

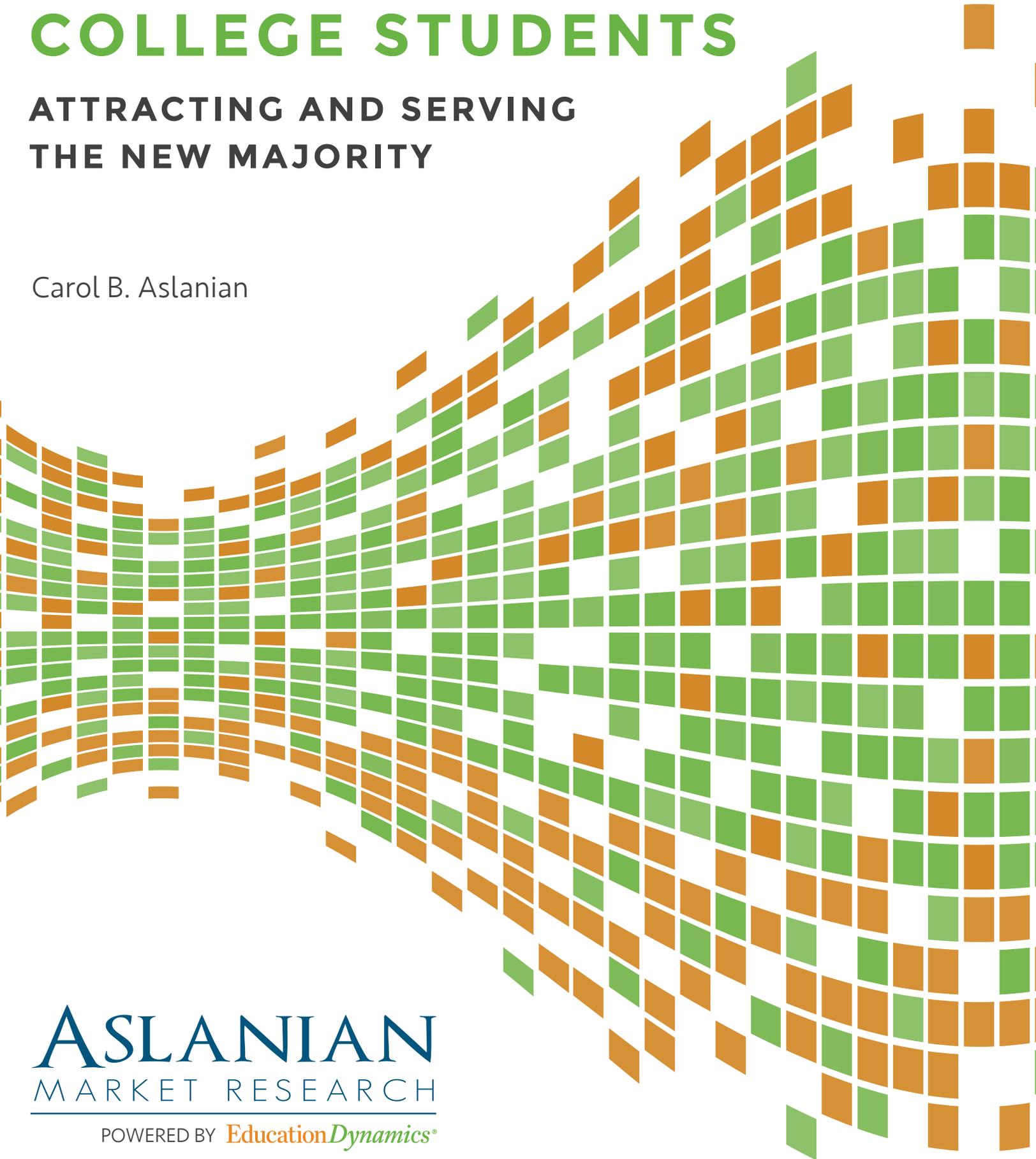
POST-TRADITIONAL COLLEGE STUDENTS

ATTRACTING AND SERVING
THE NEW MAJORITY

Carol B. Aslanian

ASLANIAN
MARKET RESEARCH

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INTRODUCTION

When the majority of Americans think of a typical undergraduate college student, they picture teenagers loading up their cars with all of their worldly belongings and driving to a beautiful campus or large city to spend the next four years expanding their mind and meeting new people. That is also the way “college going” has been characterized by much of the media and institutions themselves. Is this really the typical undergraduate college student today? No, and it hasn’t been for a number of years. In fact, this image of the “typical” college student could not be further from reality. While 70 percent of undergraduate students today¹ are between the ages of 18-24, this leaves a full 30 percent who are aged 25 and older. Moreover, this does not account for those 18-24 year olds who do not study like a traditional student (full-time during the day, in residence – living on or near campus) which can be as high as 40 percent. The majority of students, therefore, can be considered post-traditional students: students of any age who do not conform to “traditional” undergraduate college norms.

Age no longer predicts learning patterns. As such, a significant majority of these 18-24 year olds do not go away to a campus, enroll full-time, study during the day, and reside on or near campus. Many are not able to take four years out of their young adult life to study. Instead, they join the ranks of college students over the age of 25, who do not meet the profile of a traditional college student,

as they study at all times of the day and evening, work full-time, do not live on campus, and have other characteristics that buck the notion of the traditional college student. For the purposes of this report, post-traditional students are students of any age who meet one or more of the following characteristics: online and distance learners, older adults, single parents, part-time students, continuing education students, mid-career professionals, delayed enrollees, occupational certification program students,² among others. These students, the majority of college students today, are considered “post-traditional students.”

In 2013, Louis Soares, Vice President of Strategy Research and Advancement at the American Council of Higher Education, picked up the term “post-traditional student” (which had been coined by John Ebersole of Excelsior College) when he wrote, *Post-traditional Learners and the Transformation of Postsecondary Education: A Manifesto for College Leaders*. In that paper, he noted that post-traditional learners have been a growing population in higher education since the 1970’s and continue to be so. They envelop a wide array of characteristics and have differing needs. They are “single mothers, immigrants, veterans, and at-risk younger people looking for a second chance,” to name a few examples. They are flight attendants who cannot be place-bound to one location to study. They are third-shift factory workers who cannot study in the afternoon. They are “needed

wage earners for themselves and/or their families, combine work and learning at the same time or move between them frequently, pursue knowledge, skills, and credentials that employers will recognize and compensate, require developmental education to be successful in college-level courses, and seek academic/career advising to navigate their complex path to a degree.”³ Their needs must be met in a specific way in order for these students to continue to learn. Otherwise, their other responsibilities will take over.

Institutions must continue to increase their efforts to meet the needs of this growing post-traditional student population, not only to address the needs of the communities they serve but also, in practical terms, to achieve their enrollment goals. As we are witnessing, secondary school graduation numbers are relatively stagnant if not showing a slight decline in recent years.

Steven Bell of Library Journal cites three broad issues that these “post-traditional” students face in their educational pursuits: situational (conditions at a given time that limit a student’s ability to access and pursue higher education, such as lack of time or cost); institutional (conditions that hinder access such as scheduling or transportation, the provision of courses that lack relevance or practicality, bureaucratic issues, the number of course requirements, and excessive admission fees); and dispositional (personal perceptions of ability to access and complete learning).⁴ In the coming years, institutions must further move to address these circumstances in order to attract this vital population to their institutions.

Aslanian Market Research, led by Carol Aslanian, conducted primary market research in the Winter-Spring of 2015-2016 in order to better understand the needs of post-traditional students and assist institutions in addressing these needs in order to enroll this ever-growing population of post-traditional students. Aslanian Market Research addressed what led these students to not complete

their studies as a traditional student, what trigger event brought them back to school, and what will help to keep them enrolled.

The steady growth of post-traditional students in American higher education has produced new realities and rewards, but also challenges for institutional leadership. No longer do methods of recruitment, formats of instruction, and topics in curriculum resemble what was offered in the closing decades of the last century to attract traditional students. No longer is the “typical” undergraduate 18-22 years of age, studying full-time, and residing on or very near campus. Rather, the dominant profile across the 4,500 two-year and four-year institutions offering undergraduate education is typically a post-traditional learner. These are learners who have work experience or are working, who study full-time and part-time, seek accelerated programs at all times of the day, and study in multiple formats—classroom, hybrid, and online—and across a multiple array of topics that are most often career-related.



In fact, the National Center for Education Statistics has recently suggested that as much as 75 percent of the 17.25 million undergraduate students are “post-traditional.”⁵ The NCES uses risk factors to determine the post-traditional student. Its definition includes those who delay enrollment by 12 months or more after high school graduation, those who are independent of their parents or working full-time, may have their own dependents, or may have earned a GED rather than a traditional high school diploma.

“...as much as 75% of the 17.25 million undergraduate students are ‘post-traditional.’”

For the purpose of this report, Aslanian Market Research defined the post-traditional student as (a) any 25 years of age or older person who is enrolled or seeking to enroll in undergraduate study or, (b) anyone who is under 25 years of age who is not, was not, or will not be enrolling full-time, taking classes during the day, and residing on or near campus.

While many institutions have increasingly adapted their operating policies and procedures to better serve post-traditional students, there is a need to do more. The number of students graduating high school is already declining or is projected to decline in 23 states between now and 2023⁶, leading to increased competition among institutions to enroll more post-traditional students in order to maintain or grow absolute enrollment levels.

