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**Title:** What is a Non-Traditional Student at Illinois State University?

**Course:** ANTH285 Section 1 (Ethnography) Fall 2007 -- Gina de Bessa

**About the Author:** I, being a non-traditional student at Illinois State University by my own definition, the federal definition, and the one laid out by ISU itself, became interested in the topic of non-traditional students when I re-entered school at ISU this summer. Classes between the summer and fall were difficult to schedule around my daytime job at a local insurance company. I was curious as to why it was tricky for someone like myself to schedule classes when my only restriction was daytime classes, not even someone who minded going to class 5 days a week. Through attending ISU, I started wondering what the school thought of its non-traditional student body. I was curious if I was dealing with a unique situation or if many of the non-traditional students in the school were encountering similar obstacles. Class scheduling, parking, finding a place to eat anything that wasn't a cold sack lunch, from a vending machine, or fast food... all of these things were stumbling blocks towards my academic success. My choice to study this hoped to find out if others were encountering the same and just who those people are.

**Keywords:** non-traditional students, nontraditional students, illinois state university, anth 285, bessa

**Abstract:** In this paper, I discuss the results of an ethnographic project about non-traditional students at Illinois State University, specifically looking at the question, "What Is A Non-Traditional Student At Illinois State University?" Through interviews with three faculty members and one student, along with casual discussion with at least ten students at ISU, I attempted to show that the school's definitions were incomplete and that this part of the ISU student population does not have the accommodations it deserves based on its size. Based on these preliminary findings, I argue that ISU needs to do more research and, ultimately, take direct action to assist these students with their college experience. I feel that ISU could take steps such as asking the departments to allow for more major fulfilling classes to be moved from the daytime to the evenings and a non-traditional student lounge as the first of many to help out its large number of non-traditional students.

**Initial Exercises:** ----  
M#4

<This is where I'll get my pictures posted when they're scanned/ uploaded>

4. Sitting outside of Stevenson Hall between classes, life is insane. There is literally no way to accurately observe what is going on with all of the processes here. I would need about 30 video cameras, plenty of microphones, and a crew of people to both observe/ document everything that has been said and to translate conversations that I'd be completely unable to distill information from.

I'm on the bricks near the black benches and cannot (for the life of me) figure out how these students are sitting on them. I assume the temperature of the black seats is near 1000 degrees Celsius. I'm trying to follow any of the conversations or communications that are going on, but all I can gather is the following:

Nearly everyone is wearing jeans/ athletic shorts or t-shirts. The people who aren't are in the single digit percentages. There is a constant flow of people both into and out of the building. I'm watching between classes just to see how big the masses actually get. As they leave Stevenson, they either head towards the Quad or cut a right out of the building and head towards the road. Very few people are making lefts out of the building, toward CVA and the parking circle. It seems there aren't a great deal of people who live that way or who are getting picked up. That definitely may be due to the time of day (1:45-1:50 pm), but I would assume people who were getting picked up from campus would have cars arriving at that time.

I'm somewhat caught offguard by the snippets of conversation people are freely flowing. I tend to think I have a pretty vulgar mouth, but I like to try and contain it when I'm in a more public setting. However, the conversations flying here are both highly invasive and highly profane. A 5 minute audio track of this incidental conversation would not be appropriate for anyone to listen to. Additionally, I've definitely been forced to listen to people's phone conversations, but with the sheer volume of cellphones that I'm seeing here (I'd guess-timate that 80% of the students walking are either one phones texting/ talking or with headphones in), people are practically screaming about their private lives. Its disturbing, if nothing else. Partially because I'm sure I've been a part of that mass, but also because of the quantity of people doing it.

5. Strangely, the only things that shifts in my interpretation and visualization of the university environment (specifically in relation to the Basso text) is the idea that other people might think about the university in the same way that I do. I've spent a volume of time thinking about the stories and the specific idiosyncrasies of the school, but have selfishly (and certainly ridiculously) never thought that other people might think about them in the same way. Certainly, my thinking about the university changes in the light of being forced to reflect on the school's personality to myself, but to think that others casually think about it in the same way... sits me down awkwardly.

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M#1

## **Who is an Adult Learner?**

Historically, an adult learner/non-traditional student is someone who is pursuing

an undergraduate or graduate degree, but who does not meet the definition of a "traditional" college student. If you feel that any of the following describe you . . . then you are considered an adult learner/non-traditional student at Illinois State.

I am . . .

- An independent student;
- Employed full-time;
- A person with dependents;
- A person who as a result of a death or divorce, is now single and wishes to complete a degree program;
- A commuter student (you live off-campus) and will commute to campus to attend class; or
- A veteran of the United States military who recently returned to the civilian world after serving in the armed forces.

In addition, a recent Adult Learner Services Task Force created by the University describes Adult Learners as undergraduate or graduate students that are:

- lifelong learners who generally are 25 years or older, and/or have additional responsibilities such as family, career, military, or community, and are seeking a degree or other educational offering (credit or non-credit) to enhance their professional and/or personal lives.

2,354 students registered for the Spring 2007 semester are considered non-traditional students. This includes veterans of all ages, students-at-large, and students who are at least 25 years of age by January 15, 2007.

- 524 students (22%) indicated veteran status on their application for admission or financial aid form.
- 70% are full time students and average around 14 hours enrolled.
- 266 are newly enrolled at Illinois State.

