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Success for Post-Traditional Learners:

How to Make Colleges More Student-Ready

by Michael B. Horn and Levi Belnap

Introduction

A college degree is a valuable tool for many seeking to earn higher incomes and build stronger lives. But with an increasing proportion of diverse "post-traditional students" who hail from a far wider range of backgrounds, it's time for colleges to become more "student-ready."

Higher education was not designed for this diversity, but rather with the needs of only an elite few in mind, who would arrive well-prepared and stick around for four or more years in a row to earn their degree. Despite an increasing focus on college access and readiness, fewer students fit into this limited mold. An increasing number of undergraduate and graduate students are "non-traditional" or what some call "post-traditional" learners, including working adults learning while earning or returning later for a credential or degree. Helping these learners maximize their college experience benefits not only the students themselves and the institutions that serve them, but also our economy and society.

With greater student diversity has come greater educational challenge, both for students and these institutions of higher education. College is a wake-up call for even the most prepared students, and may be even more of a challenge for adult learners and other non-traditional students. Although research shows that some of these students drop out for financial reasons or because life gets in the way, most also have a variety of academic and non-cognitive skills gaps that colleges are currently unprepared to meet -- these are the focus of this paper.

As former Under Secretary of Education Ted Mitchell said, "We need innovation that cracks the code around providing access to high-quality, affordable education for the new college student who is more diverse, who has more needs, who in many ways is a challenge to the traditional system." Fortunately, such innovation is beginning to take hold at select colleges and universities across the country -- albeit far too slowly. By harnessing new technologies and smart service models, these institutions are shedding their old-fashioned ways and embracing new student needs with novel outcomes-driven solutions. These post-secondary institutions must respond in more comprehensive and personalized ways to a broader range of student needs that address the gaps with which their students arrive, so that all students can earn degrees, jobs, and life success.

Although most colleges and university are not yet as student-ready as they must become, what follows is a glimpse of what some forward-thinking schools are doing, which we hope will help more to become more student-ready faster.

Background: Who College Serves, And Why

Even as college costs have risen and other options for workforce education have emerged, a college degree remains the coin of the realm for a good career. Although there has been a slight slippage, the wage premium for college graduates stands above 80 percent—meaning that college graduates can expect to earn roughly one million more dollars than high school graduates over their lifetimes. What's more, workers with college degrees are less likely to be unemployed: bachelor's degree holders had a 3.5 percent unemployment rate in 2014 compared with 6 percent unemployment for Americans with only a high school diploma. Meanwhile, the rate of return of a Bachelor's degree has held steady for a decade at about 15 percent, according to the Federal Reserve Bank of New York.

In 2012, fully three-quarters of all undergraduates had at least one of seven "post-traditional" characteristics

Because of how vital college is to job prospects and economic mobility, more types of students are attending college than ever before. These so-called "non-traditional" students" might be more accurately dubbed "the new normal" or, as we like to call them, "post-traditional". This term was coined by former Excelsior College president John Ebersole in a 2013 American Council on Education manifesto to refer to the millions of adults already in the workforce who lack a credential but pursue post-secondary education alongside other responsibilities -- a diverse group of up to 98 million learners today.

Although the term is new, post-traditional students are in the majority. In 2012, fully three-quarters of all undergraduates had at least one of seven "post-traditional" characteristics, according to the National Center for Education Statistics: being independent for financial aid purposes, having one or more dependents, being a single caregiver, not having a traditional high school diploma, delaying postsecondary enrollment, attending school part time, or being employed full time.

Just as "traditional" captures both a suburban jock and an urban valedictorian, post-traditional students are far from a monolithic group. According to the Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP), 40% of undergraduate students are over 25 years old, and that age group's enrollment is projected to grow more than twice as fast as for "traditional" students just graduating from high school. Black and Hispanic students together comprise a third of the undergraduate student population, and growing, and half of college students have incomes under 200 percent of the Federal Poverty Level (FPL). Two-thirds work part- or full-time, which led Jobs for the Future and Eduventures to dub these adult learners '"employees who study' rather than 'students who work.'"

TODAY'S COLLEGE STUDENTS

Gender

- 56% | Male
- 44% | Female

Age

- Under 21 | 55%
- 22-29 | 27%
- 30-39 | 10%
- 40+ | 8%

Type of School

- 38% | 2-year
- 62% | 4-year

Race

- White | 56%
- Hispanic | 18%
- Black | 14%
- Asian/Pacific Iclander | 7%
- American Indian/Alaska Native | 1%
- Two or more races | 4%
- *Non-White* | *44%*

Enrollment

- 62% | Full-time
- 38% | Part-time

Employment

- Not Employed | 38%
- Part-time | 36%
- Full-time | 26%

Financial Aid

- 62% | Do not receive Pell Grants
- 38% | Receive Pell Grants

Housing

- Live on campus | 46%
- Live in other housing | 45%
- Live with parent/guardian | 9%

Dependents

- 28% | Have children
- 72% | Do not have children

Learning Environment

- Classroom only | 72%
- Online only | 14%
- Both | 14%

Image Source: [Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation]

Although many more post-traditional students are finding their way into college, relatively few are graduating. Many of these students arrive with gaps in their knowledge or preparation that make it challenging for them to persist through the academic, logistical, and financial hurdles that college presents, let alone complete their degree. A greater proportion of post-traditional students are classified as "at risk" based on a low sense of connection to the institution, low confidence about completing their program; and/or negative feelings about their current educational situation. As a result, students and institutions waste time, energy and money on education that fails to pay off the way that a completed degree does.

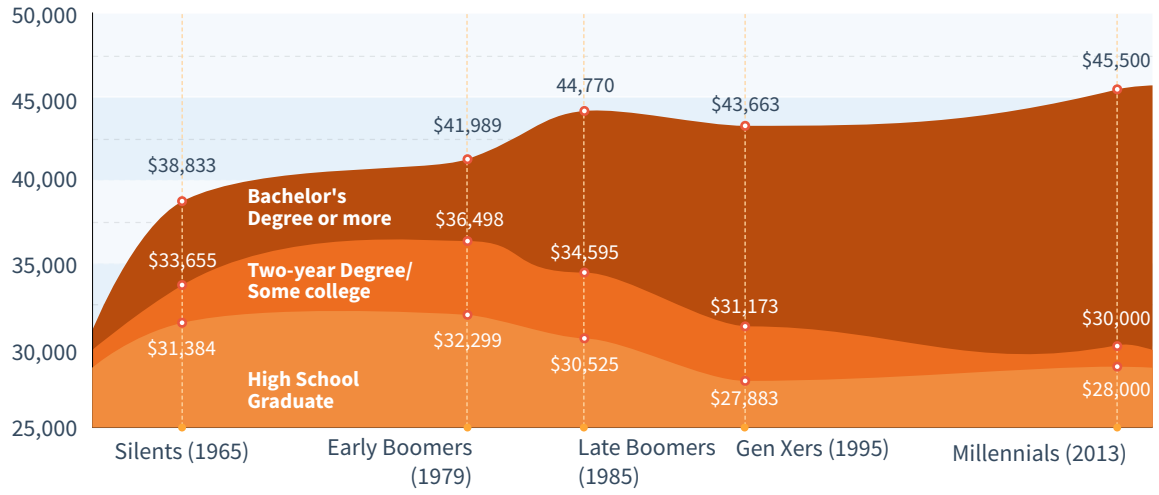
Although nearly 60 percent of students who enroll in college full-time right after high school earn a credential within six years, the Lumina Foundation finds that this rate drops to just 30-35 percent for students who are older, attend part-time, or don't have a typical high school diploma. Students have historically accepted these failures as their own, but the onus is shifting to the colleges and universities responsible for delivering instruction that works for their students and produces meaningful degrees.