The purpose of this report is to help institutions understand post-traditional students and their needs and preferences in order to implement actions that not only will increase post-traditional student access to higher education, but also increase an institution’s overall enrollment.



KEY FINDINGS

BELOW IS A SUMMARY OF SOME OF THE KEY FINDINGS.

1. POST-TRADITIONAL STUDENTS ARE THE NEW MAJORITY IN AMERICAN HIGHER EDUCATION UNDERGRADUATE STUDY.

These students include those 25 years of age and older who begin or return to undergraduate education and those under 25 years of age who begin or return to undergraduate education, but are not enrolled full-time during the day and do not reside on or near campus.

2. AGE NO LONGER PREDICTS LEARNING PATTERNS.

Given increasing and multiple life transitions and trigger events in the lives of many Americans, retooling and reeducation have become a necessity throughout one's lifetime.

3. CAREER TRANSITIONS AND CAREER-RELATED EVENTS IN LIFE DRIVE AMERICANS OF ALL AGES BACK TO SCHOOL.

Post-traditional students, in particular, seek further education to enter, advance and change their careers or jobs. Relevant credentials and certifications lead these students to the career pathways they seek.

4. THE MAJORITY OF POST-TRADITIONAL STUDENTS PREFER SOME FORM OF ONLINE INSTRUCTION.

To cope with the multiple life roles and to expedite their education as much as possible, post-traditionals—most of whom are quite familiar with online delivery—understand that online instruction provides the flexibility and convenience their busy lives require.

5. POST-TRADITIONAL STUDENTS ARE COST-SENSITIVE.

Tuition is the #1 factor driving post-traditional students' school selection, their reason for not pursuing college after high school, and their reason for dropping out. Most believe that there is not enough financial aid available today and that the first two years of college should be free.

6. THE ACCEPTANCE OF PRIOR ACADEMIC CREDITS IS CRITICAL.

Seventy percent of post-traditional undergraduate students are reentering college with credits in hand. In many instances, they are searching for institutions that will accept these prior credits in order to save time and money. On average, they bring with them 30 or so credits for transfer.

7. POST-TRADITIONAL STUDENTS MAKE DECISIONS QUICKLY.

While many students increasingly make their decisions to attend a school extremely quickly, 40 percent of post-traditional college students choose a school to apply to within four weeks or less and nearly 75 percent take three months or less between day of first inquiry and first day in class.

8. POST-TRADITIONAL STUDENTS PREFER A NEARBY CAMPUS.

Regardless of their program or course format preferences, nearly 70 percent would like to enroll at a college within 30 miles of where they live.

9. BUSINESS, IT, AND HEALTH AND MEDICINE ARE POPULAR FIELDS OF STUDY.

Business and IT continue to be the most popular majors at the Bachelor's degree level, but Health and Medicine is more popular at the Associate, Certificate, and Diploma levels.

10. MOST POST-TRADITIONAL STUDENTS STUDY FULL-TIME.

Accelerated courses and programs offered year long, along with diverse formats (online, hybrid, etc.) enable these students to take on full-time course loads while also addressing other life roles.

11. EIGHT-WEEK COURSES (OR LESS) ARE HERE TO STAY.

Clearly, institutions that seek to recruit the post-traditional student must pay attention to the length of their courses. Two-thirds prefer 10 weeks or less for their course length but definitely, the eight-week pattern is the median preference—all times of the day.

12. THE POST-TRADITIONAL STUDENT DEMOGRAPHIC.

While White/Caucasian is the largest ethnic group, Hispanics are under-represented relative to the population and Asian/Pacific islanders are over-represented. Household income distribution is similar to that of the U.S. population. Most important, the post-traditional student is typically female and is in her 20's—more than half are under 29.





UNDERSTANDING THE POST-TRADITIONAL COLLEGE STUDENT

In the winter of 2015-2016, Aslanian Market Research conducted a nationwide survey of 1,500 post-traditional undergraduate students. The overall purpose of the study was to better understand the character, intent, practices, and demographics of the majority of undergraduates in our nation's institutions who resumed or began their studies after months or years of absence. As noted earlier, these students now represent the majority of all undergraduate students today.

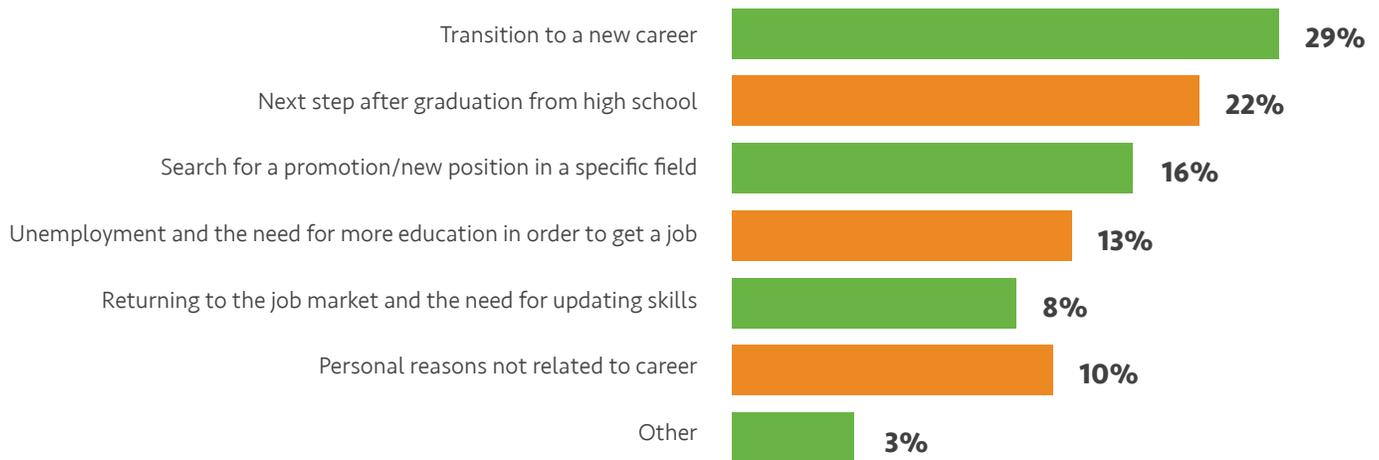
To qualify for the study, respondents of any age were eligible with one exception. Those under age 25 who were enrolled in full-time study during the day and resided on or very near campus (the typical "traditional" undergraduate student) were screened out of our sample. Most important, to qualify, respondents had to have been enrolled in undergraduate study within the last five years, or were currently enrolled, or had firm plans to return within the next 12 months.

The report that follows is organized by the major topics surveyed and the key factors in the profile of today's post-traditional student. Tables and charts present the topics addressed and responses from the sample population.

LIFE TRANSITIONS

There is one dominant life role that drives post-traditional students back to college: their career/job aspirations. We learned this in prior research decades ago in regard to adult students in The College Board's seminal publication: *Adults in Transition: Life Changes as Reasons for Adult Learning*. Among multiple life roles, nothing is more important than one's career or occupation as the prime reason for further education. For post-traditional students (most of whom began but did not complete their undergraduate studies), reentering the world of education is not motivated by tradition or seen as a rite of passage, as it is among traditional age students. Rather, it is the missing piece in securing one's place in the world of work—it is the gateway to a new position or reentry back into the job market.

PRIMARY MOTIVATION FOR ENROLLING IN UNDERGRADUATE STUDY

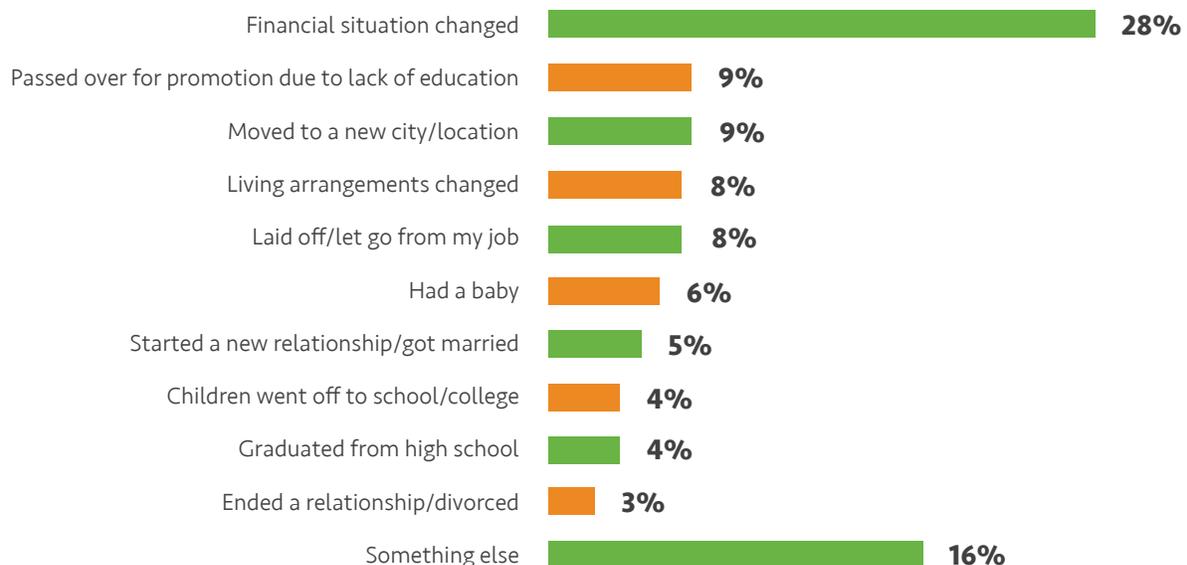


Transitioning to a new career and seeking a promotion are the specific drivers for beginning or continuing their undergraduate education for the majority of post-traditional students. Knowledge and skills that these students can apply in real time will reinforce learning and motivation to complete what they may have started at an earlier time. To attract this portion of the undergraduate student body, higher education institutions will have to offer the career-related programs that will help these students meet their goals.

