An Examination of Traditional- and Nontraditional-Aged Community College Student Experiences:

Emerging Findings from PathTech LIFE

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Community colleges have long been home to a diversity of students, and especially by age. Both traditional-aged and non-traditional-aged students study a myriad of subjects and earn a variety of educational credentials at various junctures across their lives. This study examines the educational experiences of 3,216 students enrolled in advanced technology education programs at 96 community colleges across the country. In particular, we analyze open-ended survey responses that reveal ways that age shapes educational experiences. Several themes emerge such as appreciation for age diversity within programs, both positive and negative aspects of being traditional-aged and non-traditional-aged students, as well as ways that age intersects with other status characteristics such as gender.

Community colleges have long been home to a diversity of students, and especially by age. According to the definition applied by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), students between the ages of 18 to 24 are considered of traditional age, while students 25 years and older are regarded as non-traditional-aged. At present, in 2020, 54% of two-year college students are 18-21 years old, 38% are 22-39 years old, and 9% are 40 years and older (American Association of Community Colleges *Fast Facts 2020*). Additionally, 29% are the first generation to attend college, 15% are single parents, and 20% have disabilities. About 36% of students at two-year colleges attend full-time and 64% attend part-time. The majority of students identify as women at 57%, and are racially and ethnically diverse with 26% Latinx, 13% Black, 45% White, 6% Asian/Pacific Islander, 1% Native American, and almost 10% who identify as two or more races or other (American Association of Community Colleges 2020). Both traditional-aged and non-traditional-aged students study a myriad of subjects and earn a variety of educational credentials at various junctures across their lives. During the 2017-18 school year,

community colleges awarded 852,504 Associate's Degrees, 579,822 Certificates, and 19,083

Baccalaureate Degrees (American Association of Community Colleges 2020).

There is robust discussion in the field as to what comprises a "non-traditional" identity in higher

education. A report about definitions of nontraditional undergraduates written by the National Center

for Education Statistics (NCES) finds that age is often used as a proxy to describe "a heterogenous

population of adult students who often have family and work responsibilities as well as other life

circumstances that can interfere with successful completion of educational objectives" (NCES). In

addition to age, they point to three factors that also cause for "non-traditional" educational experiences

including enrollment patterns such as a break between high school and higher education, family

financial and care-giving responsibilities, and high school graduation status (GED rather than Diploma).

When looking at these three factors in particular, the NCES study finds that traditional-aged students

who are women, racial-ethnic minorities, and first-generation students share similar educational

experiences and trajectories as non-traditionally-aged students (NCES). Some educational databases

have broadened the definition of non-traditional age to "Adults beyond traditional school age (beyond

mid-twenties), ethnic minorities, women with dependent children, underprepared students, and other

special groups who have historically been underrepresented in postsecondary education" (ERIC Search

Engine). However, Kim (2002) points out that expanding the definition of non-traditional to include

background and risk factors may very well describe most students at community colleges today.

Age categories remain significant in the literature in examining the experience of students at

community colleges. Cummins et al (2018) find similarities and differences in enrollment patterns at

community colleges by age groups. The majority of non-traditional-aged students enrolled in community

colleges (rather than four-year programs); however, 40 to 64 year-olds were more likely to be both

enrolled at a community college and on a part-time than their non-traditional-aged peers aged 25 to 39

year old (Cummins 2018). The Great Recession also played a role in enrollment rates for non-traditional-

aged students with significant increases beginning in 2009, highlighting the importance of the economy

for adult students in making decisions to enroll in higher education programs. Laanan (2003) specifically

examines why older adult learners choose to attend higher education programs at two-year colleges.

The findings from this study indicate that the reasons are diverse and include low tuition, convenient

locations, comprehensive course offerings, and flexible schedules (Laanan 2003).

Zeit (2014) in a review of information needs of mature community college students shares

evidence of the unique needs this group has. For example, Given (2002) discusses how mature

community college students may be seeking information related to parenting, child care and elderly

care, on top of common inquiries related to academics, financial aid, and campus services. In addition,

non-traditional-aged students at two-year colleges may also seek more flexible course schedules in

contrast to traditional-aged students though they may also struggle more with online formats (Jaggars

et al 2013). Bird et al (2012) reflects on the concentration of non-traditional-aged students in technical

education programs and the corresponding need for increased information about internship or

practicum experiences. Our prior research also highlights the transformational experience of higher

education for non-traditional-aged students in technician education programs where the academic

credentials brings the possibility of career advancement, a source of family pride, and a sense of

personal fulfillment (Tyson & Jayaram 2014).

We aim to build on this growing body of literature about non-traditional-aged students in higher

education through analysis of their reported educational experiences. In particular, we are also

interested in better understanding how status characteristics, like age, affect interactions within

educational settings as well. Our research questions include: 1) How do students feel about age diversity

within their programs? 2) What are positive and negative aspects of being a traditional-aged and non-

traditional-aged student? And 3) How does age intersects with other status characteristics such as

gender?

