

## Exploring Definitions of Success in College Students: A Systematic Review of the Literature

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### Abstract

*In the last few years, the number of nontraditional students in higher education has increased. This study explored the body of research on success in nontraditional college students. The results found that definitions of success ranged from positive, negative, and neutral. These definitions highlighted that the results may vary from intrinsic to extrinsic factors related to success. The size and constitution of nontraditional college student samples varied, as did the methodologies that were utilized. Implications for teaching, mentoring, and research are discussed.*

**Keywords:** Success, nontraditional, failure, strength based approach

### Introduction:

In recent years, the growth of nontraditional students seen within higher education has garnered the attention of colleges and universities across the globe. Administrators and faculty are taking a closer look at this population of students in order to explore ways to provide academic and other support to help adult students succeed or flourish in the changing landscape of higher education. Nontraditional students typically meet at least one of the following characteristics: 24 years of age and older, working full or part time, financially independent, with family and parent obligations (Sisselman-Borgia & MacMillan, 2018). Sometimes referred to as “mature” students, nontraditional adult students face significantly more challenges trying to balance their multiple roles (Chung et al., 2017; van Rhijh et al., 2016; Goncalves & Trunk, 2014; Wyatt, 2011).

The experiences and challenges of nontraditional students in two and four year educational programs has been studied in both the US and abroad (van Rhijh et al., 2016; Wong & Chui, 2019; Woods and Frogge, 2017; Goncalves & Trunk, 2014). Results of these studies indicate that life circumstances of nontraditional students create challenges and obstacles for the engagement and retainment in higher education. Although some researchers have examined the barriers nontraditional students face from different modes of studies (i.e., online, blended, and in person, or face to face classroom instruction), the outcomes indicate that both academic and emotional support, as well as the consideration of the differences in the needs of the adult learner is essential to

consider for success and retention of the nontraditional student (Wong & Chui, 2019; Blicek et al., 2019; Kimbark & Richardson, 2016; Wyatt, 2011; Golden, 2003). However, there is a need to examine the outcomes overall and determine how they may impact teaching and learning.

### ***Challenges for Nontraditional Students***

Nontraditional students have traditionally been an important component of higher education. Historically, nontraditional learners were integrated with the younger “typical” student, who was 17 to 21 years of age, no lag between post-secondary and college, and little work experience (Knowles, 1979; Kenner & Weinerman, 2011). There have been many studies done on these differences, from learning styles to the importance of life experiences in the higher education, and factors in the differences for successful outcomes (i.e. retention and completion of courses and degrees) between the two groups (Chung et al., 2017; Goncalves & Trunk, 2014; Knowles, 1979; Kenner & Weinerman, 2011; van Rhijn et al., 2016; Wyatt, 2011).

Some of the obstacles that nontraditional students face include: feeling isolated, perception that administration that does not differentiate between traditional and nontraditional students, lack of advocacy for nontraditional student needs, and no student organizational presence that represents them. These obstacles may create barriers for success and engagement within the larger college environment (Goncalves & Trunk, 2014). As noted by van Rhijn et al., (2016), nontraditional students may struggle with located needed resources and supports, as well as study options that fit their demanding schedules. Nontraditional students also face significant challenges managing a life and education balance. As a result, nontraditional students may be more likely to feel excluded, isolated, or misunderstood (van Rhijn et al., 2016).

Modality of learning with nontraditional students has also been examined with respect to success in nontraditional students. While one modality is not seen as preferential over another, details and expectations related to learning activities, availability of student support, and amount and type of engagement with faculty and staff has the potential to impact the overall experience and success in higher education (Blicek et al., 2019; MacMillan, 2020). Further, nontraditional students are more likely to examine the flexibility of administrative structures and if the college integrates the integration of practical life experiences into their degree (Blicek et al., 2019).

Despite that despite the challenges that adult students face, they possess both internal and external strengths. A combination of both intrinsic (internal) and extrinsic (external) factors have been found to be significant reasons for the success of nontraditional students. Intrinsic factors such as resiliency, internal motivation, expectations of achievement, and high levels of conscientiousness have all been found to be important in their success (Kaufman et al., 2008; Peterson, 2016; Wong & Chui, 2019). Wyatt (2011) found the more integrated and engaged the nontraditional students are in their academic program, the more likely they will to have student success. There is a need, however, to review all of the challenges and obstacles that nontraditional students may face.

