

Non-traditional Students – Leading the Charge to Change the Respect of Student Time in the Online Classroom

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Nontraditional students are multi-taskers. They work, they go to school, and they have family responsibilities. Sometimes they are successful with balancing their responsibilities. However, in many cases nontraditional students have little success. As Shapiro et al. (2015) reports, college cohorts who started in 2009 had graduation rates of 39.20% for students above the age of 24, compared to 58.6% for those who started their program under the age of 24. For online students, Patterson and McFadden (2009) drew a close correlation between being an older online student and student attrition. As a result, universities face two nontraditional student persistence impactors: nontraditional student external stressors and the intrinsic motivation needed to be a successful online nontraditional student (McClain-Smith, 2017). These impactors are areas that university's do not have control over and can provide little help...or perhaps they can?

While matriculating, online nontraditional students raise their children, deal with family crises, handle work duties and deadlines, while managing assignments, readings, and other learning activities within their courses. When external stressors become too much, nontraditional students are forced to prioritize their attention amongst family, work, and school. In turn, they face difficult choices. If stressors within college courses compete with stressors of life, students may choose to remove the easiest of all stressors, school. However, if instructional actions and course design reduce course stressors, students may be inclined to continue their courses and in turn complete their degree program.

One way to address these issues is by providing online instruction with respect of the nontraditional student's time. Student support services, along with course relevancy are often in the forefront of university online strategies. However, actual consideration of how course instruction and design affects student time constraints is an area in need of further exploration. Although instructors may allow some individual flexibility, in many cases course structure and learning activities may cause conflicts with nontraditional students' time constraints.

There are strategies available, in the area of respecting the time of online nontraditional college students, without reducing quality or instructional rigor. Key constituents such as college faculty, administrators, and instructional designers, have the ability to implement these strategies. As leaders within their universities, courses, and course design, these professional educators are the change agents needed when nontraditional students take online college courses. During phenomenological research data collection, the researcher interviewed online nontraditional students about their experiences within their online courses and the implementation of autonomy supportive actions by instructors or through course design. Autonomy supportive actions for the online classroom include (a) providing choices where students may select assignments based on preference, (b) providing rationale of the importance of the course, content, assignments, and (c) providing opportunities for personalization by allowing flexibility (Lee, Pate, & Cozart, 2015). Study results reflect that through the aforementioned actions, time, support, and relevancy are themes that reoccurred within participant statements. The Time theme had the most significant number of participant statements, accounting for 48%. The Support theme came in second with 39%, while the Personal Relevance theme had 13% of identified personal statements (McClain-Smith, 2017). As a result, time and the respect of time in particular, significantly influences students' ability to be intrinsically motivated to persist.

Of course, there are variants of online delivery across universities, with some courses being synchronous, asynchronous or blended. However, within various delivery methods there are course design and instructor delivery practices that negatively affect the matriculation of nontraditional students. Below are shared samples of participant statements (primary resources), reflecting nontraditional student thoughts and experiences while taking online courses. In some cases, students faced online courses that demand lengthy or excessive amounts of synchronous sessions. During participant interviews, when asked about synchronous lectures Participant 2 stated the following:

It can already be boring to sit through a lecture, but to sit through a lecture at your own computer with a lot of distractions at a time that might not be ideal to you can be very frustrating. I think I didn't gain a lot from those experiences. It was frustrating with the timing. I was one of the few people on a different time

zone. So that made it even more difficult because the timings of the sessions were based on the university. For most people that worked out well, but for me it did not work out well. Sometimes it felt like wasted time. It was frustrating. Part of the reason for choosing an online program is because you want to be able to get things done at a time that's good for you (McClain-Smith, 2017).

An additional practice experienced by study participants was the restriction of viewable course content. This practice limits the nontraditional online student from moving ahead as needed based on personal circumstances. When asked about course flexibility and the availability of content, Participant 27 stated the following:

I would have liked him to [put learning activities up all at once] because if I was off on the weekend I was working on schoolwork. I would have liked to see everything up front so I could work down the list. I don't know why he didn't post it. I requested it, but I don't know why everything wasn't posted at one time. Different professors are different. Some will post it all and some won't. In the back of my mind, I was a little worried, because I didn't know when I would find the time to do them (McClain-Smith, 2017).

