

**BARNES  
& NOBLE  
COLLEGE**

**COLLEGE  
INSIGHTS**

# **ACHIEVING SUCCESS FOR NON-TRADITIONAL STUDENTS**

Exploring the Changing Face  
of Today's Student Population

# NON-TRADITIONAL STUDENTS: UNDERSTANDING THEIR PERSPECTIVE & NEEDS

Students in today's university and college programs are increasingly redefining the face of college students. According to the CLASP Center for Postsecondary and Economic Success, enrollment of these "non-traditional" students is projected to increase more than twice as fast as traditional students from 2012 to 2022.

Coming from widely different socio-economic backgrounds, 25 percent of today's higher education students are 25 years old or older, almost 42 percent work part-time, and more than 25 percent are parents, the Center also revealed.

These students face a unique set of challenges and have specific needs to be met in order to feel supported and successful in their academic journey.

At a time when many colleges and universities face increased challenges to their recruitment and retention goals, a deeper understanding of this non-traditional student population is crucial to help meet the social and academic expectations of a rapidly emerging and vital student population.

## FRESH PERSPECTIVE

Most college students share two common goals: earning a degree and establishing a career. Non-traditional students are no exception, but they pave a variety of paths

to get to their destination. This research report is part of Barnes & Noble Colleges' ongoing support of its campus partners, and sets out to investigate the foundation of the non-traditional student journey. We explored the unique social and academic needs and expectations of non-traditional students, the barriers they encounter, and ways to help them achieve greater levels of success.

More than 1,000 traditional students and nearly 800 non-traditional students participated in our survey, offering insights into their experiences and perspectives on higher education — and how they differ.

The **Barnes & Noble College Insights<sup>SM</sup>** platform regularly taps into its network of more than 10,000 students, parents, faculty and alumni to better understand the thinking, behaviors and expectations of current and future college students. The efforts have resulted in generational research studies on topics such as Millennials and careers and Gen Z and their expectations of learning.



## Non-traditional students in our study identified with at least one of the following criteria:

- Age 25+
- First-generation (parents/siblings did not attend)
- Works full-time (35+ hours/week)
- Has dependents
- GED or other nonstandard high school diploma
- Veteran
- Re-entry student (non-consecutive enrollment)
- Distance learning or online

## Over half describe themselves as:

- Academically successful
- Motivated
- Optimistic



possess one or more non-traditional characteristics



consider college "moderately" or "very" valuable



feel positively about their current situation at school

2016 —————> 2022

21.7%

Growth in Non-traditional Students

8.7%

Growth in Traditional Students

Source: CLASP Center for Postsecondary and Economic Success.

# FINANCIAL IMPACT

“Money is a struggle. It all causes a lot of stress and makes me incapable of performing at the level I know I should be.” *Sophomore, non-traditional student*

Non-traditional students shoulder a variety of responsibilities that add complexity to the decision to enroll in college. Based on our previous research, while traditional students are more likely to attend college for social reasons or because of family expectations, non-traditional students are much more likely to attend in order to change careers, set a good example for their families, and earn more money. The stakes are high for these students, and that came through as they shared with us their frustration and satisfaction with their financial, academic and social experiences in higher education.

## COSTS AND FUNDING

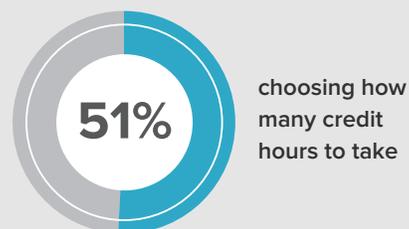
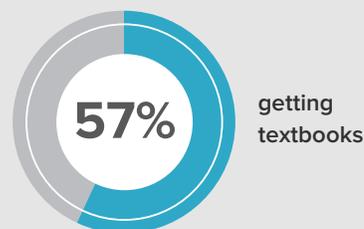
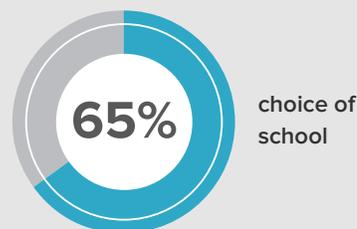
Given the rising cost of attending college, it's not surprising that non-traditional students ranked finances as their top challenge. It's consistently a top concern across student populations, as we found in *The Value of College*, a study we conducted in partnership with Money during the summer of 2016. In an integrated group of traditional and non-traditional students, 90 percent of respondents said cost is a top factor when selecting college, and nearly two-thirds said they eliminated a college as a choice due to cost.