Methods

The data for this study comes from the PathTech LIFE dataset. PathTech LIFE is a survey study that is part of a trilogy of projects funded by the National Science Foundation (NSF) Advanced Technological Education (ATE) Targeted Research in Technician Education. PathTech is a partnership between University of South Florida, the Florida Advanced Technological Education Center (FLATE), and two-year colleges nationwide.

We administered a national survey to 3,216 community college students in advanced technology programs representing 96 two-year colleges across the nation in the following advanced technology programs: engineering technology, energy and environmental technology, micro and nanotechnology, and advanced manufacturing. PathTech LIFE seeks to understand how learning, interests, family, and employment (LIFE) experiences of two-year college students impact their decisions to enroll, return for further coursework, and/or pursue a certificate or degree. We constructed the survey online (using Qualitrics) and asked questions about students' sociodemographic background, enrollment status, program satisfaction, campus resource knowledge and utilization, motivation to enroll, career and educational aspirations, employment status, and school-work-life balance issues.

Overall, the sample shows that technician students are a diverse group, and includes about 20% women, 30% racial-ethnic minorities, 10% reporting disabilities, 5% LGBT students, and an age range of 18 to 65+. Technician students are also "non-traditional" in higher education settings by way of their life experiences, with the majority simultaneously juggling school, work, and parenthood (Demographic Table Appended).

To recruit participants to the study, we sent recruitment flyers and emails to members of an advisory panel; then, these individuals forwarded the information to administrators at affiliated programs. We constructed an online questionnaire (using Qualitrics). To establish content validity, we compiled an expert panel, with two administrators each, from seven two-year college AS/AAS degree

programs in advanced technologies. The expert panel included Principal Investigators from national advanced technologies centers representing advanced manufacturing, engineering technologies, micro and nano technologies, and energy and environmental technologies. These individuals reviewed the instrument and provided feedback following a three stage iterative process known as the Delphi technique. In addition, we distributed the questionnaire in a pilot study as well as conducted a think-aloud with six advanced technologies students to provide feedback on the items of the instrument. The questionnaire was designed to capture the socio-demographic profile, life stages, life transitions, and motivating factors of students in advanced technologies programs at two-year colleges. Other sections of the questionnaire included open-ended questions in an attempt to capture information on students' life stages and transitions, demographic items (i.e., age, gender, race/ethnicity, socioeconomic (SES) factors, academic discipline within advanced technologies, employment status, marital status, number of dependents, prior academic background), and career and educational aspirations.

For this analysis, we asked students: "Did the following have a positive or negative effect on your experience at XXX college [Age / Marital Status / Having Children / Gender / Race-Ethnicity]" and then asked a follow-up question to: "Briefly describe the effects of these characteristics on your experience at XXX College." We focus on open-ended survey questions about ways students perceived their age impacts their experience in the program. Within the survey sample 3216 students, over 1000 students chose to write-in a response to the open-ended question. There were 176 unique statements about ways age shaped students' educational experience in two-year colleges. These open-ended survey responses were thematically coded and analyzed.

Findings

Several themes emerged in the open-ended survey responses about age. First, students felt appreciation for age diversity in their programs, and noted the larger social networks such diversity

produced. Second, traditional-aged students recognized the greater freedom they experienced as students without families or as many bills, and felt more carefree in their experience and able to socialize more. They were proud of the trajectory they were on and could see a path forward for social mobility. Third, traditional-aged students also experienced some trepidation in their educational programs by way of worrying about their relative (im)maturity and (lack of) experience, and how that is viewed by peers and eventual employers. Fourth, non-traditional-aged students discussed positive aspects as well, such as feeling confident about their educational choices, more mature and able to apply themselves to their studies, excited about the relationships they had formed with both younger students and their instructors, and found it gratifying that they could draw on their life experiences to help illustrate the relevance of their coursework. Fifth, non-traditional-aged students also shared the downsides they perceived to their age, namely their lack of confidence using technology, the pace of educational programs today, as well worry about how age may negatively impact their working relationships with younger students in the program as well as future employers. Sixth, students also discussed how their age intersected with other factors such as their gender to produce distinct social experiences in their programs. Finally, it is important to note that not everyone really identified within the age categories of "traditional-aged" and "non-traditional-aged" and described a grey area where they did not fully feel a part of one group of the other, but more so in between.

