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**Non-traditional Students at UT System Academic Institutions**

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## INTRODUCTION

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), non-traditional students have unique characteristics that differentiate them from their traditional peers and can be associated with a greater likelihood of attrition.<sup>1</sup> They identified a variety of non-traditional characteristics.<sup>2</sup> This brief examines recent trends and outcomes for students from the University of Texas (UT) System academic institutions who have one or more of the following non-traditional student characteristics: older than typical age, attend part-time, or are financially independent of parents. This brief examines differences between traditional and non-traditional student populations by race/ethnicity, gender, and Pell status. Additionally, the brief explores persistence and graduation rates for these two groups to highlight variations in student success outcomes, as well as differences across institutions.

## KEY FINDINGS

- Students were considered non-traditional if they met one or more of the following criteria: entering at 25 years of age or older, part-time enrollment in the entering semester, or financially independent of parents. Non-traditional students were most likely to meet only the part-time entering status criteria, but trends varied by institution.
- The proportion of the entering cohort that were considered non-traditional varied greatly between UT System academic institutions, ranging from 4.8% at UT Austin to 46.7% at UT Permian Basin.
- Non-traditional students were more likely to be Black or African American and Hispanic. About one third of entering students from these race/ethnicity groups were considered non-traditional. In addition, non-traditional students were more likely to be Pell recipients and slightly more likely to be female.
- Across UT System academic Institutions, non-traditional students had lower persistence rates, 4-year completion rates, and 6-year completion rates compared to traditional students.

## STUDY POPULATION

This study focuses on undergraduate students who entered a UT System academic institution between the 2018 and 2023 academic years, including both Fall and Spring First-Time in College (FTIC) students and transfer students. Students entering in the Summer are excluded from the analysis, with the exception of FTICs who met the criteria of inclusion in the official Fall FTIC cohort. Additionally, the study includes both full-time and part-time students, with part-time defined as enrolling in fewer than 12 credit hours in the first semester.

Non-traditional students are defined as those meeting one or more of the following criteria in their entering semester: being 25 years of age or older, enrolling part-time, or being financially independent of their parents. This definition is based on the NCES criteria and refined using readily available data points.

In the 2018-2023 entering cohorts, 91,498 non-traditional students were identified. Among them, 72.2% enrolled part-time, 44.0% were aged 25 or older, and 47.2% were financially independent. Notably, of those non-traditional students

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<sup>1</sup> National Center for Education Statistics. "Non-Traditional Undergraduates: Definitions and Data." *NCES*, U.S. Department of Education, 1997, <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs/web/97578e.asp>. Accessed 30 Sept. 2024.

<sup>2</sup> Older than typical age, part-time attendance, being independent of parents, working full time while enrolled, having dependents, being a single parent, and being a recipient of a GED or high school completion certificate.

who entered on a part-time basis, 71.8% remained enrolled part-time a year later. Only 21.0% of non-traditional students entered as FTICs, while 79.0% entered as transfer students.

Data on student enrollment and degree status comes from the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) Student Census Report (CBMOC1) and Graduation Report (CBM009), while financial aid data is sourced from the THECB's Financial Aid Database (FADS).

## TRADITIONAL VS. NON-TRADITIONAL STUDENTS: CHARACTERISTICS

Table 1 presents data on the count and percent of students classified as traditional and non-traditional in this study. The data show large differences by institution. In the 2018-2023 entering cohorts, UT Permian Basin, UT Arlington, and UT Tyler had higher proportions of non-traditional students, at 46.7%, 44.5%, and 40.3%, respectively, while UT Austin (4.8%) and Stephen F. Austin (17.9%) had lower proportions. Across all UT System academic institutions, non-traditional students comprised just 26.8% of entering students.

Trends in the proportion of non-traditional students from 2018 through 2023 were also examined. At UT System academic institutions overall, and at Stephen F. Austin, UT Austin, and UT El Paso specifically, the five-year change was stable. The proportion of non-traditional students declined over the five-year period at UT Arlington, UT Dallas, and UT Tyler. Conversely, UT Permian Basin, UT Rio Grande Valley, and UT San Antonio experienced increases in the proportion of non-traditional students.

