

**Nontraditional Learners in Postsecondary Education:  
Emerging Pathways to Access and Success**

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## **Description of the Organization**

The central purpose of the University of Virginia is to enrich the mind by stimulating and sustaining a spirit of free inquiry directed to understanding the nature of the universe and the role of mankind in it. Activities designed to quicken, discipline, and enlarge the intellectual and creative capacities, as well as the aesthetic and ethical awareness, of the members of the University and to record, preserve, and disseminate the results of intellectual discovery and creative endeavor serve this purpose. In fulfilling it, the University places the highest priority on achieving preeminence as a center of higher learning. The University is distinctive among institutions of higher education. Founded by Thomas Jefferson in 1819, the University sustains the ideal of developing, through education, leaders who are well prepared to help shape the future of the nation.

## **Project Executive Summary**

We seek to determine whether the emerging constellation of public policies, finance mechanisms, institutional arrangements and alternative pathways in higher education offers nontraditional students the same opportunities for access to degrees, training and credentials that traditional students receive. Equally important, do existing public policies, forms of finance and institutional arrangements offer equity in opportunity and outcomes for the broad spectrum of nontraditional learners to the degree that they do for traditional postsecondary learners? We begin from a belief that nontraditional students should receive opportunities at least equal to those of traditional students, and that the progress of nontraditional students through the postsecondary system needs to be better understood. It is our goal to build a framework for future research on new policies and structures that may improve existing opportunities for access and equity for nontraditional students. A key arena for this transformation is the provision of degrees, certificates, credentials and noncredit training through continuing education programs, and we will focus considerable attention on the efforts of nontraditional students to achieve academic and workforce success through continuing education programs.

## **Project Description**

Over the past decade the lives of postsecondary students, institutional leaders, and public policy makers have been increasingly shaped by the emergence of a new market for postsecondary education and training. That new market has in turn generated demands for the transformation of postsecondary institutions as they endeavor to adapt and remain responsive to rapidly shifting global conditions (Levin, 2001). The changing landscape of the postsecondary system calls for a better understanding of a number of drivers of change, including the new demographics of America's postsecondary students, shifting labor market demands, and the rise of alternative pathways to education and training (Breneman, Pusser & Turner, 2000; Pusser & Doane, 2001).

Despite the emphasis placed on the emerging market, little empirical research has been devoted to the changing aspirations and needs of contemporary nontraditional learners.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, little empirical analysis has been done on the institutional transformations taking place within public and private nonprofit and for-profit institutions in response to the changing competitive environment, and to the learning and training needs of the growing cohort of nontraditional students served by those institutions. Even less attention has been paid to those segments of existing higher education institutions that have traditionally operated under market conditions, that have practiced entrepreneurial revenue-generating behaviors, and served as a fundamental access point for nontraditional learners.

We base this research proposal on two fundamental understandings of emerging patterns in the supply and demand for postsecondary education and training. The demand for postsecondary education and training for the workforce has changed in significant ways over the past two decades. On the supply side, the pathways to access postsecondary education and training have changed in fundamental ways, but with considerably less attention in the research and policy arenas. The essential

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<sup>1</sup> A nontraditional learner is defined by the Department of Education by one or more of the following characteristics: has delayed postsecondary enrollment from high school; is enrolled in a postsecondary program on a part-time basis; works full time; is classified as financially independent for financial aid purposes; has dependents other than a spouse; is a single parent; does not have a high school diploma (NCES, 2002).

question we seek to answer is: *what are the implications of these changes in supply and demand for access and equity for nontraditional students?*

Based on prior research by members of this project team and by a number of colleagues, there is considerable evidence to suggest that new institutions will not dominate the market for nontraditional student enrollments in the coming decades (Breneman, Pusser & Turner, 2000; Levin, 2001; UCEA, 2002). While emerging competitors, such as for-profit providers of degrees, will continue to be important factors, existing institutions will continue to hold a number of comparative advantages in the marketplace (Pusser, 2002). What we believe is that traditional public and private two-year and four-year institutions will continue to develop and expand myriad alternative pathways to meet the demand patterns of nontraditional postsecondary learners. These alternative pathways are not necessarily new, as in the case of continuing education programs,<sup>2</sup> but they are considerably more prominent, and as a matter of public policy more important than ever before. Some of the alternative pathways are new, as evidenced by the rapid increase in partnerships between traditional institutions and for-profit entities for the purpose of delivering courses and degrees at a distance (Green, Eckel & Barblan, 2002).

