

Teaching Non-Traditional Students in an Allied Health Program: Community College Faculty Experiences

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[Abstract] Non-traditional students often manage work, family, and academic responsibilities, creating unique challenges that shape their learning. Community colleges help meet these needs through lower tuition, smaller class sizes, and faculty who understand the realities these students face. This study examined the experiences of faculty teaching non-traditional, allied health students in community colleges to better understand how to create classroom environments that support a diverse population. Using a basic qualitative interpretive design, the researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with faculty from Indiana, Michigan, and Ohio, recruited through purposeful criterion sampling. Thematic analysis was used to identify commonalities in teaching styles and classroom experiences. Five themes emerged: community, positive experiences with non-traditional students, classroom experiences, emotional consciousness, and ideas for support. Faculty regularly emphasized that hands-on, active learning approaches are most effective for non-traditional students.

[Keywords] allied health, community college, non-traditional student, traditional students

1. Introduction

Community colleges play a key role in the U.S. higher education system, enrolling more than six million students nationwide and showing a 4.4% increase in enrollment in fall 2023 (Community College Research Center, 2024). These institutions serve a diverse population, including students with varying socioeconomic backgrounds, racial and ethnic identities, and educational histories. Compared to four-year institutions, community colleges offer lower tuition, flexible scheduling, smaller class sizes, and accessible admissions processes, thereby making them a primary entry point for many non-traditional students (Education Data Initiative, 2024; Spector & Infante, 2020).

Non-traditional students, defined as individuals over age 24, those with dependents, those working full-time, financially independent students, and those returning to education after a break, represent a substantial portion of the community college population (Modenos, 2020). These students frequently balance academic duties with work, family, and financial obligations, which can increase stress, anxiety, and challenges with academic persistence (Quiggens et al., 2016; Sallee & Cox, 2019). In allied health programs, these pressures are intensified by the rigorous integration of didactic coursework and clinical training, which requires students to master complex psychomotor and cognitive skills (Nguyen, 2021; Nyante et al., 2020).

Despite the growing presence of non-traditional students in allied health programs, limited research has examined the experiences of faculty who teach this population in community college settings. Faculty are responsible for navigating diverse learning needs, supporting students' psychological well-being, and adapting instructional strategies to promote success. However, many allied health instructors enter academia as subject matter experts without formal pedagogical training, creating gaps in instructional preparedness (Beaumont, 2018; Wagner et al., 2021).

Faculty are on the front lines, helping students with diverse learning styles, life experiences, and barriers to succeeding in college. As such, faculty need appropriate support and professional development to understand the needs of non-traditional students, learn appropriate teaching strategies to meet those needs and develop strategies to benefit from the experiences of non-traditional students in the classroom (Van Schaik, 2021). This study aimed to understand how faculty in community colleges describe their experiences and classroom strategies when teaching nontraditional allied health students. A better understanding of faculty members' experiences when teaching non-traditional students is crucial to understanding how to support these students (Zequera et al., 2018).

2. Literature Review

The literature on non-traditional allied health students focuses on student body diversity, the distinction between non-traditional and traditional students, teaching methods and styles, mental health, and the allied health profession. This review is designed to understand current practices for teaching this student population and to identify gaps.

Faculty Teaching a Broad Range of Students

Community college faculty encounters substantial variation in age, background, and educational experience, with approximately 40% of students classified as non-traditional (Barrington, 2023). These students often balance employment, family responsibilities, and financial pressures, including caregiving for dependents (Lun, 2022; Sallee & Cox, 2019). Understanding these complexities is essential for faculty to create equitable learning environments.

Traditional Versus Non-Traditional Student Learning

Non-traditional students, typically over age 25 and managing work, family, and financial obligations, face barriers not commonly experienced by traditional students (Beckwith, 2023). They may struggle with digital literacy, academic expectations, and affordability (Sutherland et al., 2023). Barriers also include reduced academic confidence, particularly in foundational courses, which can widen social and academic divides between younger and older learners (Rabourn et al., 2018).

Andragogy in Higher Education

Knowles' andragogy framework emphasizes adult learners' need for involvement, relevance, and problem-centered learning (Hartree, 1984). As adults mature, they become more self-directed and draw on accumulated experience as a learning resource (Machynska & Boiko, 2020). In contrast,

pedagogy centers on structured instruction for younger learners (Jeanes, 2021). Adult learners require clear relevance and opportunities to apply concepts, making andragogical approaches essential in mixed-age classrooms (Chan, 2010; Chen, 2017).