**Table 1. Distribution of Non-traditional and Traditional Students, 2018-2023 Entering Cohorts, by Institution**

Institution	Non-traditional Students		Traditional Students	
	Count	Percent	Count	Percent
UTA	26,467	44.5%	33,010	55.5%
UTAUS	3,086	4.8%	61,007	95.2%
UTD	7,837	20.5%	30,397	79.5%
UTEP	13,254	36.5%	23,075	63.5%
UTPB	3,303	46.7%	3,764	53.3%
UTRGV	12,369	26.9%	33,589	73.1%
UTSA	15,800	28.0%	40,646	72.0%
SFA	3,395	17.9%	15,550	82.1%
UTT	5,987	40.3%	8,855	59.7%
<b>Academic Institutions</b>	<b>91,498</b>	<b>26.8%</b>	<b>249,893</b>	<b>73.2%</b>

Table 2 (below) details the non-traditional criteria that students met by institution. As there were three non-traditional characteristics used, students could have met one, two, or all three criteria, resulting in seven combinations. Across all UT System academic institutions, the most common way students met the study's non-traditional criteria was with part-time criteria – over 40% of non-traditional students were part-timers of traditional college age and not financially independent. The other most frequent classifications of non-traditional were by meeting all three criteria (part-time, age, independence – at 18.0%), meeting both the age and independence criteria (14.4%), or by independent status (10.1%). The majority of non-traditional students (54.7%) only met one of the three non-traditional criteria, while 27.3% met two of the three criteria, and 18.0% met all three criteria.

Trends differed across institutions. For example, non-traditional students at UT Arlington, UT Permian Basin, and UT Tyler were more likely to meet all three non-traditional criteria (i.e., part-time, age, independence) compared to other institutions. These three campuses also had lower proportions of students meeting just one of the non-traditional criteria. Most of the non-traditional students at UT Austin (73.6%) met just one of the non-traditional criteria, with part-time entering status being the most common (45.3%). Stephen F. Austin had the highest proportion of non-traditional students meeting the criteria with independence status (21.9%).

**Table 2. Distribution of Non-traditional Students by Criteria Met, 2018-2023 Entering Cohorts, by Institution**

Institution	Age (25+)	Part-time	Independence	Part-time, Age	Age, Independence	Part-time, Independence	Part-time, Age, Independence	N, Non-traditional Students
UTA	2.5%	33.1%	6.0%	15.8%	9.5%	5.2%	28.0%	26,467
UTAUS	8.0%	45.3%	20.3%	4.4%	16.7%	1.1%	4.2%	3,086
UTD	3.7%	46.1%	11.0%	4.3%	18.9%	3.9%	12.0%	7,837
UTEP	2.9%	49.1%	10.1%	6.7%	11.4%	5.5%	14.2%	13,254
UTPB	3.0%	30.2%	7.5%	10.2%	12.5%	5.8%	30.9%	3,303
UTRGV	1.2%	51.2%	11.3%	2.1%	16.2%	5.1%	12.9%	12,369
UTSA	5.7%	45.6%	11.9%	4.7%	17.7%	3.7%	10.7%	15,800
SFA	3.6%	24.7%	21.9%	3.8%	29.9%	3.5%	12.6%	3,395
UTT	3.6%	34.8%	9.3%	9.6%	15.3%	5.1%	22.3%	5,987
Academic Institutions	3.3%	41.2%	10.1%	8.3%	14.4%	4.7%	18.0%	91,498

Table 3 presents the distribution of entering students’ race/ethnicity broken out by traditional or non-traditional status. It is worth noting that Black or African American and Hispanic students make up a higher proportion of the non-traditional student population than they do of the traditional student population. When examining the proportion of students of a given race/ethnicity who are categorized as non-traditional in this study, around one third of Black or African American, Hispanic, and White students were considered non-traditional, which is a much higher rate than International and Asian American students where around 15% were non-traditional.

**Table 3. Distribution of Non-traditional and Traditional Students by Race/Ethnicity, 2018-2023 Entering Cohorts**

Race/Ethnicity	Non-traditional Students		Traditional Students	
	Count	Percent	Count	Percent
Asian American	5,876	6.4%	35,231	14.1%
Black or African American	9,939	10.9%	18,499	7.4%
Hispanic	47,628	52.1%	116,818	46.7%
International	1,663	1.8%	10,376	4.2%
Other Races	2,445	2.7%	7,968	3.2%
White	23,947	26.2%	61,001	24.4%

Table 4 illustrates the gender distribution among traditional and non-traditional students in the 2018-2023 entering cohorts. Both the traditional and the non-traditional student populations were mostly female. However, females constitute a higher proportion of the non-traditional student population (58.7%) than they do of the traditional student population (54.7%).