It is time for these institutions to step up their game -- for the benefit of students, certainly, but also for the good of colleges themselves and for the country. These schools risk losing a variety of things, including critical revenue. In a recent analysis of over 1600 colleges and universities during a single academic year, the schools collectively lost close to $16.5 billion in tuition because of student attrition -- or an average of $9.9 million per institution (though one school lost more than $100 million alone).

As for our society as a whole, when fewer students complete college, we have fewer citizens and families who can achieve the American dream of upward social mobility, as well as gaps in our economy that make our communities less productive and our country less globally competitive. College boosts earnings and employment, but when you factor in costs, it's only a significant benefit for those who actually complete their degrees: the Pew Research Center has found the value of only a high school diploma and some college dipping over the past few decades, while the median earnings of degree-holders have climbed.

Rising earnings disparity between young adults with and without a college degree

Median annual earnings among full-time workers ages 25 to 32, in 2012, dollars



Notes: Median annual earnings are based on earnings and work status during the calendar year prior to interview and limited to 25- to 32-year-old who worked full time during the previous calendar year and reported positive earnings. Full times refers to those who usually worked at least 35 hours a week last year.

Source: Pew

And while Bachelor's degree holders outearn workers with just a diploma, those with some college, and those with an Associate's degree , the benefit of completing that Bachelor's opens up doors that remain closed for the rest: the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce notes that only Bachelor's degree holders are eligible for graduate school education; one third of Bachelor's earners go on to earn an advanced degree, with income that grows far more steadily than those with only a diploma or some college -- and adding up to more than double over the course of a lifetime.

Figure 1: Median lifetime earnings by highest education attainment, 2009 dollars

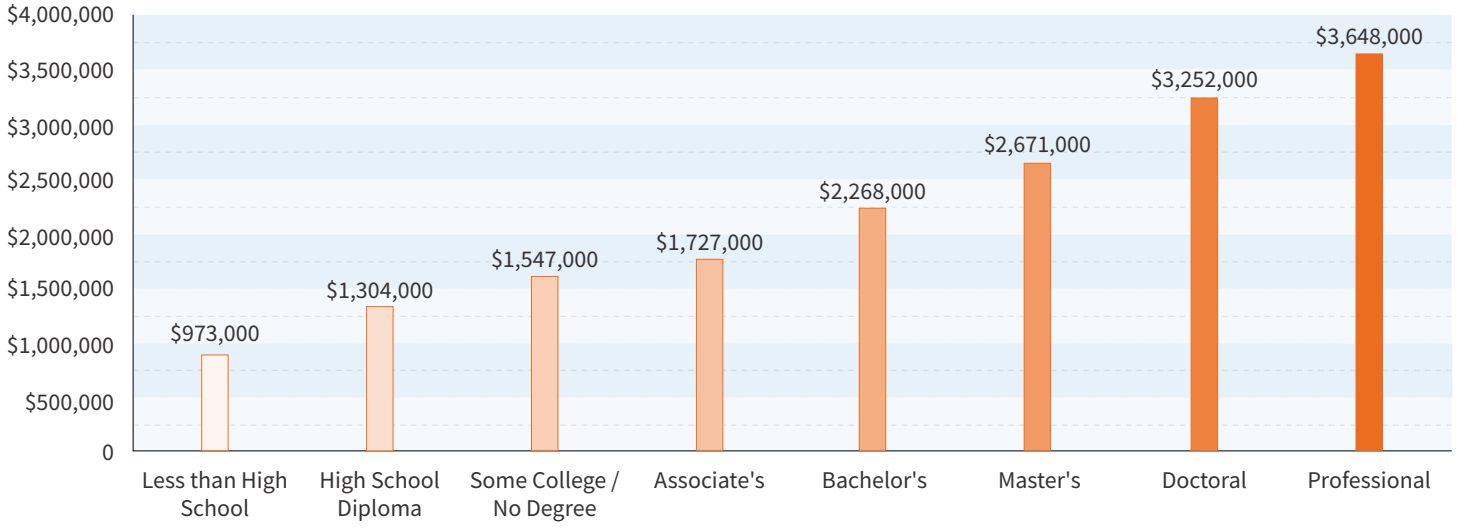
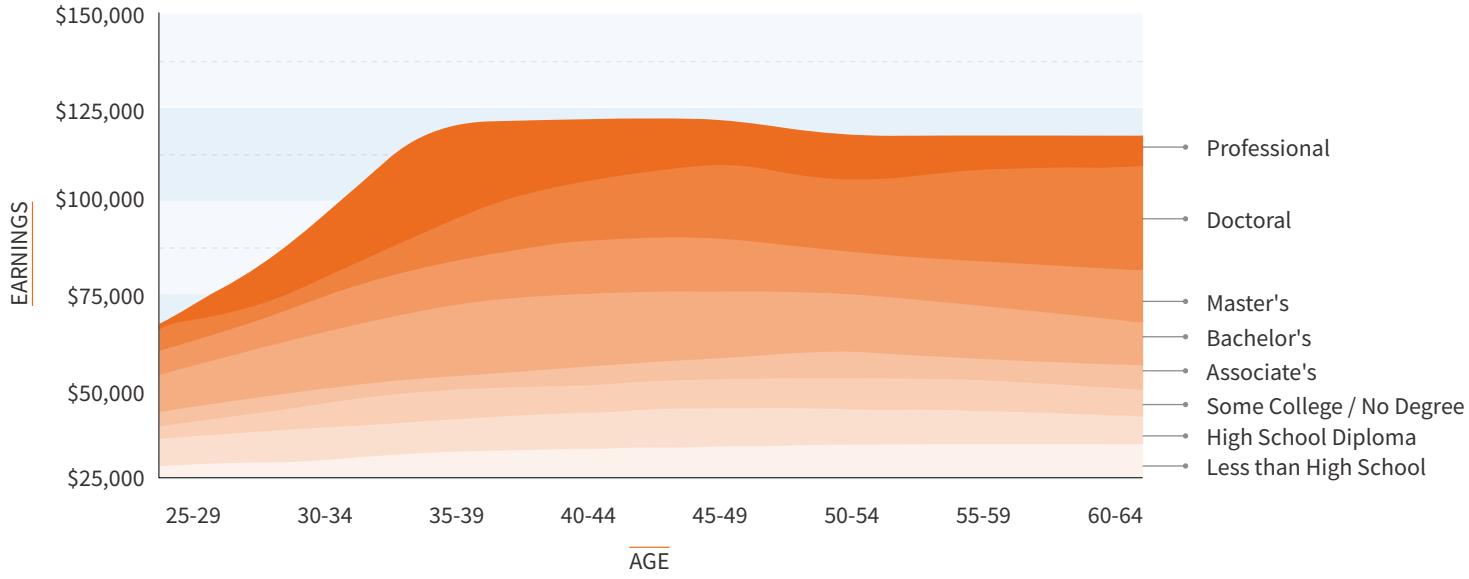


Figure 2: Lifetime earnings trajectories, 2009 dollars



Source for Figure 1 and Figure 2 above: "The College Payoff: Education, Occupations, Lifetime Earnings," Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, 2014.

"Increased earnings and productivity will expand the economy in the long run, translating to higher wages, employment, and GDP," said the American Academy of Arts & Sciences. "Individuals with greater levels of education tend to work more, with both higher labor force participation and lower unemployment, and earn higher wages." Those gains translate into increased tax contributions (and reduced need) for public services, reduced crime, and improved democratic and civic participation.

In other words, increasing college completion for many more students is an investment that would benefit us all. So let's take a look at how we can improve the odds of their success.

