

Obstacles to Success for the Nontraditional Student in Higher Education

Sally Ann Goncalves and Dunja Trunk*
Bloomfield College

ABSTRACT. Retention and success rates for college and university students at 2- and 4-year institutions have been positively correlated with level of student engagement in their academic environment. For the nontraditional cohort of students, or those students who are 25 years of age and older and who may have family and/or employment obligations in addition to their educational pursuits, attrition rates are at higher levels than for traditional college students. This exploratory research sought to identify the obstacles identified by nontraditional students that prohibit successful academic outcomes. Face-to-face interviews were conducted with 10 nontraditional students at a small private college in New Jersey. Feelings of isolation, inattention to nontraditional student needs, administrative inflexibility in special circumstances, and the lack of a nontraditional student organization and liaison were identified as obstacles that continue to persist for nontraditional students' academic success and engagement in their academic environment.

Attrition rates for nontraditional students are higher than for traditional college students, which can be partly attributed to difficulty for nontraditional students with immersing themselves in the academic environment (Kenner & Weinerman, 2011). Retention and success rates for college and university students at 2- and 4-year institutions are positively correlated with the level of student engagement (Wyatt, 2011). According to The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), *student engagement* is the amount of time and effort devoted by students to their educational pursuits, in addition to the amount of resources institutions use to coordinate programs of study and other activities that prior research has shown to cultivate learning (What is student engagement?, n.d.). In 2006, the NSSE presented its annual report, and although the report had encouraging results for the overall student population, nontraditional students were less likely to have participated in engaging activities such as "community service, foreign language

study, a culminating senior experience, research with faculty, and co-curricular activities" (Engaged learning, 2006, p. 13). The report also stated that part-time students who worked were less likely to interact with faculty and less involved in active and collaborative learning and enriching educational experiences compared to other students (Engaged learning, 2006).

In 2012, the Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance reported to the U.S. Department of Education that there is an inconsistency in defining nontraditional students (Pathways to success, 2012). According to this report, nontraditional students have customarily been defined using age, generally 25 and older, background characteristics such as culture, employment, and family, and at-risk-characteristics that may decrease the chance of degree completion. The 2012 report streamlined the definition of nontraditional student as any student who does not fit the template of a traditional full-time student aged 18 to 24 years.

As reported by Wyatt (2011), students who are

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25 years and older account for approximately 43% of students enrolled on campuses throughout the United States, and this number is increasing. The Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance report (Pathways to success, 2012) indicated that fewer high school graduates today are pursuing the traditional college track due to financial barriers and that, from 2000 to 2009, there was a marked decrease in earned bachelor's degrees. The report cited a 1996 analysis from the National Center for Education Statistics, which showed that only 31% of nontraditional undergraduates seeking a bachelor's degree earned it within five years, compared to 54% of the traditional undergraduates earning degrees, with 38% of nontraditional students leaving in the first year compared to 16% of traditional students. The report also called attention to the significant influx of nontraditional students who are still not sufficiently accommodated in higher education. In 2012, the U.S. Census Bureau reported that, in 1980, the nontraditional student college enrollment was 3,910,000, which grew to 5,714,000 in 2000. This number increased to 7,486,000 in 2009. Higher learning institutions would benefit greatly by finding ways to retain this community of students, who are most likely working and/or juggling family commitments in addition to engaging their student roles.

In general, nontraditional students are highly motivated by their desire to acquire an education for intrinsic reasons such as improving self-esteem and self-concept (Taylor & House, 2010), whereas traditional students are more likely motivated by more extrinsic reasons such as following a life track that has been decided for them by a parent or hopes for future employment opportunities. Bye, Pushkar, and Conway (2007) reported that learning becomes more enjoyable for the nontraditional student when there is a perceived collaboration with professors, leading to increased intrinsic motivation and positive affect. Despite the large amount of research conducted to target problem-areas for nontraditional students with suggestions to alleviate these difficulties, many areas remain in need of improvement (Benshoff & Lewis, 1992; Wyatt, 2011; Zacharakis, Steichen, Dias de Sabates, & Glass, 2011). For example, there is still a need for improved communication with nontraditional students, and there remains a lack of organizations on campus dedicated to nontraditional students (Wyatt, 2011). Advising and orientation specifically for nontraditional students is in need of improvement (Benshoff & Lewis, 1992), and scheduling

difficulties remain a concern for nontraditional students (Zacharakis et al., 2011). Scott and Lewis (2012) found that some campus environments are not hospitable toward nontraditional students and recommended future research to include "details to the voices of students in diverse settings to better understand the multiple perspectives that are involved in collegiate environments" (p. 8). The present study was designed to give voice to nontraditional students via personal interviews, and to capture their perceptions of the primary obstacles to academic success, as well as their suggestions for possible solutions to these problems.