Faculty Teaching in Community College

Community college faculty constitutes 20% of postsecondary educators and often brings clinical expertise that enriches instruction (Wagner et al., 2021). However, many allied health instructors lack formal training in pedagogy or andragogy (Beaumont, 2018).

Learning and Teaching Styles

Constructivist learning theory positions students as active participants who learn through doing, reflecting, and applying knowledge (Maroukias et al., 2023; Abualhaija, 2019). Constructivism aligns with andragogy, emphasizing independence and the integration of life experience (Machynska & Boiko, 2020). Strategies such as self-directed learning, experience-based activities, and problem-centered tasks support adult learners (Griffin, 2020). Allied health education requires active, self-directed learning to build critical thinking and clinical competence (Livingston, 2020).

Allied Health Professions

Allied health programs are among the largest in community colleges, enrolling over 500,000 students nationwide (American Association of Community Colleges, 2023). These programs require rigorous didactic and clinical training across diverse healthcare settings (Boolani et al., 2018). Despite the size of this student population, research on non-traditional allied health students remains limited. Their dual need for academic readiness and emotional resilience in clinical environments underscores the importance of further study.

3. Research Method and Participants

This study incorporated a basic interpretive qualitative design to better understand how community college faculty approach teaching non-traditional, allied health students in the classroom. This study included 14 faculty participants who teach allied health in a community college, with data being collected through a semi-structured interview. Demographics include faculty from respiratory therapy, surgical technology, certified medical assistant, paramedic science, dental hygiene, and occupational therapy, with educational levels ranging from associate to doctoral level and teaching experience from 5 to 30 years.

The data was collected from four colleges located in Indiana, Michigan, and Ohio. The criteria faculty to participate in the study were teaching at a community college for at least 2 years, having an average of 10 non-traditional allied health students enrolled in their classes each semester, teaching face-to-face courses, and having at least 5 years of overall teaching experience with traditional and non-traditional students. Instructors who taught exclusively in nursing or had taught for less than three years in allied health courses within a two-year period were excluded from the study.

4. Results

The objective of this study was to explore the experiences of community college faculty members who teach allied health students, particularly focusing on their interactions with non-traditional learners. This research examines how educators describe their experiences, identify successes and challenges encountered, and uncover the distinctive strategies employed to instruct non-traditional students effectively.

Five major themes developed from the data analysis: community, positive experiences with non-traditional students, classroom experiences, emotional awareness, and ideas to support students. Several subthemes consistently appeared throughout the interviews, helping clarify how faculty experienced each major theme. Patterns of drive, problem-solving, learning styles, self-doubt, and anxiety were evident across the data.

5. Community

There was an overarching theme of community as one of the most valuable pieces of their experiences with teaching in the community college. The faculty's positive experiences and successes within the classroom centered around the idea of community being a vital component of success. For faculty, the idea of a community college meant a sense of camaraderie, giving back to their home and professional communities, and a shared feeling of success in shaping the profession's future. One faculty member stated, "Community colleges actually make a difference in our communities. You come into the program two years later, and you have a whole career." The faculty felt that the sense of community within the college and their programs contributed to the success of this environment. Seeing students in the community doing the work they were trained to do was an integral part of their community college teaching experiences.

As noted by one faculty, "I love to give back to the community, and that is the community I grew up in, where I have worked in the area." Several faculty members reported that being able to provide the community with students who will become professionals was rewarding and aligned with their desire to teach at the community college level. Community college students thrive on the job market in their own community. Students who graduate from community college are 85% more likely to stay in their own community and contribute to the local workforce (Glenn, 2020). Reyes et al. (2019) found that non-traditional students who graduate from community college are motivated to complete their studies when there are local opportunities for jobs. As hospitals face an increasing shortage of allied health professionals within the community, keeping allied health students local can offset that shortage (Adashi et al., 2025). Hospitals can increase the number of students entering allied health programs by paying for education, providing temporary student positions, and supporting those furthering their education (Peticari et al., 2023).

This stresses the importance of providing a strong community foundation that enables non-traditional students to succeed academically. The concept of community as a place where you live and work shifted during the interviews to an immediate, program-level sense of belonging that directly shaped students' learning experiences. This sense of community is seen throughout the

interviews, as faculty discuss their students need for support both academically and emotionally. This shared academic community strengthened engagement and supported the development of a safe, effective, and successful learning environment.

