student health care services, career planning, counseling, the Cupboard, or tutoring. Make explicit reference to resources when appropriate. Consider including links to useful student resources on your course's canvas page.

- **Stereotype threat**

Many non-traditional students enter UWSP as transfer students from two-year college campuses. Negative stereotypes exist about the rigor of these institutions. Check your assumptions at the door to prevent students from feeling that they aren't prepared or that you don't believe they can do the work. Such attitudes impede student performance.

### Learn More:

Click on the link to enroll in the self-paced, 30-minute online CITL Course: [Faculty and Instructor Training for Promoting Transfer Student Success](#).

MacDonald, K. 2018. A Review of the literature: The needs of nontraditional students in postsecondary education. Strategic Enrollment Management Quarterly 5(4).