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# Perspectives

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## Experiences of Traditional and Non-Traditional College Students

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# Experiences of Traditional and Non-Traditional College Students

A Quantitative Study of Experiences, Motivations and  
Expectations Among Undergraduate Students

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Alexia Corbett  
Methods of Social Research  
May 10, 2010

## ABSTRACT

*This is a quantitative study of the experiences of traditional and non-traditional at the college level. The study results from a sample of 176 undergraduate students at the University of New Hampshire. Using a questionnaire, results show that there is a significant difference in the time spent studying and preparing for class between traditional and non-traditional students. The majority of non-traditional students spend upward of 6 hours each week preparing for class, where only half as many traditional students spend this much time. Results also show a significant difference in the social expectations both groups have upon entering college. Traditional students reported that their social expectations were exceeded, while the majority of non-traditional students reported having no social expectations for college. When looking at learning environment preference, results show that both traditional and non-traditional students prefer face-to-face classroom learning over online learning. Larger implications of this study show the importance of recognizing the needs of non-traditional students, as well as giving them a support system to allow a more enjoyable college experience.*

## INTRODUCTION

The demographics on college campuses in the United States have been changing over the last decade, finding a more diverse group of students that are roaming campus grounds, occupying lecture room chairs, and signing online for e-learning classes. The largest demographic adding to higher education enrollee numbers are the students classified as ‘non-traditional’. For the purposes of this study, non-traditional students are considered full or part-time students attending college ages 23 and older. Traditional students are those students who proceed to college after graduating high school and fall between the ages of 18-22.

With the expanding population of non-traditional students at universities comes a need for change and adaptation. Student enrollment in universities is no longer just for fresh-faced 18-year-old high school graduates, but also for those wishing to go back to school to receive a degree or further their education. Universities now have to take into account the services and needs of these non-traditional students. Non-traditional students have different motivations and

goals, as well as barriers that most traditional students do not. For non-traditional students, going back to school requires more planning and lifestyle reassessment than it does for traditional students. They may have families or spouses, full-time jobs, and mortgages they are responsible for.

This study seeks to explore the differences between traditional and non-traditional students regarding their goals, motivations and expectations for college. This study will also look at traditional and non-traditional students' cognitive learning levels upon entrance into higher education and which type of learning environment is most beneficial. Finally, this study will seek to explore traditional and non-traditional students' overall experiences with higher education.

We hypothesize that traditional and non-traditional students do tend to have differing goals and motivations, as well as expectations for pursuing a college education. Due to age differences and constancy in an academic environment, we also hypothesize that traditional and non-traditional students have varying cognitive levels upon entering college. We also suspect that non-traditional students will prefer an option for a more flexible learning environment and schedule (e.g. online classes) than traditional students. Finally, we hypothesize that traditional and non-traditional students will have different overall experiences with college.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### *Goals, Motivations and Expectations*

Traditionally, students' education paths take them to college once they complete high school. Admission records are showing however, that the numbers of non-traditional students applying and enrolling in their programs of study are on the rise. As of 2002, 39% of

undergraduate college students were age 25 or older (Copper, 2008), and this number is expected to continually rise. Motivation and goals for returning to, or starting school later in life have been shown to differ between traditional and non-traditional students.

For a non-traditional student, deciding to go back to school requires more planning and lifestyle reassessment than for a traditional student. A majority of non-traditional students have factors such as families or spouses, full time jobs, mortgages and various other responsibilities, which need to be taken into consideration before deciding to go back to school. Traditional students typically do not have factors like these weighing on their decision to attend college. The decision to go back to school is often triggered by critical life events or reassessment of goals and priorities; older students are more likely to attend for intrinsic reasons (e.g. self esteem or cognitive research) (Dornan, 2001). Often times, acquiring more education in specific areas or fields can lead to promotion, higher pay, or a better overall career for non-traditional students who are already gainfully employed.

For a traditional student, the transition to college is typically an easy one as their mindset is already centered on a full time school schedule. The most difficult aspect that is often anticipated for traditional students is that of moving out of the house and into a dorm or an apartment (Hermon, 2004). While not all traditional students move to campus, the majority do. Most of them tend to utilize the services that are provided for them by the university, and do so with their peers (e.g. entertainment, health care, dining, etc). For non-traditional students, this is something that they do not necessarily need, but is a figure factored into their cost for attending that specific college. Non-traditional students typically do not go to college campuses for socialization or meals, and have their own support systems (including health care) outside of school. Because of these factors, when deciding on which school to attend, they are bringing

with them exactly the same consumer expectations they have for every other commercial enterprise with which they deal (Levine, 1993). They do not need the Greek Life, sports, chaplain or dining halls, and do not want to have to worry about paying for it in their tuition either. They expect to only pay for what they need and utilize, which is a rarity in higher education.

