



# 2015 CEW Nontraditional Student Study

An In-depth Examination of the Student Experience at the University of  
Michigan, Ann Arbor Campus

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## Executive Summary

### **WHY THE NONTRADITIONAL STUDENT EXPERIENCE MATTERS**

During the past decade, much of the focus on colleges and universities has been on the dramatic transformation of the American student population. This focus has centered on the organizational, fiscal and political challenges driven by the country's rapidly shifting demographics, raising critical and complex questions about equity, access, social and educational outcomes and the institutional structures that support and hinder them. By contrast, less attention has been paid to a longstanding member of the U.S. student population: the so-called "nontraditional" student. As postsecondary education becomes an expected norm in the workforce, numbers and percentages of nontraditional students are increasing nationwide (Atlantic Monthly, 2011; NCES, 2002; NCES, 2015; Taniguchi and Kaufman, 2005).

The term "nontraditional" student is an imprecise one, not always well defined, although undergraduate status, financial independence, age and part-time enrollment are often associated with it (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Horn, 1996). (See the Literature Review section of the full report for definitions used in previous studies.) Several scholars have pointed out the limitations of the term "nontraditional" in its failure to include the diversity of backgrounds and experiences that shape students' educational experiences (e.g., Bonner et al, 2015; Trowler, 2015). Nearly ten years ago, the National Center for Educational Statistics (2002) took an important formal step in defining a nontraditional student as "any student, regardless of age, whose primary life roles and responsibilities exist separately from the university and take precedence over the role of student in time of crises or stress." Because meanings of the term continue to evolve with the massification of higher education and successive studies, we placed defining the term "nontraditional" (henceforth NT) at the heart of this study.

In addition to the imprecise definitions of what a nontraditional student is, the literature identifies lower rates of persistence and degree attainment among nontraditional students (Horn, 1996; NCES, 2002). Because elite public research institutions, such as U-M, have become increasingly selective and other types of postsecondary educational institutions (e.g., community colleges and regional universities) have absorbed more nontraditional students, the challenges and obstacles that face nontraditional students on campuses like ours have drifted off the radar. Nonetheless, nontraditional students bring economic, cultural and educational dimensions of

diversity to campus. Given this reality, the research team wanted to ascertain which challenges to inclusion and educational success nontraditional students face on the Ann Arbor campus. In addition, we wanted to determine how the institution, and CEW in particular, could reposition itself to better assist them.

Women now comprise the majority of undergraduate students across the nation. They also, disproportionately, exhibit the characteristics associated with NT students in the literature—financial independence, part-time study, caregiving status, and single-parent status (Jones & Watson, 1990; NCES, 2011; Women’s Legal Defense and Education Fund, 2013). Women are, historically, CEW’s main constituency. Moreover, graduate students constitute a full one third of the University of Michigan (U-M) student population, as well as the majority of CEW’s participants. One aspect of this project, therefore, is to explore the overlap between CEW’s core constituencies and the NT student experience. It is our hope that this study serves to inform the literature in these several dimensions and inspires other researchers to follow-up with their own context-bound work on nontraditional students.

## **SUMMARY OF FINDINGS**

The findings outlined below are based on a qualitative research study, mounted by the U-M Center for the Education of Women in Spring and Summer of 2015. The study involved 12 focus groups composed of students, faculty, and staff, held at the Ann Arbor campus. In total, more than 22 hours of audio were transcribed, coded, and analyzed. This study represents the most in-depth examination of the nontraditional student experience at U-M in recent years. It is our hope that decision-makers, faculty, and staff at the university will use these findings to improve the curricular and co-curricular experiences of nontraditional students on the Ann Arbor campus.

## ***I. Defining the “Nontraditional” Student***

### **“Nontraditional” defined in relation to “Traditional” U-M Students**

Many of the interrelated categories of nontraditional status, as described by student participants in the study, were offered in reference to what they perceived as a “traditional” U-M student. The University of Michigan, like other institutions of its Carnegie classification, boasts a highly selective student body that reflects the historical antecedents of American higher education. Its students are a privileged group. They are primarily white, affluent<sup>1</sup>, and live on campus, and are able-bodied and heterosexual. It is, therefore, not surprising that many students who do not conform to these characteristics describe feeling marginalized on campus—though they might well be in the majority, or at least a member of a sizable cohort, at a different institution. We highlight this definition of the “nontraditional” U-M student as oppositional or “other” to the traditional U-M student in order to underscore the particularity of these findings to the U-M Ann Arbor campus.