TRIGGER EVENT

Life transitions among post-traditional students are often accompanied by a trigger event prior to steps taken to inquire about and apply to colleges. The trigger event moves the prospective student from a passive to an active stage. A change in financial situation is what most frequently prompts this move.

EVENT THAT TRIGGERS DECISION TO CONTINUE UNDERGRADUATE EDUCATION

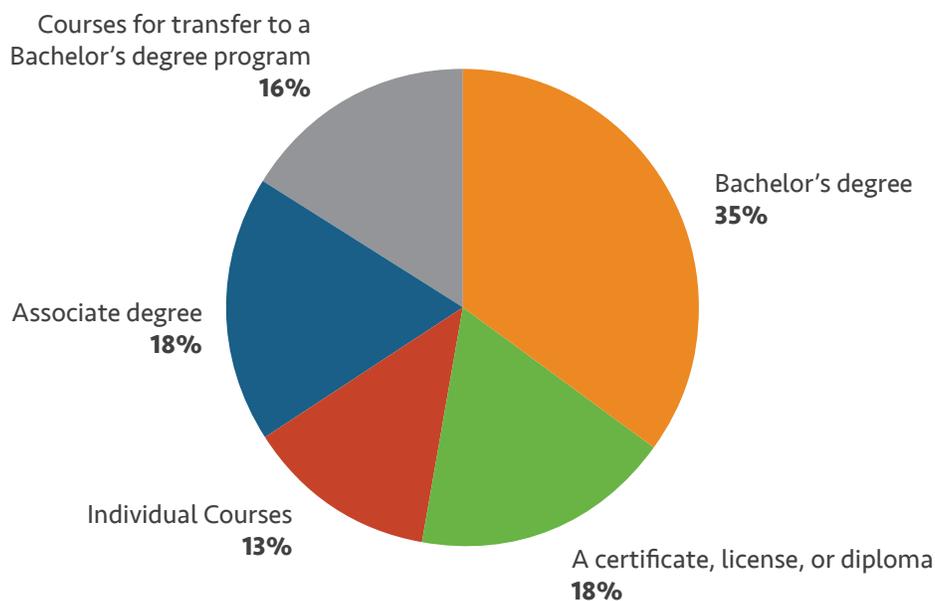


It would be wise for institutions that seek to attract post-traditional undergraduate students to understand clearly that a large portion are seeking to enhance their credentials in order to increase their income. Nothing is as important as a degree, certificate, or license that will lead to occupations that elevate their incomes.

CREDENTIALS

Over half of post-traditional students are seeking a Bachelor's degree. They either directly enroll in a Bachelor's program or take courses for transfer to such. While close to 20 percent cite that they are enrolled in an Associate degree program, it is likely that some proportion of these students also go on to enroll in Bachelor's degree programs. Nearly 20 percent seek a certificate, license, or diploma.

INTENDED CREDENTIAL



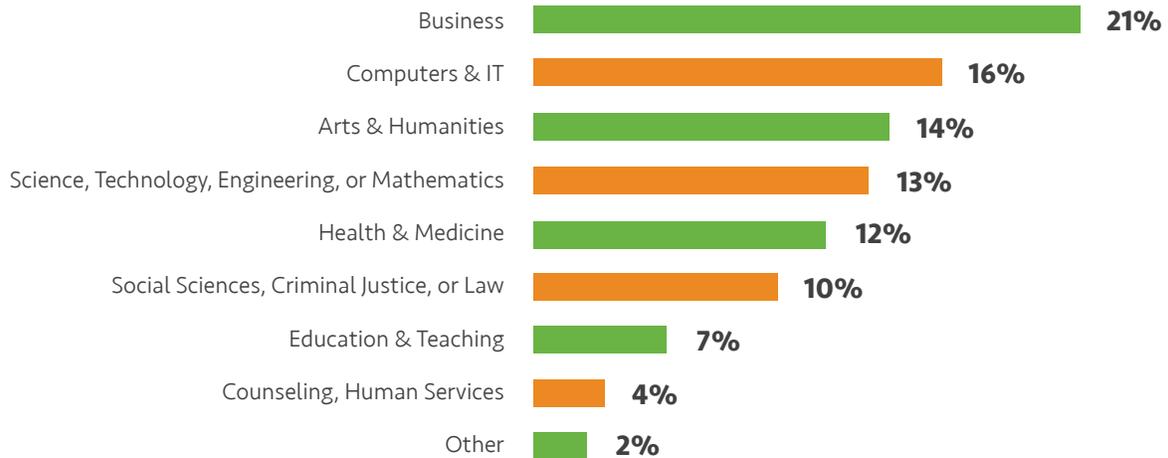
The post-traditional market is strongly Bachelor's degree-oriented. While many start or restart their undergraduate study at a community or technical college, a significant portion will eventually make their way onto a Bachelor's program. Community colleges in particular should attract post-traditional students back to school by offering them affordable terminal career-related degrees as well as a clear pathway to the Bachelor's degree many seek, including 2+2 programs and four-year college extension sites on the community/technical college campus. Bachelor's-granting institutions should recruit and attract recent or prospective graduates of the community colleges as many see the Bachelor's degree as their next goal. Finally, all institutions should expand their certificate and licensing programs—shorter-term credentials from which many post-traditional students with prior credits or degrees can benefit in regard to their career objectives.

SUBJECT AREA

Top Subject Area: Bachelor's Degree

The top subject area among those seeking a Bachelor's degree is business, followed by computers and IT. It is noteworthy that close to 30 percent seek credentials in the computer and technology areas, thereby indicating that they are paying attention to how the job market has and will continue to change.

SUBJECT OF BACHELOR'S DEGREE

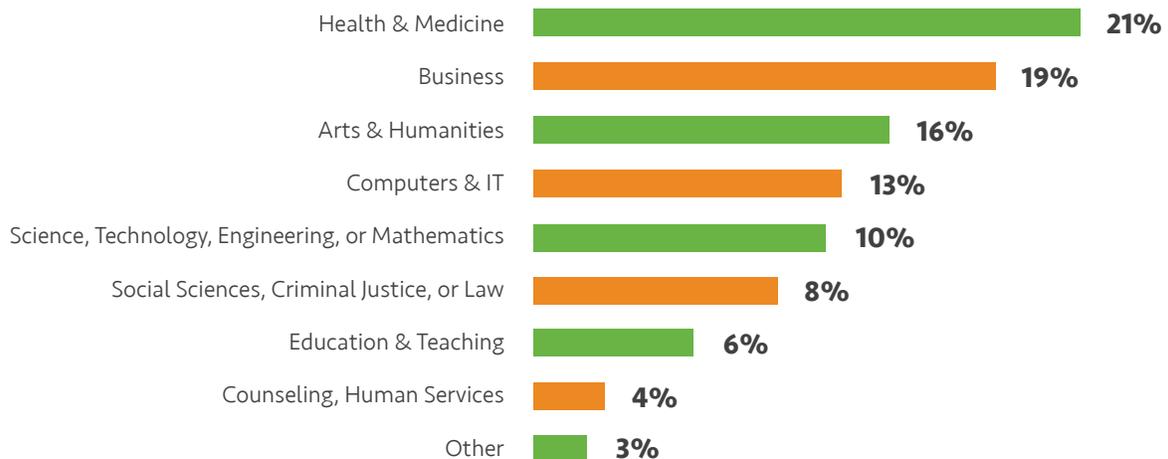


Both business and technology-oriented programs of study, comprising more than one-third of market demand, are prime-time subject areas that definitely appeal to the post-traditional undergraduate market. Institutions seeking to meet market demand must offer programs in high demand topics. These are often programs that provide “employable” degrees that lead to the careers students seek.

Top Subject Area: Associate Degree

At the Associate level, credentials in healthcare are most often sought, followed by business degrees.

SUBJECT OF ASSOCIATE DEGREE

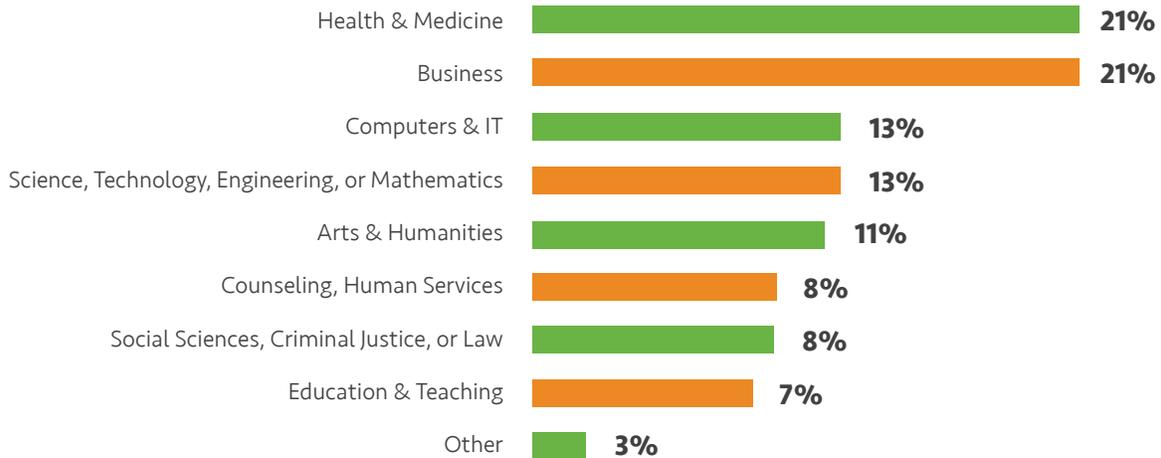


At the Associate level, health and medicine dominate as the two most popular fields of study. Many health professional credentials need only an Associate degree and post-traditional students view this opportunity as a more expedient investment of their time, leading them into a marketplace where employment opportunities are strong. And, of course, the area of business has many of the same attributes.