However, financial considerations are far more likely to make a lasting impact on a non-traditional student experience than that of a traditional student — only 15 percent of non-traditional students say they feel financially secure. It's not surprising that they can feel strained; the top ways that non-traditional students finance their education are student loans, education grants and scholarships. All require self-driven effort to secure external support. In contrast, the top two sources of funding for traditional students are scholarships and, crucially, family members.

As a result, finances influence everything from which schools non-traditional students choose to how they allocate their time.

In fact, financial issues are the number one reason that non-traditional students gave for quitting a prior program. And, financial assistance is the top request they make for additional support from their schools.

### Areas Impacted by Finances

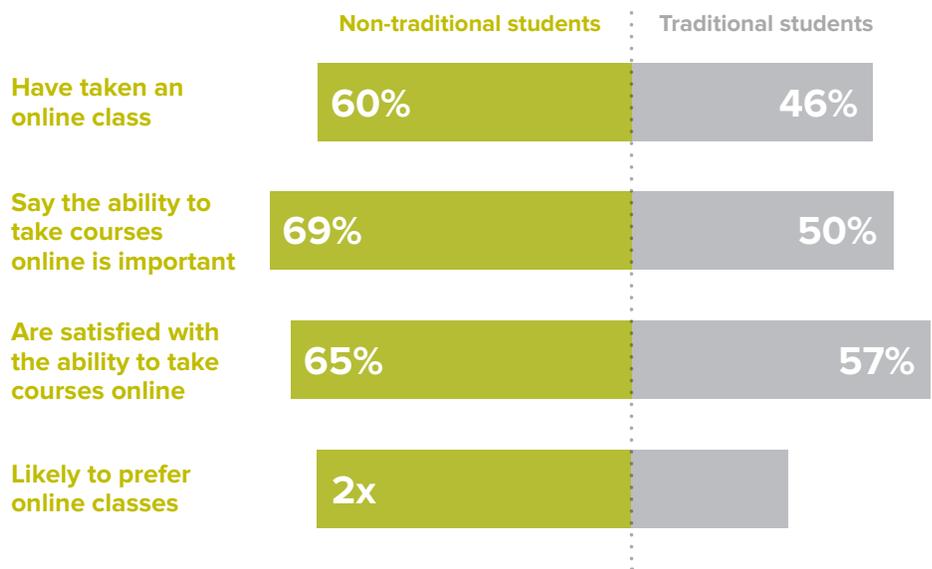


# ACADEMIC EXPERIENCE

“Education is the one thing people can’t take away from me. If I have that, my possibilities are endless.” Junior, non-traditional student

## ONLINE COURSES

Both traditional and non-traditional students still prefer in-person courses to those taught online. However, non-traditional students are more likely to have taken an online class than traditional students — 42 percent took at least one class online just in the last semester. And, the non-traditional students who are taking online courses are more likely to prefer them than traditional students. Why? Factors like convenience, transportation and comfort — vital considerations for anyone juggling their education and multiple off-campus responsibilities.



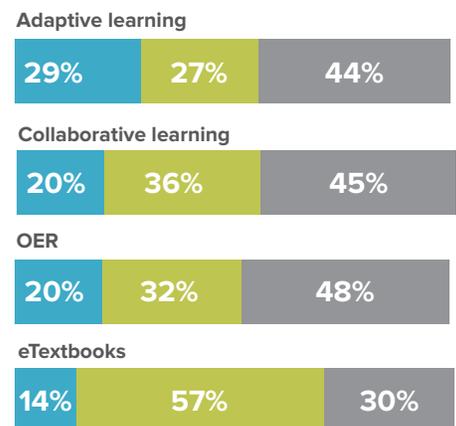
## LEARNING EXPERIENCES

With finances top of mind, non-traditional students are particularly focused on creating customized learning experiences that will have the greatest academic impact and value. When it comes to selecting the right tools, non-traditional students demonstrated the ability and the willingness to explore new ways of learning. In fact, more than 70 percent say they are moderately or very comfortable with digital options.