The first emerging theme illustrates ways that students appreciated age diversity in their classes, and as part of the educational experience, more broadly. One student felt that they attended an *"extremely diverse institution with students from all ages… It has been wonderful experience for making friends and learning from the experiences of others"* while another students commented: *"I feel like a lot of the students that are attending [my college] are a larger variety of ages then that last college I went to. This helps, because there is a wide base of knowledge from each person, and it's easier to connect with more people, because they aren't all just in one age group."* In particular, younger students

appreciated interaction with older students. For example, one student stated, *"Since I was a younger student beginning at [my college], being with other older students has given me more perspective on the world outside of school and how to proceed after [finishing program], as well as a better sense of maturity."* And another student added, *"I'm usually the youngest or one of the youngest students at the community college and I found that interacting with older people was very interesting."* Non-traditional-aged students also expressed fondness for their interactions with younger students. For example, one student commented, *"There are quite a few young people in my program which makes my classes more fun."* Overall, a saturated theme within the open-ended responses included an appreciation for the age diversity amongst the student body at community colleges.

The second emerging theme relates to positive sentiments expressed by traditional-aged students. They recognized the greater freedom they experienced as students without families or as many bills, and felt more carefree in their experience and able to socialize more. For example, students commented, *"Being young has helped in the sense that I don't have many obligations that come along being older like having kids or bigger bills"* and *"Being young and unmarried has allowed me to pursue whichever courseload I want without any judgement or issues coming from anyone else. I [don't have] too many [long-term] commitments, and so I feel it's been positive in just allowing me the freedom to commit fully to my education."* They also discussed feeling they had better skill sets than their older peers. For example, one student commented, *"I think being young helps me communicate with other students"* and others stated, *"I am young, makes learning easier"* and *"by being a younger student in my late 20's i am able to understand concepts such as math and writing skills"* and *"Age helps, when you're younger it's easier to sustain and understand new information."* They were also proud of the trajectory they were on and could see a path forward for social mobility. *"I'm more motivated and willing to do the hard work at a younger age so I don't have to do as much or am farther along later in life,"* and *"I'm*

young and hardworking, so I plan to utilize what I gain out of community college and integrate towards a healthy future. Education provides knowledge so I can provide for a family in the near future."

In a third emerging theme, traditional-aged students express their trepidation in their educational programs by way of worrying about their relative (im)maturity and (lack of) experience, and how that is viewed by peers and eventual employers. For example, students made the following comments: *"The older people occasionally look down upon younger students"* and *" [I'm] not mentally mature enough for school I believe,"* and *"I younger than most students. As a result, sometime I may not be taken seriously."* Some traditional-aged students felt they owed older student a sense of deference: *"Being a younger student amongst older classmates makes it hard to contribute to the class due to cultural norms."* Students also commented on what they perceive as a double-standard for traditional-aged students: *"Being younger makes me the target for others to say I don't know what I'm doing or saying so I have to prove myself 10× more than everyone else."* Lastly, traditional-aged students also worried how their age may impact their prospects on the job market, as one student remarked, *"due to my young age companies are hesitant to hire me."*

In a fourth emerging theme, non-traditional-aged students discussed positive aspects of age, such as feeling confident about their educational choices, more mature and able to apply themselves to their studies, excited about the relationships they had formed with both younger students and their instructors, and gratified to draw on their life experiences to help illustrate the relevance of their coursework. For example, students explain, *"My age has helped me alot because i have an idea of how the world works and i know exactly why i need to work hard and gain my degree, this keeps me motivated"* and *"At my current age of 40 I find that I am not second guessing my career and educational choice,"* and *"I think being an older student allows me to have a more mature approach to the coursework. This is something I didn't possess as a teenager"* and *"I am simply more mature and I can tell it gives me an edge compared to younger students who spend time thinking about things I've already*

worked through." Non-traditional-aged students also appreciate the relationships they are able to form, as they explain, *"I find it easier to communicate with professors as an adult and the atmosphere at the campus is comfortable. I see many other adults at the campus and in my classrooms which also adds to the experience,"* and *"Being an older student, I feel more focused and clear-minded about my reasons for being back in school. I also enjoy the big-brother / mentor role I've fallen into with many classmates"* and *"Able to relate to a lot of teachers given my age and having kids and being married. Very comfortable interaction with all staff."*

Fifth, non-traditional-aged students also shared the downsides they perceived to their age, namely their lack of confidence using technology, the pace of educational programs today, as well worry about how age may negatively impact their working relationships with younger students in the program as well as future employers. As one non-traditional-aged student poignantly stated*," Imagine going back to school at 49 years old. Now imagine that since you last went to college, they invented the internet ... and cell phones ... and smart phones. It's ridiculous. There are a few advantages to my age, but mostly I feel disadvantaged by the extreme age difference between me and my fellow classmates."* Another students also commented, *"I walked into another world where everyone is engaged with their devices. Even professors when they are finished lecturing. Lab time they return to glass-swipe mode, and I have to drag them away from virtual-land and accept them being offended for interrupting them. I guess this is how things will be. Multitasking."* Yet another student speaks of the tension related to age: *"At work, the mechanical engineers are about 4-6 years younger than me, they have an office job and get paid better. I am in the shop using my hands and getting paid less. I know i should have gone back to school after i graduated the trade school i attended after high school but i wasn't thinking clearly. Sometimes i do get depressed and frustrated because i am competing with much smarter and younger future engineers but i hope one day to hold a bachelor's degree in my hand and make my fiance, parents and sibling proud, and to use that to motivate my future children."* Finally, one student sums up how non-

traditional-aged student who expressed negative feelings respond: *"Being older can be intimidating, and demoralizing, loss of determination."*