Non-traditional students are more likely to attend college on a part-time basis than traditional students, as well as live off campus (Levine, 1993). While many of the non-traditional students try to balance work and college, many immerse themselves on a full-time basis, and find that the transition from work to school is one of the hardest parts of going back. With this factor in mind, non-traditional students arrive on college campuses with their own unique set of needs and expectations (Lintner, 1997), as well as a different learning capacity and approach. Non-traditional students tend to be more self-directed learners for whom learning is inherently joyful, and as such they carry more to the classroom in terms of commitment and goals (Carland, 2002). In contrast to the majority of traditional students, non-traditional students have made the self-conscious decision to go back to school, and tend to be paying for it out of their own pocket, whereas a traditional student typically does not have to foot the bill for college 100%. Traditional students may just attend college because it is what is expected of them and/or their social network is college bound as well.

### ***Cognitive Levels Upon Entering Higher Education***

As more campuses are experiencing growth in non-traditional student populations, there are concerns for the ways in which to integrate the 'older' student into the traditional learning environment. Non-traditional students have certain recognized characteristics that make their

higher educational experiences different from that of the traditional population (Kimbrough and Weaver, 1999). Research has described many non-traditional students as feeling like a frustrated participant in the college setting, as well as experiencing higher levels of feelings of isolation in comparison to traditional students. In addition, non-traditional students tend to have poor or rust study skills, lack of confidence in their motivations and question their motivations (Kimborough and Weaver, 1999).

Research that was conducted on a college campus in Colorado focused on the needs and concerns regarding the education levels that non-traditional students bring with them into the classroom. In this study, the non-traditional students expressed a majority of their concerns on their background knowledge of the core subject(s), specifically; math, science and writing courses. Many of these courses start on the first day with a level of assumption that each student comes in with background knowledge of at least the basic, fundamental principles that they can start applying immediately. While this may apply to the majority, for the non-traditional student who maybe has not taken a chemistry class or directly applied their math and composition skills, anything that they learned in year's prior is already behind the learning curve of their classmates (Kimborough and Weaver, 1999).

### ***Overall Experiences with Higher Education***

According to Laing, Kuo-Ming, and Robinson (2005:170), a *traditional* student is defined as one who, “entered higher education at the age of 18 straight from school or further education, [and] studied continuously and full time for either three or four years.” These students typically come from families who have had experiences with higher education and are, in turn, influenced to pursue higher education. Traditional and non-traditional students’



expectations and perceptions of higher education may vary depending on their families' experiences with it (Laing et al. 2005). Entering into higher education straight from high school (or equivalent institution) eases the transition for traditional students. They have been continuously and intensively studying in a school setting, whereas non-traditional students have not. For non-traditional students, college can be "isolating and traumatic in ways not experienced by white working-class students" (Bowl 2001:143).

However, when preparation and life-skills are taken into account, traditional students seem to be less prepared for higher education. Many students' perceptions of higher education are skewed and based on stereotypical assumptions. These perceptions are typically based on their experiences in secondary education. Many believe that college will be moderately difficult academically, and extremely exciting socially (Laing 2005). Traditional students also perceive the teachers and learning environment at a higher education institution to be similar to their high school. This often results in "many students (due in part to their previous educational experiences) will have entered higher education without having taken responsibility for their own learning" (Laing 2005:170).

A study performed by Bowl (2001:141) "points to the need for institutional change if non-traditional students are to thrive within a system that purports to be directed toward widening participation." Bowl (2001) found that non-traditional students are frustrated with the lack of change and improvements that their respective higher education institutions are will to make. Entering into higher education, for non-traditional students can result in a feeling of powerlessness, as well as a "struggle for personal, academic, financial and emotional survival" (Bowl 2001:142). Participants described their schooldays as being too much for them to handle, and that they might be better off in a vocational-type setting. They also felt that by entering

higher education at an older age, they would be forced into the job market and marriage/family life immediately upon graduation (Bowl 2001). Traditional students are often able to live at home after graduating, and not concerned with paying bills, starting a family, etc. like non-traditional students may be. These students are at different stages in their lives. While traditional students are typically 21-22 years old when they graduate, non-traditional students are upwards of 25 years.

### ***Learning Environments***

As people's lives have become perpetually busy, universities have started offering courses both in face-to-face and on-line atmospheres. By offering internet-based courses, non-traditional students can more easily return to school. There are often time and distance constraints that keep non-traditional students from making that leap back into learning. Because non-traditional students are typically 25+ years old, they have commitments to work, family, and community (Buerck, Malmstrom and Peppers, 2002). With ever-advancing technology, internet-based learning has incorporated more characteristics of traditional classroom learning.

“Research has demonstrated that key components within the learning environment, such as openness, community, interpersonal interaction, and accessibility, can be enhanced through the use of advanced technologies in the classroom...and offers potential benefits (e.g. increased retention and convenience, lower cost, the ability to transcend geographical barriers) compared to traditional environments” (Buerck et al. 2002:140). This makes entering into higher education more of an option to non-traditional students.

However, some research also shows that online courses can compromise a student's ability to learn. Phoha (1999) argues that teaching and learning is a dynamic process. There are

aspects of classroom learning that simply cannot be achieved via on-line courses (such as facial expressions, hand gestures, and feedback from students). Phoha also argues that because every student's learning style differs, there may be a need for one-on-one student-instructor attention. There is also no way of knowing whether a student's work is actually there's and not someone else's. Phoha (1999) performed a study on the students in her computer science class. She asked, "Can an entire course be successfully taught through email?" This study found that "of the 65 students who [answered the question], 54 responded that a course cannot be successfully taught via email. Only 7 students responded that it could, and four responded 'yes' with reservations" (Phoha 1999:29).

A study done by Buerck et al. (2002) looks at the enrollment and success of non-traditional students in an internet-based versus lecture-based computer science course. The participants were non-traditional (ages 22+ years) computer science students given the option to take a specific course either on-line or in-person lecture. The researchers used learning environment as the independent variable and final course grades as the dependent variable. They found that between the two groups they looked at, there was no significant difference in final course grades (Buerck et al. 2002). Computer science students partaking in online courses performed almost equally to those in the classroom setting. The research did conclude, however, that students who took the course online probably did as well as their counterparts because they voluntarily enrolled in it. In order to improve this study, the researchers could look at students who are not allowed to choose which type of learning environment they take a class in. If their preferred learning environment and learning style do not match up, their final grades may differ more than in this specific study. The researchers do say that that type of study could be unethical

because they would be putting students into a situation that could cause them to perform worse than they normally would (Buerck et al. 2002).

## METHODS

The first null hypothesis in this study is that traditional students will prefer the option for online classes rather than a face-to-face classroom setting; the alternative hypothesis for this study is that non-traditional students will prefer face-to-face learning over online learning. The second null hypothesis is that traditional and non-traditional students have the same goals, motivations, and expectations for college; the alternative hypothesis for this study is that traditional and non-traditional students have differing goals, motivations, and expectations for college. The final null hypothesis for this study is that traditional and non-traditional students do not have varying cognitive levels upon entering college; the alternative hypothesis for this study is that traditional and non-traditional students have varying cognitive levels upon entering college, with traditional students having an overall stronger cognitive level.

### *Sample*

A random sample of 4 general education classrooms, as well as convenience and snowball sampling, at the University of New Hampshire was included in the sample. Convenience and snowball sampling was conducted in the Non-Traditional Student Lounge in the Memorial Union Building. 176 undergraduate students (15 [8.5%] non-traditional and 161 [91.5%] traditional) voluntarily participated in the study. Written permission was obtained from professors to survey classrooms and oral permission was obtained from students in the Non-Traditional Student Lounge. Informed consent was attached to each survey stressing that

participation in this study was entirely voluntary and could cease at anytime during the survey. The informed consent also stated that any information the participants included in their survey would remain confidential. To ensure that information in the surveys remained anonymous, students were told not to write their names on the surveys and to place surveys in a covered box when they were complete (or incomplete if they chose not to participate). Attached to the survey was also a debriefing of the purpose of the survey, the class it pertained to, as well as the contact information of the researchers and their professor.

### ***Methodology***

For the purposes of this study, simple random sampling, as well as convenience and snowball sampling, were used. Simple random sampling was used to recruit traditional students, with the possibility of non-traditional students. Through Blackboard, we retrieved a list of all general education courses offered in the spring 2010 semester at the University of New Hampshire. Each course (with the exclusion of labs, recitations, and study abroad) was numbered 1-527 and entered into a random generator. The first 20 numbers and their corresponding courses were chosen to possibly be sampled. We contacted the professors of each of these courses through email and requested to survey their classes. Of the 20 professors we contacted, 4 agreed to participate in our study and allowed us to survey their classes. 3 out of the 4 classes we surveyed had more than 50 students, so it was likely that we would get a large sample size. Each survey consisted of 25 quantitative questions. Because we surveyed general education courses, our sample was representative of all majors, ages, genders, and races. According to the University of New Hampshire's demographics, it was expected that the

majority of our sample would be traditional students (n=161) and the minority non-traditional students (n=15).

Convenience and snowball sampling was used to recruit non-traditional students for our study. It was the most appropriate method to seek the population we were trying to study. We went to the Non-Traditional Student Lounge in the Memorial Union Building, often for 2 or 3 hours at a time, to find participants for our study. We suspected that any student in the lounge was non-traditional (aged 23 or older) and confirmed this before asking them to take our survey.

### ***Variables***

*Goals, motivations and expectations.* To test the goals, motivations and expectations of traditional and non-traditional students, we used several questions in our survey. We asked participants how their college experience measured up with any academic expectations they may have had, as well as any social expectations they may have had. This was measured on a scale of 1 “I did not have any expectations,” 2 “below my expectations,” 3 “met my expectations,” and 4 “exceeded my expectations.” We also asked participants to rank the most important influence or motivation for enrollment. The items they were asked to rank included: “further your career; my social network/group was enrolling in college; higher pay; my parents/family expected me to enroll; to achieve any future goals I had for myself; and other.” We measured this on a scale of 1-6, with 1 being the most important motivation.

*Cognitive levels.* In order to measure the cognitive levels of traditional and non-traditional students, we created a matrix asking participants how confident they were in different academic areas. These items included: “using a computer (PC); using a MAC (Apple); accessing and using Blackboard; using word processing programs; conducting internet searches; finding

resources in the library; using the research databases; using electronic presentation tools (Power Point).” Participants were asked to check the box with their corresponding confidence level. This was measured using 1 “no confidence” to 4 “very confident.” We also used questions in our survey asking how prepared students felt upon entering college, as well as how much time they spend studying/preparing for class. We asked participants how prepared they felt for college-level coursework upon entering college using a 1-5 scale, with 1 being “very unprepared” and 5 being “very unprepared.” If they reported feeling unprepared at all, we then asked them what they felt unprepared for. These items included “workload; difficulty of courses/homework; both workload and difficulty of courses/homework; and other.” Following this, we asked participants how much time, in a typical school week, they spend studying/preparing for class. This was measured on a scale of 1-6, with 1 “I do not study/prepare for class” to 5 “more than 6 hours.”

*Learning environments.* To test which type of learning environment would be most beneficial to traditional and non-traditional students, we used 1 question in the survey. This question asked participants: if they had the option, which class room setting would be most beneficial to them? This was measured on a scale of 1-3; 1 “classroom setting with face-to-face interaction between professor and student”; 2 “internet-based with no face-to-face interaction between professor and student”; and 3 “combined face-to-face and internet.”

*Overall experiences.* In order to measure the overall experiences of traditional and non-traditional students, we used several questions and matrices in our survey. First, we asked participants how often they participate in on-campus social activities (e.g. MUB movies, sporting events). This was measured on a scale of 1-5, with 1 being “never” and 5 being “more than 4 times per month.” We then asked if they were involved in any campus activities or clubs. This

was measured on a yes/no scale, with 1 being “yes” and 2 being “no.” Participants were then asked to check which campus activities or clubs they were involved with (if any). These included: “fraternity/sorority; intramural sports; university athletic team; club/committee; and other.” These items were measured on a 0-1 scale; a score of 1 was given on each specific item that was chosen and a 0 if any given item was not chosen. We used 1 matrix to measure how often students utilized UNH on-campus resources. The resources included in this question were: “health services; on-campus libraries; the MUB; dining halls; Hamel Recreational Center; campus buses; CFAR (Center for Academic Resources); the Writing Center; and OWL (Online Writing Lab).” Frequency of use was measure on a scale of 1 “not at all” to 4 “more than 10 times per semester.” A second matrix was used to measure levels of satisfaction with aspects of student life at UNH. These aspects included: “access to library databases; access to professors (office hours, email correspondence, etc.); availability of elective classes; availability of ‘core’ classes; times of elective classes; times of ‘core’ classes; extracurricular activities offered; and clubs/committees.” These items were measured on a scale of 1 “very dissatisfied” to 4 “very satisfied.”