It’s telling that nearly half of non-traditional students prefer open educational resources (OER), adaptive learning and collaborative learning materials equally to traditional

print materials. The increasing number of teaching, learning and research materials available for free with the expansion of OER creates a wealth of new, affordable options for professors to mine. And, students can structure their own experiences through the personalized teaching methods and group dynamics that adaptive and collaborative learning materials provide. For non-traditional students, these options represent critical new ways of delivering the flexibility and individualized support that enhances their success.

### Digital Learning: Method Preferred



■ New option  
 ■ Traditional option  
 ■ I prefer each option equally

# ACADEMIC EXPERIENCE

## RELATIONSHIPS WITH PROFESSORS & ADVISORS

Another form of support that non-traditional students value is their relationships with their professors and advisors, who play a direct and influential role in shaping their academic path. Research conducted with faculty through our College Insights Panel shows that faculty value these relationships as well. The challenge is finding the time and resources to provide the right level of support — and this is heightened when it comes to working with students who typically spend less time on campus and have less flexibility in their schedules. Not surprisingly, 88 percent of non-traditional students name accessibility and personalized help as very important to them. The more that schools can do to mitigate these challenges and keep professors, advisors and students connected, the better equipped students will be for success.

### Faculty/Advisor Support



**71%**

feel they have good relationships with their professors



**61%**

feel moderately or very supported by their advisors



**73%**

feel moderately or very supported by their professors



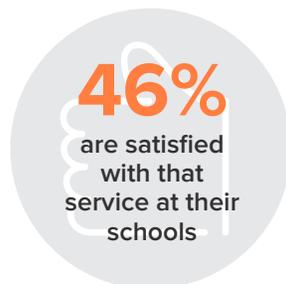
**69%**

feel like they have good relationships with their advisors

## CAREER PREP

The number one reason non-traditional students enroll is career preparation — in the classroom and beyond. Career support resources are a priority for them, but many feel like they could use more help from their schools.

Specifically, non-traditional students are interested in getting help with developing skills to get hired, finding and applying for jobs, understanding the job market, and networking. This represents a need consistent across the entire undergraduate population; our previous Millennials research showed that students are waiting too long to prepare for careers, and there's a gap between their skill sets and what employers expect. This deficit impacts recruitment — post-college job placement rates are very important to students today when choosing a college to attend. Improving and expanding career services — or finding ways to engage students more meaningfully with existing services — will only become more important for schools in the coming years.



# SOCIAL EXPERIENCE

“I commute and therefore don’t go to any events, sports or otherwise — too inconvenient.”

Junior, non-traditional student

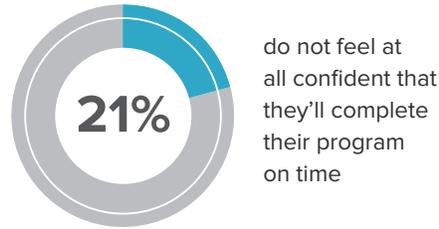
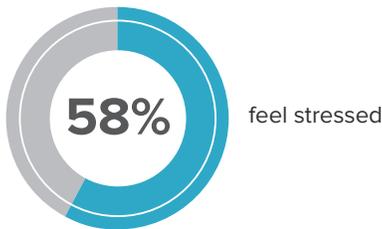
## BALANCE

Fostering student success doesn’t end with the classroom. A sense of social belonging and support are critical to a student’s overall well-being and capacity to succeed. Most non-traditional students look at the big picture and remain optimistic and confident that they will succeed in the long term.

However, when they talk about how they are doing in the moment, the picture can be less rosy.