5.1 Positive Teaching Experiences with Non-Traditional Students

Faculty members were open about how their experiences with the non-traditional student population had been largely positive throughout most of their teaching careers. Several faculties discussed how an important piece of their experience is that non-traditional students are here for a purpose, are very driven, and want to be successful in their chosen careers. One faculty member stated, “I like that it is people who want to be here. [These students] want to create a better life for themselves and their families. They tend to be more goal-driven and want to achieve and want to graduate.” Their pursuit of a better life is demonstrated through their dedication in the classroom, as evidenced by regular attendance, punctuality, preparedness, and a strong commitment to academic success. Since many are transitioning into second careers, they understand the importance of achieving their educational goals.

Sub Theme: Drive

The drive to succeed was noted several times throughout the interviews. Grabowski et al. (2016) discussed the non-traditional student mindset as an understanding that the education they receive will give them a better quality of life, making them more business-minded and prioritizing the needs of school, family, and work. The motivation to succeed shown by non-traditional students drives faculty to create a classroom environment that is exciting to be in, enables the creation of unique learning opportunities, and promotes retention. One faculty member stated: “I believe that our non-traditional students can set clear goals and follow through with them because they have a solid understanding of what they want their future to look like.” The determination shown by these non-traditional students emphasizes how deeply their goals shape their educational journey and reinforces why supporting their drive is essential to their long-term success.

Sub Theme: Problem-Solving

In the allied health field, problem-solving is paramount to success as a clinician (Titzer et al., 2012). Faculty teaching in the classroom reported that non-traditional students could solve problems more effectively due to the life experiences they brought to the classroom. The faculty stated that when faced with problem-solving tasks, non-traditional students could read social cues, understand diverse ways to approach a problem, and impart wisdom to their younger counterparts. Using students’ life experiences in the classroom can help them become part of the educational process and build subject knowledge (Hagenah & Thompson, 2021). Students with life experience offer insights that can help bridge the gap between theory and practice for traditional students. One faculty member described their experience with non-traditional students and problem-solving as the ability to “rationalize things a little better... The older students can kind of keep a little bit more together and figure it out a little bit better.” It was noted that with the age of non-traditional students came more wisdom and the ability to think through problems and remain calm.

5.2 Classroom Experiences

The classroom experiences discussed by faculty focused on strategies used to teach and the learning styles noted among non-traditional students. Determination of what learning style best met the needs of the students was a key take away. One faculty member explained, "...more of a reliance on attempting to identify what teaching strategies may help students be more successful." Identifying effective instructional strategies is essential for promoting student success in the classroom. However, because students within a single classroom often exhibit diverse learning preferences and needs, no single instructional approach is likely to be effective for all learners. Consequently, faculty may need to employ a variety of evidence-based teaching strategies to support student engagement and achievement across a diverse student population.

Sub-Theme Strategies

The strategies for instructing non-traditional students among the faculty shared a commonality: non-traditional students learn better using a hands-on, active learning style. Active learning uses instructional activities that allow students to engage in the process and utilize more critical thinking skills (Martella & Schneider, 2024). The faculty noted that when non-traditional students were allowed to participate in problem-based learning through scenarios, virtual simulations, or teach-back methods, they achieved higher success rates and better understanding of the material. Problem-based learning prepares students to become lifelong learners who understand the concepts and processes being taught, are self-directed, understand how to modify, evaluate, and plan, and foster a sense of collaboration in the classroom (Ghani et al., 2021).

Faculty noted that using a flipped classroom was also successful within this population. The flipped classroom strategy requires students to complete work outside the classroom that would, under normal circumstances, be done in class; when they arrive, they can immediately move to the hands-on portion (Nja et al., 2022). This strategy allows students to manage their time, take responsibility for their own learning, and adapt their study habits to ensure they are ready for classroom activities (Sointu et al., 2023). The flipped classroom strategy, which allows students to learn the material outside of the class and then come into class for a more active role, was utilized by three faculty members, with one stating:

The expectation is that [students] watch, read, listen, whatever it is ahead of coming to class, and then when they are in class, it is facilitated labs, typically with a lab worksheet that they fill out while they are working, and that has been highly successful.

Finding the right teaching strategy is important to students' success in the classroom. Faculty found that understanding multiple teaching strategies and understanding that there may be varied learning styles within each class is important for success. Nontraditional learners benefit from educational approaches that extend beyond traditional instructional models.

In the allied health profession, critical thinking, finding the best way to present this complex topic can be challenging. Faculty found that presenting critical thinking through multiple instructional approaches, including patient scenarios, complex clinical situations, and both large- and small-

group discussions provided students with diverse opportunities to engage with and develop critical thinking skills. Several faculties discussed the importance of providing non-traditional students with real-life scenarios. One faculty member stated,

I like to use real-life examples, case studies, using myself and experiences that I have had over the years working clinically, even though they may be similar to those in the textbook; when you can just throw out things that you have observed, it seems to make it more real.

