Connect to Your Future: A way for nontraditional students to find their ideal nursing program

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1. Introduction: motivation and user group

As early as the 1960s, and especially over the last 30 years (Frazier & Young, 2012), researchers have given attention to the distinctive characteristics of nontraditional students, a group that has been deemed different from traditional students in many ways, such as stress-inducing factors, academic skills, academic achievement, learning styles, motivation, and college socialization and adaptation. Also called mature students, or adult learners, nontraditional students are typically aged 25 or older, do not attend college immediately after high school, are commuters (they do not usually live on campus), are financially independent, and may juggle their student responsibilities with personal responsibilities, parental duties, caregiving of elderly persons, and work-related obligations. Another way of defining these students is to say that they lack one or more characteristics that define traditional students, who usually reside on campus, are between 18-24 years old, and attend college full-time (Bean & Metzner, 1985).

Nontraditional students' various obligations mean they often lack time to seek for information and that their information needs are more complex than those of traditional students.

Given (2002), who used Reijo Savolainen's everyday life information-seeking (ELIS) model to explore the information-seeking behavior of 25 mature undergraduates at a Canadian university, based on found that the many roles that those students fulfill result on their need to manage time efficiently to accommodate their resulting diverse information needs. The information behaviors of everyday activities become "tightly interwoven with academic work" (Given, 2002, p. 28). Therefore, to provide useful information support to nontraditional students is to understand the overlap of information-seeking behaviors in their various life contexts.

Additionally, the many roles nontraditional students might perform, such as being a parent, a caregiver, or a worker, suggests that their information needs are diverse and go far beyond information solely on academic aspects when they search for university programs. In fact, research on nontraditional students' retention found that environmental variables, such as childcare, commute, financial constraints, and work arrangements, are more relevant to keep those students enrolled than academic variables (Bean & Metzner, 1985, p. 491-492).

Finally, an aspect that differentiates traditional and nontraditional students is their access to information on university programs provided by their high schools. Since nontraditional students typically go back to school after an extended absence, they cannot count on the specialized support that the university provides to traditional students. While traditional students have easier access to information about university programs, as well as university counselling and summer programs catered towards high schoolers, nontraditional students do not usually have the same degree of tailored assistance or opportunities.

All the unique characteristics of nontraditional students motivated us to create our website prototype, *Connect to Your Future*, as a starting point for serving the needs of local nontraditional students in the process of choosing a university nursing program in the Southwest BC area. Based

on our own observations, information on universities and programs relevant to nontraditional applicants tends to be scattered across university websites, or hidden inside PDF documents and reports that can be difficult to find. University websites have little incentive to be transparent about their shortcomings; they are, of course, trying to boost their enrollments by accentuating the positive.

It is hard for nontraditional students-to-be to get a holistic idea of how these universities and their nursing programs differ from each other unless they have the time and initiative to do the research and take detailed notes on the advantages and disadvantages of the options before them. As information professionals, we want to help make that task easier for those students, who usually lead hectic lives (Dill &Henley, 1998; Cross, 1980). That is why we created a system that provides centralized, comparative, and less biased rundowns of university offerings in nursing within categories related to the specific information behavior and needs of nontraditional students.

Connect to Your Future will begin its pilot program with four universities located in Southwest BC: University of British Columbia, University of the Fraser Valley, University of Victoria and Kwantlen Polytechnic University. We think that featuring the four largest universities in British Columbia that offer nursing programs is a good starting point to demonstrate the purpose and functionality of our website. If the initial idea proves successful, we would aim to expand our scope to all Canadian universities and to other programs that might attract nontraditional students.

