The State of North Dakota recently hosted a retreat entitled “Envision 2030.” A vast number of state leaders, including the governor, gathered to discuss higher education and how best to plan educational pathways for the next generation of our students. Over two days, a multitude of topics was discussed ranging across various areas of student education.

I participated in a workgroup that focused on student diversity; topics included racial diversity, socio-economic diversity, geographic diversity, and the diversity noted between traditional and non-traditional students. On the topic of traditional students, our group quickly realized that the historic definition (as defined by the National Center for Educational Statistics) was outdated: “One who enrolls in college immediately after graduation from high school, pursues college studies on a continuous full-time basis at least during the fall and spring semesters, and completes a bachelor’s degree program in four or five years.” However, a larger percentage of students enrolled in higher education, especially in public institutions, currently adhere to the historical definition of a non-traditional student: “One who is over 24, has family and work responsibilities, has other life circumstances that may interfere with the educational pathway, and is more likely to be enrolled part time.”

A 2013 U.S. survey found that students age 25 and over accounted for 15 percent of degree-seeking undergraduate students. What was not noted is the realization that many of our students entering higher education directly out of high school exhibit characteristics often used to define non-traditional students. Many of these “traditional students” have family obligations, must work off campus to reduce the amount of loan debt, and have life obligations unknown to previous generations of students. These new changes within the traditional student body lead to a higher likelihood of seeing larger percentages among the student body of part time enrollment, which can interfere with the educational pathway. Traditional and non-traditional student categories are beginning to merge. Age is no longer the overwhelming factor, rather, the larger amount of outside responsibilities carried by today’s students is a greater determinant of college completion.

At Dickinson State University, we are witnessing increasing diversity within our student body based on the historical definition of a traditional student. In the fall of 2015, we enrolled approximately 27 percent of the student body that is defined as non-traditional. The university also enrolled 150 “early enrollment” students, a group that does not fit either traditional or non-traditional categories, as well as 430 transfer students and several hundred online learners. This trend within groups of students who no longer fit the traditional definition appears to be growing.

As institutions of higher learning, we not only need to reconsider definitions of traditional and non-traditional students based upon trends we see among our future cohort, but we must be flexible enough within our programming and communities to ensure we continue to offer the best possible education to all of our students. We must help guide this new set of students, who will have greater responsibilities outside the classroom and off-campus, and we need to redefine the metrics used to measure success outcomes. These students are the next generation of teachers, political leaders, community builders, and much more. They come to our institutions with more non-academic responsibilities than witnessed in previous generations, and they will require our guidance and mentorship to navigate these changing times of higher education.

We need to prepare ourselves to make sure we do not let them down.

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