Cicero
Implementing Data-Driven Strategy

WGU

UTAH SYSTEM OF HIGHER EDUCATION

WGU / USHE

Non-Traditional Students in Utah

April 2022

Background Information and Justification of Need

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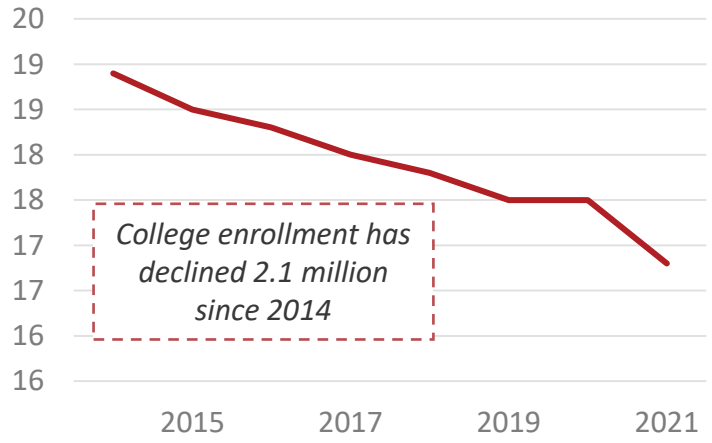
We are experiencing national declines in enrollment. Utah is fortunate to lag. In the absence of attracting and retaining non-traditional students, most institutions of higher education will suffer…

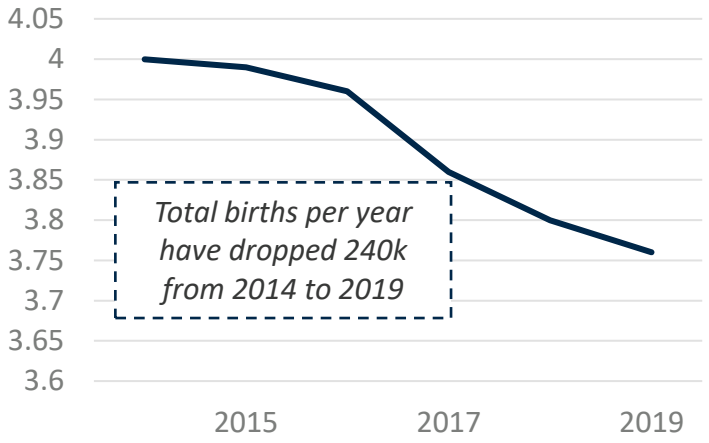
Historical Enrollment at Colleges and Universities[1]

(millions enrolled/year)



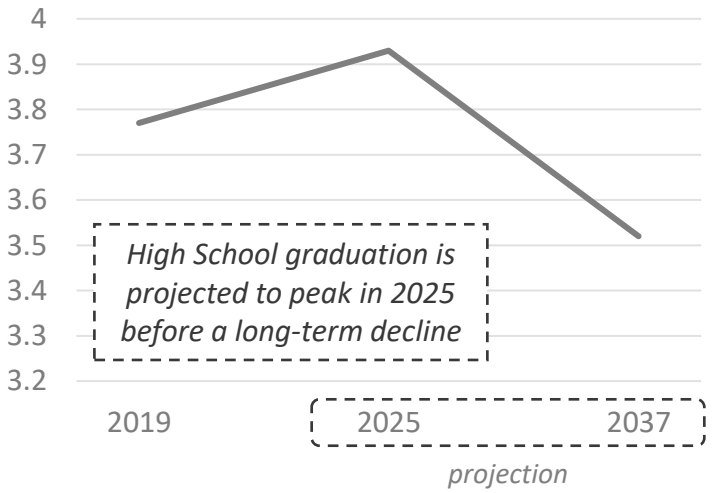
Historical Birth Rate[2]

(millions of births/year)



Projected Number of High School Graduates[3]

(millions of births/year)



Key Takeaways:

- Current demographics trends, exacerbated by COVID-19 implications, have dramatically impacted current and projected college enrollment rates
- This trend is expected to have long consequences for the education gap as low income and minority students are most significantly affected
- Higher education institutions have already begun to see the impacts of lower enrollment and face critical, long-term decisions