Top Subject Areas: Certificates, License, Courses for Transfer

The subjects of interest to those seeking certificates, licenses, or individual courses are similar to the subjects of interest to those seeking Associate degrees.

SUBJECT OF CERTIFICATE, LICENSE, COURSES

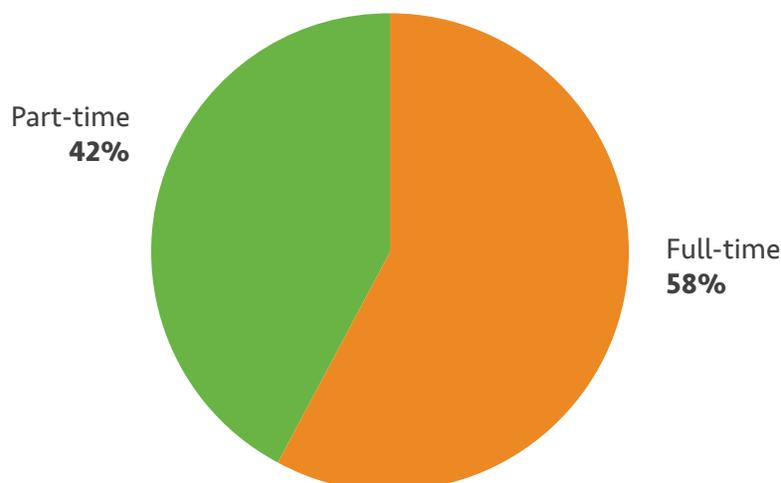


Institutions that seek to serve post-traditional students should consider offering more certificates and licensing programs in key areas, so that those who return with some number of credits can apply them to a credential that can be obtained in a shorter term and provide quicker access to the job market. Ideally, institutions could organize such certificates into the building blocks for a Bachelor's (or Associate) degree—a concept that has tested very highly in other Aslanian research.

FULL-TIME OR PART-TIME ENROLLMENT

More post-traditional students study on a full-time rather than part-time basis. These busy individuals, juggling multiple family and work-related obligations, find ways to study full-time through the ever increasing availability of accelerated programs and the multiple formats of instruction that are now available, namely online and hybrid. Those instructional options enable them to take more courses in shorter intervals, thereby qualifying for full-time study. Having said this, it is important to note that a significant percentage of post-traditional students also chose to study part-time.

FULL- OR PART-TIME ENROLLMENT



Institutions must ensure that their programs can easily be completed on both a full-time and part-time basis. Many post-traditional students do what is necessary to maintain full-time status in order to qualify for various forms of financial aid as well as to complete their studies on a timely basis. However, as important as financial aid is, full-time study must accommodate the work and family obligations that post-traditional students face. For those who cannot manage to study full-time, accelerated and efficient part-time study must also be offered.

GREATEST INFLUENCE ON DECISION TO ENROLL/REENROLL IN UNDERGRADUATE STUDY

Not surprising, the factors that influence younger vs. older post-traditional students' decision to enroll in undergraduate study differ somewhat. Among those under age 25 (who may or may not enroll directly after high school), the major influencer is parents—followed by school staff such as teachers and guidance counselors. In contrast, students 25 and older most often make their own decision.

GREATEST INFLUENCERS ON DECISION TO ENROLL IN UNDERGRADUATE STUDY (TOP 3 BY AGE)

	20 or under	21 to 24	25 or older
No one, I made this decision on my own	49%	48%	59%
Parents	74	56	28
Spouse	17	31	36
Children	10	22	24
High school teacher or college counselor	48	24	9
A teacher (non-high school)	38	21	10
Employer	7	14	20
Co-worker	7	11	16
Religious leader	6	7	6
Someone else	7	8	6

When seeking marketing targets for drawing post-traditional students back to school, there are some clear influencers. It is most wise to draw younger students by not only marketing or remarketing directly to them but also to their parents—similar to how admissions staff have traditionally marketed to the high school market. But, interestingly, even older post-traditional students can be influenced by family members—their spouses, parents, and even their children. Savvy recruiters need to generate new ways of reaching these influential players to describe the benefits of their offerings.

EDUCATIONAL PERSONA

Post-traditional students overall are most likely to rate themselves as having done pretty well or OK in high school. There was a noticeably higher proportion (almost 70 percent) of younger post-traditional students (20 years of age or under) who were much more likely to say they did pretty well or were a top student. However, across all ages, performance in high school was strong enough to indicate that these students have not postponed or delayed their undergraduate study due necessarily to ability levels, but most likely because of social and economic factors.

DESCRIPTION OF SELF AS A HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT (BY AGE)

	20 or under	21 to 24	25 or older	All
I did pretty well, some of my courses were advanced level	41%	33%	37%	38%
I did very well, and was a top student	28	19	20	22
I did OK in high school	16	27	27	25
In high school I struggled	12	13	9	10
I graduated, but I have to take remedial courses at my first college	2	3	3	3
I graduated, but I had to take remedial courses at my first college	0	4	4	3

Institutions should not assume that the post-traditional student will be of lower “quality” than the traditional student. Their past academic performance in high school is typically in line with their traditional counterparts. Their motivation to complete an undergraduate degree—primarily for career purposes and increased income—make them good college students. But, on the other hand, institutions seeking to serve the post-traditional market must also understand that one-third are unsure of their academic abilities and must ensure that these students have services available to help them reach graduation.

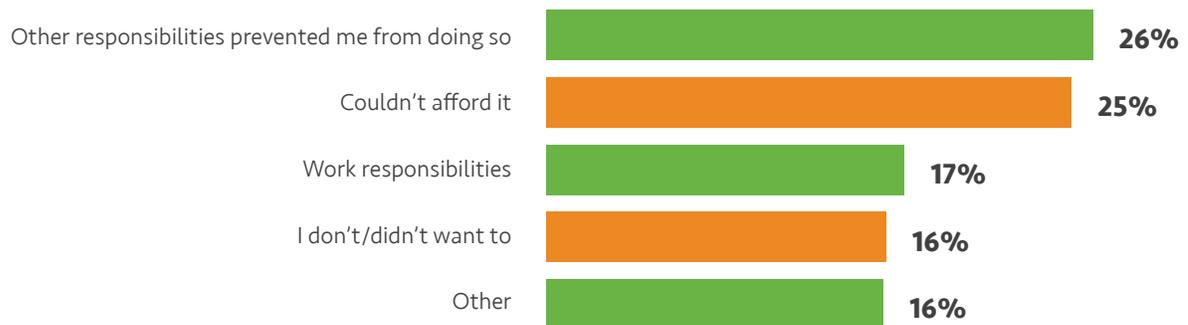
WHAT PREVENTS POST-TRADITIONAL STUDENTS FROM ENROLLING DIRECTLY AFTER HIGH SCHOOL

As respondents shared their reasons, it became quite clear that financial challenges were a primary concern. About one-third of post-traditional students reported that their concerns about college costs prevented them from seeking to enroll in college directly after high school. The next most frequent category of responses, accounting for 25 percent of the comments, concerned family conditions such as children, pregnancy, etc. The third most popular concern dealt with “motivation,” which included comments that reflected lack of readiness, lack of interest, needed time off or needed a break from schooling, maturity, and not knowing what to study.

NOT FULL-TIME AND NOT LIVING ON CAMPUS

Why does such a large proportion of post-traditional students decide not to take on the traditional pattern of attending college full-time, during the day, and residing on or near campus? Clearly, life interferes. Financial concerns are a primary reason, followed by work responsibilities. Many of these students have families and other family-related responsibilities as they may marry earlier, have children earlier, and go to work earlier than their traditional counterparts. Others enter the military directly after high school, have health issues with which to deal, while others do not know what they want to study yet, or simply they are just not ready.

REASON FOR NOT ENROLLING FULL-TIME/ON CAMPUS



WHY EARLIER STUDY WAS INTERRUPTED

Forty-four percent of respondents had been enrolled in an undergraduate course or program within the last three years but were no longer enrolled.

College exit surveys may report the reasons why students stop or dropout. Our survey did so with the promise of complete anonymity. Also, our question asked for a verbatim response, so the responses are not prejudiced by items on a preconceived list. In a review of the verbatim responses, the top categories for stopping or dropping out are similar to those that prevented respondents from enrolling in college immediately after high school. The reasons included inability to finance college study, a change in a family situation (pregnancy, illness, death, etc.), not performing at my ability level, not sure I was in the right program, the institution I attended was not a good fit, and so forth.