Method

Participants

Participants included 10 (9 women, 1 man) nontraditional commuter students who were not asked to disclose their ethnicity at a small private liberal arts college in New Jersey. Participants ranged in age from 27 to 55 years ($M_{age} = 36$). In the present study, nontraditional students were defined as being over the age of 25, enrolled full- or part-time, and having family and/or employment obligations in addition to being students. Participants included seven full-time and three part-time students. Seven were employed, eight had family obligations, and one was an integral member of a religious ministry.

Materials and Procedures

Data for the present study were collected with the approval of the institutional review board at the researchers' academic institution. Face-to-face interviews were conducted one-on-one with each participant. The interviewer was a nontraditional undergraduate student who was trained in conducting personal interview surveys by the faculty supervisor, as well as in a research methods course. Twenty-one open-ended questions were generated primarily to assess participants' perceptions of their primary obstacles to academic success, as well as potential solutions to address these obstacles. Questions were developed based on prior research that targeted obstacles for nontraditional students (e.g., Benshoff & Lewis, 1992; Brown, 2002; Wyatt, 2011; Zacharakis et al., 2011). Other questions focused on demographics and campus experiences (see Appendix).

Participants were asked to describe their interactions with other nontraditional students, traditional students, professors/instructors, and college staff such as administrators, tutors, advisors, etc. They also spoke about participation in

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extracurricular activities, goals, obstacles that detract from and experiences that enhance campus life, and whether these experiences could be attributed to their status as a nontraditional student, whether their needs were being met, and what could be done to enhance their experience.

Students were recruited in several ways including by e-mail from a list obtained from the Bursar's office that included 239 e-mail addresses of the nontraditional students who were enrolled at the college, an e-mail sent by the honors program director to eight nontraditional honors students, and through flyers on bulletin boards near academic classrooms. All but one participant were included in both e-mail lists and none were questioned as to how they received information about the study or whether they were honors students.

Participants met face-to-face with the researcher individually on campus at a mutually convenient time in the library or in a conference room in a classroom building. Informed consent was obtained from each participant. Responses were audio recorded using a Livescribe™ smartpen, and the researcher took notes during the interviews using a Livescribe interactive notebook. The researcher followed the questions on the script in order, asking participants to elaborate on yes or no answers and short responses. The duration of each interview was approximately 35 min. Participation was voluntary and no compensation was provided.

The data captured by the Livescribe pen and notebook audio were transferred to an Asus® laptop and transcribed by the interviewer. Data coding was a two-step process. First, each statement made by participants was categorized as positive, negative, or neutral in tone. Then key words and phrases were compared across responses to determine whether specific patterns emerged for each individual question. All data were coded by the primary investigator and double checked by the faculty supervisor.

Results

The interview sessions created a forum in which participants could communicate confidentially. Topics discussed by participants included their educational goals, their interactions with students, professors, staff, and administrative offices, their involvement with clubs and organizations, and their assessment of obstacles as well as positive factors contributing to their overall college experience.

Educational Goals

Seven participants reported career advancement

as the primary motivation for returning to school. Four participants stated that undergraduate work was a means toward obtaining a graduate school education. Additional motivating factors that were mentioned at least once were influencing their children through example, finishing what they started, just wanting to get their degree, and discontentment with their prior professions. Other responses included employment opportunities, to finish and master something started, and to teach and help people.

Interactions With Other Students

When asked to describe interactions with other nontraditional students, all participants expressed some difficulties in interacting with other students including not knowing which students were nontraditional, an inability to mingle, feeling isolated and alone, and an overall lack of interaction with their peers. One participant stated:

I don't know if I have had many interactions with many people at all, not even nontraditional, but I do get to meet some in class . . . we share a lot of the same experiences . . . it is nice to talk to people who go through some of your daily struggles, you know, kids, school.