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Why Students Don't Finish College

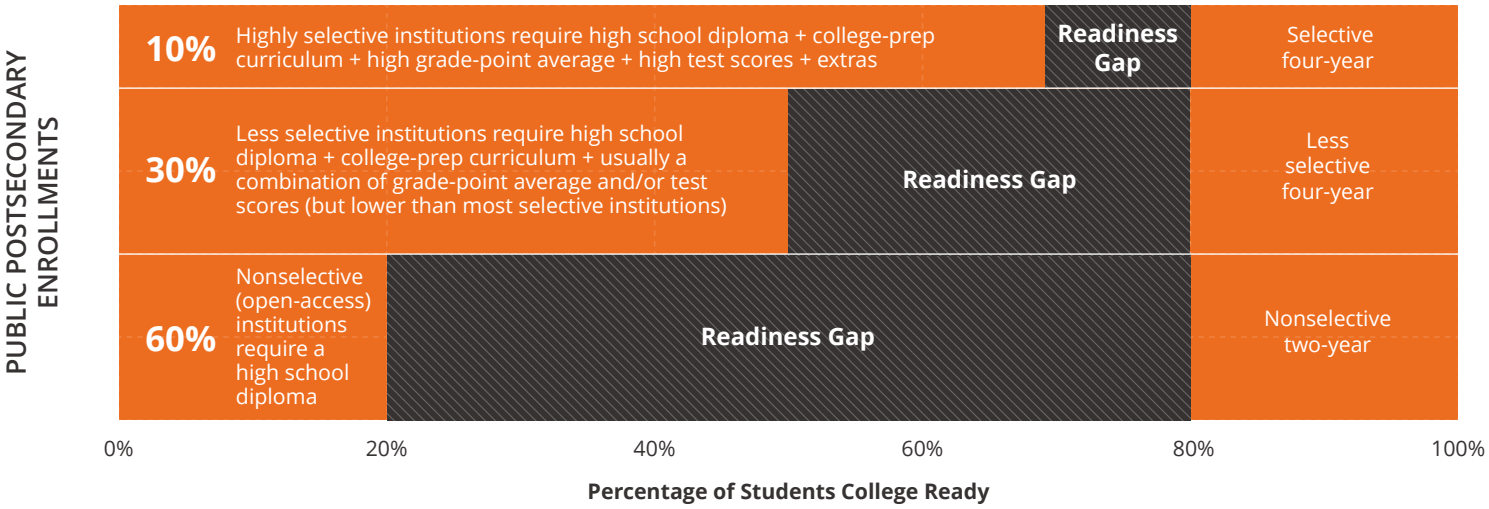
Whether they arrive straight from high school or while juggling bills and kids, college students are expected to rise up: they must not only learn, think, and perform at high levels but also do so largely on their own.

"College is the first place where we expect young people to be adults, not large children," said University of Oregon professor David Conley. "The pupil-teacher relationship changes dramatically as do expectations for engagement, independent work, motivation, and intellectual development. All of this occurs at a time when many young people are experiencing significant independence from family and from the role of child for the first time."

Although this transition to college represents an exciting opportunity for some, it can also be daunting to many, particularly those who arrive underprepared. From preschool through high school, on the way to college, we see signs -- from low test scores to inflated GPAs -- that many students aren't mastering the content and skills they'll need to succeed as adults. Therefore, many college students arrive woefully unprepared for the institutions they worked so hard to gain entry into -- and most colleges are equally unprepared for them.

Although highly selective institutions are able to screen out all but the most highly prepared students, most institutions find a significant readiness gap between what enrolling students can do and what they will need in order to succeed.

Figure 3: The Readiness Gap by Institutional Sector



Source: "Beyond the Rhetoric: Improving College Readiness Through Coherent State Policy" by National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education and Southern Regional Education Board

To meet students where they are, colleges must better address students' academic needs, as well as the so-called "non-cognitive" skills and knowledge that cut across subjects -- and affect life and learning outside the classroom and into the workforce.

Addressing Students' Academic Needs

Because K-12 academic preparation is rarely well-aligned with the requirements for college-level work, too many students are entering college academically underprepared. While some of these students are underprepared because they take less than a core curriculum, many more skate by with inflated grades in these key subjects, as they pass through K-12 while missing out on some of the requisite skills needed to succeed in higher level courses and in the workforce.

The Evidence:

- High school exit exams face political pressure to ensure that most students graduate with a diploma -- which means they rarely require students to demonstrate college-ready knowledge or skills. "Most states that have high school exit exams or other 'high-stakes' tests readily acknowledge that the exams measure proficiency at the 8th- to 10th-grade levels," found the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education and the Southern Regional Education Board. What's more, "few states have taken the steps needed to assure that reading, writing, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills are explicitly incorporated throughout the college-prep curriculum, from English and mathematics to science and social science."

- As such, less than 40% of 12th grade students are academically prepared for college, based on their scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress, administered to a sample of 12th grade students across the country.

- According to the ACT, about half of all high school graduates (1.9 million students) take its test. In 2018, just under 40% were ready for college coursework in three or four subject areas; 35% were not ready in any subject. Only about a quarter of those who are low-income, minority, and/or first-generation college students demonstrated readiness. Just 20% of students (2% of underserved students) met the ACT's benchmark for readiness in STEM subjects.

- A majority of post-traditional students rate themselves as having done "very well" or "pretty well" in high school, primarily those under age 20, with older students feeling less certain of their ability. "Their motivation to complete an undergraduate degree— primarily for career purposes and increased income—make [post-traditional students] good college students," found Aslanian Market Research in a nationwide survey. "But one-third are unsure of their academic abilities and [institutions] must ensure that these students have services available to help them reach graduation."

- The rate of incoming students who must take remedial courses upon entry to four-year colleges is about 40% -- and closer to 70% at open-enrollment community colleges, where half of those students took two or more remedial courses. Only about half of these students complete their remedial courses.

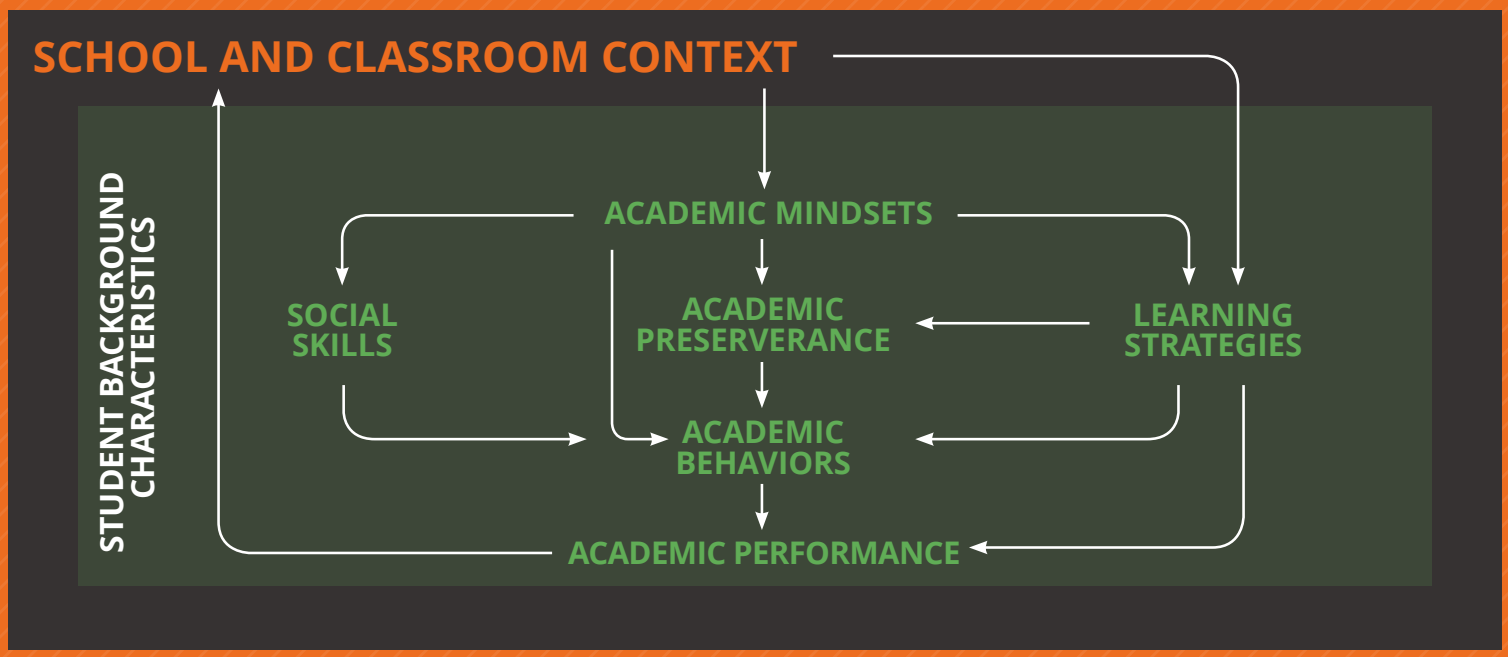
- Remedial courses are often insufficient to address students' academic needs -- and cost students time and money that typically doesn't earn credit toward their degree. It's no wonder remedial course-taking students take longer to graduate and are far more likely to drop out of college and never earn a degree at all.