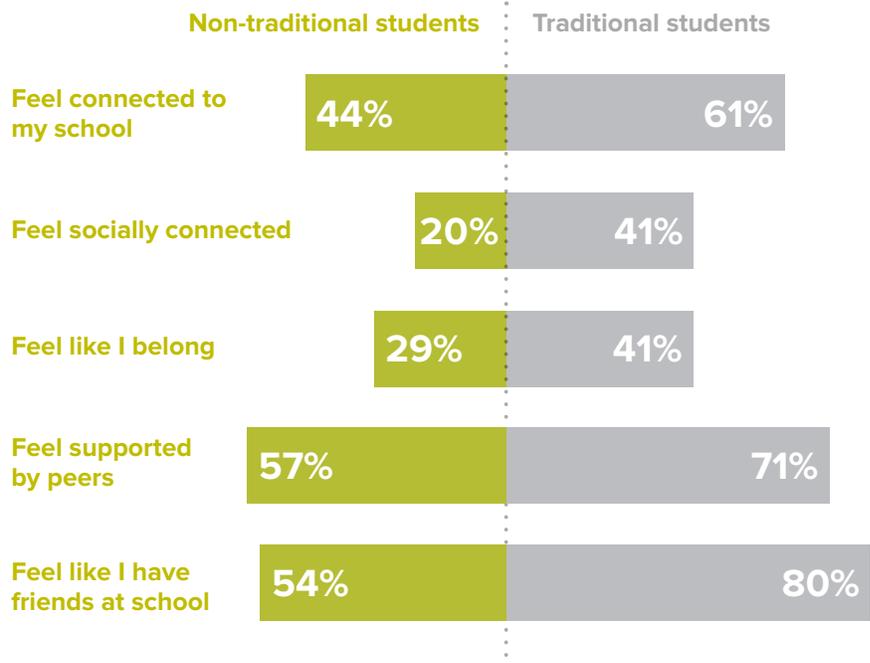
This is tied to their challenge to balance school with other life obligations — more than three-fourths of non-traditional students don’t feel balanced, and that

struggle doesn’t greatly improve over time. Stress is also a huge issue — not only did the majority of non-traditional students state that they feel stressed, but they scored significantly lower than traditional students in positive emotions like feeling happy, engaged and emotionally supported.



## CONNECTION

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. 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.



# AT-RISK STUDENTS: THREATS & OPPORTUNITIES

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“Graduating on-time is unrealistic in my situation. I have to balance work and school every semester to avoid losing one or the other.”

Sophomore, non-traditional student

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Taking financial, academic and social factors into consideration, we found that significantly more non-traditional students are considered “at-risk” than traditional students.



“At-risk” students meet at least one of three conditions: a low sense of connection to school, low confidence of completing program, or negative feelings about current situation at school. Non-traditional students are one of the fastest-growing populations in higher education, and as their numbers increase, so will the number of “at-risk” students.