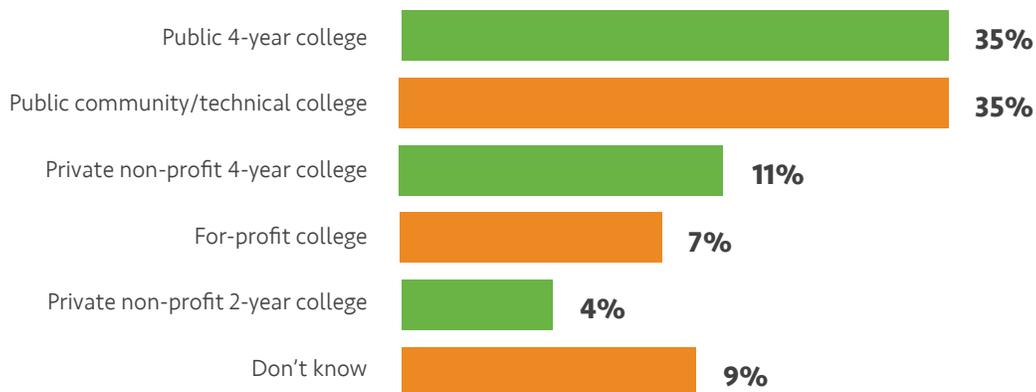
The median number of years it took these students to return to undergraduate education was about three years—a relatively short period of time. In contrast, close to 30 percent took 10 or more years to return. This trend has dropped the average age of the adult student dramatically in Aslanian studies conducted around the country.

RECRUITING THE POST-TRADITIONAL COLLEGE STUDENT

WHERE THEY PREFER TO ENROLL

Seventy percent of post-traditional students enroll in a public institution, either a Bachelor's degree-granting or a community/technical college. This conforms closely to NCES data from 2014 stating that 75 percent of all undergraduate students enroll at a public institution. They are as likely to choose a public four-year institution as a public community/technical institution.

INSTITUTION TYPE (ENROLLED)

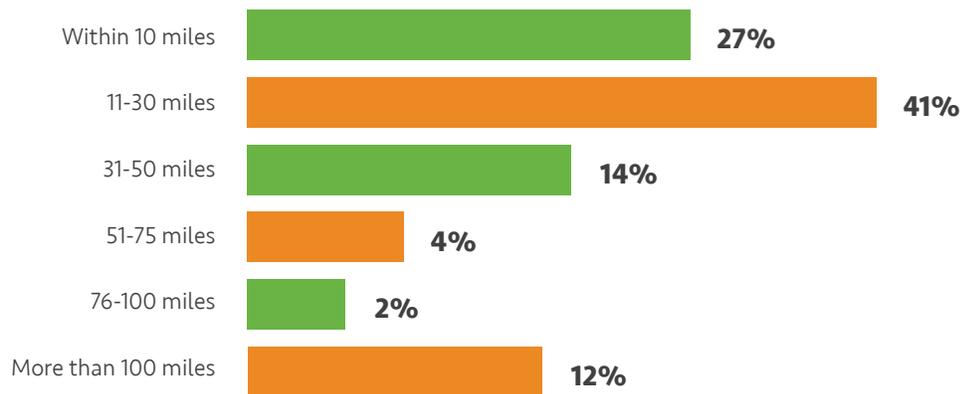


In regard to institutional type, post-traditional students act fairly closely to the ways in which all college students behave in regard to the type of institution they seek for study. In short, all institutions have a foothold among this population. As we noted earlier, tuition costs and career-relevant academic programs are the key determinants in these students' decision of where to enroll.

PREFERRED DISTANCE TO TRAVEL

One-quarter of post-traditional students prefer to travel less than 10 miles to the institution where they enroll; two-thirds prefer to travel 30 miles or less. In short, post-traditional study is local study. Colleges are best able to attract these students within their own or nearby regions.

PREFERRED DISTANCE TO INSTITUTION OF ENROLLMENT

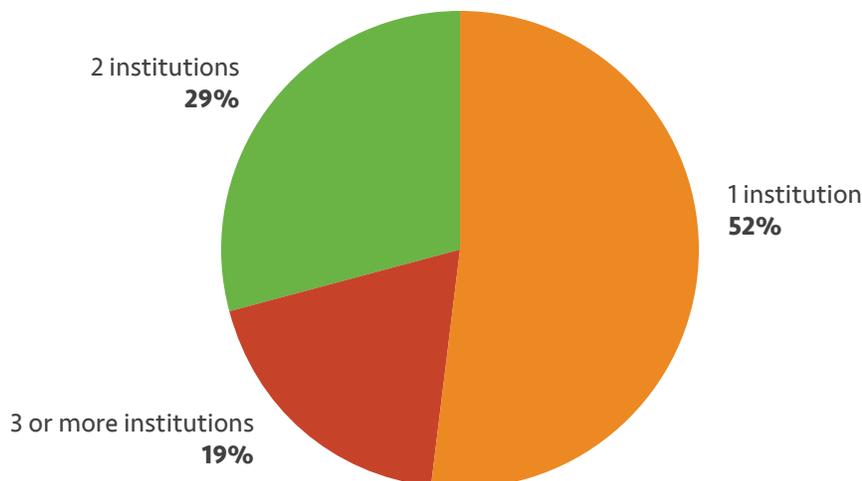


Marketing and recruitment strategies among all types of colleges that seek to attract the post-traditional student should focus on populations who reside within the nearby region in which the institution is located. This is true for those who prefer online study as well as classroom-based study, as we have learned from our previous studies. Institutions should use their proximity to local/area populations for targeted recruitment.

NUMBER OF INSTITUTIONS CONSIDERED

More than half of post-traditional students inquire/apply to only one school, while another 30 percent or so apply to two. Given their preferences for nearby institutions, it is entirely understandable that greater familiarity with local schools enables them to limit their search.

NUMBER OF INSTITUTIONS INQUIRED/APPLIED



Most importantly, institutions that seek to enroll post-traditional students must understand that when such prospective students inquire initially, at least one half of them have no other institution in mind. Therefore, quick and efficient responses to their inquiries and guidance for them through the enrollment funnel is imperative to secure (for at least half of them) their enrollment. Your "competition" is not as much another school, but possible inertia among your own recruiters.

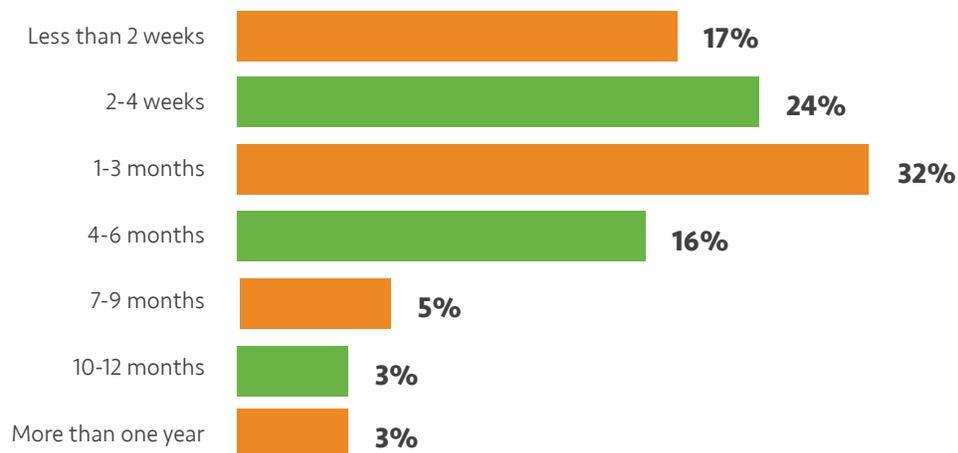


ENROLLING THE POST-TRADITIONAL STUDENT

SPEED OF DECISION MAKING

In contrast to the traditional student recruitment and enrollment cycle, post-traditional students make their decisions quickly about where they will enroll. About 40 percent will decide in four weeks or less. Three quarters will decide in less than three months. The age group 25 years of age or older will take slightly longer on average, perhaps due to the time it takes to gather past transcripts and the determination of past academic credits to be transferred.

TIME TAKEN FROM FIRST INQUIRY TO ENROLLMENT IN FIRST DAY OF CLASSES



PAST CREDITS FOR TRANSFER

Among the 70 percent of post-traditional students who have earned undergraduate credit in the past, the median number of credits they wish to transfer is about 32. Nearly 30 percent of the oldest post-traditional student group—those 25 years of age or older—have more than 75 credits earned from the institutions they have previously attended. In short, it is clear that the large majority bring past credits with them and, understandably, seek institutions that would be most receptive to them.

PAST UNDERGRADUATE CREDITS ACCUMULATED (BY AGE)*

	20 or under	21 to 24	25 or older	All
1 to 15	53%	24%	20%	25%
16 to 30	19	23	20	20
31 to 45	15	11	15	15
46 to 59	3	11	9	8
60 to 75	6	20	9	11
More than 75	3	11	28	21

*Among those who inquire and bring past academic credits for credit transfer.