In 2018, just under 40% were ready for college coursework in three or four subject areas

Addressing "Non-Cognitive" Skills

Beyond the specific academic content and skills that students must master in order to succeed in college, post-secondary learners must also obtain a broader set of skills related to learning that cut across subjects and disciplines. These are sometimes called non-cognitive skills, such as social and emotional skills, academic mindsets such as self-efficacy and "growth mindset," behaviors such as class participation and engagement, and learning strategies like self-regulation and mnemonic devices. These skills begin to develop in the brain in infancy, and continue to mature into adulthood; they can also be stunted through childhood trauma and stress of the sort that growing up in poverty can cause, leading not only to difficulty in school but also struggles in adulthood.

Researchers have shown that these non-cognitive skills can predict a range of academic and life outcomes, from health and wealth to happiness. Some also suggest that these noncognitive factors are what make high school grade point average (GPA) a better indicator of college success than test scores, despite well-known grade inflation. "In addition to measuring students' content knowledge and core academic skills, grades reflect the degree to which students have demonstrated a range of academic behaviors, attitudes, and strategies that are critical for success in school and in later life, including study skills, attendance, work habits, time management, help-seeking behaviors, metacognitive strategies, and social and academic problem-solving skills that allow students to successfully manage new environments and meet new academic and social demands," note researchers from the University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research.



David Conley at the University of Oregon has shown how these "habits of mind" or patterns of intellectual behavior -- including intellectual openness, inquisitiveness, analysis, reasoning/argumentation, interpretation, precision/accuracy, and problem-solving. -- make students capable of succeeding with college-level work. "Unfortunately, the development of key habits of mind in high school is often overshadowed by an instructional focus on decontextualized content and facts necessary to pass exit examinations or simply to keep students busy and classrooms quiet," Conley said.

Just as with academic preparation, students show up to college with a wide range of noncognitive skills and abilities -- and need support in addressing them if they are to push through to a degree. This is particularly true for post-traditional students, many of whom have missed out on recent efforts in high schools to shore up students' social and emotional learning skills.

The Evidence:

- "A major reason for students falling short of their intellectual potential [is] their failure to exercise self-discipline," say University of Pennsylvania researchers Angela Duckworth and Martin Seligman, who suggest that academic performance depends on students' self-control and that measures of self-discipline better predict positive academic outcomes than does IQ.

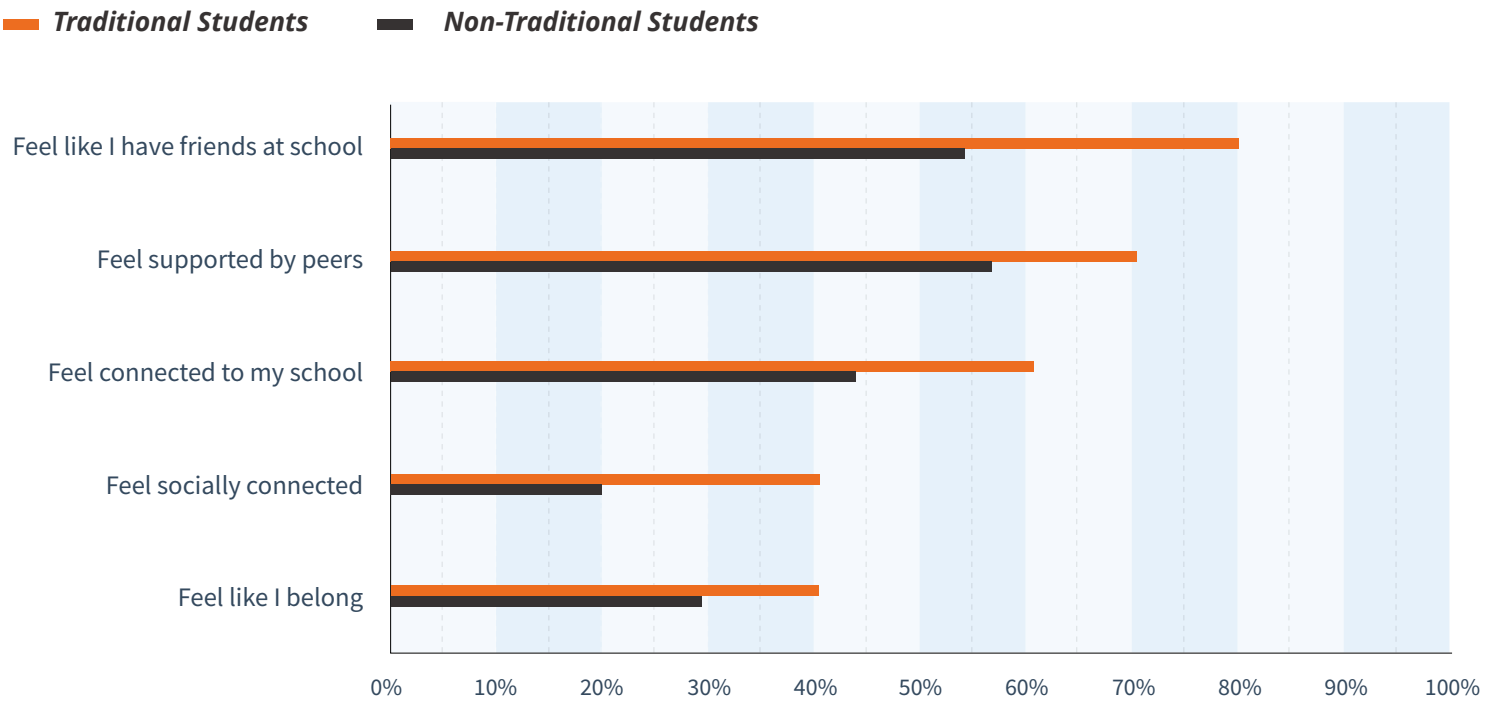
- Non-cognitive skills separate high school graduates of similar achievement levels. While the test scores of those who pass the General Equivalency Development (GED) test are similar to those who graduate with a regular diploma but do not go on to college, research has found that despite those certificates, GED earners' salaries are closer to that of high school dropouts because they lack persistence and tenacity, "[quitting] the jobs and marriages they start at much greater rates than ordinary high school graduates."