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1 – Source: National Student Clearinghouse Research Center Term Enrollment Estimates 2014-2021
2 – Source: National Vital Statics Reports 2014-2019
3 – Source: "Knocking at the College Door 10th Edition" Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education

…but attracting non-traditional students is about much more than institutional survival; it is also a social imperative. Successfully serving non-traditional students will accelerate social justice for Utah's women and diverse ethnicities. Below is just one of many examples: 25–35-year-old women…

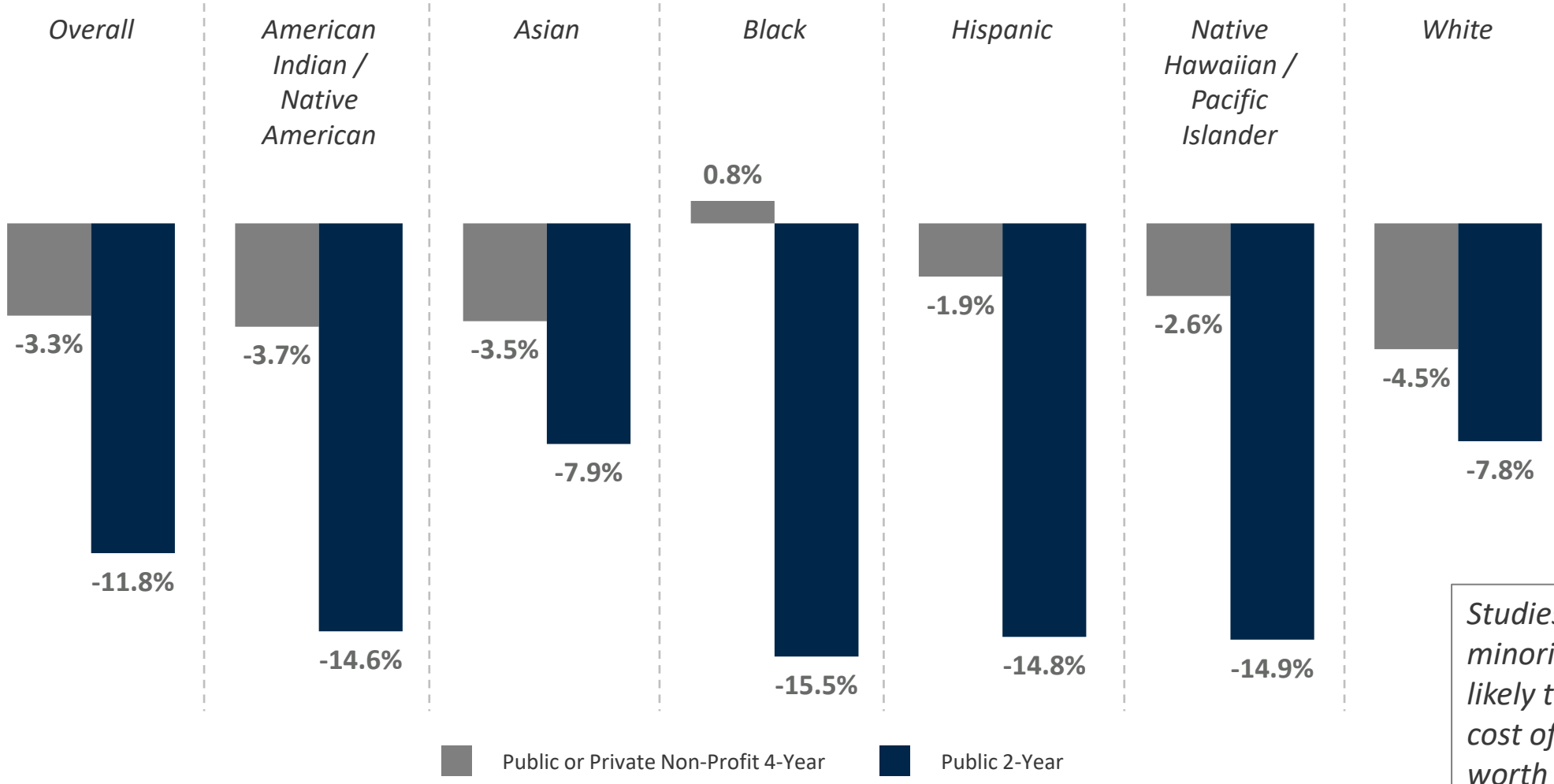
Utah Women Aged 25-35 in Higher Education