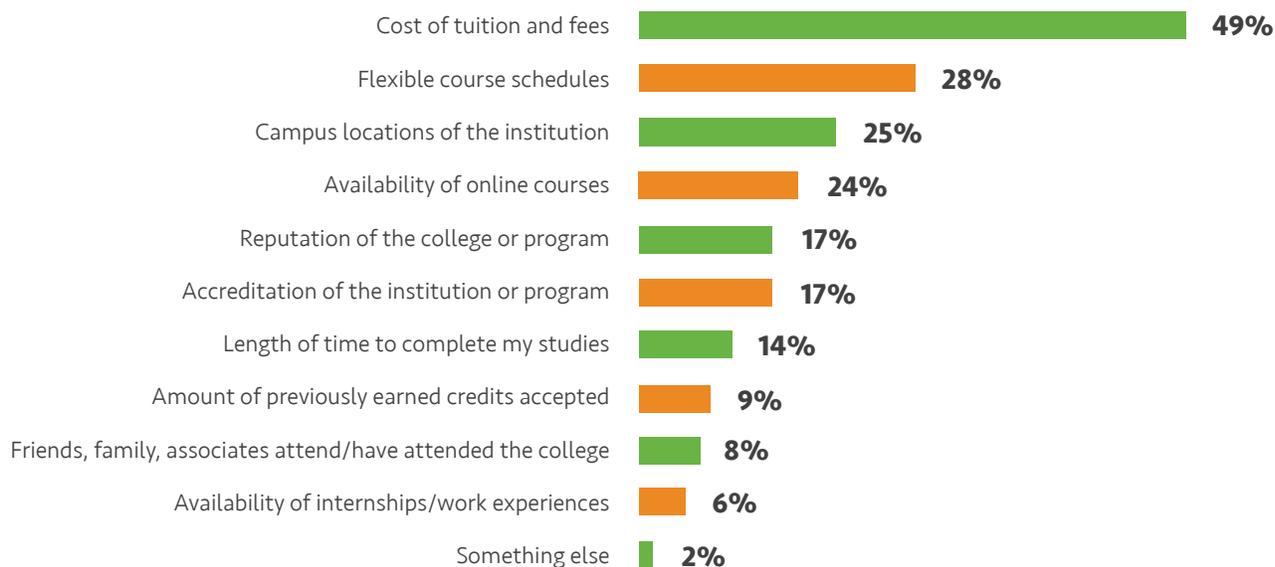
Colleges that seek to attract the post-traditional student must have efficient ways to help them obtain past transcripts and be most receptive to accepting past credits. To the prospective student, credits transferred means less cost and more timely completion.

KEY COLLEGE SELECTION FACTORS

As with most studies Aslanian Market Research conducts nationwide across a wide variety of student populations, cost is cited by nearly half of respondents as one of the top two factors in the decision about where to enroll. Data often indicate that flexibility of course schedules, location, and availability of online courses are next highest ranked as decision factors.

These findings from other studies align with the notion of the importance cost serves as a deciding factor among post-traditional students for not enrolling immediately after high school or in delaying their return to higher education. By far, cost of tuition and fees is the number one area of interest as these students explore a range of schools. The next set of determining factors include a combination of flexible course schedules, campus location, and the availability of online courses.

TWO MOST IMPORTANT FACTORS IN ENROLLMENT DECISION



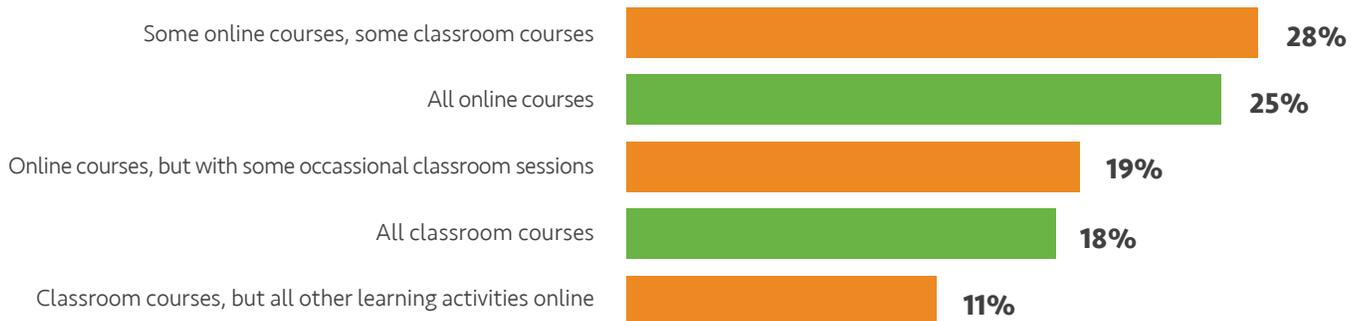
When an institution cannot or will not adjust the cost of tuition and fees to meet market demand, it must offer trade-offs. This would include flexible course schedules so that students can finish in a shorter time than usual and thereby reduce overall costs, as well as the offering of online courses so that students can speed up their time to completion using alternative formats. Having said that, there is an emerging “tuition reset” trend among institutions that may soon require more institutions to think about new ways of setting tuition.

TEACHING THE POST-TRADITIONAL STUDENT

PREFERRED PROGRAM FORMAT

Following, perhaps, the topic of study, these students are most interested in course delivery formats. In short, the post-traditional student is definitely online-oriented. Having been out in the real world for some period of time and due to their personal use of computers and other technology-driven platforms (such as phones and tablets), it is reasonable that over 80 percent look for online programs or some combination of both online and classroom-based programs. The desire for flexibility is evident among the 80 percent or so who seek online instruction in total or online instruction combined with classroom instruction. Impressively, less than 20 percent want to sit in a classroom setting to gain the instruction they seek.

PREFERRED PROGRAM FORMAT

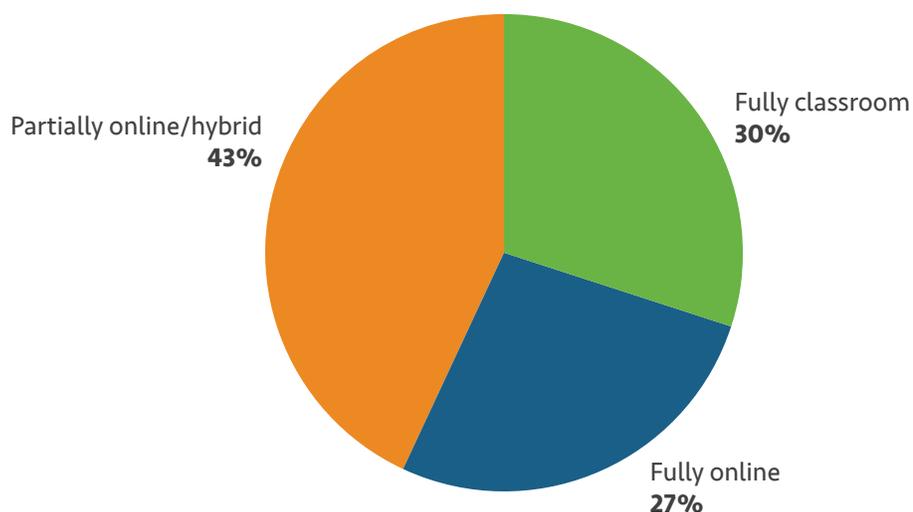


Simply said, institutions cannot attract a very large proportion of post-traditional learners if they do not provide online programs and courses at a significant level. There are, however, some age-related differences in opinion. Online courses are more important as a deciding factor to those 25 years of age or older while campus location is less important. While a marginal majority of younger students believe that online education is not as high-quality as classroom education, the 25 and older age group are more likely to disagree and are more likely to agree that employers think that online education is as good as classroom education.

PREFERRED COURSE FORMAT

Similarly, when asked about their preferred course format, only a minority—30 percent—is seeking a fully classroom-based course. The largest proportion is seeking a hybrid course with required instruction in both the classroom and online.

PREFERRED FORMAT FOR A FUTURE COURSE



PREFERRED COURSE LENGTH

Across all age groups, the median preference in regard to course length is 7-8 weeks, which matches very well what we have learned in our prior studies. Longer course lengths are losing ground steadily. About 50 percent of post-traditional students prefer a course of eight weeks in length or less.

PREFERRED LENGTH IN WEEKS FOR A TYPICAL THREE CREDIT COURSE (BY AGE)

	20 or under	21 to 24	25 or older	All
4 weeks or less	18%	27%	14%	17%
5-6 weeks	16	12	17	16
7-8 weeks	15	18	18	17
9-10 weeks	18	17	15	16
11-12 weeks	19	16	23	21
13 weeks or longer	14	12	12	13

There is little to debate when it comes to the length of courses when it pertains to the post-traditional student (and most likely, most students today). The eight-week course (or even a bit shorter) is here to stay.

PREFERRED TIME OF DAY FOR COURSES

Choosing from among all times of day, post-traditional students who would take a classroom-based course most often prefer a weekday morning course (9:00 am – 12 noon). This may be due to the fact that some work part-time, some are not employed, and some have family obligations that only permit them to study during the morning hours. However, it cannot be ignored that 40 percent or so prefer the afternoon and evening hours.

PREFERRED TIME OF DAY FOR A FUTURE CLASSROOM COURSE

Weekday early mornings (finished by 9:00 AM)	13%
Weekday mornings (9:00 AM - 12:00 Noon)	44
Weekday afternoons (12:00 Noon - 5:00 PM)	19
Weekday evenings (5:00 PM or later)	21
Weekends	3

These data on time for study suggest that institutions that seek to attract post-traditional students must offer options throughout the day and evening. Not doing so would ignore the needs of the 43 percent of respondents who indicate they would prefer to take a hybrid course—one that has a classroom component in addition to an online component.