Response: ISU seems to view the adult learner as someone with these independent needs. What sticks out to me are the original ways of looking at "adult learners" and why they are coded in this way. Personally, I know or have known many students who fit into these categories who, for one reason or another, do not consider themselves "adult learners," but simply college students looking to survive or exist beyond a bare-means college experience. Further, many of these students fall into "traditional" student by the Federal Government (specifically financial aid forms), which leads me to wonder why ISU differentiates between these students. I found it interesting that they speak

about many different categories for an "adult learner," but find it easy to lump them into one category. Since the non-traditional student is almost always guaranteed to have case-specific needs, I would think that ISU would branch the category out more instead of lumping them all together.

[http://www.emas.ilstu.edu/adult\\_learner\\_services/who\\_is.shtml](http://www.emas.ilstu.edu/adult_learner_services/who_is.shtml)

## **Advice for Adult Learner/Nontraditional Students**

Here are some tips from current and former adult learner/nontraditional students that you may find helpful in your transition to Illinois State University.

- “Submit your financial aid information as soon as you receive it!”
- “Don’t isolate yourself. Meet other students, staff, and professors. You have a great advantage when you need help to already know people who can lead you in the right direction – and it makes you feel more connected to the University.”
- “Get to know your fellow students. Don’t let the age difference stop you. We’re all in this together.”
- “Ask the librarians at Milner Library for help. They are great!”
- “Eat at campus dining centers on campus. Most of the campus dining centers, like Watterson Towers and Southside, have microwaves for you to use, in case you bring your lunch.”
- “Meet with instructors during their office hours. The time spent in individualized learning settings is well worth it.”
- “Traditional students are very nice! They automatically think that we are super focused and very smart. They know how difficult getting up the guts to go to college is. They understand what it takes to attend classes daily, and they empathize more than you expect they would.”
- “Put money on your Redbird ID card. You can use that money to eat at campus dining, pay for copies at the library, and pay for parking at the pay lots, so you don’t have to dig for change when you need it.”
- “The library is not the only place to study on campus. The Bone Student Center has lots of quiet places such as the Atrium, East and West Lounges, and the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor. You can eat there too, unlike the library!”
- “Be patient with yourself. Every semester becomes easier as you learn

more about campus. Don't be afraid to ask for help."

- "Make sure you have a support group. Whether it is family, friends, the Nontraditional Student Association, or Women's Mentoring Network, trying to get through the semester is a lot easier when you have people surrounding you who encourage you."
- "That it is okay to say 'No' when approached to take on one more thing."

[http://www.emas.ilstu.edu/adult\\_learner\\_services/advice.shtml](http://www.emas.ilstu.edu/adult_learner_services/advice.shtml)

Response: I find the aspect of adult learning here to be campus-oriented, which is interesting. Due to the volume of life that needs to happen off-campus for most non-traditional students (due to job or personal commitments, along with any number of case-specific reasons), I fail to see how non-traditional students would encourage other non-traditional students to be on-campus more. On the flip side, there is the argument that being non-traditional means your life while on campus must be highly campus focused and maximized to not waste time while physically at ISU. I would think there would be more time-oriented advice or suggestions on how commuters could handle driving. The ideas about food seem banal, but are probably much more useful than I imagine. Also, the advice on the support group seems spot on and probably quite useful for students who find themselves in a situation that ISU considers unusual (though, by their own guidelines, I would think more than 10% of the population is non-traditional).

**Question: M#8**

While debating revising my question, I'm struggling with pointing to something that isn't as biased. I think I'm swinging back and forth too much with my questions, leading to polarizing the interviewees, and I'd like to narrow the scope a bit. Hitting broad base questions about a large topic is getting too wide. So far, my questions have been leaning more toward: "Does being a non-traditional student at ISU directly affect the quality of education?" Obviously, there are indirect effects that will come up as a result of being a non-traditional student at any school. What I am interested in is if there is a noticeable effect that these students feel. Additionally, I would like to know if the school has thoughts on this. Further, by centering around this question (tightening focus), it will allow for more direct responses to aid in my study. I have been getting answers in interviews that are a bit scattered or tangential. It would be far more effective for me to try and focus those tangents toward my target.

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**M#6**

My research plan starts out pretty simply. I have three people that I would like to

contact (names are saved somewhere else) to start me on my research. The idea is to find out the following pieces of information: (who is)/ (what are) the (person)/ (people) responsible for identifying non-traditional students at ISU and what are their criteria, how many traditional students does ISU have and how many does the school say it has, and what is it these people feel ISU (does well)/ (fails to do) for this student population? My goal is to not only get this information, but also to get contacts. Right now, my scope is very broad, but I have no desire to narrow it without more explicit information. Instead, I will keep the topic open while talking with people until common themes (positive and negative) begin to repeat themselves in my research. These themes are what I'm going to narrow my question and what I will use when I start speaking with other schools in the area about non-traditional students.