All faculty acknowledged that there are multiple strategies for instructing non-traditional students, there is no one size fits all approaches, and that the key to success is finding what works for each student.

Sub Theme: Learning Style

Learning styles among the non-traditional students were primarily hands-on, with visual and didactic learning also discussed. A few faculty members shared the belief that non-traditional students may benefit from a more visual learning experience. One faculty explained, “They need those visual aids to actually be walked through once and not just expected to have read it and be able to perform at the same capacity.”

All faculty reported that a hands-on learning style was the preferred learning style among non-traditional students. The hands-on learning approach is what faculty described as the best way to achieve the expected learning objectives and obtain the outcomes necessary for students to succeed. Faculty shared the method for hands-on learning in their classroom,

I teach it to them, I demonstrate it, and then I let them do it themselves. And I think that that really does work a lot better for them. It makes them feel more confident in those things that we are doing.

Faculty discussed the importance of having their students touch the equipment and understand how it works, as simply viewing a presentation does not always benefit students. The use of scenarios and simulation were an important part of how faculty taught in their classrooms. Faculty would set up the classroom for a scenario or simulation; the students would then have to diagnose, discuss, or treat their patient, who was also a classmate. Judd et al. (2023) found that simulation-based learning allowed students to create a stair-step approach to diagnosis, demonstrate multiple skills, and provide the instructor with information on what is needed to further solidify that the student is ready for clinical practice. This allowed students to learn from each other and be engaged and excited, setting up a successful learning environment.

5.3 Emotional Awareness

Faculty acknowledged that non-traditional students could experience unique challenges during their educational journey compared to traditional students, which can impact a student’s ability to succeed. The faculty shared many areas that non-traditional students may struggle with beyond the academic aspect of college. The most common concerns shared by faculty were self-doubt,

anxiety, and difficulties managing family, work, and academic balance in the classroom. One faculty member stated,

Early on, [work-life balance] does seem to be a bigger burden. They do have kids, they are working, they are caring for the home, now they are adding didactic learning. They have tests coming up and then when we layer in clinical, it is an extra burden.

Sub-Themes: Self-Doubt and Anxiety

Self-doubt and anxiety centered around their ability to perform well in college and balance outside responsibilities. Spagnola and Yagos (2021) found that fear was prevalent in non-traditional students and manifested itself by being overly concerned about what others thought, fear of underperforming, being shy in class, thinking others were outperforming them and that they were not meant for college. Several faculty members shared that being out of school for an extended time played a role in the non-traditional student feelings of self-doubt about coming back to school and being able to complete their studies.

Faulty members shared, “There is a lot of self-doubt, just because they [non-traditional] have not been in the school setting for a great deal of time. And then the changes that schooling has endured over the course of those years.” Faculty discussed how self-doubt affected the non-traditional students’ ability to complete coursework and their feelings of belonging in the classroom. Within mixed classrooms, non-traditional students must be able to fit in with the traditional students. The faculty noted that this takes time and that it can be challenging to integrate the two student groups at the beginning.

Faculty found that anxiety experienced by non-traditional students many times stems from balancing work/family/school, their ability to be successful, and ensuring they are completing assignments/tasks correctly. One faculty member stated, “I feel like the older group worries more. They are always worried. Like, ‘Did I do this?’ They want to make sure that they are getting everything done, on time, and correctly.” Many challenges within the classroom center around outside sources that are not related to the material, or the difficulty adjusting to the classroom. Non-traditional students are those who return to school after a gap, meaning they usually have a job, potentially a family, and support themselves or an entire family. This type of responsibility plays a role in a student’s success in the classroom.

All faculty cited this ability to balance outside responsibilities with the classroom as a barrier to success for non-traditional students, and this balance, or the inability to balance, affects the students’ success in the classroom and their ability to complete a program. According to one faculty member, “The unsuccessful students that either drop out or are out due to academic reasons, often are non-traditional students. It is especially those that are single parents that are working full time.” Non-traditional students must find a balance, which includes having a support system available when their lives present significant challenges. This returns to the initial underlying theme of the importance of community within the classroom, helping to find those students the support they need to be successful.