FINANCING EDUCATION

Concerns about cost have already been reported as a reason for stopping out or dropping out and as a reason for not pursuing college right after high school as well as the most frequently reported factor in student decisions about where to enroll. Responses to these questions and the questions in this segment of our report should cause senior administrators to take a careful look at the affordability of their programs over the long term.

CONCERN ABOUT COLLEGE AFFORDABILITY

Only about 25 percent of post-traditional students believe that college is affordable today with the percent being lowest among the youngest age group. About three-quarters believe that the first two years of college should be free—again, a statement that has stronger support among the younger age group. Less than half believe that the amount of financial aid available today is sufficient. Given that, as reported earlier, 70 percent of respondents are attending or planning to attend a public four-year university or community college. These findings are of great concern for the future of the higher education business model practiced today. Older post-traditional students are more likely to agree that the education offered by private colleges is worth the extra cost.

PERCENT WHO AGREE WITH STATEMENT (BY AGE)

	20 or under	21 to 24	25 or older	All
College is affordable today	16%	23%	30%	26%
College isn't worth the cost anymore	41	44	32	36
There is enough financial aid available today	28	41	46	42
The first two years of college should be free	81	74	71	73
The education offered by private colleges is worth the extra cost	33	34	45	41

ATTITUDES TOWARD COST OF COLLEGE VERSUS QUALITY

In another testament to the attitudes about tuition costs, only 16 percent of respondents indicated that they strongly believe that cost and quality are highly correlated. The largest group—about 40 percent—is in the “somewhat” category. This is an important factor for institutions to consider as they continue to raise tuition. At some point, the student may just say, “It’s not worth it.”

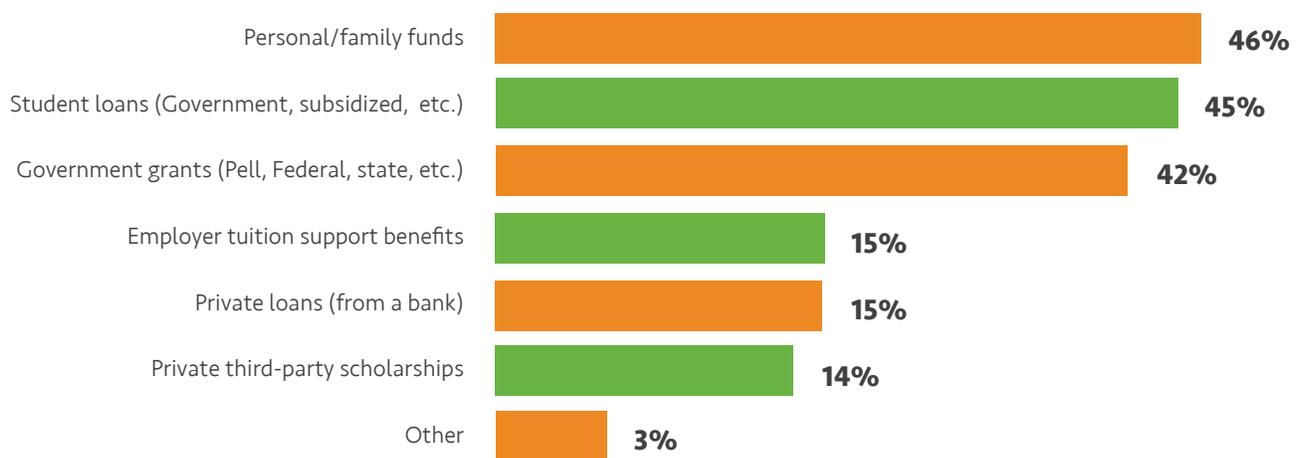
EXTENT TO WHICH HIGH COST EQUATED WITH HIGH QUALITY OF EDUCATION

1 - Not at all	7%
2	12
3 - Somewhat	43
4	22
5 - Very much	16

COURSE PAYMENT METHODS

Personal/family funds, government student loans, and government grants are the top three sources that post-traditional students use to pay for their programs.

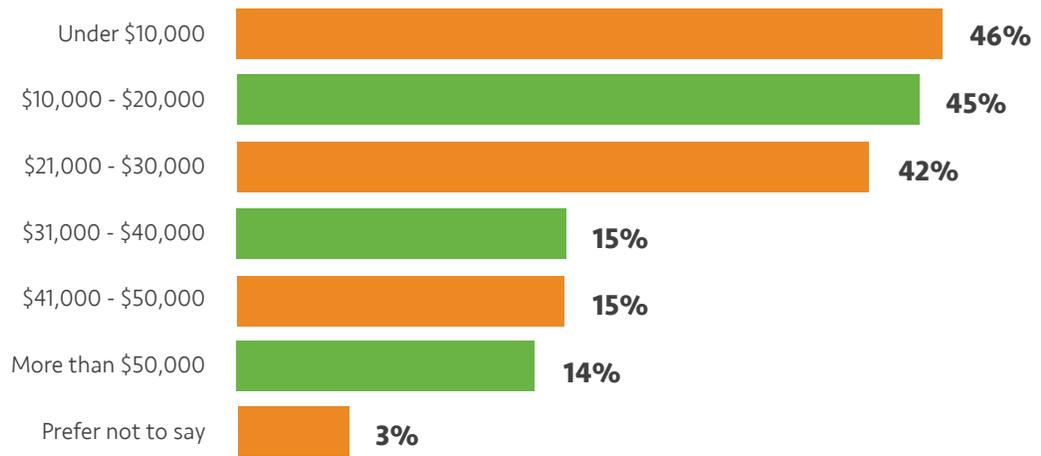
METHOD OF COURSE PAYMENT



Note that institutional scholarships were not included in the set of response options for this question. While the offering of scholarships or “discounts,” or the publication of a differential rate of tuition, is not currently a commonly advertised practice among institutions successfully serving the post-traditional student, we expect these options to become more prevalent.

INDEBTEDNESS

The median expected loan indebtedness is about \$24,000. The average indebtedness of the 2015 graduate, according to Mark Kantowitz⁷ is \$35,000, though this number includes both traditional and post-traditional students. For fully Pell-eligible students completing their programs in four years and paying 90 percent of tuition through loans and grants provides them with a Bachelor’s degree at less than \$50,000 or \$425/credit.

EXPECTED LOAN DEBT FOR UNDERGRADUATE EDUCATION

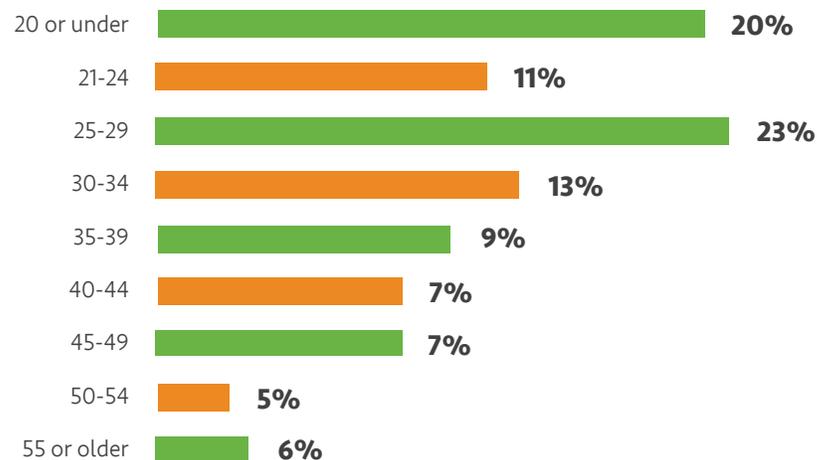
DEMOGRAPHICS

To say that the typical post-traditional college student is about 29 years of age; Caucasian by ethnicity; female and employed either full-time or part-time; and earning a median family income of between \$55,000 and \$60,000 does not do justice to the diversity of this population.

AGE AT TIME OF MOST RECENT ENROLLMENT

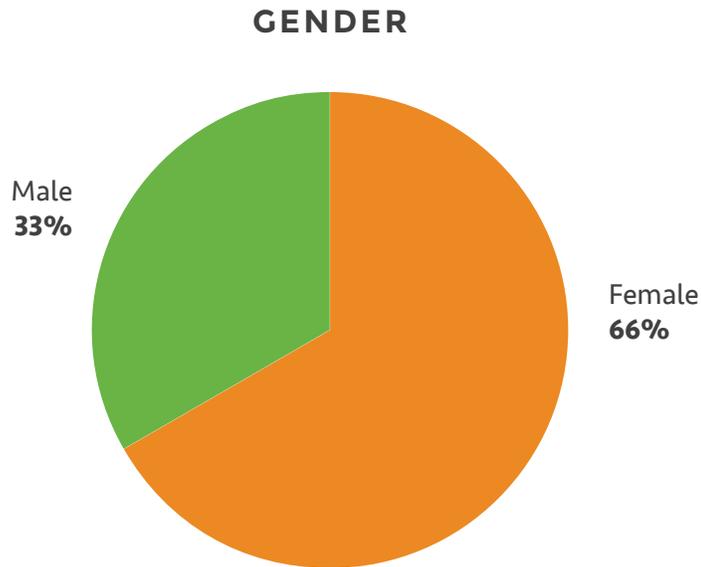
Slightly more than half of post-traditional students are 29 years of age or younger when they first enrolled or reenrolled in undergraduate education. About one-third were 24 years of age or younger. In short, over 50 percent or so of the post-traditional market is “younger” than older and do not necessarily fit the patterns of the traditional “adult” student returning to higher education. It is a far younger generation that for multiple reasons (as reported earlier) could not take the full-time day on-campus route to undergraduate education following high school or began undergraduate study but could not finish due to financial, family, and work reasons.

