

Examining Organizational Communication Strategies that Target and Engage
Nontraditional Undergraduate Students

by

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Abstract

This qualitative study explores the organizational communication strategies that target and engage nontraditional undergraduate students in higher education. Nontraditional students represent as much as 85 percent of the student population, according to the U.S. Department of Education. Still, there is a disproportionately low number of support services offered to this group within higher education. As a result, nontraditional students' persistence and graduation rates are lower than those of their traditional counterparts. Although communication barriers have been identified as impediments to academic success for this group, few previous studies have focused on communication strategies at effectively target and engage nontraditional students. Nontraditional undergraduate students were interviewed about their academic experiences related to university engagement through targeted communication. Additionally, case studies were conducted to explore two university programs that provided programs and services for specific student groups, analyzing how targeted communications were used to successfully engage these groups. Qualitative analysis revealed that although the participants' university did provide efficient and appropriate communication through email, some participants indicated distinct issues with the effectiveness/usefulness of communications related to financial aid and scholarship opportunities for nontraditional students, virtual learning environment challenges and frustrations, overcoming a feeling of disconnection from a social perspective, and giving nontraditional students a 'voice' within their university. Participant responses and information learned from the case studies were used to create a framework guiding the creation of targeted strategic communications for nontraditional students by universities.

Keywords: Nontraditional students, academic persistence, adult learning concepts, strategic communication plans, barriers to organizational communication, adult student services

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Examining Organizational Communication Strategies that Target and Engage Nontraditional Undergraduate Students

Introduction

“Reach out. Reaching out to students is extremely important. Some are afraid to seek assistance. These are the ones who need the support the most. Some may not know how or where to find the support that they desperately need.”

- Junior, nontraditional student

The preceding quote, from a comprehensive study conducted by Barnes and Noble College in 2016, reflects the importance of communication from the perspective of a nontraditional undergraduate student. Effective communication strategies in higher education (referenced in this research as ‘universities’) are vital to the success of both the student and the university, especially regarding retention, persistence, and graduation rates. Particularly vulnerable to attrition are students considered to be nontraditional, a term which has been commonly used to describe any student who does not enter a university right out of high school, among many other factors to be detailed later. To that end, this thesis describes the qualitative study conducted to examine current organizational communication strategies between universities and nontraditional undergraduate students and explains the findings of the study. Study findings allowed this researcher to assess the implications of strategic communications and consequently make recommendations on how to improve such communications so that they can effectively target and engage nontraditional students. Addressing these can potentially

and positively impact nontraditional students' retention and persistence toward graduation.

Today's universities are largely focused on the needs of the traditional student, and therefore, the programming, support systems, and communication strategies are generally focused on their needs. Yet, the nontraditional student population is growing at a rate that calls for a shift in how universities view and interact with them:

In 2010, The U.S. department of Education estimated that nearly 85% of current undergraduate students were nontraditional to a certain degree.

While the exact numbers may differ depending on who is counting and how, what is clear is that about *five out of every six college students* in the United States today likely fit the term "non-traditional." (Venaas, 2018)

Venaas (2018) states further that "Only through studying these students more closely, together, through shared assessment and research, can we identify necessary steps and programs to help these students persist and be successful in college."

During this study, questions related to the academic experience of a sample of nontraditional undergraduate students revealed a common theme related to perceived communication strategies of their university: disconnected. The reasons for this disconnectedness are multi-faceted and are not exclusive to one university, but rather a common theme nationally. Malat (2017) stresses this point resulting from a national survey of 800 nontraditional students:

Just 44 percent of non-traditional students feel connected to their school, and only 20 percent feel socially connected. Less than one-third feels like

they belong. And non-traditional students are much less likely to feel supported by their peers *or* that they have friends at school, when compared to traditional students.

Examining this phenomenon of connection as it relates to communication strategies can create a lens from which to view the perspective of the nontraditional student and inspire a necessary and long overdue call to action for universities to reevaluate how student engagement is approached. In giving specific attention to the nontraditional student; previous research indicates that a lack of communication, barriers to communication, and methods of communication may inhibit the path to graduation.

To appropriately study the complexities of the communications strategies that target and engage nontraditional students, this qualitative study was separated into two parts: exploratory case studies and nontraditional student interviews. The exploratory case studies were conducted with population-specific programs at two four-year, public higher education institutions in Northeast Ohio that were demographically similar and geographically close in proximity. The nontraditional student interviews were conducted at one of the previously mentioned institutions, and qualitative interviewing methods were used to gather data. The methodology was chosen so that this researcher could understand where current strategic communications are succeeding and identify areas that present opportunities for improvement.

Utilizing theoretical frameworks relating to organizational communication barriers, strategic communication planning, adult learning and student engagement for this research, the findings bring to light the current state of strategic communication plans at universities and discuss current communication strategies that demonstrate a strong

commitment to nontraditional students. Findings also identify barriers to communication that specifically impede the progress of nontraditional students.

Examination of formal strategic communication plans of the programs in this study revealed that inclusion and support for nontraditional students are clearly documented within their plans. Therefore, these programs may provide guidance on best practices that other programs and universities can emulate. The challenge for programs and universities is to question whether the support for nontraditional students exists, is practiced, and measured, and is ingrained in the culture of the university. The guidelines for ensuring that strategic plans are inclusive of nontraditional student needs are sometimes called equity initiatives or educational equity (U.S. Department of Education, 2020).

The Education Advisory Board (EAB), an independent research, technology, and support organization for all levels of education from kindergarten through post-graduate study, makes an important point in reference to strategic planning in a report detailing strategies to advance nontraditional student success:

Involve all levels of the campus in equity-based strategic action planning by implementing a cascading approach. Each level of the academic affairs division creates individual action plans focused on equity and inclusion. This system allows for multiple levels of accountability and generates role appropriate goals that faculty are personally engaged in achieving. (EAB, 2020)

It is the perspective of this researcher through many years working in corporate and academic environments that creating such strategic plans must intrinsically have

communication at its core. Therefore, this study examined specific communication strategies, whether formal or informal, that actively sought to assist the nontraditional students with support services, utilizing dedicated resources such as programs or branches within programs. Other support networks, such as peer-to-peer communication, special programming for specific subsets of the nontraditional student population (e.g. veterans, parents, displaced workers, etc.) and community networks will also be highlighted.

Statement of the Problem

Despite their growing presence within higher education, colleges and universities tend to concentrate on the needs of traditional students. In fact, only 58% of universities participating in the Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education Census have nontraditional student services (2014). This is a staggering fact considering the 85% of student enrollment is comprised of nontraditional students, as reported by the US Department of Education (2018). Additionally, persistence and graduation rates among nontraditional students should be examined further.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2011), nontraditional students are significantly less likely to complete their degrees within six years when compared to traditional students. In fact, persistence rates provide evidence that of those enrolling in 2003-2004, only 20% of students 24-29 years of age, and 16% of those over the age of 30 graduated within six years of starting their postsecondary degree (2011). These measurements may relate directly and indirectly to communication strategies to target and engage nontraditional students.

Universities are often known for their long-standing traditions and for decades have focused attention on the traditional student persona. As demonstrated by the previous statistics, clearly there is an imbalance within our universities regarding the composition of the student population. Gully (2017) makes an important designation:

At the institutional level, we should check our assumptions about whom we are serving, as well as whom we should or could be serving. We must not assume to know our demographics but rather examine our programs, services, and curricula to be sure they are appropriate for all students -- not just the ones that fit into an antiquated idea of traditional.