### **Intersectionality emerged as a strong theme in the data**

This finding is reflected in the survey of identifiers that respondents completed when signing up for a focus group and it is reinforced by qualitative data from the focus groups. While six students (8% of the sample) invoked a single pivotal background characteristic or experience in response to the prompt “select the life circumstances or identities that distinguish you from other members of your class or cohort,” most identified multiple markers of NT status. The median number of NT markers chosen by students in the study was four. Thirty-eight percent of respondents (30) described their nontraditional status as a combination of five or more identities or life experiences. An additional 29% of the sample (23) used an open response box that we provided to add the description of a nontraditional marker they viewed as significant. The strength of this finding reminds us that the tendency to lump students into distinct and easily quantifiable categories of identity (by gender, race, etc.) falls short of reflecting the challenges and triumphs that accompany multiple and intersecting identities.

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<sup>1</sup> 2013 Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) data indicates that 68% of U-M entering undergraduates come from households with annual incomes of \$100,000 or more, and that a full quarter of the population comes from households with annual incomes of \$250,000 or more.

### **The NT experience in relation to social inequality**

The fact that the definition of the term “nontraditional” continues to evolve means that different populations are being considered by different research teams using the same nomenclature. Complicating matters, definitions of NT have expanded over time to include more identity groups and more types of qualifying life experiences. (See Literature Review for a deeper discussion of these changes.) Rather than beginning with an a priori definition, it seemed to us that listening to student definitions of what it is to be a nontraditional student was the most inclusive (and most accurate) place to start.

The drift toward inclusiveness might confuse readers or be understood as an all-encompassing impulse that essentially means analyzing difference in its broadest sense. We wish to be clear that this is not our intent. Rather, we believe that using three guiding principles to investigate nontraditional student populations obviates the need for a priori definitions. Alongside context and intersectionality, this study can be best understood as an *investigation of social inequality in a higher educational setting*. While this characterization cuts across what we understand to be the diversity discourse in higher education, it also includes the perspectives of students who do not often receive a lot of attention. Among such students are those with the unique experiences of caregiving, with the challenges of being from a low SES background surrounded by affluent peers, or those who must disclose their identities in order to receive assistance (such as students with disabilities or members of the LGBTQ community).

### **The majority of NT students in the study, as is true nationally, are female**

Female students represent the majority of nontraditional students enrolled in undergraduate programs and the fastest growing segment of adult students in higher education (Lake Howell, 2004; Lorentzen, 2014). Eighty percent of the students in this study were female. A gender skew is consistent with the literature and reflects some characteristics associated with mixed gender NT populations (e.g., delayed educational entry and single parent status). The fact that NT students nationally and at U-M Ann Arbor are disproportionately female highlights the important overlap between these two groups and its aptness as a topic of research by CEW.

## **The term “nontraditional student” can be appropriately applied to graduate students, as well as to undergraduates**

This study examined the aptness of using the terminology “nontraditional,” not just to refer to undergraduates, but to the graduate student population, as well. Using phenomenological methods, in which research subjects self-identify with the topic of the study, we found that both graduate students and undergraduates gravitated toward the term as one that held meaning and resonated with their experiences. Analyses revealed that there was considerable overlap in what markers or background characteristics each of these two groups associated with their nontraditional status. A prefocus group survey indicated that the five most frequently cited nontraditional markers for both graduate students and undergraduates were age, being a person of color, commuting to campus, first generation status and being a caregiver.

## ***II. Nontraditional Student Experiences on the Ann Arbor Campus***

### **NT students report positive aspects to their experience on campus**

Notwithstanding the fact that many of the self-identified characteristics of nontraditional students in the study are associated with underserved and marginalized populations in higher education, students in the study identified several areas where their nontraditional status is beneficial to themselves, to other students, and to the educational enterprise as a whole. Students pinpoint resilience and a variety of life experiences as advantages while they navigated their studies. They share compelling stories of staff and faculty going above and beyond their assigned duties to provide support and help. Finally, they posited that their presence on campus played a valuable role in expanding the diversity of perspectives.

### **NT students report negative aspects to their experience at U-M Ann Arbor**

There are also aspects of the nontraditional experience that are negative. Negative experiences include a culture of microassaults and microinsults: safety concerns, slurs, stereotypes, shaming, and the misrepresentation and appropriation of culture. Students in the study also reported microinvalidations, such as feeling invisible and ignored, feeling invalidated and feeling tokenized. Specific areas where NT students reported needing more support are: in the creation of community; recognition of the value they bring to campus; not finding central

sources of information to navigate challenges; and challenges related to the provision of childcare.

### **Evidence suggests that while there are convergences, definitions and experiences also differ between undergraduate NT students and graduate NT students**

Crosstabs from the prefocus group survey indicate that undergraduates in the study were more likely than other students in the study to identify their race as a component of their nontraditional status. By contrast, graduate students were more likely than the sample as a whole to identify their age, caregiving or first-generation status as hallmarks of nontraditional status. Commuter status was the sole variable for which graduate students and undergraduates reported similar percentages. In the focus group discussions, undergraduates used more time to explore identity and social differences related to SES, race, disability, ethnicity, and LGBTQ status. By contrast, graduate students focused more of their comments on experiences such as conflicting work-family obligations and struggles to find funding. While this study provides an exploratory foray into these differences, further quantitative work with the aim of broad generalizations between the two groups of self-identified NT students would be useful.