Perhaps we can see the tension that age introduces when examining the ways age overlaps and intersects with other social factors, such as gender. For example, as one woman describes: *I am an older female student, in a college program that has mainly young male students. Looked at as "MOM", they keep me at arms length.* And another woman more dramatically states, *"Being an old white female is like being a failed disgusting degenerated meaningless nothing."* These students' experiences illustrate the simultaneous ways that both age and gender impact their interactions with their peers.

Discussion

This analysis reveals a few interesting points of discussion related to empirical findings, theoretical development, and methodological notes.

While the community college literature has engaged in rich debate over the definition of "non-traditional" as well as monitored enrollment trends and program needs specific to traditional- and non-traditional-aged students, more empirical analysis about the social experience of being a student in community colleges across age categories is needed. This analysis provides a glimpse into both similarities and differences of experiences in higher education between traditional- and non-traditional-aged students. Perhaps most notable is that students answer affirmatively when asked if status characteristics, such as age, impact their experience in their programs, and also describe a diversity of ways that age both positively and negatively impacts their educational experiences.

Sociological theory examines ways that social institutions engage in socialization processes and how accepted norms are conveyed through social role expectations. The findings from this study affirm

some normative understandings for characteristics of a "typical" college student (i.e. traditional-aged), but more so, the study finds that social role expectations around age can be more fluid and dynamic in the educational context and allow for more "role-switching" in the development of learning identities. For example, there are times that both traditional-age and non-traditional-age can be an advantage as well as a disadvantage in the two-year college setting where traditional-aged students feel 'carefree and savvy' as well as 'young and immature,' while non-traditional-aged students feel 'old and out of touch' as well as 'mature and wise.' These findings suggest that age as a status characteristic does not necessarily construct a prescribed social role in the educational context. Interestingly, when looking at age with the intersection of gender, middle-aged women students being thought of as "MOM" also illustrates how social roles from one institutional context can transfer to another, and thereby reinforce norms that may be counterproductive to the educational enterprise. While age alone may not challenge a normative understanding for the social role of a student at two-year colleges, the intersection of age with gender very well may.

Most studies about non-traditional-aged students at two-year colleges utilize administrative and survey data. Research in this area could be greatly expanded through qualitative research approaches such as in-depth interviews and ethnographies. The findings from this study illustrate some ways that age categories impact educational experiences. Further qualitative research could help identify the structural and cultural components that explain *how* and *why* age can be both an opportunity and constraint in the experience of high education.

Next Steps

There are many themes emerging in this data that will be further explored as we move forward in our project, and tied together with the survey data and interview data we are collecting as well.

Demographic Table (PathTech LIFE Sample)

	N = 702	N = 557	N = 675	N = 602	N = 678	TOTAL
Age	18-19	20-21	22-26	27-33	34+	
Male	81%	80%	77%	82%	78%	80%
Female	18	19	21	18	20	20
Gender Non-Conforming	1	1	2	0	1	1
White	71	66	64	73	65	68
White Multi-Racial	8	8	8	8	8	8
Hispanic/Latina	16	16	18	15	15	16
Black/African-American	6	8	11	9	14	10
Asian	10	14	12	5	5	9
Native American	3	3	4	3	4	3
Middle Eastern	2	2	2	1	1	2
Race - Other	2	3	3	3	4	3
Never Enrolled	91	76	48	36	37	58
Enrolled in CC	6	12	20	24	24	17
Earned Assoc Degree	1	3	9	11	14	8
Enrolled in 4 yr	1	8	16	14	12	10
Earned Bach Degree	0	0	7	14	13	7
Single	94	92	73	48	24	66
Widowed	0	0	0	0	0	0
Divorced	0	0	1	5	9	3
Separated	0	0	1	1	2	1
Living w Partner	4	5	15	14	10	10
Married	1	2	10	32	54	20
Not Employed, Not Looking	14	12	8	10	16	12
Not Employed, Looking	18	12	10	10	14	13
Active Military	0	0	0	0	0	0
Seasonal Employment	6	5	4	2	2	4
P/T not in field	41	34	27	19	12	26
P/T in field	12	18	13	9	6	12
F/T not in field	6	9	18	21	18	14
F/T in field	4	10	20	29	32	19

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