2. Why offer information on university nursing programs

We chose to feature nursing programs because these programs are highly career-oriented. That might be an element of interest to nontraditional students, which usually perceive higher

education as a means to obtain career advancement and higher paying jobs (Bean & Metzner, 1985, p. 487). Research on job choices and career relevance among college students found that nontraditional students are two to three times more likely than other undergraduates to pursue jobs strongly related to their careers and professional growth (Larkin, LaPort & Pines, 2007, p. 90, 92). Moreover, pursuing an education with no guarantee of a future payoff is a correlative factor in nontraditional students' eventual withdrawals from university (Markle, 2015). Therefore, focusing our attention in the nursing programs seemed like an ideal way to address the needs of our audience. Not to mention that the nursing shortage has been a widespread theme in the Canadian news, contributing to the notion that a nursing degree is a safe and guaranteed route to a job.

Nursing is also a field apparently welcoming to older students and professionals. In 2004, according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Bureau of Health Professions, Division of Nursing, 60.8% of nursing program graduates in the United States were between the ages of 35 of 49 years, which suggests that nursing graduates are individuals who have returned to school to embark on a second career (Strayer & Beitz, 2010). In Canada, the average age of regulated nurses was 44.8 years in 2011 (Canadian Institute for Health Information, 2011). Moreover, nursing is often advertised towards mature students as a desirable second career. The Registered Nurses' Association of Ontario website, for instance, promotes the benefits of following this professional path, stating that "it's never too late to join the exciting profession of nursing." Since nontraditional students may have a discomfort with younger classmates and believe that they are less prepared than their younger counterparts (Bishop-Clark & Lynch, 1992, p. 115), it may appeal to them to be among peers of a similar age group.

It is also worth pointing out that, since nursing programs are hands-on and solution-oriented, they may attract nontraditional students, which, research suggests, have a desire for a

more practical approach on their learning. Strayer & Beitz (2010), citing Knowles (1970), indicate that adult learners demonstrate a desire for immediacy of application in most of their learning.

3. Nontraditional students' characteristics and needs

Our categories of comparison between universities featured on our website, *Connect to Your Future*, aim to answer our audience's specific needs. Our categories *tuition, scholarships/funding, average rent range, location/ commute, childcare, retention rates, class sizes, textbook access, database access, career programs, NCLEX-RN prep, hands-on coursework* and *stress-reduction initiatives*, address the many roles performed by nontraditional students, which all need to be in balance for them to achieve academic success (Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011, p. 34).

As previously stated, environmental variables are presumed to be more important to nontraditional students' retention than academic variables (Bean & Metzner, 1985), meaning that nontraditional students will not remain enrolled in their programs if the support to their external commitments is poor. Work and family-related responsibilities often take precedence over nontraditional students' academic responsibilities (Blankson & Kyei-Blankson, 2008). For instance, being an employed student significantly increases the chances of dropping out of university at the end of the first year (Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011) and being divorced and having young children suppress degree completion for both genders (Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2005).

Research demonstrates that financial constraints can be an important barrier to nontraditional undergraduate students (Quiggins, Ulmer, Hainline, Burris, Ritz, 2016). Most nontraditional students want to be seen as financially independent (Rudel, 2006; Dutcher, 2016), but for the majority of these learners, financial precariousness is a risk factor for attrition (Legates,

2011, p. 2-3). Taking the literature into consideration, we have included the categories *tuition, scholarships/funding,* and *average rent range. Tuition* informs the price per credit, including fees, and the total program cost per year, while *scholarships/funding* informs about opportunities in this area. *Average rent range* gives information on this topic regarding the city where the university is located.

We have also included the category *location/ commute*, which presents the distances between the university and the more densely populated areas of the city of interest. Research suggests that most nontraditional students do not usually live on campus and must commute to class, which is an external variable that may influence negatively their retention rates (Bean & Metzner, 1985).