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## M#2

For the time being, I'm leaning towards something dealing with non-traditional students as my area of interest. However, the topic is broad (probably far broader than either ISU or I imagine it to be), which will cause a problem with trying to do any sort of narrowed research. The University has pointed out over 13% of their student population fits into one of three of their categories for a non-traditional student (veteran, students-at-large, and students of at least 25 years of age), but fail to include other categories into this head count. ISU, by their standards, include widowers/ divorcees, full time employees, and people with dependents. Additionally, I am having a difficult time finding out how ISU makes those distinctions (how long of a commute must a person make to be considered a commuter, what do they mean by student-at-large, where are their counts for the people who were singled by circumstances or full time employees). The questions I am currently rolling around include, "What is a non-traditional student at Illinois State University and how much do they make up of the school?," "Who is a non-traditional student, and how does that status affect their schooling at ISU?," and, "What is ISU doing for its non-traditional student population and how will this affect their plans to be a residential college?" I want to take a look at how this affects ISU's Undergrad program because I feel the Graduate and Masters programs probably do not include non-traditional students in their scope and because they are the least likely to fall under ISU's thoughts of being a residential school. A great deal of this comes from being a non-traditional student myself and having associations with many non-traditional students through external sources and living as a "townie." Also, because a close friend of mine who works in admissions at Lincoln College talks about how they recruit non-traditional students and because I have friends who work for Heartland Community College who have also spoken of their drive for non-traditional students, I have more than a passing interest in the subject. Further, because of the boom of Heartland Community College on the area, I want to see how having a very successful Community College in ISU's area has affected the number of non-traditional students in the school. The rate of retention for these students would be interesting because of the accommodating treatment they receive from that schools versus the "we will not try to fit into your schedule" mentality that ISU seems to project to non-traditional students. I

would love to start my research with ISU Non-traditional student department to get a wide base of knowledge from them and glean what they both know and talk about and what they hypothesize might actually be more accurate. I would like to explore which department actually decided on how ISU determined who is a “non-traditional” student and how they keep a functioning census of this population. Most of my research “jumping off” points are going to directly come from ISU’s non-traditional/ adult learner department, though. Once I have a grasp of the overalls that I can glean from that department, I expect that it will either guide my research or point out options that I can explore.

**Plan:** Current plan:

Week of Oct 14 - 20: Being moving interviews/ information from notes to Moodle. Conduct formal interview with a non-traditional graduate on 10-17. Conduct a follow up interview with another subject on 10-19. Contact Dr. Jong Kang about interview and to set up a group interview with multiple South Korean students. Set appointment for next week's interview with Michael Zajac. Contact Terry Patterson, president of Non-traditional Student Association RSO for an interview next week. Contact Michelle Schuline about an interview (main participant on Webboard for Non-trads). Light data/ quantitative research (facts and figures for administrative interview preps).

Week of Oct 21 - 27: Conduct interviews with Michael Zajac, Dr. Kang, Terry Patterson (?), Michelle Schuline (?). Attempt to identify any possible social gatherings for non-trad students that are used on a day-to-day (weekly?) basis. Possible other interviews with current non-trad students who are willing (many non-committal responses due to time constraints at this point). Heavier data research with post-interview quantitative numbers.

Week of Oct 28 - Nov 3: Finalize data. Follow up interviews as needed (esp. anyone suggested after formal interviews with administration). Begin analysis. Also, light follow-up on further indications from interviewees?

Week of Nov 4 - Nov 9: ?? Data/ Analysis completion ?? Heavy Follow-up on Suggestions ??

**Data:** M#14

One of the things I’ve struggled with so far is the way that I’ve had to handle the gathering of information. When I’m dealing with a group that doesn’t have a core that I can visit with, and doesn’t have a discernable visual or group identity, how am I to track down members of this “phantom” group. It’s difficult when I speak with both traditional and non-traditional students on this topic, yet neither group wants to be identified by name (including no less than three interviews where the person declined to either sign the waiver forms or be audio recorded). That sort of resistance to the topic is disconcerting as well, adding what is almost a level of indecency to a very legitimate

topic. It's like the term itself has become dirty, something people don't want to play with or indulge into.

Additionally, the resistance I'm finding is unsettling. Most of the non-trads I've interviewed either a) don't think of themselves as non-traditional students, or b) view themselves by all of the other pieces of their lives who also happen to be taking classes (as single aspect of their identity, not something they want to be identified by). It's like the idea is that being a non-trad is wrong or something worthy of causing shame. They are fine in the classroom, but the second they leave, the goal seems to be for them to get off-campus. This, of course, is simply in reference to the non-trads at ISU who can be marked visually. When approaching students who are clearly not of a traditional age, they seem to resent the fact that I'm pointing them out based on their looks, almost as if I'm creating a feeling of ageism among the students.

The ones who seem to want to blend in the classroom are able to do so, only volunteering information about themselves that will make themselves different when the opportunity becomes available and when it is self-serving (aids in giving additional support during an in-class debate, provides a level of difference between the speaker and the rest of the class to create a sense of "I have different life experience than you, so my opinion is just as valid, if not moreso"). It's difficult to pinpoint the non-trads based simply on visual evidence, which is both distracting and irritating when it comes to finding subjects to gather data from in a non-interview manner.

I am finding a bit of difficulty with the interviewing process as well. Not because the interviews themselves aren't going well, but because of my personal schedule conflicts versus the subject's availability. It is more than tricky (being a non-trad myself) to find time to speak with someone when it isn't during traditional school hours. Professors are more than willing to chat, but only during office hours. Upper faculty members are similarly willing to talk, but on their budgeted time for work (not during free hours). Similarly, non-trads are students who seem to value time significantly more than any other part of their lives, so finding a way to break into that schedule is tricky. Most of my non-trad interviews have had to take place in the later hours of the evening at non-campus locations, simply based on time-budget restraints. Squeezing fifteen minutes out of their schedule that matches with a free fifteen minutes on my schedule is not only taxing, but often feels like it's too much to overcome.

It's even been difficult to get ahold of faculty members of the more non-traditionally oriented schools when they aren't teaching. Trying to get a member of Heartland or Lincoln to sit down and discuss statistics of the student body/ plans for the growth of the non-traditional student body is nearly impossible if I'm not free from 8-4. I do wonder if these sorts of restrictions have caused problems for other non-traditional students who were just trying to get information.