It is imperative that communication strategies are designed to target and engage all students and that they do so in a manner that is inclusive as well as needs-based, depending on the subset of the student population.

Purpose of the Study

Because of the diversity within the nontraditional student population, it is difficult to address the broad range of issues that nontraditional students encounter. It is possible, however, to glean from programs that are serving these students with great success from a student perspective, and identify what works and what does not and try to replicate these best practices moving forward.

It is imperative that perceptions of what ‘nontraditional’ means change as the enrollment of these students increases. Gully (2018) states, “Those of us who work in higher education should realize that there no longer is a nontraditional student or, at the very least, we need to revise the definition of what constitutes one.” Research indicates

a multitude of labels and criteria used to call a student nontraditional and therefore indicates a further exploration into how to best ‘name’ them. Gully (2018) further states, “referring to our students as nontraditional puts them at a starting line behind other college enrollees -- not only in their sense of self but also in the minds of fellow students, faculty members, administrators and policy makers.”

Consequently, this study aims to expound upon the current state of communications targeted toward nontraditional students within the researcher’s university, as well as examining the same at a somewhat demographically similar and geographically close university for comparative purposes.

The purpose of this study is to shed light on areas where universities are succeeding in targeting nontraditional students through specific strategic communications, as well as exploring and detailing exemplary strategies that promote inclusivity, diversity, and consideration for the increasing presence of these students in higher education, toward creating a ‘best practices’ model that could be emulated at other institutions.

Significance of the Study

Returning to school after many years in the workforce, the researcher’s personal experience with university communication channels was a compelling reason to investigate what other nontraditional students were experiencing. Specifically, this researcher wanted to understand how nontraditional student research participants would describe how well they would say their university was communicating with them, both academically and socially. The motivation was to highlight communication strategies from the students’ perspective while emphasizing the growing population of

nontraditional students and the potential for universities to tap into this rich resource of students, from time of recruitment, to retention, and ultimately, attainment of a degree.

This study examines at least two successful cases of specific, targeted strategic communications processes at population-specific organizations at two different institutions to see if any elements of these cases could be extrapolated into a ‘best practices’ strategic communications plan that would effectively target nontraditional students and more directly meet their needs. A broader understanding of these needs was developed through this study’s data collection and analysis processes. As a result, this study will offer some solutions for universities to consider that focus on communication strategies that 1) demonstrate students’ value through targeted communications, 2) provide guidance for finding resources 3) offer programming that meets the needs of an older population of students, and 4) provide support through faculty and administrative staff that is sensitive to the adult learner. These communication strategies can therefore be responsible for increased persistence and graduation rates for nontraditional students.

The next section is a review of the literature related to the problem under investigation, providing examples of research related to nontraditional students and communication strategies that potentially influenced and/or improved their overall academic experiences and successes. The methods section presents this study’s methodology and research design, then shares study findings and a discussion of those findings. The second-to-last section discusses limitations of the study and suggests the implications of this study to future research, followed by the conclusion.

Literature Review

To fully explore the communication strategies that target and engage nontraditional students, several topics will be reviewed as cited in previous literature. Topics will include explaining how the term ‘nontraditional’ student is defined by the researcher’s home university, as well as how it is defined by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), and an exploration of barriers to learning for nontraditional students. Then, the review will explore the current composition of the U.S. student population and enrollment projections for nontraditional students. Assumptions about nontraditional students that can lead to misconceptions of and miscommunications with this group will also be explored.

Then, the review presents a theoretical framework supporting the study of the problem stated in the introduction, and examines literature related to organizational communication barriers, strategic communication planning, adult learning and student engagement, detailing research that directly pertains to nontraditional students.

Definition of Nontraditional Students and Barriers to Success in Higher Education

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2011), nontraditional students are significantly less likely to complete their degrees within six years when compared to nontraditional students. In fact, persistence rates provide evidence that of those enrolling in 2003-2004, only 20% of students 24-29 years of age, and 16% of those over the age of 30 graduated within six years of starting their postsecondary degree (NCES, 2011).

Although the aforementioned statistics demonstrate the significance of nontraditional student attrition, it may not capture the entire population that falls under

what is considered ‘nontraditional.’ The challenge regarding defining nontraditional students comes down to nomenclature:

If we do not know who these students are, we have no way to identify them, support them, and measure whether or not they are successful. This is serious business; when we consider the number of students who could possibly fit this population, it is a sizeable portion of both our current and future college students. (Venaas, 2018)

As a foundation for the following research, it is necessary to define what constitutes a ‘nontraditional’ student. Two definitions will be presented herein, one from the researcher’s home university and one from the NCES.

Defining nontraditional students. According to Youngstown State University’s website (2020), a nontraditional student is defined as anyone who satisfies one or more of the following conditions:

- 25 years or older
- Assumes multiple life roles such as a parent, spouse/partner, full time employee, caregiver, and student
- Returns to school after taking a break
- An active, reserve or veteran of the military

Any student, regardless of age, whose primary life roles and responsibilities exist independent of the University and take precedence over the role of student in times of crisis or stress is considered to be an adult student (2020).

Similarly, NCES (2011) defines a nontraditional student as one who has any of the following characteristics:

- Delays enrollment (does not enter postsecondary education in the same calendar year that he or she finished high school);
- Attends part time for at least part of the academic year;
- Works full time (35 hours or more per week) while enrolled;
- Is considered financially independent for purposes of determining eligibility for financial aid;
- Has dependents other than a spouse (usually children, but sometimes others);
- Is a single parent (either not married or married but separated and has dependents); or
- Does not have a high school diploma (completed high school with a GED or other high school completion certificate or did not finish high school).

Although having different verbiage, these two definitions describe a population that represents a significant percentage of enrollment in most institutions today. The reasons for beginning or returning to complete an advanced degree vary considerably. Regardless of the aim, nontraditional students are a significant part of a university's student population and culture.

Within this study, the term 'nontraditional' will be used to describe any student that is outside of the scope of what is considered a traditional student. While loosely

defined, this provides a vantage point that is significantly larger in which to view the importance of this population of students.

The following statistics demonstrate the growth of this diverse population.

Current and projected nontraditional student enrollment. According to Wyatt (2011), students who are 25 years and older account for approximately 43% of students enrolled on campuses throughout the United States, and this number is increasing. As the aforementioned statistic from the US Department of Education suggests, a number as high as 85% of students are considered nontraditional, and there can be many interpretations contributing to the disparity of the numbers (2018). No matter which of these studies reflect the appropriate representation of nontraditional students, the numbers are significant enough to signal that a dedicated effort should be placed on targeting and engaging these students.

Currently, Youngstown State University has an enrollment of 12,521 students, where the nontraditional student population (by the university's definition) represents 26% of those enrolled (College Tuition Compare, 2011). At institutions like YSU, where nontraditional students account for one quarter or more of the total student population, it is important to understand how to target and engage them to contribute to their overall academic experiences, persistence, and degree attainment.

In a 2011 NCES report, it was forecasted that between the years 2008 and 2019, U.S. enrollment at universities would increase by only 12% for 18 to 24-year-old students, but that enrollment of 25 to 34-year-old students would increase by 28% and for students 35 years old or older, it would increase by 22%. The growth of the nontraditional student population cannot be denied, and research suggests that there

should be more attention given to recruitment, academic and social support, persistence and subsequently, the completion of a degree.