**Table 4. Distribution of Non-traditional and Traditional Students by Gender, 2018-2023 Entering Cohorts**

Gender	Non-traditional Students		Traditional Students	
	Count	Percent	Count	Percent
Female	53,673	58.7%	136,608	54.7%
Male	37,825	41.3%	113,285	45.3%

Table 5 provides an overview of Pell status among traditional and non-traditional students for students in the 2018-2023 entering cohorts. Of the non-traditional students, 50.2% received Pell grants. A smaller proportion of traditional

students received Pell grants (42.2%), highlighting that non-traditional students are more likely to be recipients of Pell grants than their traditional counterparts.

**Table 5. Distribution of Non-traditional and Traditional Students by Pell Status, 2018-2023 Entering Cohorts**

Pell Status	Non-traditional Students		Traditional Students	
	Count	Percent	Count	Percent
Pell Recipients	45,928	50.2%	105,331	42.2%
Not Pell Recipients	45,570	49.8%	144,562	57.8%

## TRADITIONAL VS. NON-TRADITIONAL STUDENTS: OUTCOMES

Figure 1 details the persistence rates in the next academic year at the same institution for traditional and non-traditional students by entry status. Students are disaggregated into full-time and part-time entry status in this analysis, as well as for subsequent data views, as this can have important implications on student progress given the differing courseload. Note that only full-time status is displayed for traditional students, as having part-time status would classify a student as non-traditional. Overall, traditional students had higher persistence compared to non-traditional students.

When examining FTIC students, traditional full-time FTICs had higher persistence (84%) than both non-traditional full-time FTICs (67%) and non-traditional part-time FTICs (57%). For transfers, traditional full-time transfers had a marginally higher persistence rate (82%) compared to non-traditional full-time transfers (79%) and a 12-point higher persistence rate than non-traditional part-time transfers (70%). In addition, non-traditional full-time students had higher persistence rates than their non-traditional part-time counterparts, and non-traditional transfer students fared better than non-traditional FTICs.

When examining these trends across individual cohort years, the same pattern held true. However, trends differed for select institutions. UT Austin, UT El Paso, UT Permian Basin, and UT Tyler had a higher non-traditional part-time FTIC persistence rate compared to non-traditional full-time FTICs. At UT Austin, Stephen F. Austin, and UT Tyler, non-traditional full-time transfers outperformed traditional full-time transfers.

**Figure 1. Percent of Non-traditional and Traditional Students who Persist into the Next Academic Year, 2018-2023 Entering Cohorts, by Entry Status**