Within the same flexibility topic, when asked about course structure, Participant 2 stated the following:

“Three weeks in there's going to be a project and then a paper and then a big project. If I knew that in the beginning, regardless of if I was able to start on these things it gave me the ability to plan out my time and know if I needed to start something early. I'm going to start on this project weeks before it's due and I will start on another at another time. Because of the fact that they planned it out so well with a clear structure, they made it very well organized for us. Some even provided the rubrics at the beginning of the course, even if we couldn't complete it; it gave us the ability to plan our time” (McClain-Smith, 2017).

Depending on the action, abating or implementing such actions may influence a nontraditional student's time and subsequently impact the student's intrinsic motivation to persist. Nevertheless, there are actions to implement within online courses to counteract students' demotivation to persist. There are derived strategies that respect the time of nontraditional students based on perspectives of student's struggles and successes experienced in online college courses. To help with the time crunch of nontraditional online students, these actions include providing structure, timing, and communications (See Figure 1).

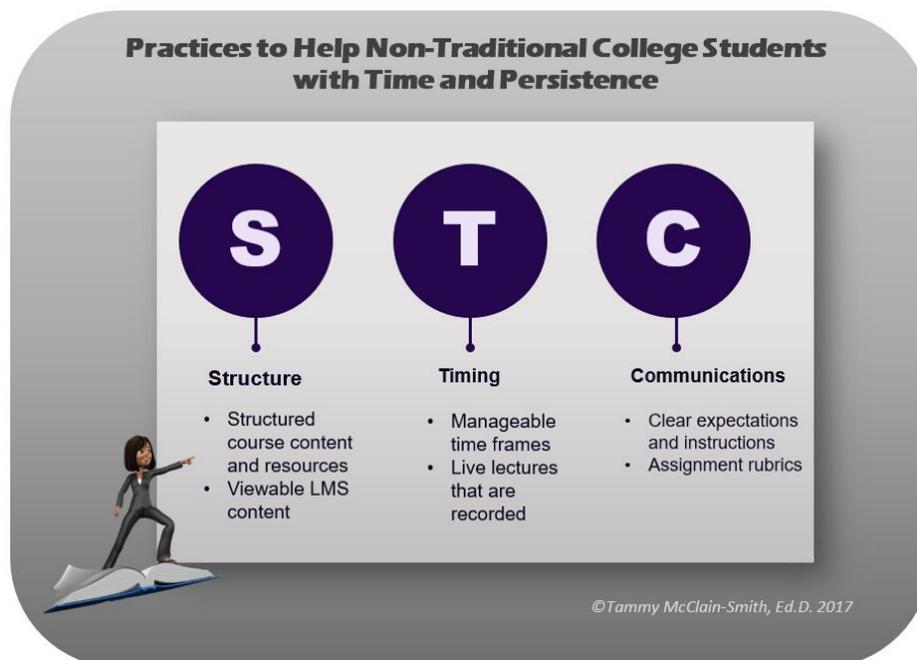


Figure 1. Recommended instructor and course design actions to assist online nontraditional students with time.

When examining course structure, well organized course layouts help eliminate confusion for the nontraditional student. Additionally, make learning management system (LMS) content viewable so that the nontraditional student can plan based on their time. In the area of timing, develop well-paced online courses, with learning activities provided within manageable timeframes. When using live lectures through a web conferencing tool, take into account lecture length and student access to lectures outside of live lecture timeframes. Recorded lectures are not only useful for nontraditional students, but also beneficial to traditional students. Finally, implement good communication by providing thorough instructions for learning activities. Additionally, rubrics are helpful in

communicating grading criteria. By using them, there will be no question of what level a student must perform to earn a particular grade. Most modern learning management systems provide the ability to embed rubrics within course assignment pages. Equally as important is providing the same rubric on assignment instructional documents for quick reference. The aforementioned actions are a sampling and considered as “low hanging fruit” that can be implemented easily within a course design or at a university policy level.

Autonomy supportive efforts that respect the nontraditional student’s time can increase intrinsic motivation within online courses. Hence, better management of student external stressors result in the reduction of course stressors. Actions are easily implemented and can assist in providing further support for the nontraditional student; whether actions are in an individual course or college-wide. These recommendations may lead towards the support of autonomy of nontraditional students. While continual research will drill down the exact impact of each action, the recommended actions are a direct result of student reactions and recommendations. As a result, the implementation of these actions could possibly lead to higher student course and program persistence.

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