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## Perspectives on Working with Nontraditional Students

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*Perspectives on Working with Non-traditional Students*

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Intuitively, University Admissions and Registrar staff may believe that serving the non-traditional student would be an easier task than working with the traditional, millennial students who approach university education with no background in post-secondary education or any significant life experience to apply to the process. However, intuition is often proven wrong, as discussed in a presentation given on Monday, February 17, 2014 at the SACRAO Regional Conference held in Raleigh, NC. Linda Dammer, Director of Student Affairs, formerly Director of Admissions, and Edward Trombley, Registrar for Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University, Worldwide, discussed these realities in their presentation entitled, "The Challenge of Supporting Adult Learners: The New Traditional Student." The presenters examined the non-traditional student process, from application through graduation, and shared their experiences with the problems and the pitfalls they have experienced in their University division, which serves a majority non-traditional and military student population.

Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University the world's largest, fully accredited university specializing in aviation and aerospace, is a non-profit, independent institution offering more than 70 baccalaureate, master's and Ph.D. degree programs in its colleges of Arts & Sciences, Aviation, Business, Engineering and Security & Intelligence. Embry-Riddle educates students at residential campuses in Daytona Beach, Fla., and Prescott, Ariz., through the Worldwide Campus with more than 150 locations in the United States, Europe, Asia and the Middle East, and through online programs. The university is a major research center, seeking solutions to real-world problems in partnership with the aerospace industry, other universities and government agencies. Linda and Ed work with the students of the Worldwide division, which averages 25,000 active students, primarily non-traditional, in any given term.

Non-traditional students generally have experience both in life and in other institutions of higher learning, and that indeed is supposed to be their advantage. The familiarity with uni-

versity rules and policies should assist in helping these students to navigate the process, and their experience in the workplace should give them background in completing applications, articulating their life and career goals, and meeting deadlines. However, it seems that the life-lessons brought to the table by non-traditional students are often forgotten, and this becomes clear right from the initial application process of these students. University staff who work with applicants should be prepared for students who do not remember the full extent of their educational background, often to the point that the student cannot articulate fully the schools that they have attended over the past several years. Military students in particular, who take courses throughout their military career and through multiple deployment locations, may not remember and disclose every school at which they completed coursework.

Applicants do not understand the need of the university to have a full educational disclosure, both for making an admission decision, as well as to provide proper transfer credit

assessment. Some applicants may protest that as they do not want transfer credit from their previous institutions, they should not have to submit transcripts. Previous poor academic experiences, including poor grades, outright failures, low GPAs and the like are similarly dismissed by many applicants, who feel that admission's officials should disregard their past performance as it was "so long ago," or because "I was young and unfocused back then." Explaining the importance of disclosing a full educational history is likely to be an element of the admission's process for the non-traditional student.

In general, it is good general guidance in the admission's process to be clear and concise in your application. Review your application with the thought of eliminating as much of the "fine print" as possible and emphasize the information that is most important for the applicant to complete. If working with electronic apps, it is helpful to make key fields mandatory, meaning the student cannot submit the form until the fields have been completed. Put the most crucial information near the beginning of the application, to be reviewed when the candidate is freshest and before "form fatigue" sets in. Do not be afraid to repeat a question in the application, restated in a different way, and include a statement near the signature asking if applicants have answered all questions truthfully and to the best of their ability. Train with your admission's representatives, counselors and recruiters to assure that any team members who work with prospective adult learners are consistently conveying the same information that the admissions office does regarding how GPAs are calculated, why transcripts are needed, and the like, as non-traditional students are likely to object to inconsistency in requirements during their admission process.

After non-traditional applicants make it through the admission's process and become students of your university, their needs continue to differ in many ways from the traditional student. Academic advisors, faculty members and registrar's office personnel are likely to encounter questions and objections that include or begin with:

- *I'm over 40/50/60 years old; why do I have to \_\_\_\_\_?*
- *I am an adult...*
- *My instructor is a kid (or is the same age as my kid)!*
- *What is plagiarism?*
- *I paid for this course...*
- *Nobody told me \_\_\_\_\_.*
- *What is APA format?*
- *I was on vacation/travelling for business, so I should be excused from my test/paper/classwork.*

While all of these standard questions and objections may be legitimate, in the sense that they are true for the student in question, non-traditional students have to be coached to realize that obstacles for successful course completion in their lives are not sufficient to excuse them from the expectations of their courses. While non-traditional students do have valuable life and career experience to bring to the classroom,

and while that may prove invaluable in making the most of their educational opportunities, it does not exempt them from classroom and university policies that govern the entire student population. Universities should anticipate the fact that non-traditional students do have additional circumstances that demand attention in their lives, and this can make retaining these students more challenging.

However, through the admission's process initially, and continuing throughout academic advising, they should be counseled to anticipate the problems they may face in their educational careers (job demands, daycare, family illness, etc.), and to create back-up plans for each of these circumstances.

Getting through an entire degree program is challenging for students at any point in their lives, and requires sacrifice to accomplish. This should be clearly explained to any incoming student. Resources should be provided online whenever possible, thus allowing access to help at any time, on any given day. Students should be provided with site maps, charts or guides to assist them in finding information they would commonly need from university websites. Keep commonly requested information on primary website screens—do not "bury" it through several levels or links that students would have to "drill down" to find. Acronyms should be avoided; use clear terminology to assist students of all backgrounds to understand your message. Create a "Knowledge Base" in an online setting (Embry-Riddle Worldwide uses their intra-net), where frequently asked questions can be posted with links to forms and answers to these questions. Of course, making advising help available is also critical, and returning emails and phone calls in a timely manner is not just good service, but also helps to keep students engaged in their educational process.