Prodded by employers and state legislatures, many higher education institutions are developing new curricula and organizational structures in order to respond better to the needs of nontraditional learners. These new structures and processes are shaped by institutional mission, the learners those institutions serve, the nature of the education provided, and entrepreneurial financial arrangements. Among the most prominent and rapidly growing of these new entities are continuing education programs offering courses, training and degrees. Moreover, with analysts predicting that the economy will require, conservatively, 12 million additional workers with some postsecondary education over the next 20 years and the declining affordability of higher education for

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<sup>2</sup> For the purposes of this study, continuing education refers to both credit and non-credit education at either the pre- or post-baccalaureate level, offered by regionally accredited higher education institutions. It should be intended primarily for nontraditional students pursuing degrees, certificates, academic development and/or work-related credentials on either a full- or part-time basis. We do not intend to evaluate lifelong learning enrollments for personal growth, an important institutional issue, but not a factor in our research.

both nontraditional and traditional students, continuing education seems bound to continue to grow in importance in coming years (NCES, 2002; UCEA, 2002).

Simply put, the fastest growing cohort in postsecondary institutions over the past two decades has been made up of nontraditional students (UCEA, 2002). These students -- a majority are working while enrolled -- place a premium on convenience, quality curricula, and student services. As a result, part-time degree programs offered through university continuing education units, online degree programs, and the degree programs of accredited private sector providers all have experienced growth in recent years. Moreover, the need for adults to constantly update their knowledge and skills in our knowledge-driven society has fueled a dramatic growth in post-baccalaureate certificate and specialized master's degree programs offered through continuing education (Kohl & Lapidus, 2000).

The increase in demand from nontraditional learners, combined with the rapid transformation of forms of supply, present research and public policy questions of paramount importance. In this proposal we outline a course of work that begins with building a database on nontraditional learners, their course-taking patterns, the role of financial aid in their transitions, and the role of continuing education programs in their transitions. These initial investigations will be complemented by a comprehensive inventory and analysis of the emerging institutional forms that will supply degrees, credentials and training for the new economy, and in light of changing political economic contexts for higher education (Breneman, 2002). We will bring together these data for a specific purpose, to better understand two fundamental issues: access and equity. At the heart of this research we seek to determine whether the present constellation of public policies, finance mechanisms and institutional arrangements offers nontraditional students the same opportunities for access to degrees, training and credentials that traditional students receive. Equally important, do existing public policies, forms of finance and institutional arrangements offer equity in opportunity and outcomes for the broad spectrum of nontraditional learners to the degree that they do for traditional postsecondary learners? While we begin from a belief that nontraditional students should receive no less than traditional students it is our goal to build a framework for

future research on ways that new policies and structures may improve existing opportunities for access and equity for all students.

## **The Questions We Seek to Answer**

### Students

With regard to students, we seek to link original case study data collected from two-year and four-year programs across the country, innovative data collection and analysis of nontraditional students in Ohio, with data drawn from a targeted survey of noncredit course activity, and national data on nontraditional student demographics. Taken together, these strands of data will provide insight into a number of key questions; what are the characteristics, postsecondary experiences and labor market outcomes of nontraditional students? Who are the nontraditional students in continuing education programs? Where do they live, and where do they enroll? How much are they paying for their training, certificates and degrees, and how do they finance that education? Are they employed, and is that employment full or part-time? To what socio-economic and racial/ethnic groups are they likely to belong? What sort of skills, certificates, credentials, degrees and training do they seek? What sort of employment awaits them upon completion of their course of study?

### Institutions

To better understand the role of institutions in providing new pathways to degrees and training, we will employ a comprehensive survey and site visits to address a variety of essential questions: How are institutions adapting to new demands and new learners? What is the role of continuing education programs? How do emerging institutional structures and processes shape nontraditional student access? What are the funding issues shaping the price and delivery of education to nontraditional learners (e.g., legislative support, state and national tax credits)? What is the relationship between core institutional departments and programs and their continuing education equivalents? Are there differences in the price of degrees and training programs within institutions depending on whether students are enrolled in traditional programs or such alternative programs as continuing education? How are teachers compensated in

continuing education programs? What credentials are required of faculty in continuing education programs, and are the standards of rigor different for those programs?

### State and National Policy

With regard to state and national policy, we will use structured interviews, surveys and document analysis to address a range of questions: How do state policymakers and coordinating authorities perceive the growth of nontraditional learner enrollments in continuing education and other alternative pathways, such as for-profit institutions? What are the implications for state and national finance and regulation of public and private postsecondary institutions emerging from the growth in alternative pathways to degrees and training? How do state and national financial aid policies shape nontraditional enrollments? Given the variety of public and private institutional types entering the market for nontraditional enrollments, what are the implications for inter-segmental coordination? How do state and national policies shape the future of nontraditional student access and success in continuing education, for-profit, and other alternative pathways to postsecondary education and training? What are the implications for the balance of public and private benefits of postsecondary education and training? How do new demands and new learners shape entrepreneurial partnerships and initiatives between institutions, state legislatures and other external entities? How do institutional options (curricular offerings, program formats, price, student services), combined with public policies, affect nontraditional student enrollment decisions and persistence at the postsecondary level? Finally, and perhaps most significantly, we believe that understanding how the educational investments of non-traditional students affect long-term economic outcomes is fundamental to understanding the returns to public subsidies for these students.

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