- 40% less likely to be enrolled in post secondary education compared to men
- When married, 79% less likely to be enrolled in post secondary education compared to married men
- With children under 5, 31% less likely to be enrolled in post secondary education compared to men with children under 5

While Utah has relatively similar enrollment and degree completion rates for men and women in the "traditional student" demographic, there is a **significant discrepancy between men and women in the 25-35 age range.** Additional factors such as marriage status widen this gap even further.

Sources: Utah Women in Higher Education, 2000-2017

…One more example of the social imperative in serving non-traditional students is the fact that nationally, students of color saw a precipitous drop in college enrollment during 2020/2021, particularly at two-year colleges

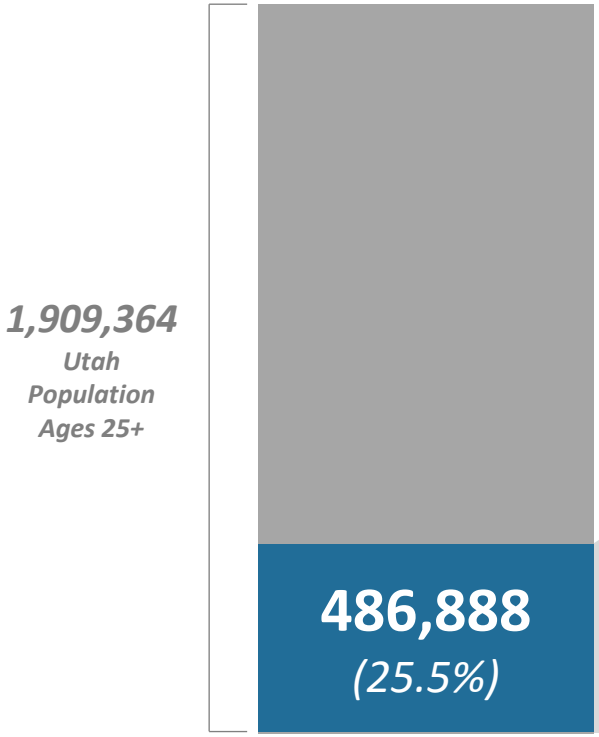


Studies show that minorities are less likely to believe the cost of education is worth the benefits

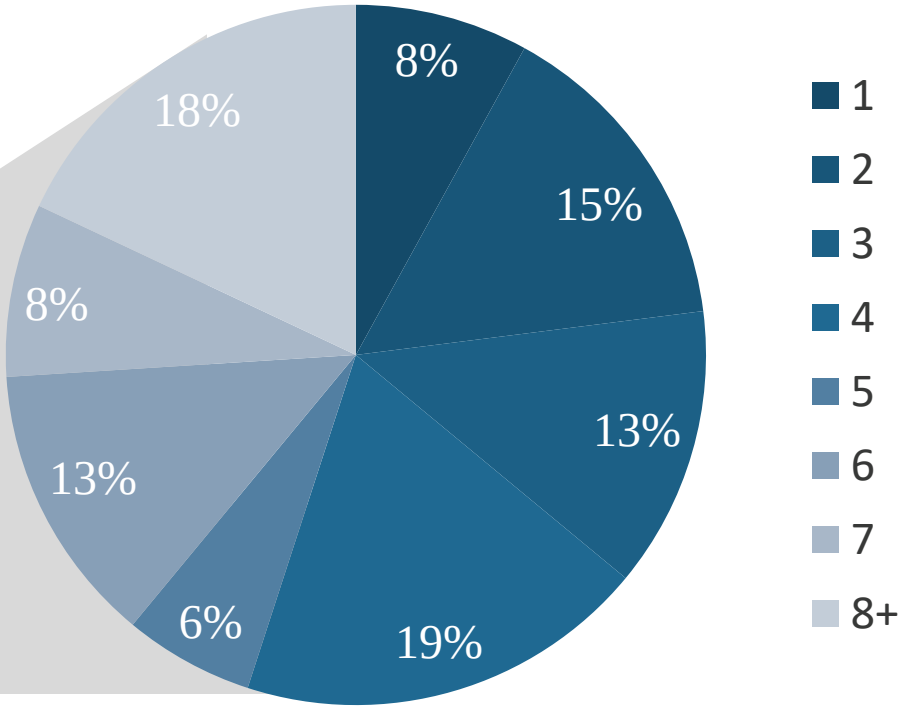
Sources: "College enrolment and Retention in the Era of COVID," College Board Research