Embry-Riddle realizes that the non-traditional student population, both military and non-military, will face outside demands during their enrollment, and has developed many policies to assist students in meeting these challenges, and still remain in compliance with University regulations. The Worldwide division offers shorter term lengths, generally nine weeks, allowing students to complete classes more quickly and balance with their work and home schedules. Worldwide offers 12 terms per year at the undergraduate level and five terms per year at the graduate level. Full- and part-time status is redefined to accommodate the shorter terms; students generally take one or two classes per term in the nine-week sessions.

In many universities, if a student does not take classes in any given term, they must formally withdraw and then re-apply or go through a "re-admit" process of some sort. Embry-Riddle maintains a two-year continuing student status policy, meaning that students may take a class any time within two years of completing their last class, and maintain good standing with the University in their initial catalog year curriculum. While we certainly hope that students would not habitually take a class, leave for nearly two years, and then resume, the fact that they can do so on occasion

allows them flexibility to accommodate changes in job, work schedule or military assignment.

This two-year continuing student status “window” allows our students to move in and out of enrollment, without penalty, as their professional and personal careers dictate. Programs are generally designed to be non-cohort, so students moving in and out of programs do not face the loss of an established peer group. The University offers courses in multiple learning modalities, allowing students who may have started their career at one of our residential campuses to move, via an intra-university transfer process, to a Worldwide campus or online should their location or availability to participate in classroom classes change.

Graduation processes have been adapted at Worldwide to accommodate the needs of the non-traditional student. As the Worldwide division is made up of more than 150 learning sites, campuses and military learning centers throughout the United States and around the world, multiple graduation ceremonies are held throughout the year. One centralized ceremony is held in Daytona Beach, where Worldwide headquarters is located, and this is the primary ceremony of the year. Held on the Daytona Beach residential campus, it allows students who, along with their families and friends, wish to participate in a “traditional” college graduation to do so. Held once per year in May, the ceremony is open to any graduate that had completed a degree program during the previous year. Several ceremonies are also held at venues geographically dispersed throughout the country and in Europe, as well as at military base locations, who host “recognition ceremonies.” This schedule allows as many grads as possible to participate in a graduation ceremony in their area.

Graduation processing of Worldwide students is centralized at headquarters, and we confer every week. Diplomas are printed in-house, so students may receive their diploma very quickly after they are conferred, and can begin to capitalize upon their new status as degree-holders. This is a great advantage to non-traditional students, who are often seeking continuing education to facilitate new employment, promotion or military advancement. Embry-Riddle’s residential campus locations, like most universities, confer twice per year, in May and December, often delaying students from taking advantage of their degree status for several months.

To meet the demands of our dispersed model and the needs of non-traditional students, Embry-Riddle, Worldwide has recently launched a centralized Student Affairs department. Responsibilities that fall under this department cover a wide range of student centric support services to include maintaining the student complaint/grievance repository, retention efforts, at-risk students, honor society, felonies, internship/co-op contacts, career services, disability services, student ombudsman, orientation as well as offering guidance and assistance to staff and faculty in their support of students. In essence, the department serves as a one-stop shop for students with who need assistance in

these areas. Academic advising for online students is centralized at Worldwide headquarters in Daytona Beach, but to best serve the scheduling needs of the students at the campuses and military sites, decentralized advising is provided.

Perhaps the single most advantageous tool that Embry-Riddle, Worldwide utilizes to facilitate the efficient transfer and tracking of student information is the University imaging system. This system of imaging stations at our campus locations, and the elaborate system of workflows that these documents feed back into allow for rapid submission of student documents, and enables faster admissions decisions, credit evaluations and the like. Non-traditional students often maintain a “customer” sensibility when working with prospective universities, and while that cannot be encouraged in all situations, from applicants who credit shop from school to school through the timely processing of graduates, the customer service experience provided by a university will be a determining factor as to whether a positive alumni ambassador leaves your doors, or an unhappy “customer.” Non-traditional students are less tolerant of poor customer service experiences, as many of them have worked in industries where they were not allowed to provide poor service themselves. Expectations may be very high in many cases, often unrealistically so. To best serve this population, it benefits a university to consider not only the message they hope to deliver, but also the manner and mentality of those who deliver it.

Non-traditional students can be very vocal when expressing their displeasure with things with which they do not agree, such as policies, instructors, course content, amount of work required in courses, grading, costs, group projects, turn-around times for receiving feedback or a returned call or email, and adherence to APA standards (formatting, spelling, grammar), to mention but a few. Student discontent can be a sword cutting both ways, as while they try to overcome their own challenges with the educational process, they can create greater challenges for those staff and faculty members who are trying to support them.

At Embry-Riddle, Worldwide, we have found success in helping to alleviate some of these challenges, for both students and staff, by practicing some very basic but trusted techniques: ensuring that policies and instructions are clearly written, offering support and information access via a easily navigated student intra-net site, incorporating a centralized grievance process, letting students know who they should contact for what purpose, listening and advising students before they cross a line in violation of the student conduct code, speaking with students firmly, but not condescendingly, and most importantly keeping the channels of communication open by stressing the importance to staff at every level of responding promptly to questions with phone calls and email. ERAU has not mastered all of the challenges we encounter in working with non-traditional students, but through our policies, procedures and our actions, we work to build and improve these relationships every day.