Kenner and Weinerman (2011) describe some of the reasons for increased enrollment of nontraditional students:

- Older students see the value in continuing their education to advance in their career;
- Retirement packages or early retirement options (that include veterans of the armed forces) have allotted more time to find enjoyment in leisure learning or enhancing their intellectual capacity; or
- Job losses have urged older students to seek other trades and disciplines in order to find work.

Scott and Lewis (2012) further explain, “Identifying this recent increase in enrollment and attributing factors is important to note because it demonstrates the need for colleges and universities to gain awareness and sensitivity to the academic and social needs of the increasing nontraditional student population” (p.2).

The next section explores some barriers to success encountered by nontraditional students in higher education.

Barriers to success in higher education. Research exploring the difficulties that nontraditional students face when re-entering or first attending college are extensive.

Reiff and Ballin (2016) state it candidly in their article about good and bad learning experiences of adult students: “Bottom line, adult undergraduate and graduate students will vote with their feet if not respected, engaged, and challenged, having a direct impact

on attrition” (p.78). In other words, students who are not fully welcomed into the college or university they are attending will show their disdain by dropping out.

Additionally, nontraditional students have been impacted by deficits in up-to-date computer literacy as technology has advanced and become more embedded within higher education. Even with basic computer skills, student success with additional technological requirements can impede and even halt academic progress. An English professor at Vincennes University, Jesnek (2012) conducted research as it pertained directly to her nontraditional students and the challenges they faced during her courses. She discussed the ability of her younger students to adapt quickly to the technology required for classes, as it had been a normal part of academic life for them. But when it came to her nontraditional students, she wrote about how “these tasks, now considered ‘basic’ at the college level, can be excruciatingly time consuming, confusing, and altogether frustrating for many of my non-traditional students that did not have a close relationship with the computer and internet during their high school years (p.3).” This is a critical challenge that must be recognized and for which solutions must be implemented to communicate to nontraditional students that they are not alone in a sea of confusing terminology and technology.

Van Doorn & Van Doorn (2014) also emphasize that “nontraditional students focus more on the learning experience and do have more difficulties as compared to traditional students in navigating the university system the first year.” University systems can include the university website, virtual learning environments and online library and learning support resources. These challenges, coupled with demands outside of academics (e.g. full-time employment, family, financial concerns, etc.), can be

daunting and lead to a stressful and confusing learning experience without proper support systems and programs.

Additional obstacles exist as assumptions of a ‘typical’ nontraditional student are not representative of their varied life experiences and circumstances. These assumptions, whether held by faculty, staff, and/or fellow students can impede their achievement. Scott and Lewis (2012), about students aged 50 and older, state the assumptions about these students is that they “lack responsibility and motivation to study as compared to traditional students because of their already developed lifestyles and responsibilities related to family and community.” These assumptions can directly impact how a nontraditional student is view by not only their professors, but peers as well. However, the reality is that “nontraditional students can seemingly add to the academic validity of a classroom setting by sharing their real-world experiences with peers” (Scott et al., 2012). These real-world experiences from the workforce and life in general can positively complement the academic environment for students and faculty alike.

As these and many other barriers exist for nontraditional student, it is a logical argument that persistence and degree attainment is also impacted negatively due to the current structure of support and social systems dedicated to the specific concerns of an older student population.

Persistence and degree attainment. The impact that nontraditional students have on enrollment, participation in the learning experience, and the future of higher education is greater than is acknowledged by current communication strategies in most institutions. Examining scholarly literature related to adult learning and student engagement, communication barriers and strategic communications from a nontraditional

student perspective creates a theoretical framework that further supports the need for this research.

Theoretical Frameworks

The Model of Institutional Departure was developed by Vincent Tinto (1987) and points to three main reasons that students leave their higher education pursuits:

Academic difficulties, the inability of individuals to resolve their educational and occupational goals, and their failure to become or remain incorporated in the intellectual and social life of the institution. Tinto's (1987) model goes on to state that for students to persist, students need to integrate into the academic and social systems of the institution.

Two areas should be considered relating to the academic and social systems referenced by Tinto. Social systems can relate to university social activities and events, student organizations, and peer-to-peer interactions. Malat (2017) makes a distinction to educators regarding this social aspect, "It may take a little logistical creativity, but creating events and activities tailored to non-traditional students can help spark social connections and build valuable relationships." Examples of some social activities will be detailed in the case study findings.

Most nontraditional students do their best to assimilate to academics, although remediation may be necessary in some subjects. MacDonald (2018) notes, "Nearly half of the adult students who enter college need remediation in some form and providing this to students immediately upon their arrival reduces their anxieties, fears, and chances of dropping out." Additionally, academic challenges may come simply by having to use new technologies that are required for coursework, research, and communication between

university, faculty, and fellow students. Some of these technological challenges were examined within the student interviews in this study.

Pedagogy versus Andragogy. When examining learning practices and methodologies as they pertain to nontraditional students, concepts to note are pedagogy and andragogy. Makhlouf (2019) provides a succinct definition of both:

Andragogy refers to the methods and approaches used in adult education and is directed towards self-actualization, gaining experience, and problem-solving. In contrast, pedagogy is an education method in which the learner is dependent on the teacher for guidance, evaluation, and acquisition of knowledge.

Research originated by Malcom Knowles and subsequent researchers identified what are known as the ‘adult learning concept’ models, that reflect the differences from traditional teacher-centered models of child and adolescent education to adults (Merriam, 2001). Knowles (1984a, 1984b) identified a series of characteristics of adult learners and from this, created five assumptions about adult learners that greatly influenced this researcher from the perspective of understanding the needs of nontraditional undergraduate students. From these, some potential strategies of engagement with nontraditional students can be created. Knowles’ (1984a, 1984b) assumptions about adult learners:

- They are “autonomous and self-directed”
- They have an “accumulation of life experiences”
- They are “goal-oriented”

- They prefer “relevancy-oriented (content) and immediacy”
- They are “practical.”

The most significant difference between children and adults noted by further research is that of adult students being self-directed (Merriam, 2001). Adult students like to share their life experiences as they relate to the coursework while providing relevancy and integration to the learning environment. Further, the encouragement and respect given to adult students will enrich the overall experience for both faculty and students. Educators should define how the goals and objectives of the course relate to the real-world.

While some have argued against the value of Knowles' andragogical model, his work is the foundation of thinking in the field of adult learning during the last decade (Hiemstra & Sisco, 1990; Merriam, 2001). There have been criticisms of Knowles work, however, Pratt (1993) affirms the following:

Amidst debate, clarification, challenge, refutation, and articulation his message has not only persisted but is the voice most associated with andragogy in North America. Some have suggested he endures because he speaks to people's experience, articulating a recognizable reality.

Whatever the case, there is no denying that his place in the history of adult education is both secure and significant because of his promotion of andragogy (p.15).

Despite the research by Knowles and many others, many educators continue to utilize the same concepts used for children and apply them to adults. Although

traditional students are accustomed to explanatory and directive style of instruction received in K-12, the nontraditional student performs better in a cooperative environment, where the instructor is both teacher and participant, and the student's experiences and feedback are integrated in the learning. To further corroborate Pratt, Blondy (2007) adds:

Knowles' andragogical assumptions were not formulated on empirical research, but were developed as a result of experience, observations, and theoretical influences. An in-depth review of andragogy reveals that Knowles' intentions were to put learners first, to strive to help them meet their needs, and encourage educators to constantly be available to guide learners to success (p.127).

Alternatively, other researchers examined the impact that adult learning assumptions had on faculty, which also may impede their best intentions to provide instruction to adult students. Day, et.al. (2011) describes adult learning as it impacts faculty and demonstrates a more flexible approach to instructing adult students:

College instructors need to respect the adult learner's multitasking abilities but recognize they may, at least initially, be more comfortable with a structured, traditional approach to learning and may need encouragement or guidance to participate in more interactive classroom activities such as team-based learning or service learning strategies (p.83).

Approaching teaching from a blended (pedagogical and andragogical) perspective may improve the overall communication effectiveness from an academic context.

Communication strategies in the classroom are an important area of discussion in this research, and is a critical component to the persistence and degree attainment for a nontraditional student. There are additional barriers that exist in communication that should also be considered in the overall communication strategy of a university.

Barriers to effective communication. To further understand what type of communication strategies effectively engage and target nontraditional students, it is important to recognize the barriers to effective communication in organizations because these will highlight some areas that may need to be examined to provide guidance for future planning. There are many barriers to communication but for the purposes of this study, several stand out in relation to those in the organizational context of a college or university: Linguistic, cultural, organizational structure, and technological (Kaphur, 2018). These barriers can add to the previously mentioned challenges of academic remediation, social integration, academic experience, and assumptions about nontraditional students.

Linguistic barriers can be as diverse as differing first languages or as subtle as organizational jargon. When someone is in an organization for some time, it becomes ingrained behavior to use acronyms and technical language unique to an organization or subgroup within an organization. For example, most nontraditional students outside of veterans, are not aware that they can receive/bypass some credits for prior 'real world' experiences. Known as PLA, the prior learning assessment should be common knowledge for nontraditional students. Fain (2012) explains:

The practice of granting college credit for learning and knowledge gained outside the traditional academic setting goes back decades, with roots in

the G.I. Bill and World War II veterans who earned credits for military training. But prior learning assessment mostly occurs behind the scenes, partially because colleges avoid loudly advertising that they believe college-level learning can occur before a student ever interacts with faculty members.

Returning to school after many years in the workforce, this researcher had no knowledge of PLA until a year later, and that knowledge came from talking to a peer who happened to be a veteran. Not having this knowledge may not only be critical for the student, but may be the deciding factor for persistence and completion of a degree. This point is emphasized by The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (2020):

Competition for adult students is increasingly fierce. If you are not improving your services to adults, you are likely falling behind. Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) is one way to enroll college students and empower them to complete their degree.

Cultural barriers can also play a role in effective communication for nontraditional students. Especially in such a diverse environment as a university, cultural differences should be considered. “Cultural barriers in communication occur mainly when communication happens between two different cultural backgrounds. We encounter cultural barriers in everyday life. In the age of globalization and digital media, the whole world is performing and participating on one platform (Communication theory, n.d.)”

Some cultural barriers that may affect communication with students include:

- Language (semantics)
- Cultural norms
- Stereotypes
- Values and beliefs
- Body language and gestures (Communication Theory, n.d.).

Organizational structure can also be a barrier to effective communication for nontraditional students. As a student navigates through all the departments and computer systems, it may at times feel that there are many advanced and confusing technologies required to complete many tasks. Alternatively, archaic processes still exist within higher education that are seemingly unnecessary or that require so many steps involving so many individuals and/or departments, that these tasks become harder to complete. Additionally, for nontraditional students who attend school in the evenings or on weekends, the ‘business hours’ of critical administrative functions such as financial aid support for students, which are typically only accessible by in-person appointments, make navigating non-course aspects of higher education institutions almost impossible (Kaphur, 2018).

As technology is a barrier to learning for nontraditional students, so too, are they communication barriers. Technological barriers can be especially problematic for nontraditional students as was detailed by Jesnek (2012). In a study undertaken by this researcher and a partner in the fall of 2019, data analysis revealed that the majority of the nontraditional students interviewed for the study described the virtual learning environment at their university to be difficult, frustrating, and was procedurally different for each and every professor that utilized it . The instruction and information

communicated by a university and faculty to properly use a virtual learning environment is a real challenge that can be explored further as it relates to contributing to attrition.

As nontraditional students navigate through their university experience, barriers to learning and barriers to communication highlighted in the research suggest that addressing some of these issues will improve persistence and ensure a clearer path to graduation. This can be accomplished in part by having a strategic communication plan. Implemented university-wide as well as population-specific, the following section describes the value of having such plans.

Strategic communication plans. Having a strategic communication plan is important in any organization, and is especially important within a university. The importance of this is noted in a study by Mazo and Macpherson (2017), “Communicating sustainable initiatives in higher education institutions presents a challenge, given that few to no universities possess or maintain a strategic communication plan that addresses the need to share this information effectively to stakeholders (students, faculty, staff, administrators, and community advocates).” Essentially, the lack of a strategic communications plan undermines the university’s initiatives that are often formally adopted within its mission. The role that institutions play in effectively communicating with nontraditional students is another important aspect to targeting and engaging them.

Zelter (2018) introduces the idea of strategic communications by noting “communication must have a planned dimension; it cannot happen randomly, it needs a plan, a strategy, it needs rules and procedures.” To further detail strategic communication Roberts (2016) detailed five tenets of strategic communication that are applicable in many industries:

- *Intentional message design* – where the communication goal is equal to the organizational goal

Example: A university that adopts an organizational goal to increase persistence and graduation rates among nontraditional students must communicate that same message to faculty and students.

- *The correct platform* – go to where your audience is

Example: A university uses Instagram to communicate major campus announcements, but misses an entire group of students who do not use social media.

- *Calculated time* – when will the audience be most likely to receive it?

Example: An important email is sent out by a university late in the evening to ensure it is out prior to the next morning, but many students miss it because they only look at what may come in the morning hours.

- *Audience selection and analysis* – who should receive the message and how will it best be received?

Example: A student organization is trying to recruit students to participate in an athletic challenge for first year students, but sends out an email blast to every enrolled student.

- *Desired impact* – how is success measured?

Example: Did people show up for the event? Did students seem confused by what was happening because they missed the message?

By using these tenets as a guideline to craft all communications within a university, the probability of connecting to the right audience will be more likely. As it

relates to nontraditional students, this is particularly important in using the correct platform. The technical knowledge, especially in the use of social media, of a pool of students ranging from 25 and older will vary considerably as compared to their traditional counterparts. These examples give way to the notion that it is important for a university to have a strategic communication plan.

Rossman (2019) explains that to begin the process of creating a strategic communication plan, it is important “to establish common language, direction, and goals.” Additionally, Rossman (2019) says that strategic communication plans should be aligned with the mission and values of the organization, and that “how you develop your communication plan and its various steps should take into account the culture of your parent organization and your community so your approach will align and resonate with those who you are trying to reach.”