Overlaying data from the 2019 American Community Survey with findings from the 2011 statewide study, SUGGESTS that there may be ~220,000 individuals in Utah who have five or more semesters completed without a degree or certificate

Portion of Utah Population with College Credits but No Degree *(Ages 25+)*



Semesters Enrolled in College or Vocational Program Without Receiving a Degree



Key Takeaways:

- Nearly 20% of students with some college and no degree completed four years (eight semesters) of college
- 25% of individuals who attended 8 or more semesters but did not complete a degree or certificate listed balancing work with school as the leading cause for non-completion

Sources: American Community Survey (2019); Prosperity 2020 Study

Survey Results & Alignment with USHE Strategic Pillars

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To gather more meaningful information about the perceptions of the survey participants, Cicero segmented them into four groups to evaluate different demographics and their specific needs

Background

- Understand the **needs**, **perceptions**, and **obstacles** of prospective non-traditional students in Utah
- Collect information around the **structural barriers** for these students to **starting or returning** to complete their degree / certificate
- Provide insight to USHE / WGU on how to **best attract and support** non-traditional students

About Survey Respondents

- N=830
- Variety of Education Levels
- Aged 25+
- 60% Female
- 86% White
- Average Income: $75K

Age

Three segments based on age: Young Adult (25-34 years old), Middle Aged (35-49 years old), and Older Adult (50+ years old)

Education

Segmented into three groups depending on their highest education level achieved: High School / Technical College, College Stopout, and College Degree

Minority

Segmented into two groups based on race: Minority (Asian, Black, Hispanic, Native American, and Native Hawaiian) or Non-Minority (White)

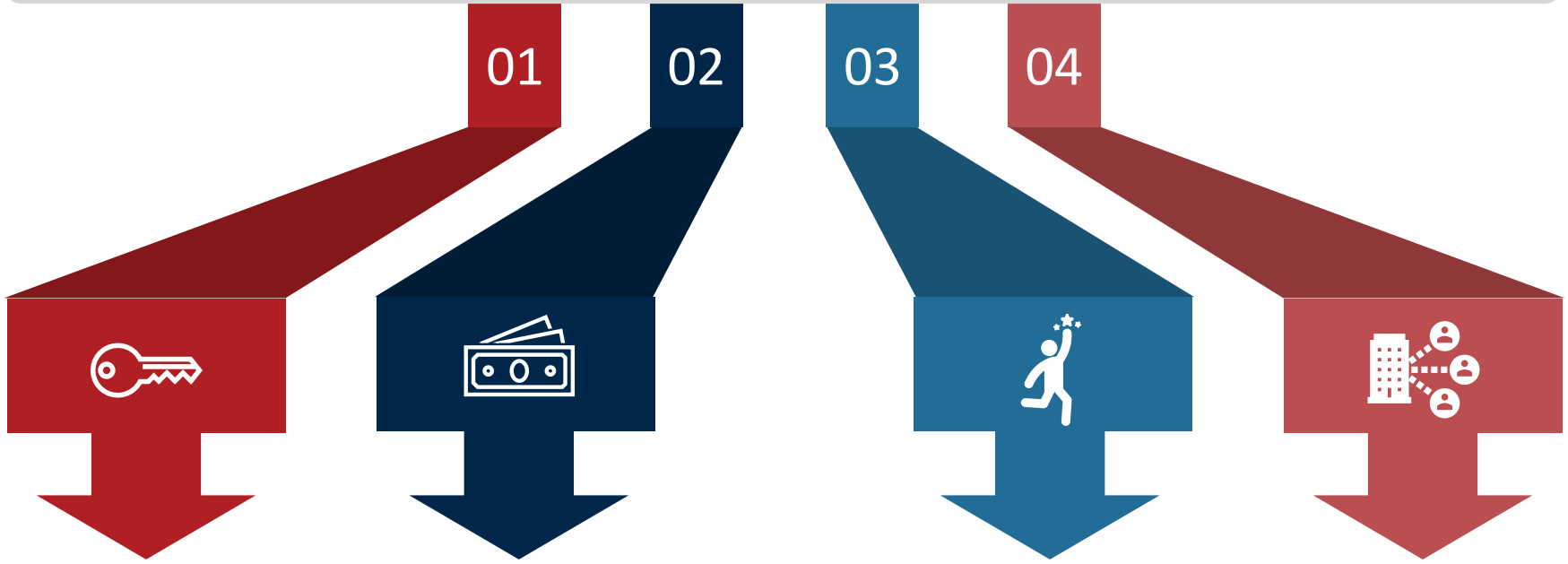
Socioeconomic Status (SES)