- As students progress into and through college, non-cognitive abilities become even more important. For example, high school grade point average (GPA) is the most powerful predictor for fall semester GPA, while non-cognitive characteristics are more strongly associated with second semester GPA.

Perseverance can't be directly influenced, but it can be improved by "affecting students' beliefs

- Noncognitive skills are malleable, sometimes through direct teaching but mostly through context. For example, research suggests that perseverance can't be directly influenced, but it can be improved by "affecting students' beliefs and mindsets about their academic work (which encourage or inhibit continuing effort), increasing their academic skills (which make it easier or harder to complete tasks), and helping them develop learning strategies (which make their efforts more effective)." Likewise, an unfamiliar or unwelcoming college social climate for minority or first-generation college-students "can undercut their commitment to obtaining a college degree and their academic behaviors and may even artificially depress their cognitive performance."

- Non-traditional or post-traditional students often feel disconnected from their colleges and universities, which places them at greater risk of dropping out before they earn a degree. "With a number of responsibilities pulling them away from campus, it's not surprising that non-traditional students also feel less connected to their school and their peers compared to traditional students," finds Barnes & Noble College, the book vendor's college bookstore division. "They are much less likely to feel they are socially connected, supported by their peers, or have friends at school. This can be a serious barrier to success and signifies a rising issue for schools in terms of retention and program completion."



Becoming Student-Ready: Old Problems Need Novel Solutions

Because of the long-standing course-based, credit-hour structure and compliance-oriented incentives of higher education, most colleges struggle to meet students where they are and ensure that they persist to complete their degree.

Those institutions focused on college completion, particularly for post-traditional learners, find they must cast aside their old-school ways in favor of new ideas. They are experimenting with more innovative structures, approaches, and technologies that can address the needs of all students -- including both traditional undergraduates and adult learners returning to school. Many are finding that traditional top-down approaches, in which leadership and professors make one-size-fits-all decisions, are efficient but not effective. Instead, giving students more autonomy -- in choosing their classes, but also in the type of learning formats and tutoring support they can access -- gives them confidence and helps them become more self-directed learners.

Increasingly, they are personalizing their approaches in ways that consider the entirety of what each student needs, including students' formal academic knowledge as well as their non-cognitive abilities and context.

Old School: Remediation Classes

New School: Corequisite Courses

Students who complete remedial courses may have learned more than necessary about some skills

As noted, remedial instruction is a blunt instrument that slows some students down and sometimes even diverts them from completing their degree. The Century Foundation has pointed out that "students who complete remedial courses may have learned more than necessary about some skills—such as diagramming sentences or factoring quadratic equations—while lacking other skills foundational to success" such as "help-seeking behavior and time-management, which go undiagnosed and unaddressed within the traditional system."

Toward that end, many institutions are replacing "remediation" with "corequisite courses," in which students in need of support take more rigorous credit-bearing classes that are paired with some sort of additional reinforcement, such as a small-group seminar or one-on-one tutoring designed to fill in their academic gaps.

For example, City University of New York found that remedial students placed directly in college-level statistics (along with tutoring or a student study group) did far better than their counterparts in remedial classes, both on passing their initial math course and in persisting in college. Austin Peay eliminated remedial classes and instead requires underprepared students to spend additional time with a tutor or in a computer lab, increasing student success in its required math courses by 10 percentage points from 65-75 percent.

Old School: Lectures and Progress Based on Credit Hours

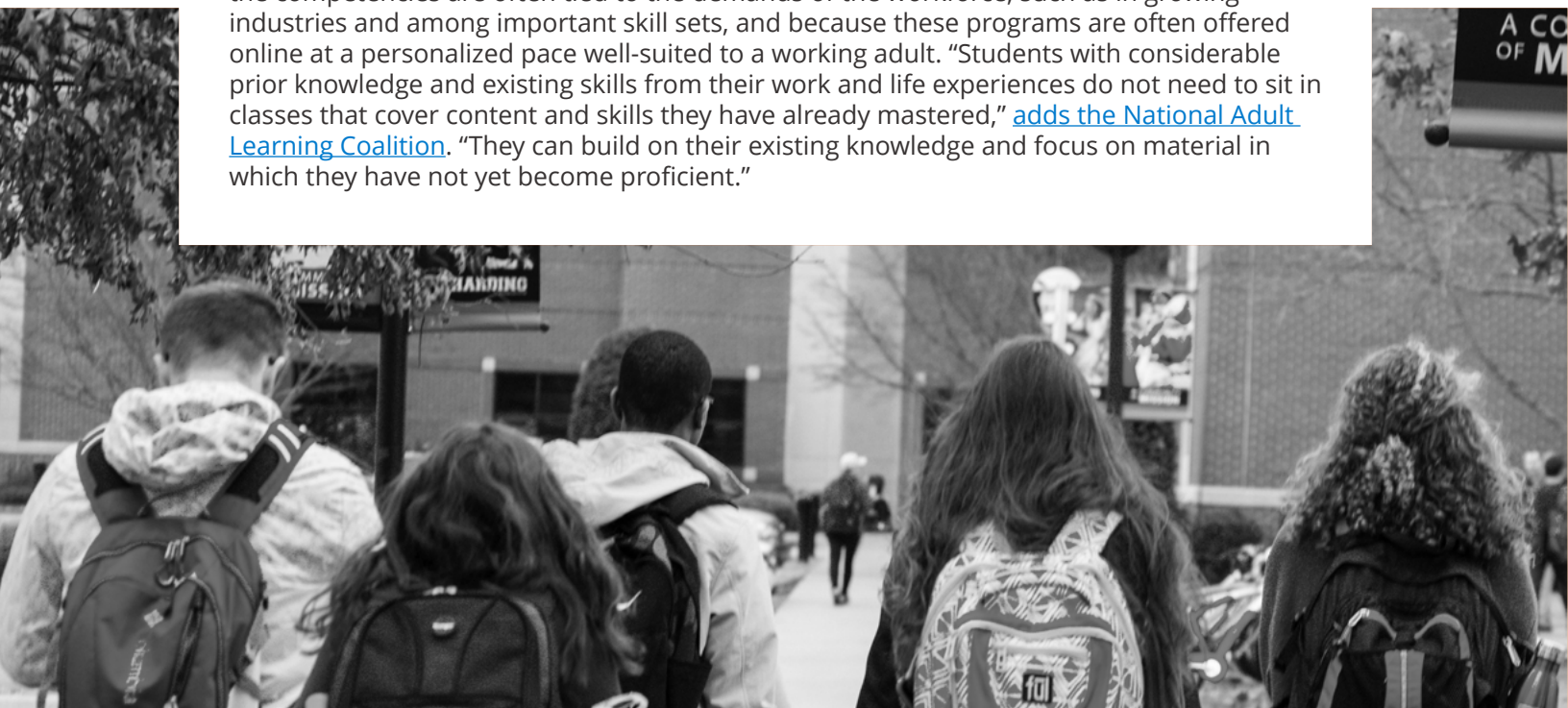
New School: Competency-Based Education with a Variety of Resources, and Progress Based on Mastery

The structure of college makes it difficult to surface and address students' needs. Most colleges and universities still organize their curriculum and advancement on course completion and credit hours, rather than around mastery of content, knowledge, and skills. As such, there is little incentive to spend the time and money necessary to ensure that students are learning.

