

**Hearing of the Advisory Committee on Student Financial
Assistance
September 30, 2011**

**Written Testimony on Nontraditional Students,
National Association of Independent Colleges and
Universities
Washington, D.C.**

Thank you for soliciting written testimony to supplement the hearing proceedings that are focused on strategies, policies and practices for improving college degree and certificate completion among nontraditional students. The National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities (NAICU) represents close to 1,000 of America's private nonprofit postsecondary institutions, characterized by campuses both large and small, from the Ivy League, women's colleges, historically black and Hispanic-serving institutions, as well as the broad spectrum of faith-based colleges, all of whom dedicate themselves to serving a student population as diverse as the nation itself.

Recent postsecondary education projections released by the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) reveal that postsecondary enrollments will continue to grow, reaching 23 million by 2020 (an increase of 13% from 2009)¹. According to the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (NCHEMS), this will be insufficient to support the 4.5% annual degree attainment rate increase necessary to achieve President Obama's ambitious, yet worthy, 2020 goal of making the U.S. first in the world in college completion. Unless we significantly increase the proportion of students that complete their degrees, the nation will not reach the 2020 goal. Nontraditional students – broadly defined as any postsecondary student who is not between the ages of 18 and 24 attending full-time – have quietly come to dominate the higher education college-going

landscape. This fact makes them a key demographic in higher education, as well as critical to meeting the nation's goals. NCES predicts that between 2009 and 2020, enrollment of nontraditional students aged 25 to 34 will increase by 21%, and enrollment of adults 35 and above will increase by 16%. Further, students attending part-time will increase by 16%, and first-time freshmen by 11%ⁱⁱ.

Nontraditional students experience multiple barriers to successful and timely degree and credential completion, and most fail in their efforts to overcome them. Many of these students juggle several competing responsibilities, and their main identity is not tied to that of being a college student; it is an aspect of their lives that frequently takes a back seat to other more pressing responsibilities. Many are employed full-time, have dependents, attend part-time and must periodically "stop-out" of college. These factors present substantial roadblocks to completion, and present a challenge for institutions to find ways to help remove these obstacles. In short, serving nontraditional students requires flexibility, support and multiple pathways to help them achieve their education goals. Fortunately, some national longitudinal data exists (NPSAS, BPS, B&B) that identify and follow students with these risk factors, illuminating the issues they face. Private nonprofit colleges and universities across the nation have already utilized this baseline knowledge, together with on-campus data and experience, to craft programs that have proven to be successful in supporting and serving these students.

While enrolling a highly diversified student body, independent colleges and universities see 79% of their undergraduates earn their bachelor's degree within six yearsⁱⁱⁱ. Further, among four-year postsecondary institutions, independent colleges and universities enroll 26% of all undergraduate students while conferring 31% of all bachelor's degrees^{iv}. This level of student success leads the postsecondary community. It has been achieved while educating a greater proportion of students considered most at-risk for non-completion than

in the other four-year institution sector^v. More than one-fifth of students enrolled at an independent four-year institution have a family income below \$25,000 a year, and over one-third are financially independent; approximately one-quarter are employed full-time, and almost one-fifth delayed their postsecondary enrollment after high school. Further, more than one-quarter are older than twenty-five, and about one-quarter attend part-time. Finally, almost one-fifth of these students have dependents, many juggling the responsibility of being a single parent as well^{vi}.

These factors long ago necessitated finding innovative ways to reach out and support the needs of the nontraditional student. The success of this history of sustained effort, emphasis and commitment to the success of all students is well documented. Data show that 68% of first-generation students who attend four-year private nonprofit institutions succeed in earning a bachelor's degree within six years, compared with only 33% at colleges and universities nationwide^{vii}. For students enrolling with up to three risk characteristics, the six-year bachelor degree completion rate at nonprofit institutions is just under 50%, exceeding the success rates of peer institutions by almost five percentage points^{viii}. Further, 61% of students with family incomes below \$25,000 attain a bachelor's degree within six years at a four-year independent college versus 49% at a public four-year; and almost 60% from the lowest quartile of SAT or ACT test scores earn a bachelor's degree within six years compared to 47% attending a public institution^{ix}. Despite these successes, we recognize that we can – and must – strive to do even more.