Building on Rossman’s supposition that it is a good common practice to have a strategic communications plan, Zelter (2018) notes that there are advantages to planning communication. Noteworthy are the following benefits to having communication plans:

- it offers a coherent framework for action,
- it gives communication a valuable place in management,
- it clarifies the role of communication in management,
- it enables monitoring, control, and evaluation,
- it authorizes anticipation and non-reactive approaches, and
- it facilitates the order of priorities in actions.

In addition to these benefits, a well-thought out communication plan simply demonstrates a commitment to faculty, staff, and students.

Creating and implementing formal strategic communication plans, therefore, are recommended for universities, and thoughtful consideration of these as they relate to nontraditional students is good practice to demonstrate commitment to their success. In addition, these plans will highlight current and anticipated barriers to effective communication regarding organizational structure. In other words, organizational structure itself can be a barrier due to ‘silos’ that exist within a university.

Research Questions

Considering the research quoted above, and particularly given research exploring strategic communications and adult student perceptions and expectations, the data obtained in this study will increase awareness of the nontraditional student demographic. Guidance from findings on how strategic communication strategies can enhance the experience of the nontraditional students by targeting and engaging them will be provided.

The following research questions will be explored:

RQ1: Do nontraditional students who participated in this study believe current strategic communications from their institution are effective in

- a) targeting them?
- b) engaging them?

RQ2: Of the strategic communications discussed by study participants, what specific elements within them did they believe were

- a) the most effective at targeting their needs and engaging and why, and
- b) the least effective at targeting their needs and why,

- c) the most effective at engaging them and why, and
- d) the least effective at engaging them and why?

To explore these research questions, this study utilized qualitative data collection and analysis methods to produce findings that explain what types of organizational communication strategies could most effectively target and engage nontraditional students. How this was done and why this matters will be discussed in the Methods section.

Method

The qualitative research study described in this thesis focused on collecting and analyzing data from previously described higher education institutions that, from findings, allowed this researcher to identify organizational communication strategies that could potentially and effectively target and engage nontraditional undergraduate students.

To gain a broader understanding of successfully implemented and strategically targeted/population-focused organizational communication strategies within higher education, exploratory case studies were conducted with population-specific organizations at two four-year, public higher education institutions in Northeast Ohio. Qualitative exploratory case study research protocols were used to gain insight and an understanding of how these strategies effectively targeted and engaged the organizations' specific populations, and which did include nontraditional students, in line with similar research conducted by Litchman (2014).

Then, toward understanding more deeply the communication needs of nontraditional undergraduate students, interviews were conducted with nontraditional students who agreed to participate in this study. Previously conducted research of this

type used face-to-face interviews as the primary method of data collection (Arbelo-Marrero & Milacci, 2016; Goncalves & Trunk, 2014) and, with necessary modifications due to the global pandemic underway during the time of this study, this researcher adopted a comparable data collection method by conducting synchronous virtual interviews with study respondents.

Data collected and analyzed from study participants were used to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: Do nontraditional students who participated in this study believe current strategic communications from their institution are effective in

a) targeting them?

b) engaging them?

RQ2: Of the strategic communications discussed by study participants, what specific elements within them did they believe were

a) the most effective at targeting their needs and engaging and why, and

b) the least effective at targeting their needs and why,

c) the most effective at engaging them and why, and

d) the least effective at engaging them and why?

Sample

Case study. Case studies were conducted with population-specific organizations at two four-year, public higher education institutions in Northeast Ohio. However, the exploratory case studies were conducted to inform this researcher of specific strategic communication ‘best practices’ at population-specific organizations within higher

education and to help craft appropriate interview questions for study participants, therefore, case study data will not be reported within data analysis.

Interviews. Interview participants were nontraditional undergraduate students from one of the two previously identified higher education institutions, who volunteered to participate in this researcher's study. Within this study, nontraditional undergraduate students were defined as undergraduate students, enrolled part-time or full-time, who were aged 25 or older at the time of participation.

Procedure

Case study venues were selected based on recommendations made by professionals in the field of organizational communication, and based on geographic proximity to the researcher. They were in cooperation with Youngstown State University's Veterans Resource Center and Kent State University's Center for Adult and Veteran Services (CAVS).

Volunteers for interview participation in this research were requested via email, from a pool of potential candidates derived using a non-probability, convenience sample. Those deemed a 'fit' for the study, based on previously discussed definitions, were interviewed by phone. Previous research used interviewing as a data collection tool to get feedback from nontraditional students (Arbelo-Marrero & Milacci, 2016; Goncalves & Trunk, 2014), and this method was found to be well-suited to this research regarding revealing reveal challenges and opportunities experienced by the participants, particularly as it related to engagement.

Instrumentation

Data for the study was collected with the approval of the Institutional Review Board (130-20) at Youngstown State University. Case studies were analyzed using qualitative case study analysis procedures (Rule & Vaughn, 2015). Phone interviews were conducted with nontraditional student volunteers for the study. A semi-structured, qualitative interview style was used to interview participants, and interview questions were created in part using guidance from prior research that examined the barriers faced by nontraditional students (Arbelo-Marrero et al., 2016; Goncalves et al., 2014). Data collected during interviews also included demographic information, collected to verify participants' nontraditional status as defined within this study, and to provide the researcher with an understanding of participants' backgrounds. (See Appendices A & B for the consent form and interview schedule).

During each interview, and with the permission of participants, the interviewer recorded the interviews and assured confidentiality in results reporting by assigning each participant with a unique participant ID#. The interviewer also took notes during the session as an additional data-check for the purposes of accuracy and to support the trustworthiness of the methods used to collect data in this study. The interviewer then transcribed each interview after each session, and the study's principal investigator reviewed all transcriptions against recordings to ensure accuracy and credibility in reporting.

During interviews, participants were asked to describe their experiences specifically related to their status as nontraditional students, and asked questions related to communication strategies they felt targeted and engaged them, exploring the 'why' of

this with participants, as well. This helped the researcher gather data to answer the study's research questions.

Following the interviews, participants were asked to participate in a follow-up survey based upon their answers that express both positive and negative experiences as it pertains to communication strategies employed by the university. This additional data allowed the researcher to engage in 'member-checking' of data collected during the interview process to ensure accuracy and clarification in reporting, adding to the overall trustworthiness of the study's data collection and analysis methods and consequently, its reported findings.

Analysis

Case study data was analyzed from the grounded theory approach. Strauss and Corbin, as cited by Rule and Vaughn (2015) stated that "it (grounded theory) seeks to develop theory about a phenomenon inductively from a study of the phenomenon. The theory emerges from a systematic collection and analysis of data about the phenomenon." The case study data was analyzed using 'selective coding' which "involves identifying a "core" category and relating it systematically to other categories" (Rule & Vaughn, 2015).

Data collected from interviews were analyzed using a conventional qualitative thematic analysis approach. Hsieh and Shannon, as cited by Litchman (2014), explained that "coding categories were derived directly from text." This method was chosen for analyzing the data to explore repetitive themes.

Results

The primary purpose of this study was to understand what communication strategies are being employed to target and engage nontraditional undergraduate students. Participants gave their feedback and personal experiences relating to the research questions by volunteer participation in interviews conducted via electronic form or phone interviews. Reviewing and analyzing the experiences of nontraditional students gave specific insights into how the strategies used by their universities affected their academic experience as they progressed toward their degree. The study's research questions were addressed with supporting evidence, including quotations and feedback from the participants. Additionally, valuable information regarding organizational communication created for and targeted toward a defined audience was gathered from Youngstown State University's Veterans Resource Center and Kent State University's Center for Adult and Veterans Services to create potential models for future programs and resources directly affecting nontraditional students that could promote persistence and steady advancement to degree attainment.