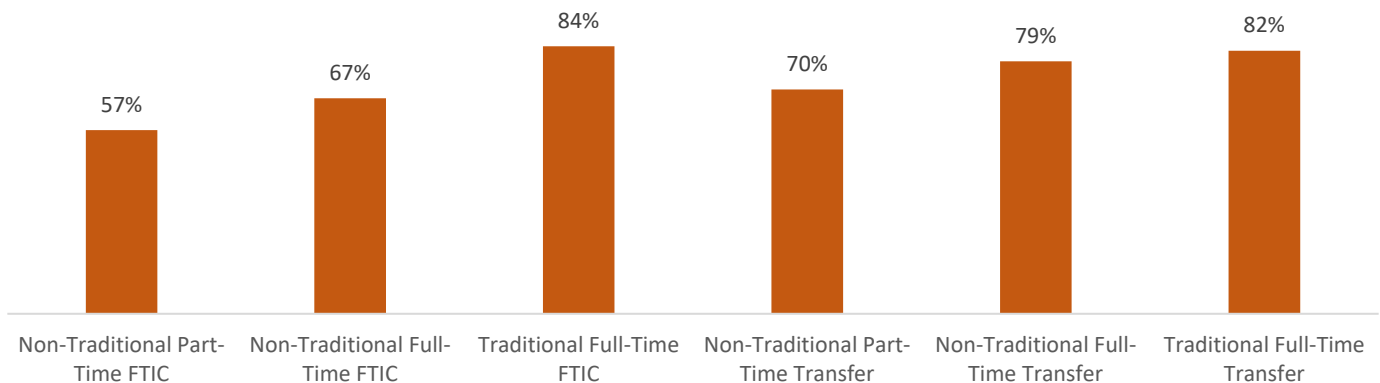


Figure 2 presents the percentage of traditional and non-traditional students by entry status who earned their degree within four years at their entering institution for the 2018-2020 entering cohorts. Overall, traditional students had higher 4-year completion rates compared to non-traditional students across all UT System academic institutions. When examining FTIC students, traditional full-time FTICs had higher rates (46%) than both non-traditional full-time FTICs (21%) and non-traditional part-time FTICs (21%). For transfers, traditional full-time transfers had a higher completion rate (62%) compared to non-traditional full-time transfers (57%) and non-traditional part-time transfers (44%).

Additionally, non-traditional transfer students had higher 4-year completion rates compared to non-traditional FTIC students.

When examining these trends across individual cohort years, the same pattern held true except in 2020 where non-traditional part-time FTICs outperformed non-traditional full-time FTICs. In addition, trends differed for some institutions. Non-traditional part-time FTICs had a higher 4-year completion rate than non-traditional full-time FTICs at UT Austin, UT El Paso, UT Permian Basin, and UT Tyler. Non-traditional full-time transfers also outperformed traditional full-time transfers at UT Austin and Stephen F. Austin.

**Figure 2. Percent of Non-traditional and Traditional Students who Graduated within 4 Years, 2018-2020 Entering Cohorts, by Entry Status**

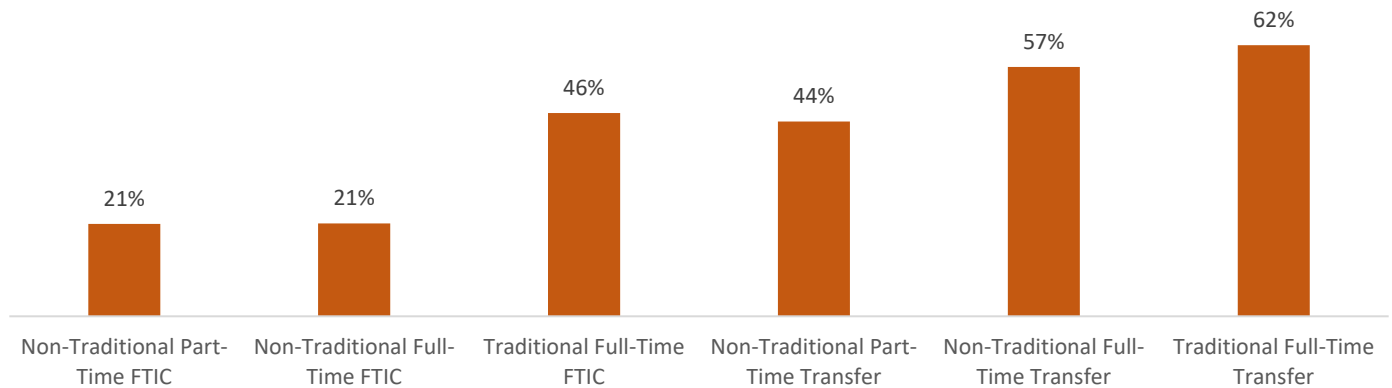


Figure 3 shows the percent of traditional and non-traditional students by entry status who earned their degree from the same institution within six years for the 2018 entering cohort. Overall, traditional students had higher graduation rates compared to non-traditional students. When examining FTIC students, traditional full-time FTICs had a higher 6-year graduation rate (63%) than both non-traditional full-time FTICs (36%) and non-traditional part-time FTICs (34%). For transfers, traditional full-time transfers had a higher rate (69%) compared to non-traditional full-time transfers (61%), and non-traditional part-time transfers (53%). In addition, non-traditional transfer students had higher 6-year completion rates compared to non-traditional FTICs. This trend generally held true for individual institutions with a few exceptions. Non-traditional part-time FTICs performed better than non-traditional full-time FTICs at UT Austin, UT El Paso, UT Permian Basin, and UT Tyler. Additionally, non-traditional full-time transfers performed better than traditional full-time transfers at UT Austin and Stephen F. Austin.