### ***Limitations***

One limitation of this study was the abolishment of the Non-Traditional Student Union (NTSU) at UNH. When creating our sampling design, we planned to contact the president of the NTSU and attend any meetings this organization had to survey the members. There is an entire website dedicated to this committee, but upon contacting the person listed as “president,” we found that the NTSU no longer exists. In order to efficiently and effectively collect data, our second best option was to go to the Non-Traditional Student Lounge in the MUB and ask people



to participate in our survey. Another limitation of this study was the small percentage of non-traditional students enrolled in UNH. We would have liked to get more non-traditional students to participate in our study, but in order to do that we would have to get access to their email addresses or other contact information. Due to privacy laws and university rules and regulations, we were not able to sample the bulk of non-traditional students, we were only able to access those that we came across through convenience and snowball sampling. There would be no way for us to receive this type of information from the registrar. Our study was not entirely representative of the UNH undergraduate population; 10% of undergraduates at UNH are non-traditional, and they made up 8.5% of the sample in our study.

## RESULTS

After entering our data into our codebook, we ran a quantitative analysis of our data. Using SPSS to analyze our data, we were able to test our hypotheses to see how traditional and non-traditional students vary in their college level experiences. The final sample size consisted of 176 total undergraduate students. Of this sample there were 15 students that fell into the non-traditional definition of our study (age 23 or older), and the other 161 students were of the traditional definition (ages 18-22). Approximately 10% UNH undergraduate student body is considered to be of a non-traditional student status (UNH Office of Admissions); our sample is representative of the undergraduate student body with 91.5% of our students were traditional and 8.5% of our students were non-traditional students. Using a series of Chi-Square tests we were able to look at the differences in college experiences between the traditional and non-traditional students at UNH.

**H1: Due to age differences and constancy in an academic environment, traditional and non-traditional students have varying cognition and preparation levels upon entering college**

In an attempt to see differences in how traditional and non-traditional students felt upon entering college, we asked them to rate how academically prepared they felt. Using a Likert Scale, participants were asked to rank their feeling of preparedness from 1-5; 1 being very unprepared and 5 feeling very prepared. In looking at the overall results from this question, we did not see a significant difference in the level of preparedness felt between traditional and non-traditional students (Approx. Sign. = .873). However, in looking at the results in the follow-up to this question, which asked those students who did feel unprepared, what they felt unprepared for. We did find a difference between the two groups.

Table 1 looks at the areas where students expressed feelings of unpreparedness upon entering college. As you can see, 50% of the non-traditional students experienced feelings of unpreparedness when it came to the general workload of college level classes, where only 23.6% of traditional students experienced workload unpreparedness. Additionally, 20% of the traditional students and 0% of the traditional students, experienced difficulty with the amount of assigned homework and the level of difficulty of their classes. Nearly twice the amount of traditional students than non-traditional students (49.1% vs. 25.0%) reported feeling unprepared for the course workload, homework and class difficulty.

TABLE 1: Areas of Unpreparedness Crosstabulation

		Traditional	Non-Traditional	Total
1.00	Count	13	2	15
	Workload	23.6%	50.0%	25.4%
2.00	Count	11	0	11
	Difficulty of Courses & Homework	20.0%	.0%	18.6%
3.00	Count	27	1	28
	Combination 1&2	49.1%	25.0%	47.5%
4.00	Count	4	1	5
	Other	7.3%	25.0%	8.5%
Total	Count	55	4	59
	% within sample	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

As seen in Table 2, we did find a significant difference (Approx. Sig.=.117) in the amount of time that traditional and non-traditional students spend preparing and/or studying for class. When looking at the data analysis, we found that no non-traditional students reported preparing or studying for class less than 3-4 hours per week, and a majority of the non-traditional students (40.0%) reported spending 6 or more hours a week preparing and/or studying for their classes.

Conversely, the majority of traditional aged students reported spending an average of 3-4 hours per week (32.3%) or 5-6 hours (34.2%) preparing for class. Approximately half as many traditional students (21.1%) compared to non-traditional students (40%) reported 6 or more hours spent preparing/studying for school.