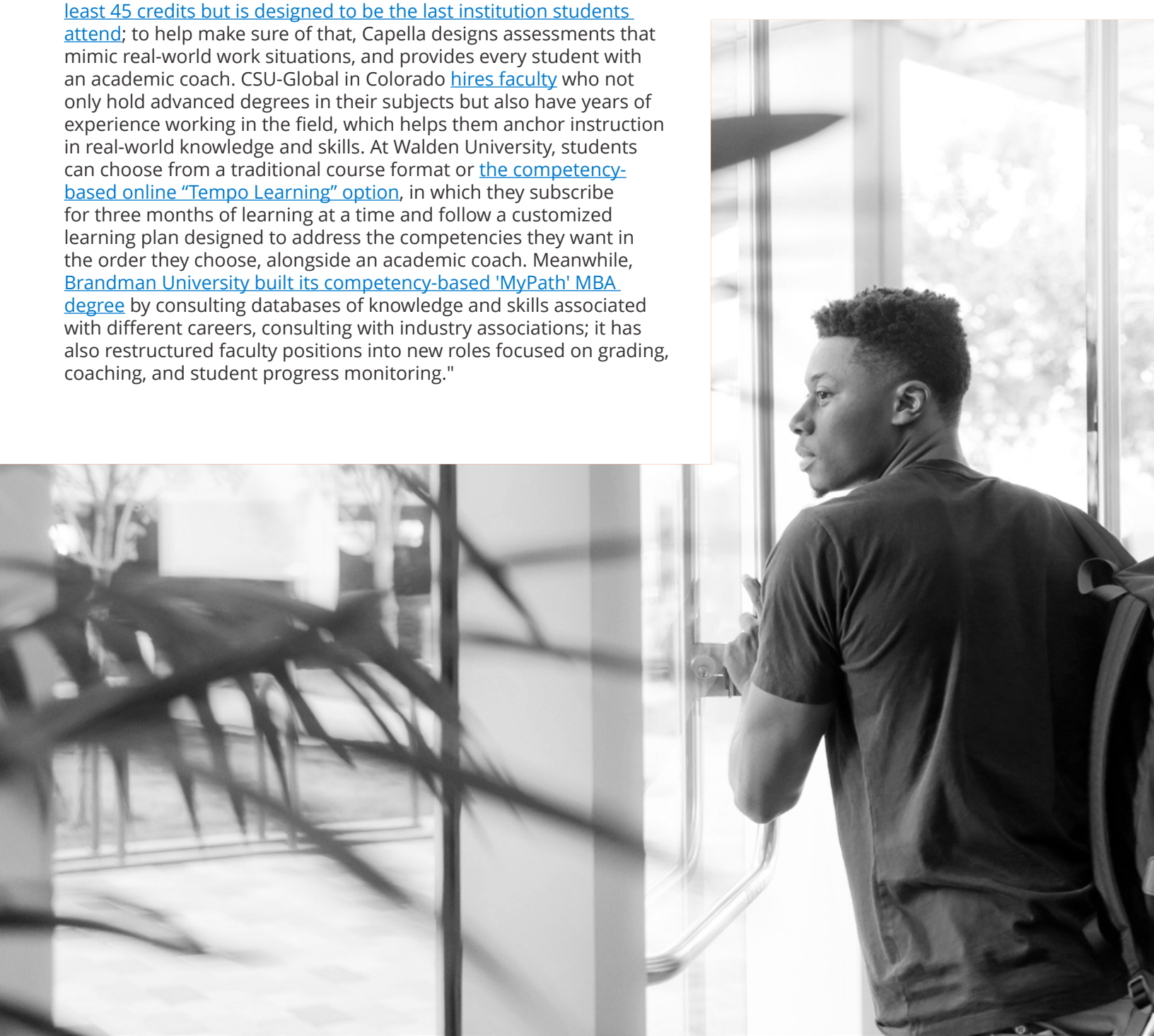
Moreover, professors struggle to personalize learning while also covering the syllabus -- not to mention pursuing their own research and tenure goals, which are sometimes at odds with the demands of classroom instruction. They are trained to teach a college-level subject, not to plug in students' gaps, particularly those that fall outside of the direct scope of a course.

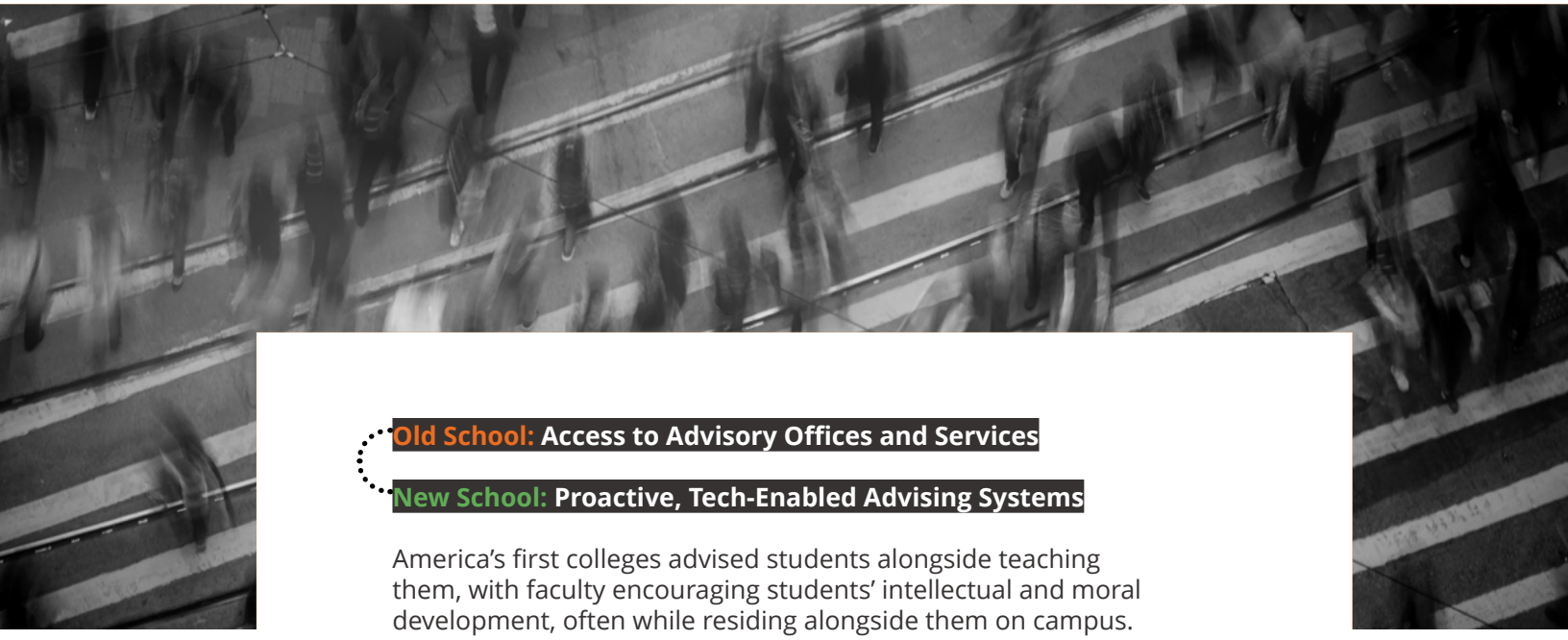
"Traditional postsecondary instructional methods tend toward "chalk and talk" lectures and textbooks that assume the student to be passive, with little experience or expertise to bring to the learning relationship," notes a Department of Labor paper. This is particularly off-putting for learners who have struggled in K-12 as well as those who bring real-world experiences to the classroom. Adult learners and others "prefer active learning strategies, appreciate opportunities for self-direction in learning, and prefer learning that is clearly applicable beyond the classroom setting," but only about 40% of faculty have adopted or are open to adopting these methods, finds Higher Ed Insight.