Another participant said, "I don't really know who is and who isn't [a nontraditional student] so I don't really interact with anyone." A third participant stated, "I don't hang around on campus and try to make friends. I don't have time."

When asked to describe experiences with traditional students, four participants stated that they had little to no interactions with them, or they did not know who were traditional versus nontraditional students. Four of the responses were positive. Of the two negative comments, one participant stated that the traditional students do not fully grasp the gravity of the education they are receiving. The other stated that fitting in was an issue and that most of the time spent on campus was solitary.

Interactions With Professors

The majority of participants described interactions with their professors as being positive. One participant remarked, "I feel comfortable going to them . . . I think because of the age thing. I don't stop myself from going to them if I need help or if I need to talk to somebody." Another participant stated, "It [age] has everything to do with it [my

interactions with professors]. I think that the traditional student is more afraid of talking with their professors.” Another participant commented:

I feel that, as a nontraditional student, I have more interactions with my professors than traditional students, but I’m also older so I find that I have a different relationship with my professors, like more out of respect for them.

Citing prior research, Zacharakis et al. (2011) remarked that interactions with professors produce a more enriched experience that led to positive life changes. Although most participants were satisfied with their faculty-interactions, one student disagreed by stating that the professors are “a strange bunch.”

Interactions With Staff

There were diverse opinions on the question related to interactions with other college staff because this question encompassed a rather large group including administrators, advisors, and tutors. The tutoring department received mostly positive comments including one that the “tutoring has been awesome.” One participant stated that their experience was very good. Another described the overall staff as resourceful, willing to give advice, and that they try to be helpful. When asked if this could be attributed to their nontraditional student status, one participant responded that “Yes, I think that comes from maturity.” Another participant commented that they felt that they were an equal to the staff as far as being an adult.

Interactions With Bursar’s and Financial Aid Offices

The Bursar’s office was not viewed favorably by most participants. Comments included “they don’t know how to work with the public” and “I can’t say anything positive about the Bursar’s office. Their attitude is kind of standoffish.”

Opinions varied on the topic of the financial aid department from excellent and efficient to awful and not very pleasant. A few participants stated that they received unsolicited information on scholarships that was helpful, with one admitting that they were partly responsible for not getting information because they did not take the initiative and look in the college catalog. One participant was receiving a full scholarship, but felt that, if they were not, their financial needs would not be met. Another participant stated that the financial aid

office never answers the telephone and that specific needs would not be addressed unless students specifically visited the department with questions. One participant said that she typically e-mails the department and only gets a response when “I start to say that I’m leaving school. I’m going to transfer, and I need all my stuff. Then I get answers real quick, unfortunately.” Another participant stated that the financial aid department caters to the traditional students; they leave out details and explain very little to anyone else. One participant disclosed that what brought her to this particular campus was the assurance that she would have a reduced tuition as a result of her status as a nontraditional student. She claimed that, without explanation, her tuition has nearly doubled, which will culminate in a huge student loan bill upon graduation.

Clubs and Organizations

Ninety percent of participants said that they would join a club or organization that was specifically geared toward the needs of nontraditional students if such a club existed. Some felt that it would be a great way to network with other nontraditional students about job opportunities and a way to share what activities were going on within the campus and commiserate about the particular needs of the nontraditional student. One participant stated, “There should be an actual room where there are nontraditional students, just to have something where there are people you can relate to, brainstorm, figure out new ideas and how to deal with things.” Likewise, another participant commented that it would be a good way to meet people outside of their major and “it would be nice to meet other people that are feeling the same stressors and feelings like my kids never see me, like things that traditional students wouldn’t understand.”

Advising

Eighty percent of participants thought it would be beneficial to have an advisor who only dealt with nontraditional students, and several participants suggested that an advising team would be useful. Several participants stated that they had had up to three advisors already, and that this was not helpful in meeting their needs. One participant stated that she was talked down to by an advisor and that she resented the fact that, as an adult, she was spoken to in such a way. Another participant recalled that an advisor made her feel like she was a “loser” and a “dummy,” resulting in her questioning why she was even pursuing an education and leaving her

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in tears. The overall consensus was that having an advisor or team specifically for nontraditional students would be beneficial because it would help to remove barriers and scheduling issues that nontraditional students face due to outside obligations.