**Figure 3. Percent of Non-traditional and Traditional Students who Graduated within 6 Years, 2018 Entering Cohort, by Entry Status**

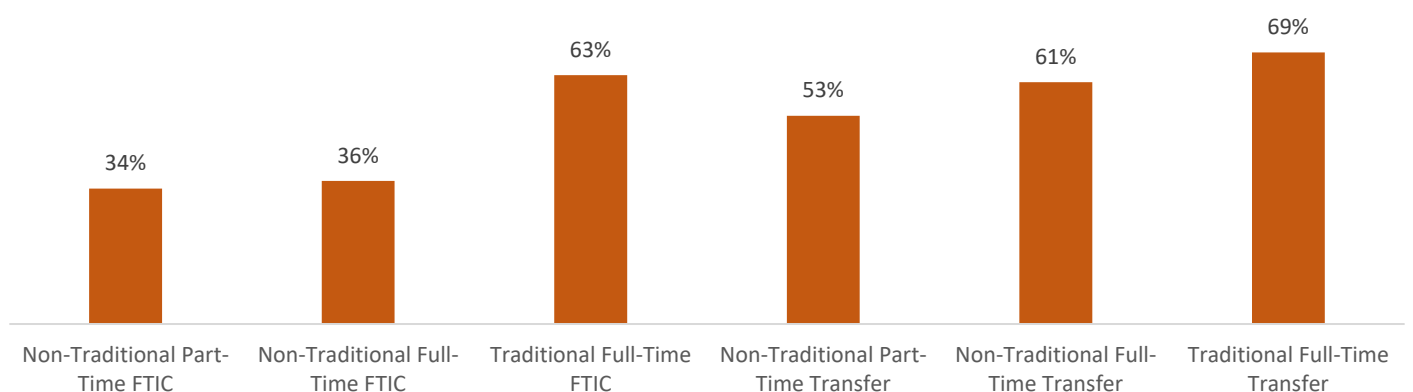
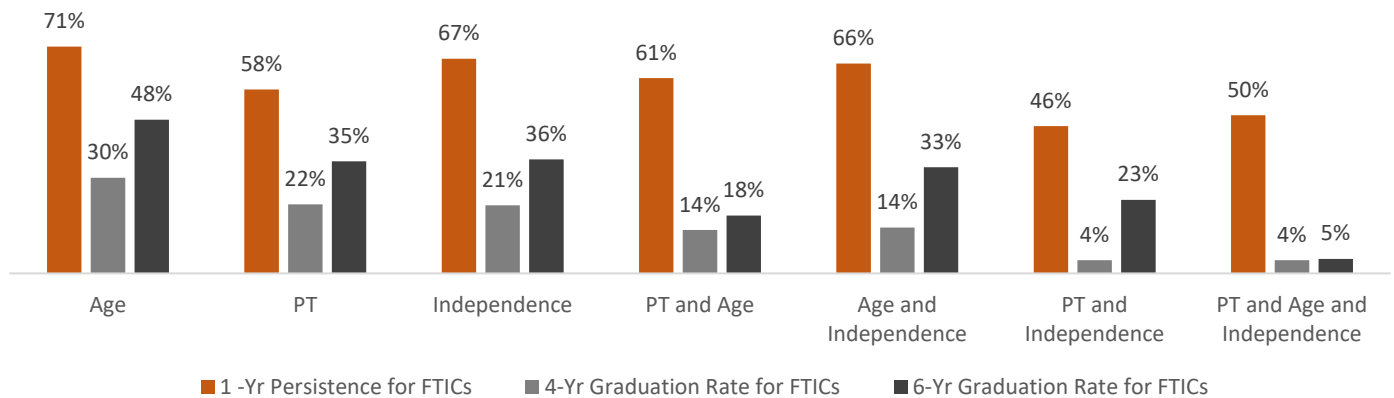