Four segments based on SES, which was determined by income level, marital status, and having children under 18 years old

To better understand the implications and outcomes of the research, Cicero bucketed key findings into the four pillars of the USHE 2021 Strategic Plan

We have all this information.. *NOW WHAT?*

Aligning with four of USHE's Pillars from the 2021 Strategic Plan, let's look through the lens of each of the four demographic segments exploring key takeaways, similarities, differences, and supporting data from the survey.



Access
Remove Structural Barriers to Entry

Affordability
Remove Structural Barriers for Affordability

Completion
Remove Structural Barriers to Graduation

Workforce Alignment
Increase Availability and Stackability of High-Demand, High Wage Programs

ACCESS | Remove Structural Barriers to Entry

AGE

1. **Cost:**
   - Nearly 40% of each age group **worries about cost**
   - **Over 60%** of Young Adults believe cost will be $20K+
2. **Time:**
   - Middle-Aged adults are the most concerned about **finding time for a degree**
3. **Perception of Obstruction:**
   - Older Adults expressed **least** concern overall—indicating **actual concerns are vague**

EDUCATION

1. **Cost:**
   - ~60% of people think education cost will be <$20K **yet cost is still primary barrier**
   - College Stopouts have **higher perception of cost** than other education backgrounds—likely because of types of degrees pursued
2. **Financial Aid Process:**
   - Those without college experience are **most deterred by financial aid processes**

MINORITY

1. **Cost:**
   - Minority groups are **more likely** to believe the cost is **>$20K** compared to Non-Minorities
2. **Acceptable Grades:**
   - Notable concern of Minorities: **confidence in maintaining acceptable grades**
3. **Language Barrier:**
   - English **as a non-primary language** impacts 15% of Minority individuals; for 7% of Minority individuals, it is the #1 barrier

SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS

1. **Knowing Where to Begin:**
   - Lower SES groups **know less where to begin their journey** (36%) compared to the Upper SES groups (5%)
2. **Rigor of Program:**
   - Students in Upper SES have more confidence in their ability to handle the rigor of the program; 16% of Upper SES expressed concern compared to 30% of Lower SES

AFFORDABILITY | Remove Structural Barriers for Affordability

Perception of Value

***62%** of all respondents said they agree or strongly agree that the value of an education is greater than the cost*

Age

Young Adult	▼ 4% below average
Middle Aged	▼ 3% below average
Older Adult	▲ 10% above average

Education

HS / Tech College	▼ 8% below average
College Stopout	▼ 12% below average
College Degree	▲ 7% above average

Minority

Minority	▼ 6% below average
Non-Minority	▲ 1% above average

SES

Lower SES	▼ 11% below average
Middle-Low SES	▼ 10% below average
Middle-Upper SES	▲ 4% above average
Upper SES	▲ 10% above average

Cost

- 89% of College Stopouts say cost is an obstruction to pursuing higher education
- 65% of Older Adults, compared to 38% of Young Adults, believe the cost will be under $20K
- Individuals in the Middle-Low SES subsection had the highest proportion of respondents who believed the cost of their program would be greater that $50k