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M#13

<http://www2.nea.org/he/heupdate/images/vol8no3.pdf>

One of the possibilities for the non-traditional student, both locally and nationally, that I have taken a slight look at is distance education. While it doesn't fit into my overall concept of the non-traditional student, it is something that should be considered a future option for ISU students who are unable to attend regular class times. While I haven't given extensive research to the subject, it has come up in passing more than a few times. However, because it hasn't come up in any aspect beyond "passing" in any of the interviews or research, I've glossed over it.

When doing some research at the NEA.org website about non-trads, one of the trends that continued to pop up was this trend of taking care of classes online. While the article points to the overall flaws of the online course as a fiscal company, it does touch on a few things that I think could affect the increase in online classes at Illinois State University. First and foremost, it is an expensive technology with very little return on its money at this point. With budget cuts across the board for education, ISU can hardly afford to toss money at a program unless they believe it is going to have significant return for their investment. However, the school is suffering in this department because there is not the demand for these courses. They fill up because students enjoy the flexibility, but there isn't a push for these courses to increase in volume. Without a student demand, the school won't supply them. Further, without the money to just start new programs in the school, openly channeling money into departments that have a history but no proven track record seems futile. Student demand is necessary to help keep waves of online classes going, much less increasing. It would be the increase in the number of online classes that would attract additional non-trads at ISU.

Additionally, the precedent for these programs is one of failure. According to the article, most online schools or online programs lose money and borrow deeply into debt. This is something ISU simply cannot afford at this point in time. While it would be a nice option, speculation on the returns for opening more doors for non-trads may not be an option. And while the failure of the classes could be written off if the educational benefit was exceptional, the track record disagrees. The study shows that students in the classes tended to not do as well as students taking the classes in the classrooms, that professors were both swamped and unable to maintain a quality control with these online classes, and that students simply preferred getting their information in a classroom setting. All of these factors seem to be enough for ISU to prevent working on the next level of their project, instead focusing on what they have at the school right now instead of what they could be doing with the school in the near future.

The one point of promise is at the end, when the study points out that the schools who focused on the non-traditional students or the ones that used distance learning to enhance the current educational value of the institution were the schools that were the most successful. The schools that treated distance learning like a cash cow were unlikely to succeed, but the ones that understood what it could do for the students who

wanted or needed to use it based on their current lifestyle needs were the ones likely to see the greatest benefit. ISU could easily take the lead from this final lesson, understanding that distance learning could work as an additional tool in the assistance of the non-traditional student, and incorporate it into their program.

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M#12

While studying the ISU archives looking for information on Non-traditional students, I came across a piece that I found very intriguing. I expected the history of non-traditional students to be mostly glossed over, minor points in the school history (if they were even touched on). However, during the 1980s, non-traditional students actually played a major role in the development of the university. According to pages 79 and 80 of *The Thirteenth Decade: Illinois State University, 1977-1987*, ISU took as serious account of its non-traditional population, as well as openly acknowledging the different needs of these students. I found out unexpected information on the effect and treatment of non-traditional students at ISU during this time period.

During the 1980s, when a majority of schools in Illinois were losing student population, ISU maintained its size (and actually sparked a student growth) based on its non-traditional student population. During 1987, the non-traditional student body actually helped the school to peak in size, pushing it past 22,000 students. 20% of that student population was non-traditional, keying ISU into the fact that they would need to take care of this large percentage of students with different needs than the traditional students they were used to dealing with. *The Thirteenth Decade: Illinois State University, 1977-1987* points out the major problem the university had to deal with, similar to the problem I have located during my studies: what is ISU supposed to do to fit this student body that fits a different class schedule.

Because of the time needs of these students, ISU requested that different departments begin to offer classes at times not during the traditional 8:00 am - 4:00 pm schooling hours, a push that would assist the current students and would open the doors for more non-traditional students looking to complete their degrees. However, since this wasn't enough, the university instituted a new program. The college of continuing education stepped in to assist, coordinating evening sessions and special admissions procedures. The book states that nearly 3,000 students were enrolled in this program in 1987 (which was 3/5 of the non-traditional student body), helping to significantly assist the different needs of non-traditional students. Unfortunately, the Board of Higher Education put an end to this, stopping the program from moving to an evening-weekend course load (due to budget restraints).

This is a large piece of interesting data when analyzing my report. The school had to restart its non-traditional student programs just a few years ago, yet two decades before, a non-traditional student population of a similar proportional size actually changed the class meeting times within the university. The major concern for non-traditional

students at this point, above everything else, is the need to fit classes into their daily routine. There is precedent for ISU to take charge of what they could allow these students to do: even putting a little pressure on a few departments to move a few classes to later hours would seem to have a positive influence on the percentage of students enrolled in the school. Why would ISU not want to make these changes?

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M#11

I've picked the banner from the Non-Traditional Student Association website from ISU <http://www.studentclubs.ilstu.edu/nsa/>. This picture carries heavy significance because it is the first thing students see when they are accessing the website, blazing itself across the front and top of the page. Centered in the middle of the webpage and across the red ISU background, the banner presents itself as important in two ways. First, being the central piece of visual representation, it is showing what the Non-Traditional Student Association (abbreviated NSA from here on out) is comprised of, and second, it gives picture of what people should expect when looking into NSA.