In an effort to identify and highlight the programs driving our sector's level of student success and achievement, NAICU, in partnership with the Council of Independent Colleges (CIC), launched an initiative entitled Building Blocks to 2020. Our goal is to identify, collect, and publicize proven programs, making them more visible on a national scale. NAICU does so that others can learn from and/or replicate them, leading to higher levels of student

success across the spectrum of higher education institutional types and levels. To date, NAICU has gathered information on hundreds of diverse and successful programs, and has made them publicly available on its website

[\(http://www.naicu.edu/special_initiatives/2020/\)](http://www.naicu.edu/special_initiatives/2020/) in an effort to inform and encourage the postsecondary community in its entirety. The programs themselves demonstrate the many and varied pathways students require, if they are to navigate the complexities in their life circumstances. Further, the personal stories of hard work and achievement that underlie these programs build on the American spirit, and appeal to citizens across political ideologies. We believe that these programs can serve to inform policy makers and other key stakeholders about meaningful, proven programs that are currently underway. They are demonstrating positive gains in advancing both students and the nation toward their respective completion goals.

Following are just a few examples of the progressive and varied programs that have been quietly transforming the lives of nontraditional students, and are among the hundreds that are publicly available on NAICU's Building Blocks to 2020 website.

1. The Degree Start and Degree Completion programs at Albright College (PA) are accelerated degree programs for working adults and provide a convenient route to earning or completing a degree. Degree Start allows students to earn the general studies portion of their bachelor's degree in as little as two years, while working full time. After two years, students can transfer to Albright's Accelerated Degree Completion Program (DCP) or a traditional Albright daytime degree program.
2. Mary Baldwin College's (VA) Adult Degree Program serves adult students returning to college. The program provides individualized academic counseling, and flexible course options that facilitate access and completion. Students may attend courses

online, in the classroom, in hybrid formats, or in tutorials. Faculty and advisers serve students out of nine regional centers throughout Virginia.

3. The Return to Learn program at Rider University (NJ) provides assistance to adult learners who have completed more than 60 credits but have not earned a degree. Funded by a grant from the New Jersey Commission on Higher Education, the program provides prior fee forgiveness, individualized counseling, and online course and degree options to qualified adult learners.
4. The Resumed Undergraduate Education (RUE) program at Brown University (RI) targets students that are over the age of 25 and have begun college elsewhere, left before earning a degree, and are now returning after more than a five-year absence in academic study. This program offers the option to study part-time, and also offers social events throughout the year. Each RUE student is assigned an academic advisor who assists in planning a course of study that will lead to degree completion.
5. The Women with Children Program at Wilson College (PA) is a residential program offered for single women with children that are 20 months and older. Prospective students and their families undergo a separate interview process to make sure that the family is ready for residential life. Students are able to benefit from all of the programs offered on campus and to participate in co-curricular activities. Child care for children of the appropriate ages is provided without charge to the student.

NAICU and private nonprofit institutions nationwide have been, are, and will remain committed to the success of all students, and will continue to strive for higher rates of meaningful degree and credential completion. NAICU is likewise committed to identifying and disseminating information on the innovative and successful programs of its institutions,

and advocating for their expansion and duplication across the higher education community.

We support and remain highly engaged in this important national effort, embracing our responsibilities to our students, the postsecondary community, and the nation.

ⁱ U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Projections of Education Statistics to 2020, Thirty-ninth edition.

ⁱⁱ U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Projections of Education Statistics to 2020, Thirty-ninth edition.

ⁱⁱⁱ U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2003-04 Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study, Second Follow-up (BPS:04/09). Data represents Bachelor's degree attainment within six years at any four-year independent institution for full-time students. Analysis by the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities.

^{iv} The Condition of Education 2011 (NCES 2011-033), U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Section 1, Indicator 8 and Section 5, Indicator 42.

^v U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, NPSAS: 2008. Most at-risk is defined as possessing four or more risk factors. Data reflects students attending four-year institutions. Analysis by the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities.

^{vi} U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, NPSAS: 2008. Analysis by the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities.

^{vii} U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2003-04 Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study, Second Follow-up (BPS:04/09). Data represents Bachelor's degree attainment anywhere through 2009 for full-time, first-generation undergraduates enrolled at four-year institutions. Analysis by the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities.

^{viii} U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2003-04 Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study, Second Follow-up (BPS:04/09). Data represents Bachelor's degree attainment within six years at any four-year independent institution. Analysis by the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities.

^{ix} U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2003-04 Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study, Second Follow-up (BPS:04/09). Data represents Bachelor's degree attainment within six years at first four-year independent institution attended. Analysis by the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities.