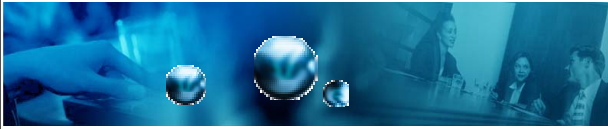


## Distinguishing Traditional from Nontraditional Undergraduates: Simplistic Methods May Mask Modern Trends



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## Basic Research Question



Do “traditional undergraduates” make up a majority or a minority of our university’s student body and by how much?

## Different Answers

- Traditionals are a Large Majority
- A likely answer if the commonly used and overly simplistic single age cutoff of 23 (or 25) is used to categorize undergraduates
- Traditionals are a Surprising Minority
- A likely answer if multiple factors are taken into account that capture nontraditional characteristics beyond age alone

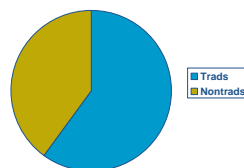
## What is a Traditional Undergraduate?

- The typical traditional undergraduate:
  - Enrolls as a freshman immediately after high school graduation (at age 17-19)
  - Attends on a continuous full-time basis
  - Is employed less than half-time
  - Resides on campus
  - Is financially dependent on others
  - Completes a bachelor’s degree program in 4 to 5 years at the age of 22 or 23

## Single Age Cutoff Example

A majority, 60% of the undergraduates at KSU in Fall 2003, could be categorized as traditional since they were 23 years old or younger.

Fall 2003 KSU Undergraduates



## Three Factors Considered

1. Age
2. Undergraduate Classification (freshman, sophomore, junior, senior)
3. Enrollment Status (Full-time or Part-time)



## Three Factor Definition

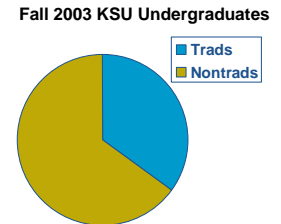
Undergraduates were counted as “traditional” if they enrolled on a full-time basis and fell into one of the following classification by age categories:

1. Freshmen 19 years old or younger
2. Sophomores 20 years old or younger
3. Juniors 21 years old or younger
4. Seniors 23 years old or younger



## Three Factor Example

A minority, 35% of the undergraduates at KSU in Fall 2003, could be characterized as traditional students once classification and enrollment were taken into account with age.



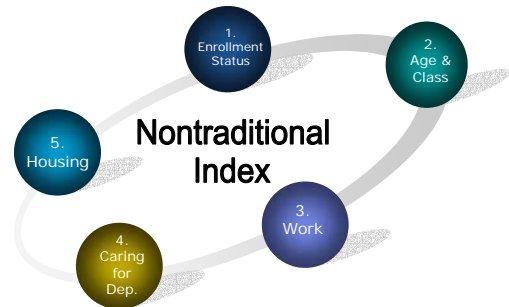
## Six Factors Considered

Factors in KSU’s Nontraditional Student Index: (2004 NSSE Results for First-year and Seniors)

1. Age
2. Undergraduate Classification
3. Enrollment Status
4. Employment Obligation
5. Dependent Care Obligation
6. Campus Housing



## Nontraditional Index Factors



## Nontraditional Index Scoring

Index Scores: 0-1 (traditional)  
 2-3 (moderately nontraditional)  
 4- 5 (highly nontraditional)

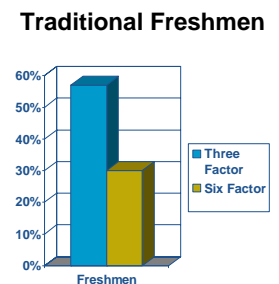
Scoring: 1 point added to the Index when student:

- a) Is enrolled part-time
- b) First Year is >19 yrs old; senior is >23
- c) Is employed >20 hours per week
- d) Has dependent care obligations
- e) Lives off campus



## Three Factor vs. Six Factor Comparison for Freshmen

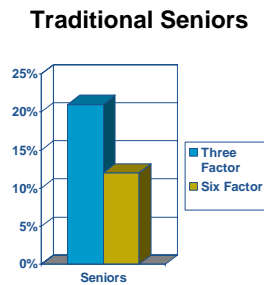
Whereas a majority of the freshmen, 57% at KSU in Fall 2003, were traditional using three factors, a minority of freshmen, only 30%, were traditional using the six factor index.





## Three Factor vs. Six Factor Comparison for Seniors

Whereas a minority of the seniors, 21% at KSU in Fall 2003, were traditional using three factors, a much smaller minority of seniors, only 12%, were traditional using the six factor index.



## Lessons Learned

- KSU's analysis of Fall 2003 traditional undergraduates is consistent with national findings that the majority of today's college students have at least some nontraditional characteristics (see "Nontraditional Undergraduates," NCES, 2002).
- Simplistic methods that only use age to define traditional students mask or distort the reality that nontraditional students are in the majority on many campuses nationally.



## More Lessons Learned

- Dichotomous categorizations of traditionals versus nontraditionals are overly simplistic. Many college students today are nontraditional to some degree.
- When multiple factors are taken into account that capture nontraditional student characteristics beyond age alone, the number of traditional students appears to be in shorter supply than we are generally led to believe.