TABLE 2: Hours Spent Preparing/Studying for Class Crosstabulation

			Traditional	Non-Traditional	Total	
study	Don't prepare	Count	1	0	1	
		% within sample	.6%	.0%	.6%	
	1-2 hours	Count	19	0	19	
		% within sample	11.8%	.0%	10.8%	
	3-4 hours	Count	52	5	57	
		% within sample	32.3%	33.3%	32.4%	
	5-6 hours	Count	55	4	59	
		% within sample	34.2%	26.7%	33.5%	
	6+ hours	Count	34	6	40	
		% within sample	21.1%	40.0%	22.7%	
Total	Count	161	15	176		
	% within sample	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%		
Symmetric Measures						
			Value	Asymp. Std. Error <sup>a</sup>	Approx. T <sup>b</sup>	Approx. Sig.
Ordinal by Ordinal	Gamma		.329	.190	1.569	.117
N of Valid Cases			176			

a. Not assuming the null hypothesis.

b. Using the asymptotic standard error assuming the null hypothesis.

## H2: Traditional and non-traditional students tend to have differing goals and motivations as well as expectations for pursuing college education

In looking at the expectations of traditional and non-traditional students experiences in college, we looked at both academic and social expectations asking students how their expectations measured up to the experiences they had. In attempting to find an overall variation between groups and their experiences in general, we ran an ANOVA test. This resulted in a non-significant finding, as seen in Table 3.

TABLE 3: ANOVA

Overall Experiences of traditional & non-traditional					
	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	.072	1	.072	.006	.940
Within Groups	2120.665	169	12.548		
Total	2120.737	170			

While there was no significant finding in overall college experiences between traditional and non-traditional students, there was a significant difference (.004) in their social expectations. There was not much variation between traditional students and non-traditional students who thought that it met or was below their expectations. However, 34.8% of traditional students reported that their social experiences exceeded their expectations, while only 6.7% of non-traditional students reported experiencing the same. Non-traditional students also reported significantly higher numbers (40%) regarding not having any social expectations for their college experience, while only 5.6% of traditional students entered college with no social expectations.

In looking at the motivations of why traditional and non-traditional students enroll in college, we found no significant difference between groups. Overall, and among the two groups, the number one reason for enrolling in college was to further their career, second was to achieve any goals future goals I had for myself, third was to obtain higher pay, fourth was their parents/family expected them to enroll, fifth was that their social network/group was enrolling in college, and a small percentage chose other however, there was no trend in their responses.

TABLE 4: Social Expectations Crosstabulation

		Traditional	Non-Traditional	Total	
Exceed	Count	56	1	57	
	% within sample	34.8%	6.7%	32.4%	
Met	Count	68	6	74	
	% within sample	42.2%	40.0%	42.0%	
Below	Count	28	2	30	
	% within sample	17.4%	13.3%	17.0%	
No expect	Count	9	6	15	
	% within sample	5.6%	40.0%	8.5%	
Total	Count	161	15	176	
	% within sample	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	
Symmetric Measures					
		Value	Asymp. Std. Error <sup>a</sup>	Approx. T <sup>b</sup>	Approx. Sig.
Ordinal by Ordinal	Gamma	.625	.139	2.849	.004
N of Valid Cases		176			

a. Not assuming the null hypothesis.

b. Using the asymptotic standard error assuming the null hypothesis.

Similar to their social expectations and experiences, we wanted to look at the frequency of their involvement in on-campus activities and/or clubs to see how it correlated with their social expectations. This was due to the fact that we also believed that non-traditional students, having no social expectations, would be less involved in on-campus activities and clubs than traditional students, who have higher social networking goals and would be more frequently involved. In this area we did have a high level of significance between traditional and non-traditional students involvement in clubs/activities (.001) as shown in Table 5. When asked if they were involved in any campus clubs or activities, 86.7% of non-traditional students reported 'no' and 13.3% reported 'yes'. Looking at the traditional students, 64.6% of traditional students reported 'yes,' whereas only 35.4% reported 'no' to club/activity involvement.

In addition we asked how frequently the students, both traditional and non-traditional, attended campus social activities that are run by all/any UNH organization. The majority of non-traditional students reported attending on campus social activities 1-2 times per semester, whereas the majority of traditional students reported attending on campus social activities 1-2 times per month (See Table 6). Another noticeable difference was that 26.7% of non-traditional students compared with 8.1% of traditional students claimed to never attend on campus social activities.