Concerning the category *childcare*, which informs whether childcare facilities are present on campus, it is also crucial information that relates to nontraditional students' retention rates. According to the U.S. National Survey of Student Engagement (2006), about three-fourths of nontraditional students cared for dependents. In contrast, about four-fifths of traditional students said they spend no time caring for dependents. It is reasonable to assume that that data may be similar in Canada. Much of our target audience may have dependents with a spouse – or may even be single parents – and that might influence their capability to continue their studies and reach academic success. Childcare is a central feature of life that must be arranged before these students enter the institution (Bowl, 2001). Undependable childcare services may constitute a major strain in the lives of students and their children.

To countenance nontraditional students' mental health, we have included the category *stress-reduction initiatives*, which talks about initiatives in that area within the university. Dill and Henley (1998) found that nontraditional students experience significantly less academic stress and

health problems than traditional students. Why might this be? Nontraditional students' ideas of success might, in general, be less tethered to their roles as students, since they juggle many other roles (spouse, parent, or employee) which they might perceive as more valuable or important to them than their academic status. Nevertheless, research on nontraditional women students found that women returning to the university after an absence of at least two years had depression symptom scores that were twice as high as the general population. Psychological support was found to be a significant factor in feelings of satisfaction for women who were re-entering the academic world (Dill & Henley, 1998, citing Kirk and Dorfman, 1983).

The categories *career programs, NCLEX-RN prep,* and *hands-on coursework* were created to answer nontraditional students' need to have more control over their learning activities than traditional students (Senter & Senter, 1998). Nontraditional students often appreciate real-world approaches and problem-centered activities in which they can share their life experiences (Quiggins, Ulmer, Hainline, Burris, Ritz, 2016). Furthermore, their motivation when returning to school is often to increase income, gain a certification, obtain a higher degree, in order to gain new ways of remaining marketable and competitive (Milheim, 2005, p. 120). Our literature review demonstrates that some of the reasons the population of nontraditional students has been growing in the last decades is the decline of blue-collar sector of the economy, poor job markets, corporate downsizing and the increase of jobs being outsourced overseas (Singletary, 2010). Universities and colleges have become the gatekeepers to many higher paying positions, and nontraditional students seek out these programs to gain access to those positions (Bean & Metzner, 1985, p. 487). Consequently, categories related to hand-on activities and placement in the job market will probably interest our users.

It is worth mentioning that we have not included categories related to extracurricular activities on campus, since research shows nontraditional students do not get involved in these activities very often (Donaldson, 1999; National Survey of Student Engagement, 2006). Their lack of campus engagement, however, does not influence their educational outcomes, and there is no evidence that this particular type of social integration influences nontraditional students' institutional commitment (Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011, p. 33-34). For those reasons, and since the highest priorities of our public are work and family, and not campus participation, we decided to keep categories related to that topic out of our website.

4. Our product: *Connect to Your Future* website design

Connect to Your Future aims to assist busy nontraditional applicants by gathering, consolidating, and itemizing the information they need to make uncomplicated, yet informed decisions about their futures in nursing. Additionally, we supply a built-in online forum to help prospective nursing students make early connections with their peers. Above all, we want to provide a quick, easy-to-use, and comprehensive service that does not overwhelm users, and that frames information in a more objective or candid way than a typical university website might.

The scope of this project is, for now, rather narrow. We limited our product to four universities currently offering nursing programs in Southwest BC: University of the Fraser Valley, Kwantlen Polytechnic University, University of British Columbia, and University of Victoria. Because nursing is a growing, practically-minded field that nontraditional students in British Columbia might gravitate toward, we decided to use it in our pilot. *Connect to Your Future* could easily be expanded to include different programs of particular interest to nontraditional students, or repurposed into a separate but similar product to suit those programs' particular needs.

Likewise, the project could be expanded beyond the geographical boundaries we've imposed for the purpose of this pilot. If successful, we would aim for the service to go province-wide, and we would consider spreading it out to other provinces as well.

We intend to divide our more detailed information into two subsets: the information that falls under the purview of the universities themselves (campus organizations, health services, childcare services, commutes, funding options, *etc*.) and the information that falls under the purview of the universities' *nursing programs* (extent of the program, career training, standardized exam prep, and so on). We think this is a sensible way to break up a block of information that might otherwise prompt a sense of overload if it was presented on a single webpage.