Demographics of Participants

The results of this qualitative study are based on interviews of nine nontraditional undergraduate students currently enrolled at a public university in Northeast Ohio. All students voluntarily participated in the study. The university's faculty and the director of the Veterans Resource Center were contacted through email and asked to disseminate a request for participants to nontraditional undergraduate students enrolled in their courses and/or by utilizing the services of the Veterans Resource Center. Students sent an email to this researcher indicating their interest in participating in the study. The nine

participants in this study are currently enrolled the same public university. The participants had various backgrounds and gave accounts of their current experiences at school and some background leading up to enrollment. Of the nine nontraditional students, six were seniors preparing to graduate, and the remaining three participants were a freshman, a sophomore and a junior. The college majors of participants also varied and represented six separate colleges at the university. The students were all natives to the area, representing Mahoning and Trumbull counties in Ohio and Mercer county in Pennsylvania. Five students were full-time students and four were part-time students. Ages ranged from 25 to 50, therefore representing the target population as defined in this study as a nontraditional student. Eight students were female, and one was male. One student identified themselves as a veteran.

Interview Procedures

A semi-structured interview format was designed to allow participants the flexibility to expound on the open-ended questions. Three participants were interviewed via phone and six participated in the same interview by filling out a Google form which was automatically returned to the researcher via Google Forms. This methodology was adapted from the original intended method of in-person interviews due to the Covid-19 measures that were taken by the university, per proclamation of Ohio Governor Mike DeWine in March 2020. Phone interviews were scheduled based on the convenience of the participants' schedules and the electronic interviews were sent through Google forms with a targeted return time of one week. Phone interviews allowed for convenient digital recording by the interviewer. Electronically submitted interviews were in text format,

allowing for the compilation of a single spreadsheet. All interviews were conducted during March and April 2020.

The researcher conducted the phone interviews and recorded as well as took notes for added accuracy and trustworthiness (particularly, the criterion of credibility in trustworthiness). Prior to each interview, the purpose of the study and interview protocol were reviewed with participants. The interviewer also sent a consent form to each participant prior to the scheduled interview and a verbal confirmation was obtained prior to beginning the phone interview. Those participants responding to the electronic survey also received the consent form via email and the Google form required affirmative consent before the participant could proceed with the interview questions. All electronic forms were retained in a confidential file according to protocol.

Basic demographic questions were asked to obtain background information about each participant to establish nontraditional and undergraduate status. The most critical question that was confirmed was if the student was nontraditional by confirmation of age. The participant either confirmed that they were 25 or older simply by saying yes or by providing their actual age. The other remaining demographic questions were asked to give the interviewer a general background about the participant and allow them the freedom to relay their experience, enhancing the credibility of the study's trustworthiness. Following the demographic questions, the interviewer proceeded on to the interview questions for the phone interviews, and those participating in the electronic surveys proceeded as directed in the form.

The interview questions were asked as written in the interview guide. The interviewer had the freedom to ask follow-up questions such as “can you tell me more about that?” or “why?” for the phone interviews. This allowed the interviewer to gain more of an understanding of the experience of the participant and gather more information. Although the surveys that were electronically submitted did not allow for probing questions, adhering to the interview questions as written in the interview guide via the Google forms enhanced the trustworthiness criterion of dependability of responses received via phone interviews and Google forms.

Each phone interview was recorded using a digital recorder and transcribed into the same Google form used to compile the electronic responses for consistency and to ensure conformability and dependability in trustworthiness were assessed. Interviews were transcribed within a week of the interviews by this researcher. Notes taken during the phone interviews were compared to each transcript for accuracy. The electronic surveys were compiled into a grouped compilation sheet in Google forms along with the responses from the phone interviews. Qualitative thematic analysis was used to study the participants’ responses. The responses to the interview questions were coded by theme and the codes were grouped into categories. Those categories were reviewed, and themes emerged from this data. Thematic data analysis was used to present the results (Arbelo-Marrero & Milacci, 2016).

Research Findings

From the data collected, several themes emerged. The prominent themes regarding nontraditional undergraduate student experiences were:

1. Students identified the **virtual learning environment (Blackboard)** and reasons that its use was problematic in their experience.
2. Students related their feelings about **being supported** in their education and how it helped or hampered their study.
3. Students offered information about **resources** they knew were offered to students and which ones, if any, they utilized.
4. Students expressed **financial aid and scholarships** as a concern of nontraditional students.
5. Students expressed if they felt **valued** as a student based on their overall experience.

Theme 1: Virtual Learning Environments

All nine interviewees identified the various technological systems that each used as required for enrollment, registration, coursework, and general information. One of the most commonly cited was the virtual learning environment (Blackboard), which is the main vehicle to get to most course information, assignments, grades, and resources for the study's participants. As reported by participants:

Participant D:

Blackboard is a nightmare though. Every professor does it differently and it is impossible to find things.

Participant A:

I have trouble with Blackboard sometimes. It times out a lot and it looks different for every course. The menus and where stuff are located.

Participant E:

And the blackboard site it a pain sometimes. It is just not the same for every class. it's like you have to learn it all over again every time you have a new class.

Theme 2: Students' Support from Faculty

Each participant identified the experience they had with faculty. Most participants felt that they received good support from their professors. There were two participants who identified that it was harder to get support and questions answered in larger courses. Several noted that the support they received within their major / college was very good. The overall impression of faculty support was good, though two participants mentioned that they did not feel that advisors were helpful in their career paths. Noted by participants:

Participant G:

Advisors could be better informed so not take too many classes on path to graduation.

Participant H:

Advising did not help with my career path. Not enough available times for advising that fits my schedule. General studies was a good option but I felt like I was "frankensteining" a major.

Theme 3: Student Resources

Each participant was asked to identify what resources they were aware of to obtain assistance with various tasks. Several participants knew of and utilized some of

the services offered by the university and some knew little to nothing of the services that could be used to assist them in their study. Identified most frequently as resources used by the participants were the writing center, tutoring services, and the tech desk. It was interesting to note that many of the participants did not know of all the resources available to them. The knowledge of the university's resources varied greatly among the participants.

Two resources that were utilized by participants are worthy of note. One participant noted that they use services from The Veterans' Resource Center for most of their needs. Also mentioned was the Center for Student Progress, though the participant who discussed this resource did not know about it until senior year.

Participant F:

The vet center really is where I go for all my answers. they know my background, so they know what help I need. It feels personal with them. I think (my university) really cares about the veterans. I don't know how other students feel, but I know my future is important when I'm at the center.

Participant I:

The CSP (Center for Student Progress) was great but no one knows about it. I felt like they really care how I'm doing, even personally.

One student participant noted an additional resource they wish they had when they began:

Participant B:

When I first started, it would have been so helpful to have had a non-traditional section on the university website filled with FAQ's and resources.

Theme 4: Financial Aid and Scholarships

The participants were asked their opinions on financial aid and scholarships. Several participants offered the following responses to the question “Do you feel the university provides you with enough information in regard to financial aid and scholarships?”:

Participant A:

No. I had no idea that there were so many scholarships out there. A peer pointed them out.

Participant B:

Wish they had more opportunities for non-traditional students.