Chung et al. (2017) in a study examining the difference in resilience between traditional and nontraditional students, nontraditional students had significantly higher resilience compared to traditional students. Resilience has been defined as the ability to adapt to daily stressors, and even crisis, while maintaining effective functioning (Greene, 2014). Despite the challenges and obstacles that may be experienced, nontraditional students may develop higher levels of resilience due to being able to overcome the many barriers they have faced accessing and succeeding in higher education (Chung et al., 2017).

Motivation has also been examined as another key factor related to success in courses and college overall. Mindfulness and internal motivation were identified as important in success in the courses (Kaufman et al., 2008). Further, motivation as well being goal driven, ability to multi-task, and autonomy have found to be related to completion of a degrees (Peterson, 2016).

Student success was associated with students’ high internal expectations for achievement (Golden, 2003; Wong & Chui, 2019). In order to achieve this, however, nontraditional students need to access to support and services (Wong & Chui, 2019). Adult students have unique skills, providing them a great opportunity to succeed in higher education. External resources (extrinsic) that have found to be helpful include learning activities that integrates adult life experiences into their educational experiences, student support specific for nontraditional students, and supportive campus environments, were related to higher graduation rates (Longerbeam, 2016; Kenner and Weinerman, 2011; Kimbark, 2016; MacMillan, 2020; van Rhijn et al., 2016). As some studies suggest the

importance of internal resources for student success, many also indicate the combined importance of internal strengths and external supports (Goto & Martin, 2009).

Strengths-based and resilience theories are at the core of social work practice and education. The strengths-based perspective provides a different way of looking at the challenges our students face in returning to higher education. It is a way to view their individual circumstances and characteristics, as well as unique abilities, resources, goals, motivations, and talents (strengths). The strengths approach includes assessing and utilizing people's resources (internal and external) and helping people use these effectively to attain their goals (Saleebey, 1997). When working with nontraditional adult students, applying the strengths perspective will provide an opportunity for faculty to teach our students in an effective and meaningful way. However, this needs to be assessed in the context of success with nontraditional students.

The literature suggests to administrators and faculty the importance of incorporating adult students' distinctive skills into their learning, with academic and emotional support, to increase their likelihood of retention and completion (Peterson, 2016; Jepsen & Tobolowsky, 2020; Wyatt, 2011; Goto, 2009; Goncalves & Trunk, 2014). Jepsen & Tobolowsky (2020) identified four areas to assist nontraditional students obtain their degree. They suggested colleges help students reestablish academic momentum, overcome financial challenges, receive institutional support, and integrate life experiences in learning, will help students with successful outcome.

As there has been an increase of interest in the need for retention and engagement of nontraditional students, it is an appropriate times to review previous the results of previous research in order to appraise our teaching and mentoring practices. The purpose of this article is to a) to summarize the research methodologies utilized; b) to synthesize the research findings from various disciplines as they relate to effectiveness and efficacy.

## ***Method***

### **Selection Criteria**

For this review, the selected articles were original research articles that examined success in nontraditional college students. The search was conducted between July and August 2020. Research articles were selected for the study if it focused on success in nontraditional college students and specifically include a sample of current nontraditional college students. Our search was not limited by the definition of success that was utilized, nor the age population of students as the definition of nontraditional covers a wide age range. Because the term success is often used as an umbrella term that often encompasses academic engagement, all articles were reviewed for operationalization of that term. Studies that examined interventions that were created to promote success, but not measure it, were excluded. All types of research were included in the search parameters (i.e., intervention, cross-sectional, observational, and qualitative) and no specific time frame was utilized in order to provide for a breadth and depth examination of the body of literature.

The eligibility criteria that was utilized for articles included:

1. Published in a peer-reviewed journal in English;
2. Included a sample of nontraditional college students;
3. Focused on success in college;
4. Assessed factors that impact success and/or exploring the nature of what it means.