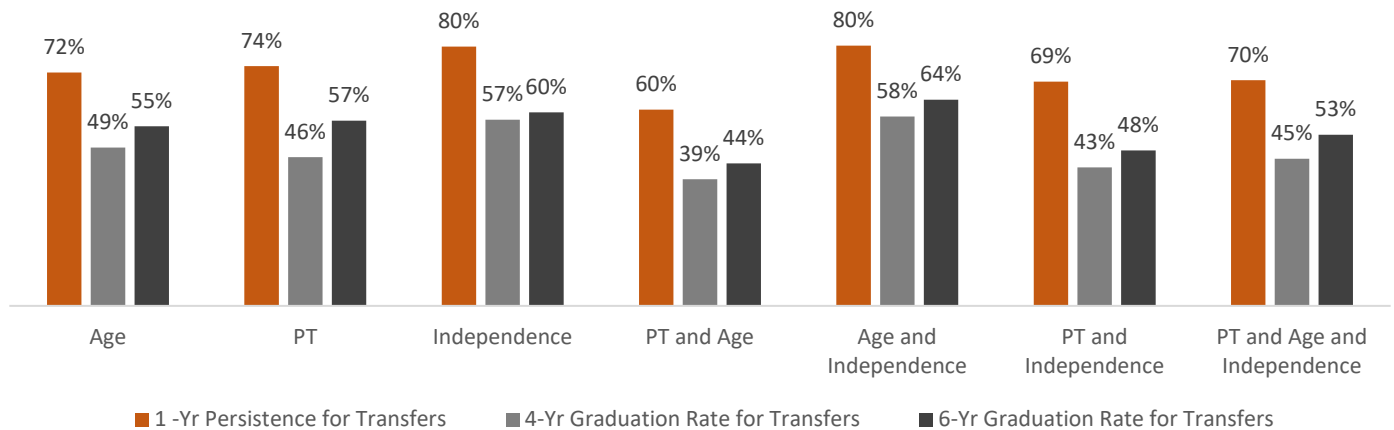
Figure 4 (non-traditional FTICs) and Figure 5 (non-traditional transfers) further examine these student outcomes based off the non-traditional criteria met. Within the FTIC student population, non-traditional students who met the part-time and independence criteria as well as students who met all three non-traditional criteria had the lowest student success outcomes. Conversely, FTICs who only met the non-traditional age criteria experienced the most success across these three metrics.

Among the transfer student population, non-traditional students who were part-time and age 25 or above, as well as part-time and independent transfer students experienced the lowest success rates. On the other hand, non-traditional transfers who met the age and independence criteria, as well as transfers who met only the independence criteria had the highest persistence, 4-year graduation, and 6-year graduation rates.

**Figure 4. Persistence, 4-year Graduation, and 6-year Graduation Rates for Non-traditional FTIC Students, by Criteria Met**



**Figure 5. Persistence, 4-year Graduation, and 6-year Graduation Rates for Non-traditional Transfer Students, by Criteria Met**



## CONCLUSION

This study examines the non-traditional student population at UT System academic institutions from 2018 to 2023. With 91,498 non-traditional students identified, the findings highlight significant variations in enrollment patterns, demographic characteristics, and academic outcomes when compared to traditional students.

It is important to consider how non-traditional students are captured in common metrics that utilize cohorts of first-time full-time degree-seeking (FTFTDS) students such as official graduation and retention rates. Across all UT System academic institutions, only 3.6% of the students classified as non-traditional students were FTFTDS, compared with 75.0% of traditional students. All the UT System academic institutions had under 5% non-traditional students that were FTFTDS, except for UT Austin and Stephen F. Austin which were closer to 10%.

**Table 6. Percent of Non-traditional and Traditional Students who Met the First-Time Full-Time Degree Seeking (FTFTDS) Criteria, 2018-2023 Entering Cohorts, by Institution**

Institution	Non-traditional Students		Traditional Students	
	Count	Percent	Count	Percent
UTA	453	1.7%	22,333	67.7%
UTAUS	328	10.6%	51,398	84.2%
UTD	116	1.5%	21,942	72.2%
UTEP	542	4.1%	17,750	76.9%
UTPB	148	4.5%	2,556	67.9%
UTRGV	515	4.2%	26,959	80.3%
UTSA	612	3.9%	27,787	68.4%
SFA	345	10.2%	11,483	73.8%
UTT	193	3.2%	5,330	60.2%
<b>Academic Institutions</b>	<b>3,252</b>	<b>3.6%</b>	<b>187,538</b>	<b>75.0%</b>

The above data illustrates that non-traditional students are largely not captured on officially reported success metrics that only use cohorts of FTFTDS students. Non-traditional students – by the very nature of the characteristics that define that designation – may face additional barriers, underscoring the essential need to monitor their success. Broader analyses and definitions beyond traditional success metrics are necessary to ensure the support of all students.