At first glance, there are two things that stand out in the picture: the homogeneity of the members and the choice of non-human photo subjects. First, it is important to examine the member homogeneity. Across the front, there are five pictures containing people. 4 of them contain middle aged white females and 1 contains a small child in an ISU shirt. 1 of the photos with a middle aged white female has a male in it, but the female is holding a plaque. This signifies that she is both the recipient of the award and the focus of the photo. There are two single shots of females that look like they are cropped out from larger photographs. These females provide a frame for the photograph of three middle aged females together. With those three photos in a row and overlapping, it looks like each of them is offering support for the other, with even those outside the middle photograph huddling in. The child shown in a photo by itself is white, and it seems to lend more weight to the single white female demographic strongly supported by the other pictures. These visual photos tend to imply that the group consists of exclusively white, middle aged females and that these people are the ones that should be expected when exploring NSA.

The banner also consists of two photos, one of a street sign and one of a billboard. The street sign shows a cross-street with NIVERSI as the cut out letters in the middle and strongly implying the word "UNIVERSITY." This shows that the University (ISU) is at the cross-road (implied "of life" could be added there). It is also the first picture in sequence, pointing to the idea that the cross-road will lead to the following people. The billboard is the NSA billboard with six pieces of paper on it. The writing on the paper is indistinguishable, but is probably there to both include Non-Traditional Student Association on the banner as well as to show what is being done by the group to promote themselves.

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Poking around, its been difficult to find quick links (things that don't require phone calls or e-mail) to let me know about meetings or group activities for non-trads (their choice of terms). The student webboard is quite dead, with only a few links on there that, at the most recent, date March 24, 2007. Michelle Schuline seems to have taken a very active approach to this board last semester, but didn't get the feedback she needed (she is currently listed as an Academic Advisor for ISU through its People Search engine).

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I stepped into the office of a Non-tenure track faculty member of ISU (for the time being, I'm going to refrain from more identification to allow for anonymity). It reeked of "Fresh Linen" (from a plug-in that was previously and admitted turned far too high) and newsprint. The walls are adorned with high concept bits of humor (ironic action figures, prints with amusing captions, other objects that may identify the subject too easily). During the interview, the interviewee kept the office door open to allow students to enter during the written office hours. We were not interrupted until immediately after I finished my questioning.

The interviewee was a non-traditional student at ISU (transfer from a community college) from August '03 until May '05. I specifically asked about the middle two semesters spent at ISU (the calendar year 2004) and wanted to get recollections from that time period. I felt the need to deviate from the order of the prescribed questions, allowing for a broad questioning to a more narrowed/ focused one.

The way the interviewee defined friendship was not based on "time spent" with individuals, but based on immediacy of the subject's entirety. Specifically, the subject considered someone a friend if that person were able to talk about a vast majority (subject originally said, "all," but allowed for a possibility that there were unshared interests with certain people that were considered friends) of topics and interests pertaining to the subjects broad tastes. The subject also narrowed this group of people to a more subjective "knew who [the subject] was" collection. They needed to both share interests and meet specific personality traits.

This narrowed the group of friends to the following people: a vast majority of people were individuals that were met on one of ISU's intercollegiate competitive RSOs (again, more specifics would probably identify the individual). These made up a large majority of the friends of the subject, though also included were professors from the Fall 2003 term and satellite individuals who were met through the RSO. Subject's siblings were also included, as the subject spent a great deal of time keeping in touch with family at home and considered them a part of the ISU experience even though they were not physically at the school. Through more probing, I was able to narrowly define friends as members of the RSO or met through the RSO, with very few exceptions.

The subject spent a vast majority of time with people from the RSO, meaning that the friends were also people that shared a time-consuming extracurricular. Subject had a roommate from August 2003 - May 2004 (the non-traditional student had a very traditional dorm experience for both years on ISU's campus) and a full load of courses, but neither of these things deterred time from being spent with RSO students. Subject actually moved into the dorms with another member of the RSO in Fall 04, meaning that all of the subject's time was spent exclusively with the RSO members and friends formed from it. Subject only spoke of friends from the RSO in Fall 04 (not mentioning family or previous professors, though they may have been included in the overall "Who are you friends at ISU?" question). Weekends were spent on campus or at other campuses in this semester with RSO members. The subject also mentioned that the Summer of 2004 was spent almost entirely with RSO members.

I broadened by question scope by just a bit for further information. I asked the subject if the RSO was what kept the subject at ISU, to which they responded, "yes." They stated that if it had not been for the RSO, they would have attended another school (probably NIU). Because of the support group found in the RSO and mixture of traditional and non-traditional students in the activity, the subject was able to have a positive experience at ISU that they would not have had at all without the RSO.

Subject also volunteered that they went to the ISU Preview in Summer 2003 for non-traditional students and was turned off to every activity. Subject stated that all of the activities were either bureaucratically or logistically based with no social activities (subject was invited to seminars on how to succeed as a non-traditional student or the differences between the educational experience they would get versus traditional students, but that there was no attempt to form either a social network or a support group).

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M#5

1. I'm observing the main entryway of Williams Hall. The idea is that this should end up being some sort of a mixture between traditional and non-traditional students, since multiple schools are being housed in this hall. The English department's displacement and the necessity of this hall to be used for classrooms should allow for a varied example of the student body. Additionally, I would like to see what people are using this hall for during non-class times, allowing for an examination of who might walk through the halls to meet with professors during the non-rush moments. I hope to catch lots of students and a larger proportion of non-traditional students walking back and forth through the hallways, since there is less fear of them feeling like outsiders.

I'm parking myself near the stairway dressed in an outfit that most students wouldn't be wearing in this weather. By being more dressed up, but sitting with a laptop and a book bag, I'm hoping to convey the idea that I am a non-traditional student who is just trying to get some work done between classes that I've placed before or after work.

2. I'm sitting in a cold hallway, lots of black tile floors, with Cinderella staircases in the next room and immediately next to loud steps. There are three different hallways that can be approached from my vantage point, along with stairs leading directly to the outside. I'm doing an observation from 2:05 (hopefully enough time for the late students to get to class) until 2:35 (which should allow the students plenty of time to get around the available offices, and for the afternoon appointments to get rolling. I also think this might be a solid time for parents who are back in school to get to meetings before having to be home for their children after they are done with school.

3. Observation:

Overhearing a professor's conversation who is clearly comfortable discussing personal matters with his door open. First student walked by, but he was clearly focused on something other than walking.

An Asian student walked by who seemed older than normal heading into a hallway. Larger student went outside.

Two students in athletic shorts, one male one female, both moving like they are \*really\* late for class.

There is very little activity.

A definite professor just walked upstairs.

The hallway is definitely daunting and a bit ominous. I would feel that it would be

better suited for something official.

The student that I thought was late to class is now leaving the building.

A former classmate is heading to a meeting with a professor. I know he's non-traditional, but I wouldn't guess that without knowing him. He was definitely dressed like an atypical college student.

A nontraditional student walked by, leaving a meeting.

The professor's office now has a student in it, and even with me outside the door, the door is open for the conversation.

The other student that I thought was late for class left while talking on a cellphone.

Student walked by with headphones blaring.

A non-traditional student/ university worker is walking through the hallway. She is immediately followed by another student on a mission who is non-traditional (or dressed like a college student). Two classmates are walking through a hallway.

The overheard conversation next to me is about the struggles of the students. I'm typing loudly, but they still won't close the door.

Another student on a cellphone, with earbuds in the other ear, headed to what looked a meeting.

Was just questioned by two classmates about a missing cellphone. I was no help, since I didn't know about it.

Someone who is of appropriate age to be a professor just left.

Four students and one student-looking middle aged Indian walking around. He may actually be Hispanic. He could very easily be a math professor.

The math conversation with the wide open door has been going on far too long for them not to have shut the door out of privacy.

4. Sadly, I think I've wasted a half hour of observation. All I picked up on was incidental strolling and no actual way to find out the purposes of the trip. I'll be better served by trying to focus on places non-traditional students are either expected to be or where they have been directed to go (as a starting point) for later observations. Additionally, I wasn't surprised. While I was hoping to make some startling discoveries, its hard for me to have seen anything but the expected of students walking and occasionally talking on their cell phones. Its also a little tricky to pick out non-traditional students when they aren't wearing

their student status on their sleeves (something else to look into). Actually, that *\*was\** unexpected. The number of non-traditional students v. professors is almost impossible to discern simply by looking at what they're carrying or how they are carrying themselves. That will be something I need to look into further for when I'm doing observational studies. I was saddened by what I assume were only okay observations. I would like to see a little more depth to what I'm looking at next time (I didn't feel like I was getting a true observation), so I'm planning on picking a more viable vantage point. I felt like someone trying to take a survey of who uses the interstate by putting a chair on the side of one and jotting down notes as cars passed by. I would be better served by getting out of the flow of traffic and doing explorations at the entrances or exits. Might be a better starting point for information.

5. I feel like I didn't do a solid enough job in reference to Emerson when it comes to my note taking. I believe I was too focused on the "what was happening," especially when multiple students would show up at once and I would try to take them all in. I felt like I was simply gathering quantitative data and failed to explore why these people would be here. Instead, I'd like to really focus on different things with the students next time. Possibly by examining the postures and items that someone who could be a non-traditional student might carry (which could also help to identify them even when their looks aren't obvious). Also, I failed to detail any of the overheard conversations, which is something that I need to keep in mind the next time I observe. Getting surface details, but missing the little ones, is a definite flaw in my observation at this point. Also, I feel like I did a better job observing my 5 minute explosion into college life outside of Stevenson than I did in Williams. I want to capture the feel next time. I feel that I still function better with full sentences than bullet points, so the next time I'll revert back to that method of information gathering.

**Discuss:** Perusing the catalog of classes at Heartland Community College after my tenure there as a student, I noted that the volume of evening classes were astounding. Evening classes cater to the working professional who needs flexibility of scheduling. I took time to compare the Heartland catalog to Illinois State University's and was surprised at the significant contrast. Illinois State's courses are scheduled during banker's hours--a shorter and more compact day, with (comparatively) fewer undergraduate classes offered during evening hours, on the weekend, or online. Many departments actually offer required major classes only in the middle of the day, effectively excluding students who need to attend evening classes to help complete a major.

Heartland is a smaller school but provides a more flexible schedule than ISU even tho it has fewer faculty members and less space. Intrigued, I wanted to look into this further: Does ISU have so-called "non-traditional" students? After all, the school seemed to be fighting against them solely based on class scheduling.

