Contemporary college students want cost-efficient and flexible schooling options.

An insights report by U.S. News & World Report’s Marketing and Business Intelligence Teams and Strayer University
TIME & MONEY

Contemporary college students want cost-efficient and flexible schooling options.

U.S. News & World Report’s Marketing and Business Intelligence Teams, together with Strayer University, sought to uncover how students’ backgrounds and circumstances impact their attitudes and choices with higher education. We surveyed 1,000 adults of various ages nationwide, collecting their thoughts on why and how they attend school.

What we found is that there’s been a sea change to the definition of a “student.” These individuals aren’t unencumbered minors receiving financial support from parents and indecisive on how to springboard into life. Many are in their mid-twenties or older and are juggling real-world responsibilities when they pursue or complete their degree.

As a result, contemporary college students are more focused on the tangible when choosing, experiencing and assessing their education: They want programs that are comprehensive, cost-efficient, flexible and utilitarian.
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Traditional vs. Nontraditional
According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), a nontraditional student is defined by the relationship between his or her age, financial circumstances and enrollment patterns. Still, the NCES notes this isn’t precise.

For the survey, we decided to first categorize a traditional student: Someone who pursued a Bachelor’s degree full-time while under age 25 and who was also claimed as a dependent on someone else’s tax return during their schooling.
Traditional vs. Nontraditional

Branching off that, **nontraditional students could be any variation on the previous theme**:

- He or she may have attended school full-time, but supported him or herself
- He or she could have started undergraduate studies when they were 18, but completed their degree when they were 27

**The Bottom Line:**

The factors that make a student **nontraditional** are universal. Consequently, nontraditional students are, inevitably, more common.
Traditional vs. Nontraditional

32% of survey participants were nontraditional students.

75% of nontraditional students completed their undergraduate degree.

14% of survey participants were considered traditional students.

81% of traditional students completed their undergraduate degree.

ADDITIONAL INSIGHTS

• Nontraditional students were more likely than traditional students to be African American or Hispanic.

• Nontraditional students are more likely to work full-time.

• Twenty-four percent of nontraditional students make between $60,001 and $80,000 annually.

• Sixty-seven percent of nontraditional students are their household’s primary breadwinner.
Reasons &
Regret
Education remains an important rite of passage. Just over half the panelists felt a degree is important. 60 percent felt a college degree would help them earn more.
Reasons & Regret

There were significant differences in the reasons traditional versus nontraditional students pursued a Bachelor’s. Nontraditional students had practical rationales for wanting that first degree. Meanwhile, traditional students’ reasoning was more rooted in expectations.

**Key Differences**

- Traditional students were more likely to list a desire to get a job as the chief reason for pursuing a Bachelor’s (49 percent, versus 35 percent of nontraditional students), but it’s important to note that most nontraditional students were working full-time already.
- Also notable: 23 percent of nontraditional students said they pursued a Bachelor’s degree to advance at their current job, compared to only 3 percent of traditional students.
Those surveyed also expressed little regret in pursuing a degree.

**DO YOU REGRET PURSUING YOUR DEGREE?**

- Associate: 11%
- Bachelor’s: 7%
- Master’s: 9%

*Feeling the degree wasn’t worth the money was the prevailing source of said regret.*

**REGRET IN NOT PURSUING A DEGREE**

48%

Of those panelists who didn’t pursue a higher education said they regret that decision.
The C’s of Choice: Cost & Convenience
Students have firm reasons for why they choose to attend college, but then, how do they decide which college to attend?
The C’s of Choice: Cost & Convenience

Among both nontraditional and traditional students, programs and total cost were the top factors influencing school choice. But once more, traditional and nontraditional students break off on the other contributing factors that weigh into their decisions.

When picking a school, traditional students are more likely to care about look and feel, such as:

- The overall reputation of the institution: 53%
- The quality of the faculty: 33%
- Campus aesthetics: 24%
- Quality of social life: 22%

Meanwhile, nontraditional students care more about convenience and amenities:

- Scheduling flexibility: 24%
- Availability of online courses: 12%
- Tutoring services: 5%

Scheduling Classes

Non traditional students are more likely to take evening and weekend classes and to take 25 percent or more of their courses online.
Conclusion
Conclusion

Prospective, present and past students weigh many monetary considerations about college

It’s a factor for those who didn’t pursue higher education, for those chasing a degree to find a job and for those paying tuition, either out of pocket or with the help of loans and grants. Therefore it’s easy to infer that offering more affordable programs, as well as accessible information on funding options, could influence the number of people of pursue an Associate’s degree and higher.

Expanding access to education could also change the landscape

Although we didn’t directly ask students how they’d wish to change educational systems, the timbre of survey responses indicates that students seek more flexibility when scheduling and taking classes.

Increased flexibility would particularly benefit nontraditional students

The survey findings could be interpreted to show that pursuing a degree came with more perceived obstacles for this group:

• They were also more likely to feel they’d experienced challenges in obtaining it
• They were more likely to cite scheduling flexibility and a lack of personalized pace of instruction as variables that would have improved the learning experience
• They were more likely than traditional students to select debt as the greatest disadvantage of their degree

Students generally noted the benefits of their education, and the survey found nontraditional students were more likely to consider increased self-esteem as one of the benefits of their degree.
HOW IT ALL WENT DOWN: This is a report prepared by Strayer University and the U.S. News & World Report marketing and business intelligence teams regarding higher education students. The U.S. News editorial staff was not involved in the preparation of the report, and the report does not necessarily reflect the views of the U.S. News editorial staff. U.S. News & World Report and Strayer University administered this collaborative survey online between late August and early September 2016 with 1,000 adult panelists nationwide. Some panelists didn’t pursue further education after high school and were asked questions about the reasons for that decision. However, the meat of the study was devoted to the choices and experiences of panelists who pursued and completed Associate’s, Bachelor’s, Master’s and Doctorate degrees. Those participants were grouped into two categories: Traditional students, those who pursued a Bachelor’s degree while under age 25 and were claimed as dependent on someone’s tax return for the duration of their undergraduate studies; and nontraditional students, those whose circumstances deviated from the aforementioned traditional scenario in any way.