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## **Distinguishing Traditional from Nontraditional Undergraduates: Simplistic Methods May Mask Modern Trends**

### **Presenters**

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Kennesaw State University

### **Abstract**

Most universities do not collect or maintain the information needed to confirm the "traditional" and "nontraditional" status of their students. An age cutoff of 23 or 25 is often used to separate younger traditional students from older nontraditionals. That simplistic cutoff underestimated nontraditionals greatly in this case study. When more precise traditional-age cutoffs by classification were applied along with class load, nontraditionals increased substantially over time. When multivariate "Nontraditional Index Scores" were generated from the institution's NSSE data, highly traditional students all but disappeared. Highly traditional students are in shorter supply than some analyses would have us believe.

### **Research Question**

The commonly held definition of a traditional undergraduate is a student who enrolls in college immediately after high school, attends on a continuous full-time basis, resides on campus, is financially dependent on others, is employed less than half-time, and completes a bachelor's degree program in four or five years at the age of 22 or 23 (NCES, 2002).

Most universities do not collect or maintain all of the student information that would be required by this definition to distinguish traditional from nontraditional students accurately. One common practice is to divide the undergraduate student body into the younger traditional and older nontraditional groups using a single age cutoff of 23 or 25. However, use of this overly simplistic age cutoff can incorrectly categorize students as traditionals. Some nontraditional students join the military or take full-time jobs after high school graduation and are younger than 23 or 25 when they later enter college. Some traditional new freshmen enroll initially as full-time students and fall back to lighter part-time loads once they encounter the daunting challenge of college coursework. Some traditional-age students take on nontraditional obligations such as car payments, off-campus apartment rents, and family responsibilities and must seek employment beyond 20 hours a week to make ends meet.

Surely, there are more precise ways to use the age variable for identifying nontraditional students. Perhaps there are also multivariate approaches which go beyond age. A multivariate model for identifying nontraditional students would not only improve the

accuracy of estimated numbers, but might also expand campus understanding of the different degrees to which students may take on nontraditional attributes.

## **Research Method**

The effects of three different approaches to distinguishing nontraditional from traditional students were examined in this case study of a master's level comprehensive metropolitan university. First, a single age cutoff of 23 was applied to the institution's enrolled undergraduate student body for Fall 2003.

Next, traditional age cutoffs were established for each of the undergraduate student classifications as follows: 1) 19 or younger for freshmen; 2) 20 or younger for sophomores; 3) 21 or younger for juniors; and 4) 23 or younger for seniors. Fall 2003 undergraduates who fell within these age and classification categories and who were enrolled full-time were counted as traditionals, and those who did not or were enrolled part-time were categorized as nontraditionals.

Third, the universities' participation in the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) in the spring of 2004 provided data for a multivariate "Nontraditional Index Score" for each of the first-year and senior respondents. Index Scores were incremented by one point when: 1) the respondent was enrolled on a part-time basis; 2) the first-year student was older than 19 or the senior was older than 23; 3) the respondent reported being employed for pay more than 20 hours per week; 4) the respondent reported being a caregiver for dependents; and 5) the respondent did not reside in campus housing. Consequently, each respondent had a score that ranged from zero (highly traditional) to five (highly nontraditional).

## **Research Results**

Using the single age cutoff of 23, nearly two-thirds (60%) of the institution's undergraduates in Fall 2003 were traditional-age students. When traditional age cutoffs for each undergraduate classification and full-time enrollment status were taken into account, the proportion of Fall 2003 students categorized as traditional dropped to one-third (35%). Furthermore, when multivariate Nontraditional Index Scores were calculated for the NSSE respondents that year, only 12% of the first-year students and none of the seniors were uniformly traditional with scores of zero.

A major shift in representation from traditional to nontraditional was documented between the freshmen year and all subsequent undergraduate classifications. A majority of the institution's freshmen (57%) were classified as traditional-age and full-time. Among the sophomores, the majority (68%) was nontraditional. An even greater majority (79%) of juniors and seniors were nontraditional. This trend was reinforced by the proportions of traditional-age students at each classification level who were enrolled on a part-time basis which is a nontraditional attendance attribute. Of the traditional-age students within each classification, 10% of the freshmen were enrolled part-time, and that percentage increased to 13% for sophomores, 16% for juniors, and 22% for seniors.

An analysis of Nontraditional Index Scores revealed that the nontraditional status of college students is a matter of degree rather than all or none. Half of the first-year students (48%) and two-thirds of the seniors (62%) were moderately nontraditional (Nontraditional Index Scores of two or three). A fifth of the first-year (19%) and a quarter of the seniors (26%) were highly nontraditional with Index Scores of four or five. Only a third of the first-year students (30%) and one-tenth of the seniors (12%) had low Index Scores of zero or one. Almost all students lived off campus, and over half were employed in jobs for more than 20 hours per week and were over the traditional age for their classifications. About a quarter of the first-year and senior students were enrolled part-time and were caring for dependents.

### **Lessons Learned**

In a recent report from the National Center for Education Statistics (2002) entitled, "Nontraditional Undergraduates," researchers concluded that nearly three-fourths of the nation's undergraduates are nontraditional to some extent. Over half were found to be moderately or strongly nontraditional. This institution's analysis of its Fall 2003 undergraduates reveals results that are consistent with the findings of that national study.

Simplistic research methods commonly used to distinguish traditional from nontraditional students are probably masking and distorting the reality that nontraditional students are in the majority on many campuses. Most importantly, many college students today are nontraditional to some degree rather than all or none. Dichotomous classifications of traditionals versus nontraditionals are overly simplistic. It may also be overly simplistic to assume that older nontraditionals are the ones who are employed more than half time. There is some evidence in this study that younger traditionals become nontraditional in age, perhaps because of competing job obligations. Overall, highly traditional students appear to be in shorter supply than we are generally led to believe.

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