Provide effective and compelling campus connections for non-traditional students in NIU

By

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According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), a non-traditional student is identified by the presence of one or more of the following seven characteristics: delayed enrollment into postsecondary education, attended part time, financially independent, worked full time while enrolled, had dependents other than a spouse, was a single parent, or did not obtain a standard high school diploma. At Northern Illinois University, we focused on students who live off campus, commute from home, have children, are military students, and/or are over the age of 24. Through this assignment, we attempted to discover the current situations encountered by some non-traditional students, as well as identifying the ways NIU could help them in finding more effective and compelling campus connections. Through interviews, we concluded that the main reason they chose to study at NIU is due to the close proximity of the university to their homes. Because one characteristic of a non-traditional student is commuting to school, the distance from school to home is one of the main reasons why a specific university is chosen. Also, some students did mention that NIU has better courses than another university nearby. One example mentioned was the excellent reputation of the departments of Accounting and Nursing. Apart from being “Huskies”, these students do not feel connected to the NIU campus and activities. Their connection might come from the faculty or department he or she is enrolled in, but not from the overall university. Also highlighted was the fact that they do not spend as much time on campus as they might want to. Being at work and married are some factors why little time is spent on the campus. When asked if they want to be more connected to the campus, the answer was generally negative. Some say that there is nothing NIU can do to help this condition, and others mention that the organized events were not conducive to their needs. As they are usually older than the traditional students, school or university events are no longer what they are looking for. What we identified is these students were not interested in becoming more connected on campus with NIU except for the purpose of getting a degree.

Unexpectedly, 71% of the students in a university are considered non-traditional. We found that non-traditional students feel they are more connected to their faculty than to the university campus. The academic departments should be able to identify these students and accommodate their needs. The collaboration between the academic departments and the non-traditional students department may have a huge impact in providing non-traditional students with effective connections. Non-traditional students are known to be more focused, prepared and have more experience in the real world. They have an invaluable perspective and a greater sense of purpose which enables them to have more defined career goals and a wealth of practical experience. The non-traditional students are capable of discerning what is important and better envision how to transfer their education over to real-world work. Some method needs to be found to transfer those experiences and insights to traditional students. Social network events that engage not only both traditional and non-traditional students such as a short motivational talk “to us, by us” could become a gateway for a compelling connection.