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). 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 students in the future could certainly further the question that asks, in the now, “What is a non-traditional student at Illinois State University?”