Participant C:

Not at all. If I didn't seek out information, I would not have known what to do to get additional aid.

Participant D:

For sure not. I did not know about some scholarships that I could have gotten and most that I have seen are mostly for younger people.

Participant E:

I've been lucky because I had friends that went through before me. But if they didn't tell me some things I wouldn't have known about some stuff like scholarships.

The feedback to this question provided valuable information that can provide the university with information as to a possible communication strategy that needs improvement / clarification for nontraditional students.

Theme 5: Students' Perceptions of Value as a Student

The following question was asked of the participants a: "Do you feel valued as a student at your university?"

It yielded noteworthy responses.

Participant B:

Actually, I'm currently taking a class where the teacher makes me, and my responses feel very valued. I feel so good about myself every time I answer a question.

Participant C:

From certain professors. and sometimes (my university), especially with the safety measures that they have taken during this pandemic. It feels like older students get lost in the system. Most social things I see are pointed to younger students. The athletic students seem to be more valuable than others.

Participant D:

Not really as an individual. I feel like I'm just a cog in a wheel sometimes. But I am only a sophomore and I don't get involved in much.

Participant F:

Not as a non-traditional student. It feels like the younger folks are more important. In my major though, I do.

Participant G:

Yes. I have received scholarships, so they acknowledge my accomplishments.

Participant H:

It's a commuter school, Not socially connected, first year geared to traditional students, you're on your own after that, people don't really care to connect.

Participant I:

No. It's complicated. I'm just ready to graduate. 4 years to complete a degree is not a reality.

Additional Noteworthy Findings

Targeted communication. From the data collected from nontraditional student interviews, there was evidence that some areas related to communication employed by the participants' university are indeed targeting them. As noted in response to the question, "Do you think that you receive enough information from your university through the communication channels you have available to you? (email, text, website, portal, social media)," most participants agreed that their university communicated

important dates, announcements of student activities and other university-wide information in a timely and appropriate manner.

Engagement through communication. Extrapolated data collected from participant interviews revealed that from an engagement standpoint, there were mixed feelings in answer to the question, “Do you feel that you have a 'voice' at your university?” Some participants stated that they did not have a voice, as in “the professors have the final say,” while other participants felt that they had a voice when it came to their professors, particularly the ones within their program of study.

Peer support. An informal resource that was noted by several of the participants in the study was assistance received by peers. Some participants noted that they were assisted by other students often. Social connections appeared nonexistent to most, with some noting age as a factor and time on campus as another. One participant noted being connected at school due to involvement in a student organization.

Social connection. Overall, the university is viewed almost exclusively as a commuter school by this study’s participants. This finding could explain in part the lack of social connection typically found at a university. Age was a factor for some, where participants noted that most programs were geared toward younger, nontraditional students. Also mentioned was the availability of labs and the library due to the hours of operation.

Case Studies

This researcher was compelled to investigate programs that focus on nontraditional students based on findings from an unpublished study conducted in

cooperation with a research partner in Fall 2019. Interviews about nontraditional students' challenges with technology yielded valuable information that further guided this research. From the unpublished research paper written by this researcher and her research partner:

According to the two veterans who were interviewed, the Veterans' Center served as an all service center that can be utilized for all student assistance. The students knew that they could go to the center and they would be provided with or directed to whatever assistance was needed. The head of the resource center was identified as being a key to guiding the two veterans in their enrollment and subsequent study at the university (Hixenbaugh & Moss, 2019).

Until that time, this researcher, also a nontraditional student, was not aware of any specific services that were geared toward the nontraditional student at her home institution. Thus, the idea to investigate this via this study.

Searching for communication strategies that engage and target nontraditional students, two programs at geographically close and demographically similar programs became the focus of the following case study.

Youngstown State University's Veteran Resource Center and Kent State University's Center for Adult and Veteran Services (CAVS) were evaluated, first by interviewing the program directors of each and second by reviewing the centers' mission statements, programs offered, and services provided by each. The intent was to highlight

examples of ways in which universities can place a focus on services for students who are not served by the typical ‘traditional student’ services.

Highlights of Nontraditional Student Focused Programs

Youngstown State University Veterans Service Center

On the Youngstown State University website, prospective and current student veterans are directed to a page dedicated to the Veterans Center. The mission of the center is detailed in the ‘About us’ section:

We work to assist YSU students who have served or are currently serving in the armed forces of the United States of America in attaining their educational goals, and we are continually improving and working toward being a "one-stop" office for all YSU student veterans. The Student Veterans Resource Center (which opened September 2014 and dedicated to Vietnam War Veteran and YSU alumni, Carl A. Nunziato May 2018) helps military veterans and service members transition to college and succeed as university students.

The following programs and services are also highlighted on the site:

Free-Standing Building on Campus featuring:

- Student lounge
- Computer lab
- Fully ADA Compliant
- Handicap Parking

- CAC Computer Access
- Office of Veterans Affairs
- Community Room

Selected services offered:

- Waived application and orientation fees
- Orientation breakout for Veterans
- GI Bill registration and certification
- Priority registration
- Weekly communications
- Student Veterans group
- Writing center services
- Extended hours

From a report by local media station WKBN, in which the Veterans Center was highlighted:

When it comes to service to military students and veterans Youngstown State University goes above and beyond. The new 6,000 square foot, \$1.3 million Veterans Resource Center is another example of what sets YSU apart from other Ohio colleges. "That we are the only university that has a

stand-alone veterans center in Ohio," said Rick Williams, Resource Center Director.

The Carl A. Nunziato Veterans Resource Center at YSU is an exemplary program that occupies a free-standing building on Youngstown State University's campus. Highly touted by veteran students at YSU as being the main source for support and encouragement for attaining their post-secondary degree, it exemplifies a model program that can be replicated in a similar way for nontraditional students.

Kent State University goes one step further by integrating adult and veteran services into one unit. The KSU program sees adult and veteran students as having similar challenges, while also acknowledging that some services are unique for each of these populations.

KSU Center for Adult and Veteran Services

Accessible via its website's landing page, Kent State University has a dedicated page for veterans and adult students. The mission of the program is as follows:

Kent State is committed to meeting the needs of all its students. Coming back to school after/ while serving in the military or as an adult learner gives you a different perspective on college than traditional students. Kent State's Center for Adult and Veteran Services is designed to help you build on those life experiences, easing the process of returning to college. Get familiar with Kent State's programs and services for adult learners and feel free to contact us with any questions you may have.

Programs and Services:

- Pre-Admissions Counseling
- Academic Advising
- Career Guidance
- Adult Student Orientation
- Advocacy
- Referrals

Additional accolades for Kent State's program demonstrate how the CAVS program is impacting the veteran student population:

Kent State was named a military friendly school by G.I. Jobs for the eleventh year in a row, most recently earning the bronze designation. In addition, Kent State University regional campuses at Ashtabula, Tuscarawas, and Trumbull have also received military friendly honors (Kent State University, 2020).

These two programs are examples of what could be possible by creating similar programs for nontraditional students. But more importantly, the communication strategies for both programs focus on the needs of the student, whether with direct programs or services, or as advocates for the students with whom they work. Both programs also keep the students informed with weekly communications through email

and social media. Contact information is always available, as is someone to answer the call when a situation arises.

