

Information Needs of Non-Traditional Students Before Entry Into Post-Secondary Education

Sometimes referred to as OTA, or "older than average" students, students who go on to attend post-secondary institutions after a delay have also been described as "mature undergraduates," "returning students," "adult learners," and "non-traditional students." Whatever terms are used to describe the population of students who do not move directly from high school to their post-secondary educations, these students frequently encounter information literacy issues that differ from those of their younger peers who have just finished high school. This is a needs assessment of those non-traditional students as they begin to pursue their post-secondary educations.

How are non-traditional students defined? This varies by institution; some post-secondary institutions, like community colleges, consider most of their students as non-traditional. Many institutions use age as a factor, and define non-traditional students as older than twenty five. As an example, 54% of the students Portland Community College served (in classes taken for credit during 2005-2006) are older than twenty-five; 11% of those students are fifty years old or older (Office of Institutional Effectiveness 2006). In contrast Oregon State University, a more traditional four-year state institution, has an average *graduation age* for those receiving their bachelor's degrees of twenty-five years old (Office of Institutional Research 2006). While Portland Community College's non-traditional students may share age-related characteristics, they are diverse in almost every other demographic category, such as ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity, physical ability, income, and family responsibility (Heery 1997, Given 2002).

Arguably, undergraduates (non-traditional or otherwise) face challenges in information literacy no matter how long it's been since high school, if only because the level of work expected in college-level classes is generally more demanding than the work they have done to date. However, non-traditional students face increasing challenges the more distant they are from participating in an educational process. These challenges are not just in learning how to do research, but also how to become proficient in new technologies.

While most of the available academic literature on non-traditional students focuses on developing information literacy in an academic environment, this gap in proficiency or literacy in information-related technologies is present *before* these students begin school. Non-traditional students need to know how to make informed choices about degree programs and institutions, about applying for financial aid, and a host of related decisions such as job-related choices, child care choices, and so on (Matus-Grossman, Goode, Wavelet, Diaz, & Seupersad 2002). Because non-traditional students oftentimes come to these choices without the assistance of school staff, friends, or family members (Given 2002) when navigating these information structures (in the same way traditional undergraduates do), it is critical to provide information literacy support to them before their enrollment in an institution. The same best practices used by academic libraries to develop enrolled students can be used by institutions such as public libraries to assist *potential* students.

Key areas for returning student information literacy, prior to attending classes

Before students begin their time in a post-secondary setting, many of them will need to navigate the world of applying to schools and applying for financial aid for the first time. Some students will need to take entrance or placement exams as well. From a review of post-secondary institutional sites and other sites developed for non-traditional students, three main types of information need for incoming students emerge:

- *Choice* information before the application process – Location of institutions, program descriptions, available financial aid/scholarships/funding packages, placement test requirements of the institutions, third-party ratings or reviews, or other information needs arising from choosing where to apply.
- *Lifestyle* information – Understanding how to balance working and going to school, availability of childcare and insurance for students, transportation needs, mental health/counseling resources, or other information needs related to the student's personal life.
- *Bureaucratic* information during and after the application process, but before participating in classes – insurance plans, FAFSA, on-line application forms, registering

for classes, signing up for orientation, and other information needs arising from the actual application process and subsequent enrollment.

Additionally, for all of these areas students need a way to evaluate retrieved information, particularly from freely available Internet sources, that has more rigorous standards than their existing evaluation methods for personal resources (for example Whitmire 2004, Mactague & Oleszkiewicz 2006). While specific needs for any given group of non-traditional students would be determined by performing a needs assessment (such as the Catalyst WebQ survey located here: <https://catalysttools.washington.edu/survey/iamray/36361>), available literature (as well as interviews with current and previous non-traditional students) suggests the following examples of typical information literacy needs and their related skills:

Choice Information: Needs and Skills

Need: Identifying candidate institutions for applications

Task: Finding information on various universities that can help with institutional choice.

Example questions: Who has programs I'm interested in? How much is tuition?

Skill: Selecting appropriate resources

Skill: Using the basic features of an OPAC/search engine to search for resources

Skill: Using the advanced features of an OPAC/search engine to retrieve targeted resources, and to browse the shelf for additional related resources (building an informed search)

Skill: Evaluating those resources in context (for example, when are Google results good, and when are they bad?)

Need: Appropriate institution-specific information

Task: Finding program information, entrance requirements, scholarships offered, etc.

Example questions: Do they have a Theatre Arts program? Who teaches the upper-level math classes? How many credits do I have to take to graduate? Do they have an active student body?

Skill: Using the basic features of a web browser/search engine

Skill: Locating FAQs

Skill: Creating bookmarks for retrieval

Need: Contact information for candidate institutions

Task: Getting in touch with admissions counselors, alumni of potential programs, etc.

Example questions: Who do I ask for more information? How do I get in touch with the institution?

Skill: Using the basic features of a web browser/search engine

Skill: Understanding web-based e-mail

Lifestyle Information: Needs and Skills

Need: Childcare Resources

Task: Finding on-site childcare providers

Example questions: Does my institution have childcare? Who qualifies? Is there a waiting list?

Skill: Using the basic features of a web browser/search engine

Need: Transportation Resources

Task: Getting to and from classes

Example questions: Do I need a parking permit? Are bus passes discounted for students?

Skill: Using the basic features of a web browser/search engine

Need: Institutional Support Resources

Task: Finding support/counseling/tutoring or other personal resources

Example questions: Does my institution have resources for LGBTQ students? If I'm not good at math, will I be on my own?

Skill: Using the basic features of a web browser/search engine

Bureaucratic Information: Needs and Skills

Need: Applying to programs

Task: Navigating to the institutions' admissions pages; filling out application forms

Example questions: When do I have to get my paperwork in? Where do I send everything?
Should I print out a copy of what I send? How do I get high school transcripts?

Skill: Using the basic features of a web browser/search engine

Skill: Locating FAQs

Skill: Filling out web forms and saving copies

Need: Financial aid

Task: Filling out the FAFSA as well as institutional forms and returning them; searching for and applying for scholarships

Example questions: What are my deadlines? How do I qualify for scholarships/grants/loans? Do I have to finish my taxes before I fill out my FAFSA?

Skill: Using the basic features of a web browser/search engine, especially with federal sites

Skill: Locating FAQs

Skill: Managing passwords for secure sites

Skill: Filling out web forms and saving copies

Need: Completing enrollment requirements

Task: Filling out and returning any additional institutional forms

Example questions: What are my deadlines? Where do I send my forms? Do I need a measles vaccination? How do I get my student ID?

Skill: Using the basic features of a web browser/search engine, especially with federal sites

Skill: Locating FAQs

Skill: Managing passwords for secure sites

Skill: Filling out web forms and saving copies

Need: Class registration

Task: Using the on-line registration system

Example questions: How do I pick classes? What if I want to take classes that overlap? Do I always have to take the prerequisite classes?

Skill: Finding appropriate courses

Skill: Locating FAQs

Skill: Managing passwords for secure sites

Skill: Filling out web forms and saving copies

Accurate identification of the information needs of non-traditional students both in advance of their attendance at a post-secondary institution and once they attend (American Library Association 2006) can help information professionals in both academic and public settings develop successful instructional materials for building information literacy skills.

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