**TABLE 5: Involvement in Clubs/Activities on Campus Crosstabulation**

			traditional			
			Traditional	Non-Traditional	Total	
Question_9	Yes	Count	104	2	106	
		% within sample	64.6%	13.3%	60.2%	
	No	Count	57	13	70	
		% within sample	35.4%	86.7%	39.8%	
Total	Count		161	15	176	
	% within sample		100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	
Symmetric Measures						
			Value	Asymp. Std. Error <sup>a</sup>	Approx. T <sup>b</sup>	Approx. Sig.
Ordinal by Ordinal	Gamma		.844	.111	3.433	.001
N of Valid Cases			176			

a. Not assuming the null hypothesis.

b. Using the asymptotic standard error assuming the null hypothesis.

**TABLE 6: Involvement in Campus Life Crosstabulation**

		traditional		Total
		Traditional	Non-Traditional	
Never	Count	13	4	17
	% within sample	8.1%	26.7%	9.7%
1-2 times per month	Count	59	1	60
	% within sample	36.6%	6.7%	34.1%
1-2 times per semester	Count	38	10	48
	% within sample	23.6%	66.7%	27.3%
3-4 times per month	Count	32	0	32
	% within sample	19.9%	.0%	18.2%
4+ times per month	Count	19	0	19
	% within sample	11.8%	.0%	10.8%
Total	Count	161	15	176
	% within sample	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

### **H3: We suspect that non-traditional students will prefer an option for a more flexible learning environment and scheduling (online classes) than traditional students**

Our third and final hypothesis was regarding the differing preference for learning environments between traditional and non-traditional college students. We suspected that non-traditional students would prefer a more flexible learning environment to include the option of incorporating online classes in addition to, or instead of, a traditional classroom setting. We also thought that traditional students would prefer a classroom style setting since it is what they are accustomed to from their high school education. It would also give traditional students the opportunity to see friends in classes or around campus, and interact with fellow peers.

When we ran this data in SPSS we did not find any significant difference between the two groups and their preferences for academic learning environments. Surprisingly, we found that the majority of non-traditional and traditional students preferred a classroom only type



learning environment, and the second preference was a combination of both online and classroom based. A learning environment that was solely online was the least popular with both the traditional and non-traditional students.

**TABLE 7: Learning Environment Preference Crosstabulation**

		Traditional	Non-Traditional	Total
Classroom only	Count	102	9	111
	% within sample	63.4%	64.3%	63.4%
Internet only	Count	3	0	3
	% within sample	1.9%	.0%	1.7%
Combined	Count	56	5	61
	% within sample	34.8%	35.7%	34.9%
Total	Count	161	14	175
	% within sample	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

## DISCUSSION

We found traditional and non-traditional students do experience differences in their college experiences on the UNH campus, however the differences are not as significant as we had expected. As expected, there was a difference in the level of unpreparedness that traditional and non-traditional students experience upon entering college. Traditional students tended to have a more difficult time with the overall difficulty of their courses and workload. Non-traditional students, however, showed to have more difficulty regarding their course workload and keeping up with the assignments and readings, as well as the in-class lectures.

In relation to feelings of preparedness, we did hypothesize that non-traditional students would spend much more time outside of the classroom preparing for classes and studying than traditional students. This hypothesis was also supported and displayed large variation in the

hours each group spent preparing and studying for class. Traditional students reported a majority of their study and preparation time took between the 3-4 hours per week or 5-6 hours per week. However, the majority of the non-traditional students we sampled reported spending more than 6 hours per week preparing and studying for classes. There were no non-traditional students reported any results that came in under 3-4 hours of studying and preparing per week. This was consistent with the literature that we found as we explored the topic outside of our own research, as well the claims that non-traditional students require and do spend more time than traditional students studying and preparing for their courses.

Another area that had a significant difference was when we looked at the social experiences and expectations of students. We hypothesized that non-traditional students would have differing expectations and experiences than traditional students when it came to social experiences in college. We felt that traditional students would come to college with higher expectations of increasing their social network, and non-traditional students would not need to rely on college to expand their social network because they have a larger out-of-school network than traditional students. This hypothesis was supported by our findings.