Obstacles

When obstacles on campus were addressed, participants expressed that feelings of isolation and not fitting in, lack of access to computers, scheduling conflicts, lack of course availability and course times, financial difficulties, and the lack of catering to nontraditional students detracted from the overall college experience. Not surprisingly, parking was also described as a major issue due to lack of parking spaces and the cost involved in obtaining a parking permit.

Advantages

In terms of positive factors, 50% of participants commented that their professors contributed to an enriching experience on campus. In addition, the small campus size, meeting encouraging people, and tutoring services also enhanced their college experience.

Overall Campus Experience

When asked if any campus experience, either positive or negative, was related to their status as a nontraditional student, several participants credited their maturity as the primary reason for being motivated and focused on getting an education. One participant stated, "I'm actually learning." Negative aspects of being a nontraditional student were reported as not being able to participate fully as if one were a traditional student, not being able to spend much time on campus, and the overall lack of attention given to the nontraditional students' needs.

Recommendations by Participants

Suggestions for how to enhance the nontraditional student experience included a mentorship program for incoming nontraditional first-year students, more flexibility with classes, meetings, clubs, improved advising and orientation, a quiet area with access to computers, a mini part-time or per diem dorm where students could either rest or organize their paperwork and regroup, and free parking. One participant suggested that offering jobs on campus to nontraditional students would be a way to increase student engagement. It would help keep nontraditional students on campus for

longer periods of time rather than running back and forth from school to work and vice versa. Similarly, another participant suggested that more on-campus jobs that offered shadowing or internship opportunities would be a way for students to gain hands-on employment experience and enable students to spend more time on campus. This participant further rationalized that the more time students spent on campus, the more interest they would have in getting involved in campus activities.

Additional Participant Comments

At the end of the interview, each participant was given the opportunity to voice any additional comments regarding life as a nontraditional student. Responses included a need for more online classes to alleviate scheduling difficulties, an administrative office that is open at night to address and offer guidance for nontraditional student needs, a way to integrate more with the overall student population, and a need for a substantially increased security presence in the evening. One participant commented that the campus had a "village-like" atmosphere where few were afraid to ask questions, that there was a lot of community spirit, and that everyone on campus was very supportive.

Discussion

Nontraditional students' perceptions of obstacles to academic success in the present study were highly reflective of the challenges faced by the nontraditional population of college students nationwide (Benshoff & Lewis, 1992; Falasca, 2011; Kenner & Weinerman, 2011; Russell, 2006; Wyatt, 2011). In the present interviews, the most positive responses from participants were derived from the question of interactions with professors. This finding was encouraging because the learning process is cultivated through this interaction (Bye et al., 2007). The present results suggested that nontraditional students are, by and large, experiencing a collaborative endeavor with professors.

The present results also suggested that there is much more that could be done to cultivate on-campus services and activities, which would lead to increased engagement and participation for the nontraditional student body and improve retention rates at the same time. One does not have to look further than institution websites to see that photographs of fresh-faced students still primarily reflect a nonrepresentative sample of the student population on campus. Few photos depict what one thinks of in terms of what the nontraditional

student looks like. Higher learning institutions should be more astute that this is often the first marketing opportunity to attract new students and that it is often the first resource when seeking information about the institution. The lack of a representation of all people may be an intimidating factor to some individuals and may also send the message that nontraditional students are not as welcome or a vital part of the campus community. The interview data collected in the present study supported these conclusions because participants reported experiencing a lack of integration, as well as feelings of isolation, and being overlooked by staff and administrators as a unique cohort of students with different needs and concerns than the traditional student body.

Wyatt (2011) pointed out that students who are active participants on campus, either in or outside of the classroom setting, are more successful and satisfied. The present research resonated with Wyatt's (2011) findings. It was mentioned repeatedly throughout the interviews and across questions that there was a lack of attention given to the needs of nontraditional students, difficulty in scheduling due to course offerings and times, and an inability to participate fully because of time constraints related to obligations off campus. Most disturbing was the fact that students reported feeling isolated and alone. How can an individual be engaged while experiencing such distressing feelings?