Plus, we want our website to reflect how the typical nontraditional student perceives the university as a whole versus how they perceive the university's nursing program. The university nursing program meets specifically *academic* needs. The university at large, meanwhile, is expected to provide a suitable environment for nontraditional students to get involved, use resources, and feel comfortable in their own skin. It makes sense for the information we help supply to "reflect barriers, conflicts, and the traditional separation between mature students' academic and daily lives" (Given, 2002, p. 19). Nontraditional students, with existing private lives and other commitments, do not spend as much idle time on campus as a "traditional" student attending university straight out of secondary school. Yet they still need to know that their needs will be met on a campus where they will be spending a significant amount of their time. Because nontraditional students so often attend university with the express intent of finding a job, they also need to know how academic nursing programs are taking steps to make sure they succeed professionally.

With that in mind, the university and program pages on the website will be formatted similarly, but will generally sport different sets of information. For both, we use a Frequently Asked Question format, featuring inquiries particular to nontraditional students' needs. The Q&A format keeps relevant information spaced out and focused – not buried in lengthy paragraphs that are difficult to parse.

With our *Compare* feature, our users can check the features of one university against another's. Two panels on the left and right hold short pieces of information on each university, itemized by several different categories. The user selects one university from a dropdown box to display its information in the left panel, and another to display in the right panel. The user can then weigh the advantages and disadvantages of both.

For example, suppose a prospective nursing student in Surrey has a small child, and is thinking about applying to either Kwantlen Polytechnic University (KPU) or the University of British Columbia (UBC). If they use the tool to compare the two schools directly, they may notice that the Kwantlen Polytechnic University nursing school is located on the Langley satellite campus – which is closer to Surrey than UBC's Vancouver campus is. They may also notice, however, that UBC has a childcare service on campus, with scalable rates based on the child's age and whether the child attends the center part-time or full-time. KPU, on the other hand, has no campus childcare services at all. This could be an important-enough detail to make the student reconsider Kwantlen Polytechnic entirely.

Rebecca Rudel says that among the nontraditional nursing students she studied, "peer support [was] recognized as essential for coursework, test preparation, occasional tutoring, and determining answers to any number of concerns" (2006, p. 50). We recognize that building a supportive network of like-minded peers is critical for nontraditional nursing students to strike the

complicated balance between their private lives and their academic lives. That is why we want to provide a supplemental, interactive forum, where users can post their own content and reply to others. We have included a sample message board "thread" in the prototype that demonstrates how a forum user might solicit specific information, and how another forum user might respond to the solicitation with relevant information on the topic at hand. By studying trends in the forum's content, we, the website's creators, may get a better idea of any unanticipated student needs, and augment the content on the rest of the website in order to meet those needs.

To begin, users simply supply their name and e-mail address, create a username and a password, and are sent a confirmation e-mail. After this 10- to 15-minute process, they are ready to start browsing and posting in the forum. Because the user audience will likely be career-minded adults, we anticipate a minimal need for moderation; the webmaster can check in a few times a day to make sure nothing potentially problematic or offensive has been posted and that everything is in working order.

As we attract users to the message board early on in their process – at the point where they are still deciding which university to attend – we also hope to position the message board as a renewable information and socialization resource so we can retain them well after they make their decision. *Connect to Your Future*'s forum has the potential to be a continual resource well into a student's actual program, but its perpetuation depends in large part on its ability to foster a sustainable online community.

5. Link to product prototype

https://e5hckz.axshare.com

The password is **connect** – all lowercase.

Home: Landing page

Programs > Kwantlen: Sample of a nursing program FAQ page

Compare: Comparison page w/ data from four universities

Message Board: Sample of a thread on the website's proposed forum

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