We found that more traditional students reported that their social experiences in college met or exceeded the expectations that they had coming into college. Non-traditional students either claimed to have entered college having no expectations regarding their social life, or that it met their social expectations. This data allowed us to see that there were significant expectation differences in the way that traditional and non-traditional students experience college social activities/life.

In order to get a more in-depth look at how these social interactions and experiences varied, we asked both groups of students if they were involved in on campus activities and/or

clubs that would provide additional exposure for them to increase their social networks. What we found was also statistically significant between groups. Traditional students reported more than four times the involvement of on-campus clubs and activities than non-traditional students. This variable was further broken down to show that traditional students attend, and are involved in, on-campus activities much more frequently than even the small amount of non-traditional students that do attend on campus activities. Traditional students reported attending on-campus social activities between 1-2 times per month, while non-traditional students only reported attending these activities at a rate of 1-2 times a semester or never at all. This supports our hypothesis that non-traditional students do not come to college expecting to be highly involved with on campus activities to increase their social network, as they have a social network that pre-existed their college attendance.

An area where we did not find significant variation, but expected to, was regarding the motivations for going to, or going back, to college. We hypothesized that traditional and non-traditional students would have differing goals and motivations for going to college. However, when we looked at our data results, we found no variation between the groups. Both non-traditional and traditional students expressed that their number one reason for going back to school was to further their career. Additional motivations for going back to school showed no variation either with the other motivators for both traditional and non-traditional students falling in this order: second motivator was to achieve their goals for the future, third was to receive higher pay, fourth was that their parents/family expected them to and fifth was that their social network was enrolling/attending college. This surprised us, as we felt that more non-traditional students would report feeling pressures from their family and parents to attend college and/or

that they would be more likely to attend based on the sole fact that all their peers in their social network were going to be going to college, which was not the case.

The final hypothesis we tested in our research was in regards to preference in learning environments between the two groups of students. For this variable, we hypothesized that non-traditional students would be more likely to prefer an all-online academic environment to accommodate their lives outside of college, or a more flexible environment that allowed a combination of both online and in-class learning. We also felt that traditional students would prefer a traditional classroom experience, as they are coming right from high school where they have been in a classroom setting and attending classes each day. This would allow them additional opportunities to socialize and increase their social networks.

In this area, we refuted our hypothesis as we found that there were no differences in the preferences between traditional and non-traditional students and the learning environments that they preferred. Additionally, both the majority of the non-traditional and traditional students preferred an all classroom based learning environment instead of an online one. What was more surprising was that no non-traditional students reported wanting a solely internet based learning environment. In the preference of a combination of an online and in-classroom flexibility, there was also no variance between the two groups' preferences.

In looking at the results of our study, there are definite broader implications that need to be recognized. There is a definite difference in the way that traditional and non-traditional students experience college and achieve academic success. With the number of non-traditional students on the rise, they are still an underrepresented group on the UNH campus. Administration needs to provide additional resources that will allow non-traditional students to feel that that are as integral a part of the UNH student life and academics as the traditional

students. Professors should also take note and be aware of the differences in learning styles that they bring to the table and the varying levels of preparedness and preparation time that non-traditional students experience in college.

We had a large overall number of participants in our study, and administering a survey allowed us to ask a number of inclusive and in-depth questions getting at the experiences of the students. The Non-Traditional Student Lounge that was also on-campus, located in the MUB, was also extremely helpful. This lounge allowed us to conduct convenience sampling on a daily basis, as well as snowball sampling from the participants that we were able to draw from.

If we had more time and access to more students, we would have liked to look more at the differing levels of confidence between traditional and non-traditional students when it came to operating various pieces of technology, as well as their confidence in using on-campus resources and databases. We would also have looked more into the varying stressors that traditional and non-traditional students face both in and outside of school, and how those affect their college/learning experiences. Having more time would have also allowed us to get a larger sample of non-traditional students, which would have allowed our results to be more generalized.

Future research needs more insight into how the bridge can be closed between traditional and non-traditional students on college campuses. Additionally, looking at the positive effects of having a Non-Traditional Student Union for the non-traditional students could prove to provide inside knowledge of the needs and support systems that they require to have an enjoyable college experience. With the demographics on college campuses changing, higher education institutions must adapt to their needs. Traditional and non-traditional students differ in many ways; the way they approach entering college, how they learn, what their personal lives entail, and their overall experience with college are all different. Not every student's education path takes him or her

directly from high school to college. While this is still the minority, the population could continue to grow and become more of an integral part of a university.

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