Financial Aid

- 72% of Minority individuals listed navigating the financial aid process as a primary barrier in pursuing their program
- 73% of individuals with High School / Technical College experience also listed navigating the financial aid process as a primary barrier in pursuing their program

COMPLETION | Remove Structural Barriers to Graduation

College Stopouts say the following prevented them from completing their degree / certificate

- **47%** Family & Work Responsibilities
- **25%** Could No Longer Afford Tuition
- **22%** Uncomfortable with Student Loan Debt
- **18%** Personal Health or Medical Complications
- **17%** Lack of Support from Family or Friends

Other Barriers

Age

- 43% of Middle-Aged Adults are worried about how to pay for their program and the time commitment that their program requires

Education

- 51% of College Stopouts don't know how they would pay for a college program or certificate
- Only 16% of HS / Tech College reported disrupting their current employment as a barrier for working on a degree or certificate

Minority

- For both Minorities and Non-Minorities, the time commitment to complete a program and the difficulty in maneuvering through the financial aid process were consistently both meaningful obstacles

SES

- Consistent concerns across all groups include time commitment and managing demand of work responsibilities while enrolled in a program
- 30% of Lower SES are concerned about rigor of program compared to 16% of Upper SES

WORKFORCE ALIGNMENT | Increase Availability and Stackability of High-Demand, High Wage Programs

Important Factors in Choosing a School

- Older and Middle-Aged Adults expressed the importance of an education with a **customizable pace** and **online coursework**
- **59% of College Stopouts** reported a college's **ability to customize the pace** of their degree as important
- **Minority students** rank **reputation** as most important factor when selecting a school
- Flexibility with pace and platform is most important factor for Lower SES when selecting a school

Degree/Certificate Preference

- 55% of **Middle-Aged candidates prefer to attend an online college** or university, while **49% of Young Adults want a 4-year university**
- 47% of **Minority** students prefer to attend an **online college or university**
- 46% of **Lower SES** students prefer to attend school at **a traditional 4-year university**

Type of Program & Mode of Study

- Young, Middle-Aged, and Older Adults **all prefer schooling that is part time with hybrid learning**
- Those with **High School / Technical College prefer online school** compared to hybrid
- Non-Minorities are not as concerned about having the option to choose between online and in-person options as minorities
- Members of each **socioeconomic status prefer part-time and hybrid modes of study**

Preferred Program/Major

- **Business and Computer & Information Sciences** majors are the most popular across age groups and SES statuses
- Those with a High School / Technical College degree or certificate are likely to pursue certificates for personal services (nail artist, esthetician, etc.)
- **Minorities prefer to study healthcare** and medicine compared to **Non-Minorities** who are more likely to go into **education**

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National Best Practices: peer-reviewed studies provide guidance on process and service-related best practices helping non-traditional students succeed

Process and Service-Related Best Practices for Supporting Non-Traditional Students

Simplify the Path
Create a defined degree plan prior to student's enrollment. Provide a narrower selection of course pathways to eliminate confusion, simplify scheduling, and to improve the quality of classes focused on non-traditional students

Improve Transfer Processes
Improve the ease and personalization of transferring credits, offer competency-based assessments for credit, and liberally expunge negative performance in academic history

Intense Support
Significantly increase support systems and personnel to provide application support, financial aid hand-holding, academic guidance, advocacy, mentorship, and career coaching

Workforce Alignment
Generously credit experiential and workplace-related learning already achieved; illustrate skill and knowledge alignment and stackability with high-demand jobs to demonstrate compelling ROI

Belongingness
Organize non-traditional students into cohorts and sections where they will make up the majority of the classroom; minimize the size of cohorts to engender feelings of belongingness

Equitable Access
Provide non-traditional students privileges for scheduling, parking, transportation, child-friendly study rooms, campus resources, and even day-care facilities

Sources: Breaking with Tradition—Making Federal Grant Aid Work for Today's Students. 2015; Supports for Nontraditional Students in Higher Education: A Summative content Analysis Using a Corpus-Based Approach

Thank you!

Questions?