5.4 Support of Students

The faculty noted that non-traditional students could benefit from the institution's support services. Non-traditional students may not understand how to navigate certain barriers, and when those barriers are not removed, they become unsuccessful in their courses. Typical student services include academic support, writing/math support, and disability services; in addition, non-traditional students may be more likely to require assistance with food insecurity. In a study conducted by Peterson and Freidus (2020), 26.6% of the student population experienced food insecurity due to financial barriers, with students not seeking help because of stigma, lack of time due to being on campus for classes, and lack of transportation. Institutional support for non-traditional students should include extended course hours, advising before starting a program, and access to support services with extended hours, which can reduce anxiety and self-doubt among non-traditional students (Markle, 2015). Supporting students in balancing the academic, personal, and professional demands of higher education enables faculty to address the needs of the whole student while reducing anxiety that may impede academic success.

5.5 Ideas to Support

The faculty members shared ideas about how best to support the success of the non-traditional students who make up a large percentage of their course rosters. The faculty suggested several ideas, including providing daycare options, having a positive and communicative relationship between the student and the instructors, and having college support/programs for those students. One faculty discussed that when advising their non-traditional students, it is important to “Be a good support system as well as their advisor. Being able to talk them down when they start to get really stressed.” The connection between the student and faculty was noted to be an important aspect and there was a need to help students navigate personal barriers and the college system. Another aspect discussed was the lack of childcare for students on campus. The community colleges that participated in this study do not all have appropriate daycare options for those students who are in allied health fields. Allied health requirements are classroom hours during the normal college day and clinical hours that may run 12 hours per shift. The availability of campus childcare services may not adequately meet the needs of students who are required to attend clinical courses during the week, creating an additional barrier to their academic participation and success. One faculty member felt that the college could better support these students with daycare options on campus, stating,

[that a] better variety of class time options would benefit them. I keep saying we really need a childcare option for community college because that is a lot of barriers that we have is the lack of childcare.

Non-traditional students may not understand how to navigate certain barriers, have the support system needed to help, or know where to begin to find help, and when those barriers are not removed, they become unsuccessful in their courses.

6. Faculty Development

There was a noticeable level of educational differences among the faculty, ranging from an associate degree to a doctoral degree, with only two having a formal degree in education. Liu (2021) found that faculty who had completed formal education in teaching could instruct students with a wide variety of learning styles more efficiently and effectively. Non-traditional students require more non-traditional learning styles that are not necessarily part of the conventional classroom, necessitating additional faculty training (Bozzeti et al., 2024; Stamou et al., 2024). This study found that non-traditional students were more receptive and achieved more positive outcomes when non-traditional methods were used, such as flipped classroom, problem-based learning, and collaborative learning (El Geddaway et al., 2022).

Several faculties continued to work in their selected allied health profession, which provided the students with real-world experiences to bolster their education. According to Wagner et al. (2021), those who continue to work in the chosen field help students gain a unique opportunity to understand the material's practical application. Clinical reasoning is an integral part of healthcare, and faculty who continue to work in their field can provide students with real-world experience. Corrao and Argano (2022) also assert that clinical reasoning is a complex skill that can be difficult and thus, is crucial in educating medical professionals. This supports the idea that having someone in the classroom who continues to work in their field is valuable to students as they learn. However, there is an essential factor to consider, even with quality real-world experience, the lack of training and formal education on teaching methods in the classroom should be addressed.

The faculty who are teaching require support to understand teaching strategies and how to implement them in their classrooms. Professional development for faculty members ensures that, regardless of their educational level, there is an opportunity to learn how best to support non-traditional students. Professional development should include all faculties who teach non-traditional students and focus on teaching strategies, the barriers non-traditional students face, and how to implement them in the classroom. The quality and ability of faculty are parallel to student success in the classroom; providing high-quality professional development will help create both quality faculty and students (Sancar et al., 2021).

7. Conclusion

This study revealed faculty experiences with non-traditional students in themes of community, positive experiences with non-traditional students, classroom experiences, emotional awareness, and support of non-traditional students. The study findings indicate that faculty members have positive interactions with non-traditional students that focus on their successes inside and outside the classroom. The faculty divulged that learning strategies for the non-traditional student should emphasize hands-on, active learning to achieve optimal educational outcomes. Concepts of emotional awareness also emerged, revealing that anxiety and self-doubt were significant barriers to student success.

These findings highlight the importance of fostering supportive, student-centered learning environments that address both the academic and emotional needs of non-traditional students. The findings also focus on the need for faculty to incorporate innovative and flexible instructional approaches that align with the unique characteristics and learning needs of non-traditional students. Ongoing professional development that prepares faculty to implement non-traditional teaching strategies and to recognize the academic and emotional challenges experienced by non-traditional learners may enhance instructional effectiveness and contribute to improved student success.

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