By the university's own multiple definitions one would certainly think ISU acknowledges that student population. These are the definitions given by two ISU websites for what a non-traditional student is (with the differences bolded). If the school can't even agree on its own definition, I wondered how fragmented of a definition I would come to while conducting my own research. ISU clearly states that 2,354 students in the school are considered non-traditional by the school's standards on their Adult Learner/ Non-Traditional Student Website ([http://www.emas.ilstu.edu/adult\\_learner\\_services/who\\_is.shtml](http://www.emas.ilstu.edu/adult_learner_services/who_is.shtml)). The student body is listed at 17,885 Undergraduate students, which means that potentially 13% of the ISU student body is non-trad. That's a significant number. The significance of that number started the question ball rolling. Why does ISU not offer additional evening classes or allow for more class flexibility for this 13% of their student population? I began to wonder just what ISU thought of its non-traditional student population and to wonder what accommodations these students would need and which were offered. This information distilling process eventually brought me to following question: Just what is a "non-traditional student" at Illinois State University, anyway? My study consisted of researching through interviews of both Illinois State University faculty and students. My first interview was conducted with a faculty member at Illinois State University who was a non-traditional student during his undergrad and now teaches an almost exclusively traditional student body in one of the required Illinois State University courses. While acknowledging that he was a non-traditional student by some definitions, his personal specifics led him toward stating that he did not think he was a non-traditional student for the duration of his ISU course work. During the interview, he wanted me to take note of the following self-fulfilling prophecy at ISU: ISU is a traditional student school; ISU assumes non-trads who go to ISU will assimilate themselves into the traditional student body. Because ISU doesn't offer much for non-traditional students, those students will either gravitate toward the traditional student bodies or find themselves excluded in the school. He believes this leads non-trads to often think of themselves as traditional students or as part of an excluded minority. I concluded the interview by asking him to categorize a non-traditional student or how he would define them: he stated that it was a situation to situation definition and that one narrow or broad definition would fail to encompass them all or could include students that didn't actually fall in the category.

In another an interview, this time with an Illinois State University academic Non-traditional advisor I was able to narrow down the definition from an advisor's perspective, as well as get information about both the major problems non-traditional students face and what the school can do for non-traditional students. From the beginning,

she wanted me to understand that the school definition was not the definition the Office of Enrollment Management and Academic Services uses. The advisor stated that the U's definitions were inadequate, so they assisted students who considered themselves non-traditional and not just students the school listed as non-traditional. The three major problems she deals with are the following (Power Point slides). She stated that non-trads at ISU are students suffering from these problems whether or not they fell into the school's definition. These are some of the additional "non-traditional" students she assists that don't fall under the ISU definition.

One of my most enlightening interviews was with a non-traditional student who saw himself as existing "outside" of ISU except for his classes. His non-traditional status was explained through a number of different factors. However, when asked if he considered himself a non-traditional student, he stated, "No." While attending ISU, he simply considered himself an older version of a regular student, working full-time and living in an off-campus apartment while looking to simply get a degree that would allow him to further his professional opportunities. When I asked if there was anything ISU could do to help him complete his education, he stated that he would like it if he could have a non-traditional lounge so that he could take afternoon naps so he wouldn't get cranky and that warm milk would be nice, too. He also stated that scheduling classes over syndicated Matlock and Murder, She Wrote episodes was really slowing down his education. And while he was being glib, this part also intrigued me the most: maybe non-traditional students at ISU weren't looking for major assistance because they didn't feel they needed it. Maybe the silent majority of non-traditional students at ISU were simply concerned with getting a degree, forgoing any need for "community" or a "college experience". The attitude of the non-traditional student toward ISU seemed to be more concerned with the self than with the group. Of course, this could be the self-fulfilling prophecy rearing its head again. The non-traditional students may not be concerned with these things because they are not available. Taking into account the simple need to graduate and the case by case basis of non-traditional students that seemed to establish itself during this and other research, I was able to come up with the two following recommendations for ISU (partially based on suggestions from the ISU Non-Traditional Student Advisor). First, that a non-traditional student lounge would be useful. A lounge would give non-trads who needed it a place to get school-wide information that is traditionally only found in the dorms; thus, a student lounge would assist in creating more communication. A quiet lounge with a microwave and couches would also give commuters an informal place to rest, eat, and study. Also, the suggestion for it to be non-traditional is that, if it were open to all students, the non-traditional students in the ISU

setting may be too uncomfortable to go room domination by traditional students. The second, and much more difficult, recommendation would be for ISU to require departments to offer the around 1/5th of the necessary classes to fulfill major requirements in the evening hours. This would accommodate a large percentage of the non-traditional students. But, this would create strain on which superiors the departments are answerable to; however, it would allow for much greater flexibility in non-traditional student class scheduling. I believe it would be beneficial (and interesting) to get the perspective of department heads who assist with scheduling classes to find out what they think of non-trads at ISU. Additionally, finding out if other departments, such as those who handle internet classes, are developing them for non-traditional students or to just broaden the ISU student experience. More research on what will be done to assist ISU non-traditional student

**EUI Links:** -----  
M#3

[http://www.inquiry.uiuc.edu/bin/update\\_unit.cgi?command=select&xmlfile=u13841.xml](http://www.inquiry.uiuc.edu/bin/update_unit.cgi?command=select&xmlfile=u13841.xml)

There were a few ideas that I wanted to play with from this research, mostly reinforcing what I already wanted to do. Specifically, the idea of looking at how balance works with the non-traditional student is something that I see as important to my research (as well as finding out how that balance can/ will be assisted by the University). The promotion of these services, I believe, also will have a very serious impact on the non-traditional student's ability to function within a potentially hostile or conflict causing environment. I had simply not thought of including graduation success in my research (had simply thought of focusing on retention), but including the eventual "goal" of a university would probably be beneficial in my research. I am interested to see what happens when the non-traditional students form informal groups: do the people in the group support each other, or do they simply function as people to sit next to during class? Also, do the goals of the university for their students line up with how they assist their non-traditional students in approaching the goals? Does a school try to force non-traditional students to handle school the way they ask traditional students to handle it? What does ISU do to help both promote their services for non-traditional students while assisting them to meet their traditional goals?

