



September 2006, Issue 34

The Changing College Experience for Young Adults

Maria D. Fitzpatrick and Sarah E. Turner

Where once young adults in their early twenties moved step by step through a chain of decisions—leave home, go to college, get a job, marry, and have children—today, as the Network on Transitions to Adulthood has documented, that path is much more roundabout.¹ This change is perhaps no more evident than in the growing tendency of young adults to stretch out their college years while they balance work and family responsibilities.

Maria D. Fitzpatrick and Sarah E. Turner, in their chapter in the upcoming Network book, *The Price of Independence*, report that between 1970 and today, the median time it takes to complete an undergraduate degree has increased from four years to five, and the proportion taking more than six years to complete a degree increased from 15% to 23%. Further, the percentage of undergraduates over age 21 has nearly doubled since 1970.²

Some have argued that youth today are simply drifting more in college. Others argue that rising tuition or other college costs prevent students from attending full-time. Still others argue that students are unprepared for college or make poor choices once enrolled. The authors find that another factor affecting time to degree is the rise in nontraditional students. The change in time-to-degree has largely been concentrated among older, nontraditional students attending non-elite schools. As financial aid opportunities have expanded for older, nontraditional students, more are attending school. However, many of these students continue to work and balance family demands, especially female students.

How College Participation Has Changed

The numbers attending college have steadily increased during the last quarter century, and the characteristics of those enrolled have also changed. Undergraduate enrollment is no longer confined to the immediate post-high school years. More than 45% of undergraduates are now over the age of 21, compared with a little more than 25% three decades ago. Another dramatic change is the rise in participation of women, especially older women. In the late 1960s, enrollment rates of men were nearly three times those of women. By 2003, more women than men were enrolled at every age. Also narrowing is the enrollment gap between whites and minorities, especially for older students.

The share of students who follow a traditional track and achieve a B.A. by age 22 has remained essentially unchanged. However, what is new is the addition of a growing number of students who achieve their degrees over a longer period of time while juggling work and family.

¹ Rick Settersten et al., *On the Frontier of Adulthood* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

² Sheldon Danziger and Cecilia Rouse, editors, *The Price of Independence: The Economics of Early Adulthood* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation Press, under review). Danziger and Rouse are members of the MacArthur Research Network on Transitions to Adulthood. For additional Network books on the transition to adulthood, see www.transad.pop.upenn.edu.

The Emergence of Nontraditional Students

As noted in the introduction, the number of years enrolled in college has also increased. More than 20% of graduates now take more than six years to finish their degree. This lengthening time to degree is concentrated almost exclusively among students who attend public colleges and universities outside the most highly ranked research universities.³

The authors find that the rate of students who follow a traditional track and achieve a BA degree by age 22 has remained essentially unchanged. However, what is new is the addition of a growing group of students who achieve their degrees over a longer period of time while juggling work and family. These older, nontraditional students are often women, minorities, or of lower income. The increase in women who work while enrolled in college, for example, is significant—an 18 percentage point rise for women aged 18–23 and an approximately 15 percentage point increase for women aged 24–35. With the exception of males aged 18–19, the proportion of men combining work and school has remained fairly constant.

Paying for College

The authors find that tuition charges at community colleges and public universities, which have typically risen nearly 4% per year in real terms over the last three decades, have deterred few from enrolling in college. This does not imply that overall college costs, including living expenses, have no effect on families' capacity to pay for college. Quite the contrary: changes in the structure of earnings and the living expenses associated with college likely have had dramatic effects on college choices, particularly for students from low-income families. In particular, for those over age 24, enrollment rises during economic downturns, as individuals appear to use periods when job prospects are scarce, and implicit costs of college attendance are low, to advance their education.

One contributing factor to the growing enrollment of nontraditional students is the expansion of the federal Pell grant program. Among traditional college-aged students (recent high school graduates still depending financially on parents), Pell grants have had little effect on enrollment. However, among nontraditional students, the effects have been dramatic. The share of Pell grant recipients who are financially independent (generally over the age of 24) has risen from about 30% in 1975 to about 58% in 2003-2004. Loan programs, in contrast, have had little effect on enrollment.

Pell grants have not increased enrollment among traditional college-aged students. However, among nontraditional students, the effects have been dramatic. The share of Pell grant recipients who are financially independent (generally over the age of 24) has risen from about 30% in 1975 to about 58% in 2003-2004.

That said, neither the real value of Pell grants nor loan limits associated with Stafford have risen at the same pace as college costs over recent decades. Couple that with the rising cost of living (which makes college housing, food, and books more expensive) and erosion of family income and lower-income, or older, nontraditional students often must work while attending or intermittently work and return to school, which will naturally extend the time to degree.

³ John Bound, Michael Lovenheim, and Sarah E. Turner, "Understanding the Increased Time to the Baccalaureate Degree," Unpublished paper, University of Virginia, 2006.

Nevertheless, changes in federal student aid policy have clearly opened college doors for students beyond the immediate post-high school years, as student aid has become available for nontraditional students through Title IV programs and programs such as Lifetime Learning Credits.

Extended College: Good or Bad?

The extension of college says much about the changing face of young adulthood today. College was once a four-year waystation for select youth making the transition to adulthood. Youth left home, went to college, graduated, landed a job, married and settled down, in that order. Today, the norms governing when and at what pace a young person accomplishes these markers of adulthood have changed enormously, and youth no longer move lockstep through them—perhaps no more evident than in the changing face of college and the blurring boundary between college enrollment and traditional indicators of adulthood such as full-time employment and family formation.

Whether this “blurring” is a policy success or a policy failure is debatable. On the one hand, costs may force students to extend college, limiting the rate of college attainment. On the other hand, expanded financial aid and wider college opportunities have plainly changed the college participation decision from a “once and for all” window, and students now more readily return to college in response to the labor market, to invest in training, or in response to changes in personal circumstances.

Based on Sarah Turner and Maria Fitzpatrick, “Blurring the Boundary: Changes in the Transition from College Participation to Adulthood,” in The Price of Independence: The Economics of Early Adulthood, edited by Sheldon Danziger and Cecilia Rouse (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, under review).

Sarah Turner is Associate Professor of Education and Economics at the University of Virginia. Maria Fitzpatrick is a doctoral candidate in the Economics Department at the University of Virginia.

The Research Network on Transitions to Adulthood and Public Policy examines the changing nature of early adulthood, and the policies, programs, and institutions that support young people as they move into adulthood. Significant cultural, economic, and demographic changes have occurred in the span of a few generations, and these changes are challenging youth's psychological and social development. Some are adapting well, but many others are floundering as they prepare to leave home, finish school, find jobs, and start families. The network is both documenting these cultural and social shifts, and exploring how families, government, and social institutions are shaping the course of young adults' development. The Network is funded by the MacArthur Foundation and chaired by University of Pennsylvania sociologist Frank Furstenberg.