Both authors searched for articles to in order to maximize the results. The following databases were included: Academic Search Complete, Associates Program Source, Canadian Reference Center, Cinahl Plus, Education Source, ERIC, Health Source: Nursing/Academic Edition, Library Abstracts with Full Text, MedLine, Professional Development Collection, Psyc Articles, Psych Info, Social Sciences Full text, SocIndex, and Teacher Reference Center. The following search terms were utilized: success, academic success, college and nontraditional students. Forty articles were initially identified. Five articles were removed as they were duplicates found by both authors, five were not appropriate as they were not research articles, and 17 were not utilized as no definition for success could be identified, did not include information about the college population under study, and focused on other primary outcomes (e.g. satisfaction with college, satisfaction with online courses). A total of 13 articles were included for the review.

Each article was examined for its research design and key findings. The data from the articles were then analyzed by both authors utilizing a form guided by the work of Littell, Corcoran, and Pillai (2008).

### Rating Criteria

This review included articles with quantitative and qualitative methodologies. It was difficult to apply one specific criteria to all of the studies. This summary provides for a comprehensive view of defining and exploring success in college students. Please see Table 1 for a summary of each article that was included in this review.

	<b>Sample</b>	<b>Methodology</b>	<b>Definition of Success</b>	<b>Outcomes</b>
Longerbeam, S. (2016)	709 first-year and senior students and 8 upper-division nontraditional	Mixed methods	Graduation	Supportive campus environments and academic challenge predicted graduation.
Peterson, S. (2016)	15 student parent participants	Qualitative	Degree completion	Clear goals, motivation, persistence, multi-tasking with life issues, and empowerment
Chung, E., Turnbull, D., & Chur-Hansen, A. (2017)	442 undergraduate students, with 113 nontraditional	Quantitative	Level of resilience	Higher resilience compared to traditional students
Jepson, J. A., & Tobolowsky, B. F. (2020)	6 males	Qualitative	Obtained Bachelors Degrees	Students can have numerous strengths and skills they bring to college completion
Blieck, Y., Kauwenberghs, K., Zhu, C., Struyven, K., Pynoo, B., & DePryck, K. (2019)	College students	Qualitative	Dropout and retention	Quality of learning and student support as priority
Kimbark, K. Peters, M., Richardson, T. (2016)	197 participants in a student success course and 235 individuals not enrolled in the course	Mixed Methods	Grades in specific courses and level of engagement	Those in the course were persistent and were able to achieve good scores in English and Math
Spitzer, T. (2000)	355 full-time undergraduate	Qualitative	Collegiate goals, GPA and career decidedness	Nontraditional students had higher GPAs and greater decidedness
Goncalves, S. A., & Trunk, D. (2014)	10 students from a small private college in NJ	Qualitative	Obstacles to success	Feeling isolated, reporting that administration does not attend to their needs nor do they wish to, and no organizations for adult students
Golden, S. (2003)	1,000 GED graduates	Quantitative	GPA	GPA was related to self-efficacy, confidence, and self-esteem
Wong, B., & Chiu, Y.-L. T. (2019)	30 nontraditional students	Qualitative	Completing the program	Completion was related to internal drive to finish the degree
Kaufman, J. C., Agars, M. D., & Lopez-Wagner, M. C. (2008)	315 nontraditional undergrads	Quantitative	First quarter GPA	Presence of organizational skills, motivation, and drive
van Rhijn, T. M., Lero, D. S., Bridge, K., & Fritz, V. A. (2016)	270 “mature” undergrads in Ontario, Canada	Mixed Methods	Issues affecting learning	Unable to access resources and services. Felt that there was not enough options for adult students. Found it difficult to finding a balance.
MacMillan, T. (2020)	15 nontraditional students	Qualitative	Definitions of success	Personal definitions of success and failure in college are tied to intrinsic and extrinsic sources

## **Results**

### **Summary of Success Definition**

The definition of success was categorized into one of three categories: positive, negative, or neutral. A neutral definition of success was categorized by articles that examined grade point average, grades in a particular course, or completion of a degree (Golden, 2003; Jepson & Tobolowsky, 2020; Kaufman et al., 2008; Longerbeam, 2016; Peterson, 2016; Spitzer, 2000). A positive definition of success was categorized by articles focusing on aspects of resilience, engagement in learning, or persistence in learning (Chung et al., 2017; Kimbark et al., 2016; MacMillan, 2020; Wong & Chiu, 2019). A negative definition was categorized by articles that examined aspects of dropout, attrition, or obstacles (Blieck et al., 2019; Goncalves & Trunk, 2014; van Rhijn et al., 2016).