Overwhelmingly, participants welcomed the idea of having a club or organization whose members would be made up solely of nontraditional students, which supports Wyatt's (2011) findings that nontraditional students favored participation in programs that were devoted solely to the nontraditional student. The idea of having a lounge or some type of area where students could gather to either organize themselves and meet other nontraditional students was widely popular. Feelings of isolation could be drastically reduced by having a designated area for nontraditional students. To find ways to create campuses that were welcoming to veterans, the St. Cloud State University (SCSU), the Minnesota Department of Veterans Affairs, and the SCSU Student Veterans Organization collaborated after repeatedly hearing that it was important for the veterans to feel a sense of belonging and be part of the campus community. One of the recommendations in their article to facilitate these needs was to provide an area that allows for networking with other veterans (Lokken, Pfeffer, McAuley & Strong, 2009). Coulter, Goin and Gerard (2004)

found that graduate students also have specific needs for a designated meeting area to focus on professional development workshops and a venue for social interaction with peers. The most obvious example, as far as attending to the needs of nontraditional students, was related to a response from a participant who was having difficulty completing an internship that was a requirement as an education major. This participant was employed in a school system as a secretary. To fulfill the requirement of the internship within her major, this individual was offered a paid student-teaching position through her employer. Despite the fact that she was offered a position as a student teacher off site from where she typically works and in a different role, she was not permitted to do the internship due to a conflict of interest. This was an individual who was a student, an employee, and a homeowner living with children and grandchildren. Taking an unpaid internship position would present serious financial hardships for this student, which could be avoided by allowing her to complete the paid internship. It is possible that there were either personal or administrative issues involved in this particular case that were not discussed, but this student exemplifies the necessity for administrators to explore options that would assist in resolving particular impediments and demonstrate a desire to accommodate nontraditional students' special concerns.

The idea of an advising team or person specific to nontraditional students was greatly favored. Having an advisor(s) aware that the needs of nontraditional students differ from traditional students may alleviate scheduling difficulties and be more personalized to specific needs. An advisor for nontraditional students would be in a position to act as a liaison between students and administrators to facilitate problem-solving.

As described in the results, opinions regarding financial aid were varied. The overall consensus was that obtaining financial aid should be a more efficient process for the nontraditional student, who has little spare time between school, family, and employment to have to seek out multiple ways of financing their education, particularly when there is an entire department devoted to this task. An article written for the Lumina Foundation (Headden, 2009) stated that finances might be a barrier toward obtaining an education and that the system of loan and grants discriminates against working adults. Nontraditional students might benefit from having a nontraditional student financial

aid advisor who is knowledgeable with the financial aid process for this population. Unless nontraditional students, as well as traditional students, are enrolled on a full scholarship, repayment of loans will be mandatory upon graduation. This is in addition to the other financial obligations that nontraditional students already have.

The recruitment process for the present study was interesting in and of itself. Although the participation rate was low overall, there was plenty of interest in participating. The total number of individuals interested in but unable to participate was not tracked. The opportunity to participate was over the course of one semester. All those interested in participation were contacted to attempt to schedule an interview. Participation would have been much greater had it not been for issues related to the time constraint associated with meeting face-to-face to be interviewed. This incidental finding suggested that there may be a desire to be more engaged. However, time constraints due to multiple commitments such as family and employment may make participation in on-campus activities difficult. Many responded that they hoped that the dean or other administrators would get to see the results and address some of the frustrations encountered by nontraditional students. When participants were given the informed consent form and were advised that all responses would be kept confidential, many stated that they hoped someone would see what they had to say. One participant commented:

You know, I wish the administration would really be more involved with the nontraditional students because we are like the up-and-coming people, and they are going for the younger group . . . but the nontraditional students, that's what they're getting now. I don't think the administration has really looked at this . . . they are still looking at the ones that stay on campus . . . There is going to be more of us, but because they're not, they are missing out on a lot. They are missing out on a lot of people that could be here.