A growing number of institutions are trying a different approach with "competency-based education" (CBE). "Rather than awarding credit based on the credit hour, CBE focuses on awarding credit for skill, competency, and knowledge mastery or simply demonstrating competency itself as the means of awarding a credential," explains the American Council on Education. This approach resonates particularly well among adult students because the competencies are often tied to the demands of the workforce, such as in growing industries and among important skill sets, and because these programs are often offered online at a personalized pace well-suited to a working adult. "Students with considerable prior knowledge and existing skills from their work and life experiences do not need to sit in classes that cover content and skills they have already mastered," adds the National Adult Learning Coalition. "They can build on their existing knowledge and focus on material in which they have not yet become proficient."



Many of these programs offer flexible degrees designed to address the needs of learners who have credits from other institutions and who are continuing working alongside learning. As such, many feature professors and tutors with industry expertise in the field they teach in, and offer coaches and mentors that provide proactive support designed to address the unique needs of self-paced learners. For example, Capella University's self-paced FlexPath bachelor's degree program requires that students enter with at least 45 credits but is designed to be the last institution students attend; to help make sure of that, Capella designs assessments that mimic real-world work situations, and provides every student with an academic coach. CSU-Global in Colorado hires faculty who not only hold advanced degrees in their subjects but also have years of experience working in the field, which helps them anchor instruction in real-world knowledge and skills. At Walden University, students can choose from a traditional course format or the competency-based online "Tempo Learning" option, in which they subscribe for three months of learning at a time and follow a customized learning plan designed to address the competencies they want in the order they choose, alongside an academic coach. Meanwhile, Brandman University built its competency-based 'MyPath' MBA degree by consulting databases of knowledge and skills associated with different careers, consulting with industry associations; it has also restructured faculty positions into new roles focused on grading, coaching, and student progress monitoring."





Old School: Access to Advisory Offices and Services

New School: Proactive, Tech-Enabled Advising Systems

America's first colleges advised students alongside teaching them, with faculty encouraging students' intellectual and moral development, often while residing alongside them on campus. However, as the number of college students and the size of institutions grew, faculty became more focused on their curriculum and advising became a field unto itself, chiefly focused on guiding students toward careers and helping students enroll in the right courses for their major.

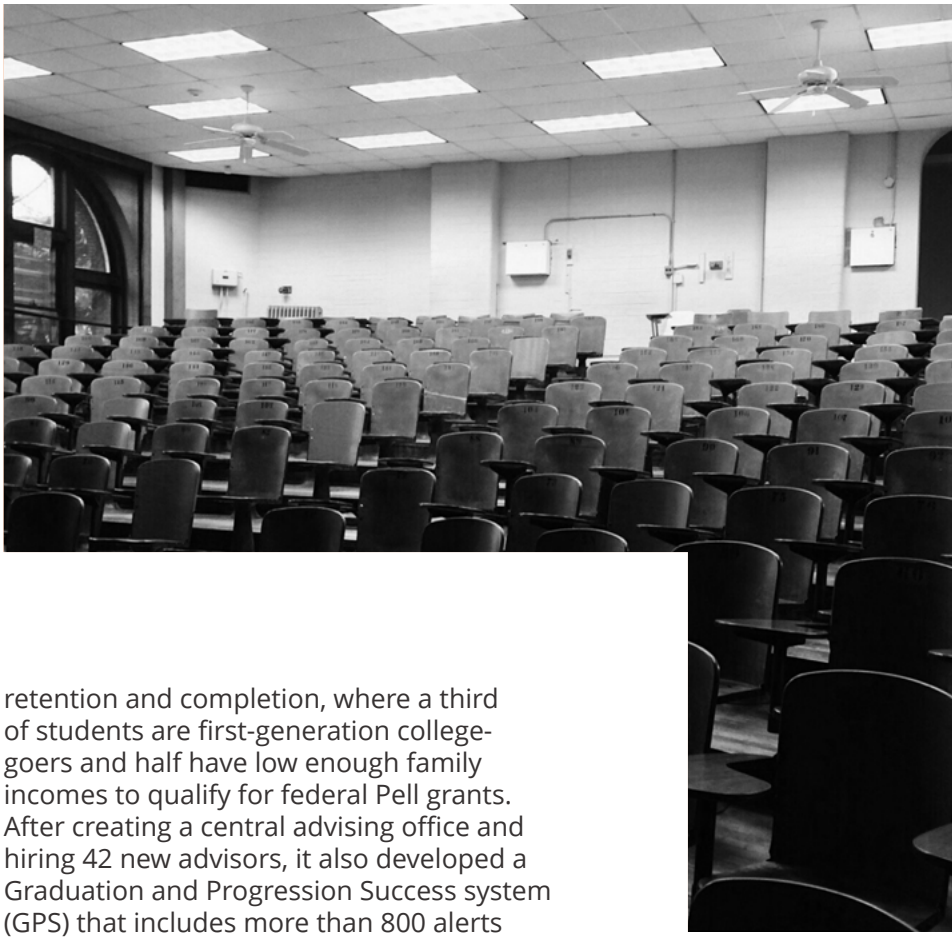
However, advisory systems and student support resources were designed and built for traditional students and are often insufficient to bridge persistent gaps in academic preparation, let alone the easily shaken confidence of a learner for whom education has already been a struggle. The old school approach was designed for access, not success, particularly in open-enrollment community colleges. "The same features that have enabled these institutions to provide broad access to college make them poorly designed to facilitate completion of high-quality college programs," explains the Community College Research Center, including "an array of often disconnected courses, programs and support services that students are expected to navigate mostly on their own."

This is one reason why students who need the most help are the least likely to engage with the existing support services universities provide. For example, a Canadian study of campus support services there found that only half of students who reported a learning need actually made use of the corresponding services. Ironically, students who need help the least are often the most likely to engage with the open access support services universities currently provide. Jennifer Gregor and the Learning Resources team at St. Petersburg College in Florida have a phrase to describe the behavior of successful students who use support services; they say these students are "polishing the A."

Although some have advocated for more proactive outreach (or so-called "intrusive advising"), student advisory caseloads tend to be high, between 300 and 450 students per advisor. That means that students either receive shallow support, or that only the most motivated students get the kind of deep support that struggling students actually need.

Fortunately, technology has made advising available to more students in more flexible ways, as it allows more institutions to tailor their offerings to the varied needs of students. Rather than assuming that all students are available for classes, advisory meetings, and tutoring centers during the hours of 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., these services can be offered outside of business hours or online, which can accommodate many more post-traditional students and even nudge those students who need help rather than waiting around for the students to seek it.

Meanwhile, as technology platforms make it ever easier for students to handle course enrollment on their own, advisors have had some of their time and energy freed up to focus more on retention and completion. Many have embraced "predictive analytics" technologies that mine student data in order to identify students most in need of advising services; some use enrollment and demographic data, academic performance data of current and past students, and learning analytics to nudge students toward majors and courses they may be more likely to succeed in, while others tap into that data to flag students potentially at risk for dropping out. For example, in 2011 Georgia State University set out to revamp its student advising system in order to boost retention and completion, where a third of students are first-generation college-goers and half have low enough family incomes to qualify for federal Pell grants. After creating a central advising office and hiring 42 new advisors, it also developed a Graduation and Progression Success system (GPS) that includes more than 800 alerts aimed at helping advisors keep students on track to graduation, leading to thousands more meetings between students and their advisors as well as a six-year graduation rate that now stands above the national average (52% versus 43%) -- including for first-generation, Pell-eligible, black, and Latino students.



Technology has made advising available to more students in more flexible ways, as it allows more institutions to tailor their offerings to the varied needs of students

Likewise, Arizona State University is using a range of tactics to boost its freshman retention rate and overall graduation rate, including focused outreach and ongoing peer coaching for first-generation students, and a technology platform called Civitas that monitors student engagement to flag students who might be veering off-track and need help. The university credits these initiatives and others with helping it grow the freshman retention rate 11 points over the last 15 years, with 85.2% of freshmen returning this year.