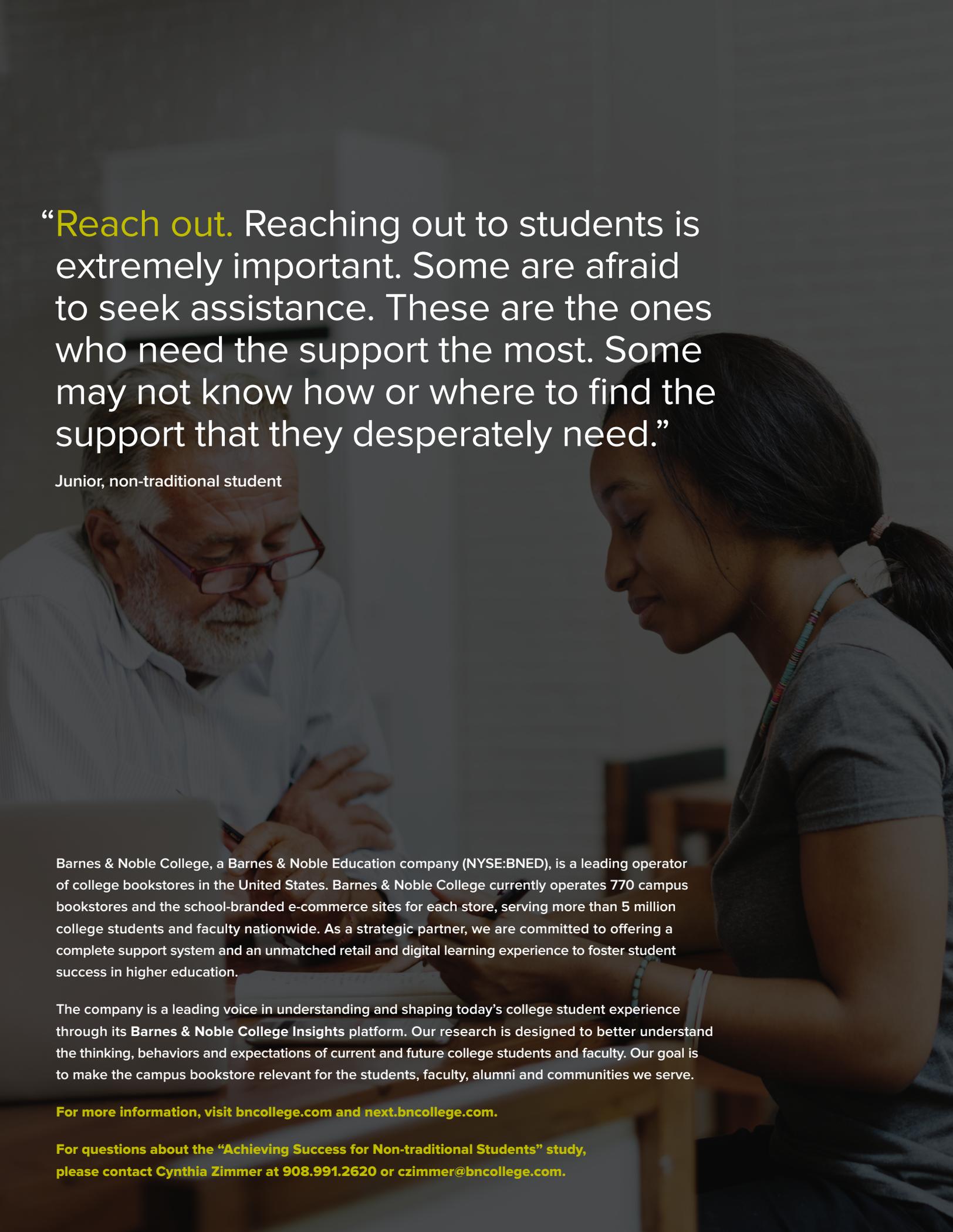
Our research uncovered several key ways to help these students address challenges and bolster long-term success.

- 1. Know your “at-risk” students.**  
Understanding who’s most likely to need support allows you to focus efforts on helping them succeed.
- 2. Increase access to affordable materials/learning solutions.**  
Proactively offering students options for more affordable course materials and newer learning methods and tools helps them find the right support at the right time for their unique needs and preferences.

- 3. Offer expanded career counseling support.**  
Connecting students driven by the potential for career opportunities and advancement with the people who can offer focused insights and guidance is critical.
- 4. Offer services that will help them deal with their stress.**  
Educating students on campus resources that might not be as intuitive for them — such as skill-building assistance or mental health services — can make a big difference.
- 5. Act as their support system and help them engage more deeply.**  
Planning events and activities tailored to non-traditional students helps them build connections with the peers who can understand and help them the most.

- 6. Provide clear, proactive communication and information about the support services offered.**  
Making an extra effort to reach this time-challenged population increases the chance that they will understand and make use of the resources available to help them succeed.

Non-traditional students — and particularly those who are at risk — have unique needs, strengths and challenges. And they will only become a stronger presence on campus in the coming years. Investing time and resources to better understand, engage and support these students is critical for colleges and universities looking to the future.



**“Reach out.** Reaching out to students is extremely important. Some are afraid to seek assistance. These are the ones who need the support the most. Some may not know how or where to find the support that they desperately need.”

Junior, non-traditional student

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The company is a leading voice in understanding and shaping today’s college student experience through its Barnes & Noble College Insights platform. Our research is designed to better understand the thinking, behaviors and expectations of current and future college students and faculty. Our goal is to make the campus bookstore relevant for the students, faculty, alumni and communities we serve.

**For more information, visit [bncollege.com](http://bncollege.com) and [next.bncollege.com](http://next.bncollege.com).**

**For questions about the “Achieving Success for Non-traditional Students” study, please contact Cynthia Zimmer at 908.991.2620 or [czimmer@bncollege.com](mailto:czimmer@bncollege.com).**