### **Summary of Samples Utilized**

The samples utilized varied in size and characteristics. In several articles, the sample size was large with over 100 people (Chung et al., 2017; Kaufman et al., 2008; Kimbark et al., 2016; Longerbeam, 2016; MacMillan, 2020; Spitzer, 2000; van Rhijn et al., 2016); others utilized a sample with less than 30 non-traditional students (Blieck et al., 2019; Golden, 2003; Goncalves & Trunk, 2014; Jepson & Tobolowsky, 2020; Peterson, 2016; Wong & Chiu, 2019).

The definition of nontraditional varied in all of the studies. While some defined this by an age of older than 21 (Blieck et al., 2019; Chung et al., 2017; Golden, 2003; Jepson & Tobolowsky, 2020; Kaufman et al., 2008; Kimbark et al., 2016; Longerbeam, 2016; Spitzer, 2000; van Rhijn et al., 2016; Wong & Chiu, 2019), while others defined this by a particular characteristic (Goncalves & Trunk, 2014; MacMillan, 2020; Peterson, 2016).

### **Summary of the Research Designs & Data Collection Methods**

There were a variety of qualitative and quantitative methods utilized in the articles that ranged from cross-sectional designs to qualitative narratives. The data collection methods were also very different, including mixed methodologies (Kimbark et al., 2016; Longerbeam, 2016; MacMillan, 2020). Cross-sectional surveys were the most popular method and type of data collection (Chung et al., 2017; Kaufman et al., 2008; van Rhijn et al., 2016). In qualitative studies, interviews were the most common (Blieck et al., 2019; Golden, 2003; Goncalves et al., 2014; Jepson & Tobolowsky, 2020; Peterson, 2016; Spitzer, 2000; Wong & Chiu, 2019).

### **Summary of Outcomes**

The outcomes of the studies can be categorized as intrinsic or extrinsic in nature. Intrinsic is defined as self-expectations (Golden, 2003; Wong & Chiu, 2019), presence of goals (Kaufman et al., 2008; Peterson, 2016), motivation or self-empowerment (Kaufman et al., 2008; Peterson, 2016), ability to multi-task (Peterson, 2016), level of self-confidence (Golden, 2003), development of personal academic strategies (Jepson & Tobolowsky, 2020), and higher resilience (Chung et al., 2017).

Extrinsic was defined as engagement with instructor or classmates (MacMillan, 2020), academic support (Blieck et al., 2019; Kimbark et al., 2016), institutional structure that engages the student (Jepson & Tobolowsky, 2020; Longerbeam, 2016), quality of learning activities in the course (Blieck et al., 2019; Kimbark et al., 2016), financial difficulty (Jepson & Tobolowsky, 2020), administrative inflexibility (Goncalves & Trunk, 2014), lack of student organizations (Goncalves & Trunk, 2014), difficulty accessing services (van Rhijn et al., 2016), and limited study options (van Rhijn et al., 2016).

## **Discussion**

This study explored the body of research on success in nontraditional college students. The results found that definitions of success included aspects of positive, negative, and neutral. These definitions highlighted that the results may vary from intrinsic to extrinsic factors related to success. The size and constitution of nontraditional college student samples varied.

The distinction between positive, negative, or neutral definitions of success has implications for interpretation of the findings. Success in the academic setting can be shaped by the strengths and obstacles that a student may face (Blieck et al., 2019; Golden, 2003; Kimbark & Richardson, 2016; MacMillan, 2020; Wong & Chiu, 2019; Wyatt, 2011). Success defined as intrinsic can mentor or strengthen the nontraditional own capabilities, while success

defined as extrinsic can be the provision or placement of a structure to meet the needs of this unique and ever-growing group. Creating an integrated approach of access, engagement, and support that combines aspects of internal and external success may be the formula to best meet the needs of nontraditional students (Kaufman et al., 2008; MacMillan, 2020; Peterson, 2016; Wong & Chui, 2019; Wyatt, 2011)

Many of the colleges or universities in this sample seemed to be traditional in nature as a large part of their samples were in the traditional age group. The findings from the studies suggest that there may be an increased presence on these campuses by nontraditional students. Examining the experiences of a truly mixed campus of traditional and nontraditional may be necessary as they have very different needs (Woods and Frogge, 2017). There is a potential that the academic support and services provided on traditional campuses does not meet the needs of nontraditional students.

