Creating a Flexible Learning Environment for Online Nontraditional Students

Nontraditional students are a growing population across community colleges, technical schools, and universities. Although no universal definition exists for nontraditional students, characteristics they share are being an adult over the age of 24, working full-time, attending school part-time, and being financially independent. In addition, nontraditional students are often highly motivated, prefer self-directed learning, and bring a wealth of career and life experiences with them. One of the biggest challenges they face is balancing family, work, and school roles.

Faculty who come from a traditional higher education environment may be surprised at the numerous unique challenges associated with nontraditional students. They may assume that these students require less individual attention and have fewer issues. Oftentimes, however, the opposite is true. Many nontraditional students require more individualized attention and support.

To address this, we developed a flexible program and curriculum based on nontraditional students' unique characteristics. We realize this is a continuous process, and there has certainly been some trial and error, but we are beginning to create a blueprint for success.

Understanding Nontraditional Students

The first step in creating a flexible program and curriculum is getting to know your students and understanding their unique backgrounds. To better understand our students, we collect basic demographic data on all new students, ask them to provide video bios, and collect data on their learning habits and desired methods of instruction. We believe that the better we know our students, the better we can tailor our program to meet their specific needs.

Flexibility

We designed our program to be flexible and accommodating by providing rolling enrollment with a clear, navigational path to graduation. Students have the option to start in any semester they wish and enroll in any course, since there are no prerequisites. All courses are delivered online and follow a 15-week schedule.

There are five core courses and several electives available each semester. Although not all of our students prefer online courses, they do enjoy the flexibility online courses provide. We address students' hesitation to online learning by meeting with them one on one, providing tutorials and videos, and holding virtual office hours.

Course curriculum is also flexible. Course formats, assignments, and due dates are adjustable to align with each student's specific field. To promote self-directed learning, we offer several different content delivery options including video lectures, book chapters, articles, and additional external resources, which allow students to select the best option for them. Our goal is for our curriculum to complement and enhance what our students are doing in the workplace.

Embrace Your Students' Unique Experiences

Nontraditional students bring a wealth of experiences into the classroom, and we make every attempt to embrace these experiences and incorporate them into the curriculum. For example, as part of a curriculum development assignment, students evaluate the curriculum of one of the courses they take and develop new methods to deliver the content. We also allow students to share their experiences in discussions, group projects, and video presentations. These discussions become a collaborative learning experience and serve as an excellent resource for sharing best practices.

Compassion

A major area of emphasis for our faculty is being flexible and compassionate when issues arise outside the classroom and beyond our students' control. For the majority of our students, school is not their top priority and often takes a back seat to family and work. Our students who struggle or withdraw often do so because of factors outside the classroom. By remaining flexible, we are able to accommodate these students and provide them with an opportunity to complete the course and address their pressing needs.

Feedback

Obtaining student feedback has taught us a great deal. We solicit feedback at the end of the term, the midway point, and in the form of electronic correspondence

throughout the semester. By promoting a safe and supportive learning environment, we believe that our students are comfortable and feel secure in providing honest, constructive feedback.

Nontraditional students are a growing population on campuses across the country, and we must ensure their needs are being addressed. By identifying these students and developing effective strategies, we create a supportive learning environment that adapts to student demographics, complements what these students are doing in the workplace, and helps them thrive on our campuses.

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