A limitation of this research was the small sample size that included only one man and, therefore, could present a gender bias. This qualitative research is also subject to interviewer bias because there was only one interviewer, a nontraditional student, conducting the interviews. Participants were not told that the interviewer was a nontraditional

student. However, it is possible that participants might have concluded this due to the physical characteristics of the interviewer. Selection might have also threatened internal validity because only those individuals where a mutually convenient interview time was possible participated. Some respondents refused participation after learning that, in order to participate, they would have to meet on campus to be interviewed rather than a telephone interview. Others scheduled a meeting time but either cancelled due to scheduling conflicts or did not show up for the interview. Results were specific to this institution and cannot be generalized without investigation at other institutions. To determine whether nontraditional students face similar obstacles to success at other institutions, future researchers in other locations should attempt to replicate this study with a larger sample size and additional interviewers. The population of this study only consisted of nontraditional students. Without comparisons to the traditional student population, it is difficult to determine whether the experiences of all students are similar or are exclusive to the nontraditional student population. It may be that many obstacles to academic success are shared among traditional and nontraditional students. For comparison purposes, future research should investigate traditional college students' perceptions of their primary obstacles to academic success.

Despite many years of prior research indicating that students who are engaged are more likely to do well and to complete their degrees, the present study showed that little has changed for the nontraditional population of students (Brown, 2002). In contrast to previous research, the present study allowed for an up-close and personal perspective of nontraditional students' experiences on a college campus, and provided a more intimate look at their perceptions of what obstacles stand in their way of achieving academic success. The results of the personal interviews corroborated previous research findings (Taylor & House, 2010; Wyatt, 2011) in addition to giving voice to specific concerns experienced by this small group of nontraditional students. Past research has offered suggestions to creating an engaging campus environment for nontraditional students, yet college officials are still grasping for ways to make this happen (Brown, 2002; Wyatt, 2011). Rather than exploring what nontraditional student needs are, future research might measure whether implementing special programs for nontraditional students and

other groups with particular needs does increase student engagement, retention, and success and to what extent.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, the nontraditional student population has increased in past decades and accounts for a large portion of the student body across campuses. Future research may investigate reasons for institutional resistance toward programs promoting enrollment and retention of this population. Financial resources may be a limiting factor at higher learning institutions that would impede this type of endeavor. However, according to the Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance (Pathways to success, 2012), nontraditional students represent the new majority, thereby making the benefit worth the cost of making institutional changes. Benschhoff and Lewis (1992) concluded that institutions that revise their programs to help serve the nontraditional population will benefit from this adjustment. These institutions will be better able to attract, serve, and satisfy the needs of this particular population. In conjunction with previous research, the present study clearly identified problem areas for nontraditional students. The question should not be what should be done, but rather how do we implement these changes? A first step could be as simple as a function for incoming and current nontraditional students and their families so that students could immediately begin to network with each other, as well as faculty and administrators. Higher learning institutions need to be creative and restructure some of their priorities in ways that would help attract and further expand this growing population.

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Author Note. Sally Ann Goncalves and Dunja Trunk, Social and Behavioral Sciences Department, Bloomfield College, NJ.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Sally Ann Goncalves, Social and Behavioral Science Department, Bloomfield College, 59 Freemont Street, Bloomfield, NJ 07003. E-mail: sgoncalves@cse.edu

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APPENDIX

1. What is your sex and age?
2. Approximately how far do you travel to get to school from either home or work?
3. Are you a part-time or full-time student?
4. Have you been enrolled in or graduated from any other higher learning institutions including vocational school?
5. Aside of your obligations as a college student, do you have other obligations such as family and employment?
6. What motivated you to return to school?
7. What are your goals as a result of your higher learning experience?
8. How would you describe your interactions with other nontraditional students?
9. How would you describe your interactions with traditional and resident students?
10. How would you describe your interactions with your professors/instructors?
11. How would you describe your interactions with other college staff such as administrators, advisors, tutors, etc.?
12. Do you feel that the financial aid office has been efficient in providing information that is useful in funding your education?
13. Do you think you would be inclined to join a club or organization specifically geared toward the needs to nontraditional students? Why or why not?
14. Based on your experience, do you think you would have benefited from an advising team specifically geared toward the needs of nontraditional students? If yes, how so?
15. Have you participated in any extracurricular activities on campus that are outside of the classroom environment?
16. What have the obstacles been on campus that detract from your experience?
17. What experiences have you had on campus that enhance your experience?
18. Do you attribute any of these experiences (positive or negative) to your status as a nontraditional student?
19. What can be done to enhance your experience as a nontraditional student?
20. Are you needs as a nontraditional student being met by the college?
21. Do you have any additional comments about your life as a nontraditional college student?

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