[http://www.inquiry.uiuc.edu/bin/update\\_unit.cgi?command=select&xmlfile=u13856.xml](http://www.inquiry.uiuc.edu/bin/update_unit.cgi?command=select&xmlfile=u13856.xml)

This one had a very interesting observation. The idea that a student will attend school and be originally counted as a "traditional" student, only to eventually find their way to "non-traditional" status is intriguing. I would like to see the number of freshman at traditional status and how they make their way through school: what happens to the traditional freshman by their third and fourth year at ISU? Are they working full-time? How many have dependents? Does the school include these findings, or are they working off of numbers based on the original date of enrollment and not updating by

semester? The idea that a sliding scale of some sort for ISU might be appropriate (somewhat non-traditional) would be interesting. How would looking at multiple characteristics for a student affect the way of judging traditional versus non-traditional? Additionally, would looking at students this way actually affect the traditional status? Would a full-time employee not be considered a non-traditional student, but would one who lives somewhere that is not in the dorms be considered one? Examining through multiple lenses might helpful is seeing patterns or trends in the way ISU does research about this subset of their student body.

**Reflect: M#10**

I'm finding it more and more difficult to focus on the task at hand: namely, to identify what it is that ISU is either doing or not doing for its non-traditional students. The few interviews I have had have been somewhat tangential, often leading far from the course of the topic. Part of it certainly has to do with the idea that I am not dealing with names at this point: individuals feel free to become light around me and discuss non-traditional students in a joking matter, both if they are/ have been non-traditional or if they are reacting to them. What is both interesting and somewhat infuriating is this attitude toward the non-traditional student, the idea that they are thought of something of a joke by students. I believe that when I interview people with whom I can place names and faces, the topic will get a bit more serious. However, is this level of humor associated with these students? Are they expected to either be the hyper-serious kind or the class clowns who have gone past the point of caring about anything but the slip of paper? Are both categories mutually exclusive and polar opposites? Questioning this further with (hopefully) more informed individuals will help narrow my questions.

I am finding difficulty in getting responses. I feel comfortable in assuming that this has more to do with the fact that I'm actually doing an ethnographic study than the topic that I am dealing with. Certainly, fishing for people to answer questions isn't easy, but to get as many committed responses that lack follow through \*or\* non-committal responses is a bit more than frustrating. I am sure that I'm echoing the sentiments of ethnographers who have to focus more on the interview aspect than the group observation, but it is nonetheless equally eye-opening and frustrating.

I have also discovered a level of discomfort with the people I am interviewing when discussing and questioning about non-traditional students. I feel as if it is easy to explore this topic, but because it deals with such a potentially polarizing set of answers, I don't want to guide people in one direction or another. It would be awesome if ISU just forced all of its non-traditional students to wear badges and proclaim their status of Non-Trad... I'm obviously joking (though it would make for a bit easier of a study). Instead, I am actually invading personal thoughts and lives on a topic that people may not be terribly comfortable with.

**Recommendations: M#15**

The common theme that I have found during my research is that there is a certain amount of common ground between the ISU Non-traditional Students and the ISU faculty that work with them: both want to do more for non-trads, but there isn't a ton of ideas floating around that could really assist either group. The faculty feels somewhat helpless because they don't know what they are supposed to do to help out non-trads as a whole: each have such specific individual restrictions that it is almost too difficult to handle anything except on a case-by-case basis. The students don't have a ton of major requests because they are so personal or individually tailored that they aren't requests for non-traditional students as a whole, but for one or a few students in particular.

The one goal that seems to be common among both groups is the idea of maximizing the time spent on-campus or aiding in time-management, which seems to be the most valuable commodity with the non-trads. What are my personal recommendations that I would extend to the university? In order to better help non-trads at ISU maximize their time, the following accommodations could be made: there could be a non-traditional student lounge, parking exceptions, and a class schedule preference. Of course, all three of these things are impractical, but they are the most common requests from students and have some support in the faculty.

The idea behind the non-trad student lounge would be a place where people who don't live on campus could gather for a quick scan of what's going on in campus, while also allowing people who can't jump back and forth between home and class when they have an hour to kill a place to study that isn't the library. Additionally, a room like this would work as an excellent common ground for non-trads looking for a way to get together for study or support sessions, along with actually allowing concurrent growth in the non-trad student body.

The parking exceptions might be a little more difficult, but for people who are working around a much tighter schedule, it would certainly assist if it only took someone 5 minutes to walk to class instead of 15. That, of course, would require a stricter definition of "Non-Traditional" in order to provide the passes to those in need, but it is plausible.

The class schedule preference is the most difficult. Because classes are determined by department (including times) and not the university, there is no way to streamline classes for the non-trads to have a fully workable evening schedule (something both Heartland and Lincoln offer). Thus, the non-trads would need to have more flexibility with the classes they are choosing to take, so allowing them preferred registration would assist with them getting the classes they need to graduate.

The other recommendation that was proposed was to make sure that all of the non-traditional student housing (such as at Cardinal Court) be included in the university wide ad campaigns. Often, students in the dorms would have flyers posted that would not be put up elsewhere. I believe this may simply be an oversight and should be quite easy to fix.