Old School: Offering On-Site Mentors, Coaches, Peer Tutors, and Outsourcing Simple Q&A Tutoring

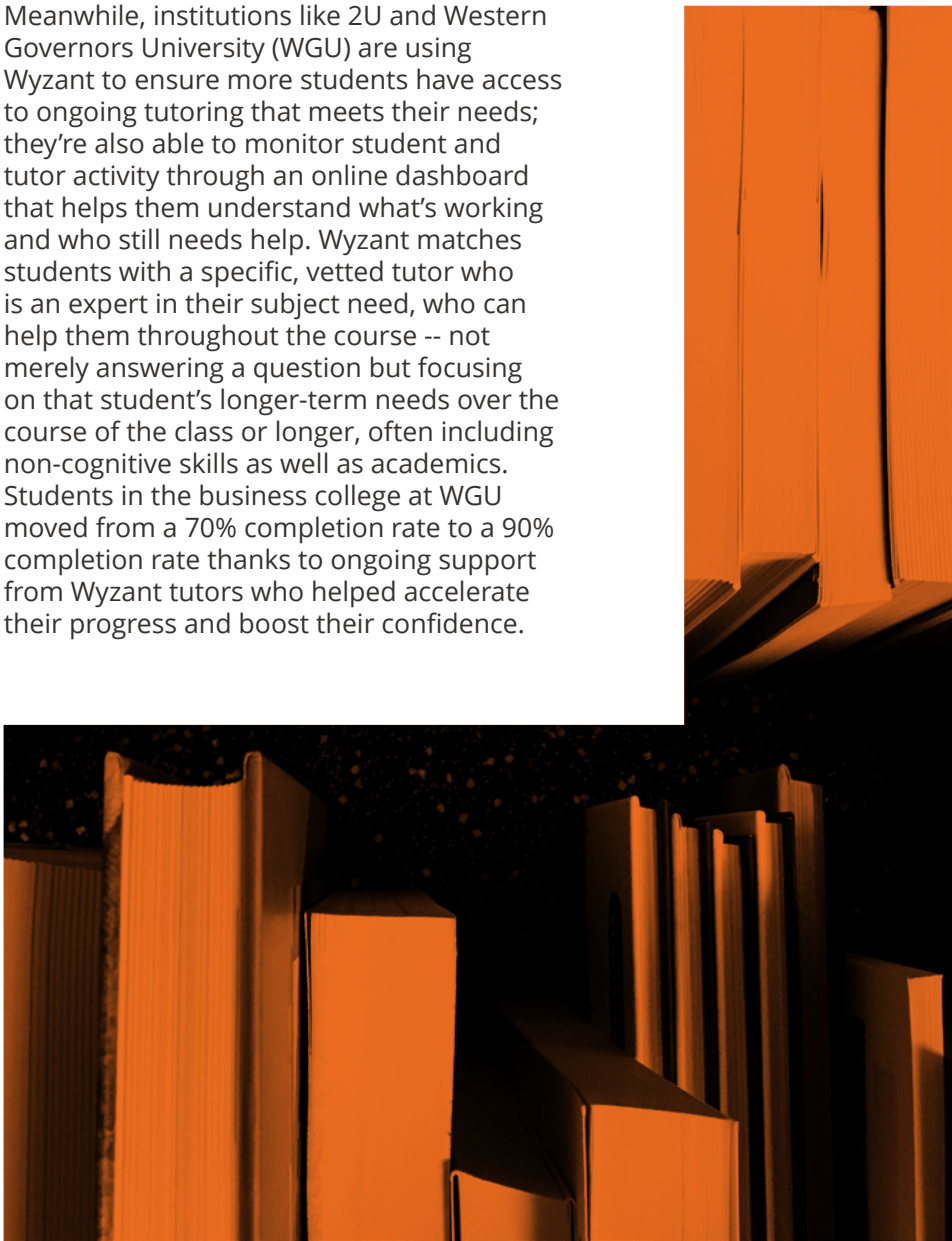
New School: Tapping More Flexible, Deep and Ongoing Expert Resources through National Networks of Mentors, Coaches and Tutors

Once an early warning system or tech-enabled student advisor identifies a student in need, few universities know how to address these needs with any real precision or depth. This is particularly challenging for those learners most at-risk, who bring with them the largest gaps in academic knowledge and cognitive skills, as well as those whose native language isn't English, those who have been out of school for years working, and those struggling to fit college in alongside demanding job and family responsibilities. Most institutions have open access resources available to assist these students, such as mentors, coaches, peer mentors, and on-campus tutors, as well as open access to question-and-answer style tutoring designed to help students with tough homework or other short-term needs.

Each student with gaps needs something different -- and often something beyond what the college on its own can offer -- to ensure that they can get on track academically, with the non-cognitive and social-emotional skills they need to persist to a degree or beyond. They also need ongoing expert help to not only remedy those gaps -- which takes more than answers to homework questions to close -- but also increase their confidence and persistence throughout their college years. Frequent small-group tutoring is among the practices that leads to significant learning gains in K-12 schools, particularly if the number of hours of tutoring is greater than 40. Indeed, there is no form of teaching more effective than one-on-one tutoring, particularly by well-trained tutors who understand their subject well and provide high-quality instruction and feedback. And just as elementary school students learn best from teachers who mirror their own identity and experiences, post-traditional learners need coaches, mentors, and tutors who look and learn like they do, and who can guide them credibly over time toward college completion and career success.

For example, many colleges have partnered with Inside Track to offer their students one-on-one, executive-style coaching to set goals and stay on track toward graduation, improving retention and graduation rates by 10 to 15 percent versus matched peers without a coach at those schools.

Meanwhile, institutions like 2U and Western Governors University (WGU) are using Wyzant to ensure more students have access to ongoing tutoring that meets their needs; they're also able to monitor student and tutor activity through an online dashboard that helps them understand what's working and who still needs help. Wyzant matches students with a specific, vetted tutor who is an expert in their subject need, who can help them throughout the course -- not merely answering a question but focusing on that student's longer-term needs over the course of the class or longer, often including non-cognitive skills as well as academics. Students in the business college at WGU moved from a 70% completion rate to a 90% completion rate thanks to ongoing support from Wyzant tutors who helped accelerate their progress and boost their confidence.



Conclusion

Colleges must empower students to be self-driven, competent learners and contributors to work/society -- but these institutions must be ready to handle an increasingly diverse set of learners who arrive at college with a wide array of needs and require a different model of learning than the top-down, one-size-fits-all model of instruction and service so many have relied upon until now. "[Post-traditional learners] want to be treated as adults, extended services in a courteous and caring manner, and made to feel that their tuition dollars are well spent," explained John Ebersole, the former president of Excelsior College, who coined the term "post-traditional." He encouraged his peers to model their student supports after Nordstrom's high-quality customer service and hotel concierges. "Given the rising cost of a degree, the global competition that already exists at the graduate level, traditional higher education needs to up its game if it wants to serve that segment of higher ed that isn't shrinking," he wrote before his passing in 2016.

Indeed, in order to ensure that more students leave college with the degree or credential they need, colleges ought to provide greater "continuity of care" focused on proactive wrap-around support for students who will otherwise waste valuable time and money, leaving them and their institutions short on outcomes and long on debt. This type of care requires leveraging technology as well as real human relationships to provide students with exactly what they need to succeed -- before it's too late. By better serving post-traditional learners and their diverse needs, colleges and universities might finally find their way toward a more student-ready model of teaching and supporting students that in turn makes those students ready for whatever their careers and lives throw at them.

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