### **NT students report difficulties with health, wellness and relationships to faculty, staff, and peers**

Analyses of the focus group data revealed two overarching themes. First, stress and anxiety had a debilitating effect on health and wellness. Respondents described a variety of specific sources of tension, including social isolation and the need to balance school with work and home life. The inability to find or to create community was a consistent thread; several focus group participants commented that these forums were the first place where they had encountered a safe space to engage with peers who had similar experiences. After the study ended, a focus group participant founded a support group for nontraditional undergraduates called the Michigan Organization for Nontraditional Students (MONTs).

A related second vector of marginalization that emerged from the data was the difficulty that nontraditional students experienced establishing relationships with faculty, staff and peers. Respondents to the study reported instances of stigmatization, and issues of fairness and trust as obstacles to the process of building strong relationships with each of these three constituencies.

### **NT students perceive the financial aid system as inadequate to their needs**

A strong current running through discussions of SES and financial aid in the focus groups revolved around normative notions of who the traditional student is and the needs he or she exhibits. Nontraditional student respondents identified a number of ways in which the financial aid structures fail to account for the particularity of their situations. In the report, we examine *the assumptions undergirding the failures of the financial aid system for this portion of the U-M population* (see Table 2. Student Perspectives on the Assumptions of the Financial System). Issues shared by respondents related to financial stress were mostly linked to child and eldercare responsibilities, lack of access to credit or financial support from family members, and the inability to generate extra resources needed to participate in social activities.

### **NT students in the STEM Fields experience extremes in marginalization**

Analyses revealed that while many of the challenges and obstacles experienced by students in non-STEM disciplines and fields overlap with those of nontraditional students in STEM fields, there appear to be some frustrations that are more common among STEM students. These include: more pronounced age-ism brought on by a culture of early decision-making and contiguous patterns of study; limited discourse around issues of inclusion and difference due to a lack of exposure to critical social theories used in the arts, humanities, and social sciences; difficulties in participating in labs and high visibility research teams, due to gendered norms that do not include caregiving responsibilities; extreme social isolation for underrepresented and LGBTQ men and women; and gender biases against women.

## ***III. Faculty and Staff Views on the NT Experience***

### **Faculty and staff see the challenges that NT students face and are sympathetic to them, but feel that their ability to help is limited**

Faculty and staff shared many stories—some heartrending, some inspiring—about their interactions with NT students. Many individuals expressed the desire and the willingness to help, and shared stories of great personal efforts to help students. However, faculty and staff also viewed the problems that NT students have as difficult to resolve due to three factors: the

complexity of the problems that NT students face (multidimensional and ongoing), a lack of institutional focus on/commitment to NT students, and the enormous amount of time required to resolve individual problems on an *ad hoc* basis. Several faculty members expressed a lack of personal familiarity with the circumstances of NT students, and the desire to have a more robust form of central support that aided them in helping students more effectively.

#### **IV. *Views of CEW and its role on campus***

##### **Views of CEW among NT students on campus is generally positive**

One of the reasons for this study was to closely examine how NT students (one of CEW's main constituencies), as well as faculty and staff viewed CEW and its support role on campus. Time was spent during each focus group asking respondents what their perceptions of CEW were. Students who were familiar with CEW reported knowledge of its scholarship programs, critical difference grants and counseling programs. Others noted that it was known as a "safe space" for underrepresented students, LGBTQ students and student parents. There were few male students familiar with CEW; those who were had heard testimonials from friends. Faculty and staff differed somewhat in their response to the questions about the unit's role. They saw great institutional value in CEW's 50-year presence on campus; particularly in the faculty and staff support programs that have sustained people of color and older women. A smaller constituency of respondents noted the unique ways in which CEW bridges the town and gown gap by serving members of the community through statewide advocacy and counseling.

#### **CONCLUSION**

The CEW Nontraditional Student Study provides a contemporary snapshot of the "nontraditional" student experience at U-M Ann Arbor in 2015. It is not intended to be a generalizable study. However, its questions and findings are relevant in an era that continues to witness the expansion of the nontraditional student population across the country and its increasing marginalization on elite campuses. We hope this report fuels consideration of

practices and programs that U-M and CEW might engage to level the playing field and bolster the educational success of nontraditional students. We also hope that the definitional and theoretical work done here will contribute to deepening the literature on the nontraditional student experience more broadly.