The methodologies that were seen in this review were mixed. Given the broad range in the ways that success was defined in the articles that were found, this suggests that success is truly a complex and multi-faceted topic. Further, as characteristics of the samples that were utilized were very broad, it highlights that a term such as non-traditional does not encapsulate all individuals and the results may not be generalizable to all (MacMillan, 2020). One suggestion for future research is to replicate the methodologies and definitions of success utilized with other populations.

As research continues to examine the unique needs, strengths, and challenges of nontraditional students, additional methods, samples, and definitions of success need to be included in order to provide for a larger understanding of what defines success in nontraditional students. As noted above, success may be a multidimensional concept and nontraditional students may be too large to encapsulate into one. The studies in this summary appeared to only utilize samples drawn from one college or university. This may limit the characteristics seen in the sample and introduce a potential sampling bias as only those who are taking courses and/or succeeding may have been likely to participate. As such, studies that could examine the needs, strengths, and challenges of all students, those who are facing difficulties and those who aren't, should be included. More information about each student and their unique educational experiences should also be examined in order to understand who the population of nontraditional students is. Being able to differentiate the different sub populations of nontraditional students and how they define success is crucial in order to retain and engage this ever-growing population.

### ***Limitations of this Literature Review***

This paper attempts to summarize the literature on success in nontraditional college students. It should be noted that there is a dearth of research in this area. This review may have been limited by the databases that were utilized to search for articles. These may not all inclusive of this multidisciplinary topic and student population. As noted in the inclusion criteria, only articles in English were included. Studies in other languages may exist and could have presented additional information that would have benefited this summary. Finally, as there was a multitude of quantitative and qualitative designs, data collection methods, types of participants included, and wide range of definitions, it was impossible to conduct a statistical analysis in order to bias.

### ***Implications for Practice***

The results of this review highlight the need for supportive environments and a multi-faceted strength based approach to teaching and mentoring of nontraditional college students. It is clear through the varied findings that adult students have inherent strengths that they bring to higher education. Their varied life experiences, motivation for success, and ability to multitask are just a few of the skills they bring to the academic environment. Providing college credits for life experience, providing increased opportunities for development of social support (peers and instructors), increasing access to academic and other administrative support services, are some few approaches that can easily be developed into practice.

The strengths- based perspective provides a different way of looking at the challenges our nontraditional students face in returning to higher education. It is a way to view their individual circumstances and characteristics in light of their abilities and competencies. The strengths approach includes utilizing people's internal and external resources and helping people use these effectively to attain their goals (Saleebey, 1997). One way to achieve this is through the use of credit for life experience, known as Prior Learning Assessment (PLA; CAEL, 2017). The academic benefits of PLA's have been demonstrated through multiple studies through the CAEL Institute, and



include early degree completion rates and increased overall student learning (CAEL, 2017). Providing college credit for learning through PLA is a way to validate a student's knowledge and experience in a way that emphasizes their strengths and abilities.

Identifying or developing social and emotional support for individuals is another important component of the strength's perspective (Saleebey, 1997). It is also necessary for colleges and universities to provide opportunities for development of social support among peers and instructors (MacMillan, 2020). The presence of meaningful connections has a dramatic effect on learning, whereby college feels less like an academic set of programs and courses and more about a place of learning (Chambliss, 2014; Laurian-Fitzgerald, 2015). Formal and informal social networking events, class group interactions, peer and faculty mentoring programs, and student organizations are just a few examples of encouraging programmatic opportunities in higher education. Supportive relationships are another essential factor for student's successful attainment of their educational and professional goals.

Lastly, employing external resources is another important element of both the strengths perspective and student success. As noted in the findings, adult students may experience accessibility issues with support and resources due to the need to balance multiple roles. Many adult students access to academic support services (i.e. writing, math, technical and computer access) weekday evenings and weekends to accommodate their personal and professional schedules. Accessibility to other student support services, i.e. financial aid, registrar and bursar's office should also be available during evening and weekend hours.

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