AGE AT TIME OF MOST RECENT ENROLLMENT



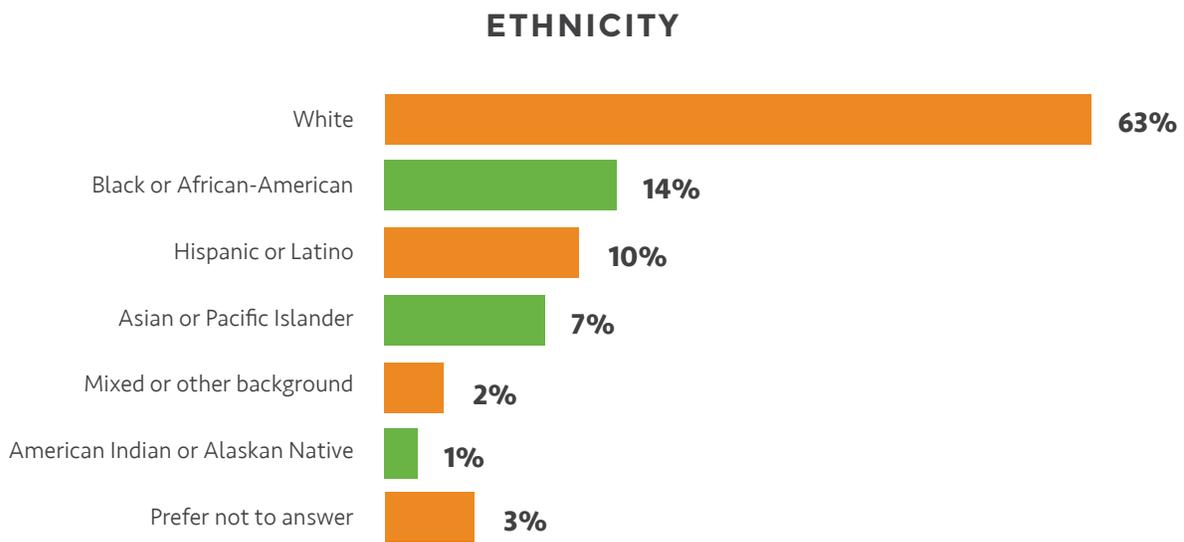
GENDER

Not surprisingly, about two-thirds of post-traditional students are female. This is similar to the traditional adult returning population, which is also dominated by women and, of course, the fact that the majority of undergraduates nationwide is also female.



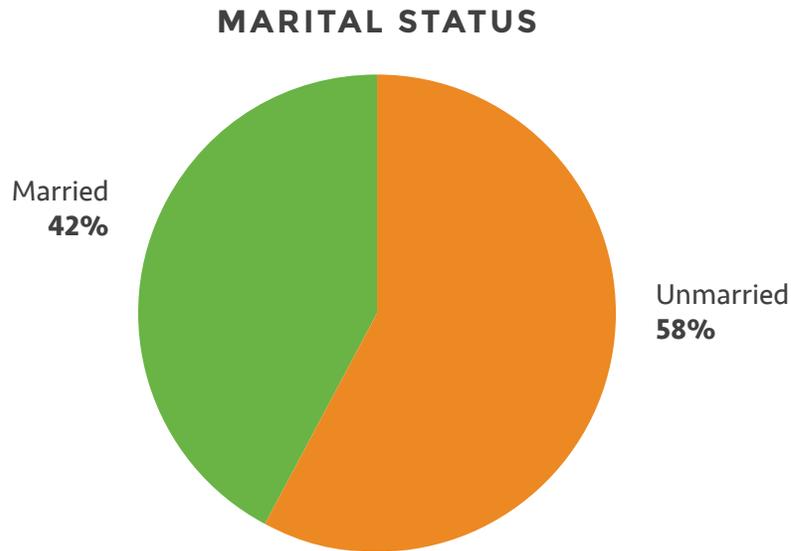
ETHNICITY

The ethnicity mix is similar to the most recently published data from the Census Bureau except for an underrepresentation of Hispanics or Latinos and an overrepresentation of Asians or Pacific Islanders.



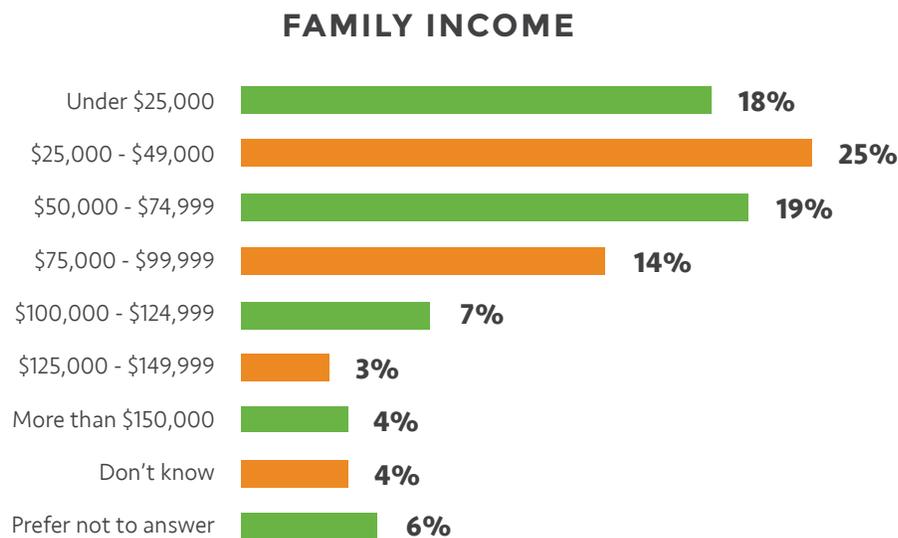
MARITAL STATUS

Post-traditional students are more often single than married. This is best explained by the large proportion of younger students within this population.



FAMILY INCOME

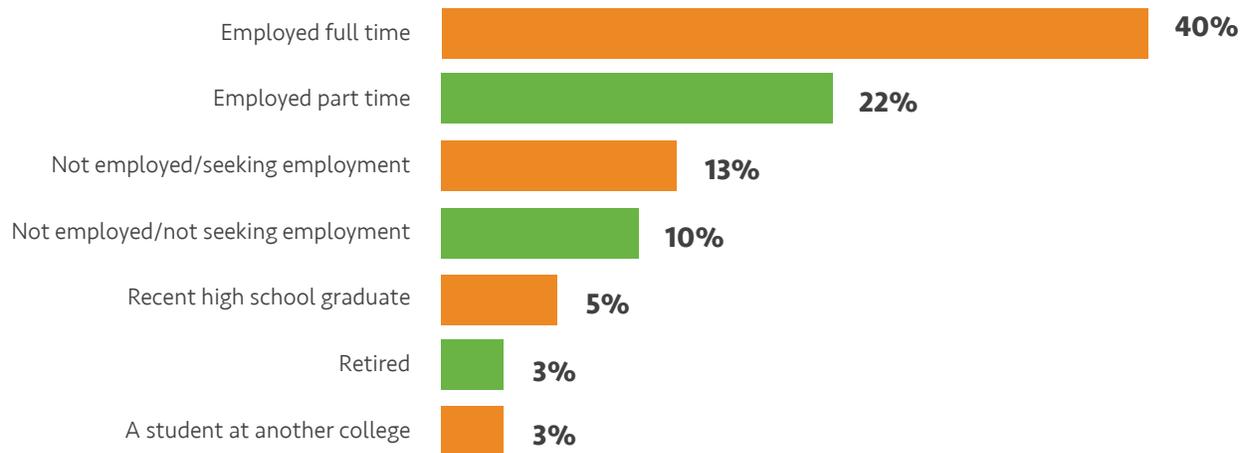
Fairly similar to Census Bureau figures nationwide for 2014, the median total family income for post-traditional students when they initially enrolled at their last institution is between \$50,000 and \$74,999.



EMPLOYMENT STATUS

The question about employment relates to the status of post-traditional students at the time they enrolled in their last undergraduate institution. About three-quarters are working full-time, part-time, or seeking employment.

EMPLOYMENT STATUS



SOURCES

¹http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d15/tables/dt15_302.60.asp?current=yes

²Recruiting the Non-traditional Student: Building a Modern Day Infrastructure That Both Creates And Captures Demand, Krekemeier, Plattform

³"Post-traditional Learners and the Transformation of Postsecondary Education: A Manifesto for College Leaders," Louis Soares, American Council on Education

⁴Nontraditional Students Are the New Majority | From the Bell Tower, Steven Bell, LibraryJournal

⁵[Nces.ed.gov/pubs2015/2015025.pdf](http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2015/2015025.pdf)

⁶[Nces.ed.gov/pubs2015/2015073.pdf](http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2015/2015073.pdf)

⁷<http://blogs.wsj.com/economics/2015/05/08/congratulations-class-of-2015-youre-the-most-indebted-ever-for-now/>

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Carol B. Aslanian is founder and president of Aslanian Market Research. She is a national authority on the characteristics and learning patterns of adult and post-traditional undergraduate and graduate students. She has made hundreds of presentations and has authored numerous articles and reports on the topic. For more than 20 years, she worked at the College Board in support of adult learning services. Ms. Aslanian has led market research projects for more than 300 colleges, universities, and educational agencies.

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