Discussion

This study was conducted to examine organizational communication strategies that target and engage nontraditional undergraduate students. As indicated in the literature review, there are many opportunities for universities to improve the way they communicate with nontraditional students:

- recognizing that the composition of the nontraditional undergraduate student population is growing (NCES, 2013),
- the current nontraditional student presence can be as high as 85% (U.S. Dept of Education, 2020),
- adult learning concepts can be employed to ensure a positive academic experience,
- communication barriers exist between universities and nontraditional students that should be recognized and addressed appropriately, and
- strategic communication strategies should be established to ensure that nontraditional students get the information they need, when they need it, in a manner that is timely and in an appropriate format.

The case studies in this study provided information that directed some of the interview questions that provided important information about best practices that can be emulated to provide more targeted communication to specific groups of nontraditional students. YSU's Veterans Center and Kent State's CAVS programs were examined and

the manner in which they are successfully targeting and engaging veterans and adult students was highlighted.

The compilation of the findings provides the following responses to this study's research questions.

Responding to the Study's Research Questions

The primary research questions that guided this study:

RQ1: Do nontraditional students who participated in this study believe current strategic communications from their institution are effective in

a) targeting them?

b) engaging them?

The data collected from nontraditional student interviews revealed that the communication received from their university targeted them via the various communication channels employed by the university such as email, text alerts, and social media. The overall impression of university news and events was well-established. Specific targeting of nontraditional students was mentioned on both sides of the issue, where a veteran participant felt that they received great information and support from the vet center for all of their needs, and other students noted that direct links for nontraditional student information would be helpful.

Engagement with students from a communication perspective also had mixed reactions, where some students felt that they could interact with their professors easily and comfortably, and others noted that although they completed the course and faculty

assessments at the end of each semester, it was just an ‘exercise’ and the professors had the ‘final say.’

Many participants summed up their opinions about engagement in the same manner, indicating that they considered their university to be a commuter school, and that they did not get involved in many social activities. Social connection seemed to be lacking with all participants aside from one student that was in a student organization.

RQ2: Of the strategic communications discussed by study participants,

what specific elements within them did they believe were

a) the most effective at targeting their needs and why, and

b) the least effective at targeting their needs and why,

c) the most effective at engaging them and why, and

d) the least effective at engaging them and why?

Most students cited email as their most important source of information. University-wide communications were deemed appropriately informative, thus emphasizing Roberts’ (2016) tenets of strategic communication as outlined in the literature review. However, some students indicated differences in how faculty communicated and that it sometimes caused frustration. Particularly mentioned by participants were that faculty’s preferences in how they communicate varied widely and at times caused more work for participants to find the most appropriate manner to communicate with their professors.

An effective communication strategy was recalled by one participant: “Actually, I’m currently taking a class where the teacher makes me (feel valued), and my responses feel very valued. I feel so good about myself every time I answer a question.” This engagement relates back to the adult learner assumptions discussed in the literature review. Overall, participants’ communication with faculty was positively noted, with a few minor exceptions. Most participants noted that they especially felt engaged with faculty within their field of study. One of the communication tools used by the university related to academic requirements was the virtual learning management system, Blackboard, which was another source of frustration for many students. Most often relayed by participants was that it was difficult to use, hard to understand, and that there was no consistency in how it was utilized by the university and the faculty.

Another area where communication is neither targeting or engaging nontraditional students pertains to financial aid and scholarships. There were many instances where participants said that if they did not go searching for the information or get help from peers, they had no idea how to get financial assistance, either through federal aid or scholarships. Also, students in general did not feel targeted socially, as many noted that most university events were geared toward younger students, including freshman orientation. The suggestion was made in this researcher’s previous work that there should be a specific orientation for nontraditional students, including a focus on remediation for technology use. Participants indicated that they felt ‘old’ or just did not fit in because social events primarily targeted ‘traditional’ students.

As was found by a nontraditional student veteran participant in the study, the veterans center was the go-to for all things school-related, as well as some outside

concerns that were supported by connecting the students to other resources within and outside of the university. The veterans center demonstrated the way a population-specific communication strategy can be applied in other areas to engage and target other groups and subgroups of students.

Best Practices for a Strategic Communication Plan

As a compilation of the research conducted in this study, it is possible to create a communication strategy that targets and engages nontraditional students using Roberts' (2016) five tenets of strategic communication as a frame.

According to Roberts (2016), the first tenet of strategic communication is Intentional Message Design. For nontraditional students, based on what was learned in this study, this means ensuring that the 'message' you wish to share with nontraditional students is precise and to-the-point, and that the message is consistent across all communications media used to target nontraditional students.

The second tenet of strategic communication is The Correct Platform (Roberts, 2016). As a university, it is important to consider all platforms (e.g. social media, email, text, website links, etc.) when communicating with nontraditional students. The university must consider what is sometimes taken for granted, and that is that some of these students are technologically challenged and may not be knowledgeable of some of the platforms used for communicating messages from the university. This can result in missed opportunities to engage with many students. Missed communication can be just as problematic as a lack of communication.

Tenet three is Calculated Timing (Roberts, 2016). The timing of a message can be critical for the audience for which it is intended. Kramer (2016) states it this way: “The best communicators know how to time what they say to coincide with when their audience is most receptive. Whether that's in online or offline conversations, there's no difference.”

Therefore, for a university, knowing when their audience (nontraditional students) is going to receive messages is important. A nontraditional student with a family is not likely to be reading emails at 1:00am. And further, if that message comes in the form of social media, it can be ‘lost’ in a sea of subsequent messages and comments.

Next, the fourth tenet: Audience Selection and Analysis (Roberts, 2016). This may be the most important tenet for a university and incorporates the first three tenets discussed herein. For example, sending blanket messages to an entire university listserv that only affects a subgroup within the university is overkill and likely to be dismissed entirely. Additionally, analyzing the nontraditional students’ circumstances and challenges within the university population should drive the messaging and subsequent delivery.

And finally, the Desired Impact (Roberts, 2016). Marketing experts measure the impact of messaging to consumers as a rule. Having the desired impact means that it must be measured in some way. For example, if a message is sent for a university event, how does the university measure its success? That could mean simply counting the number of students attending, follow-up polls, revenue created, and so forth. The main point here is that messages are measured. A target goal for a university may be to

increase nontraditional student participation in student government. The follow-up to the messaging strategy must be a concrete measurement of success.

These five tenets of strategic communication (Roberts, 2016) can be a frame to begin constructing a solid plan for targeting and engaging nontraditional students. All of these, along with a better understanding of the barriers to success for nontraditional students, whether it be defining who they are or what their unique circumstances are, can ensure best practices for communicating with them, thereby leading to better outcomes of persistence and graduation rates. Specifically, those invested in creating such a plan should solicit and use regularly feedback from nontraditional students within their plan to ensure strategic communications are both effective and useful.

This study demonstrates the possible positive outcomes for developing communication strategies that target and engage nontraditional students. The following section describes the limitations to the study herein.

Limitations

The study was limited somewhat by the small sample size of nine participants, although the data collected from those participants was rich in detailed information and consistency in answers regarding their university's communication strategies. The use of a semi-structured interview was helpful in providing detailed examples and insights from the participants. However, the closing of the university to all in-person activity in March 2020 due to the Covid-19 pandemic required phone and electronic form interviews to be conducted. This limited the researcher's ability to collect paralanguage, which may have minimally affected the overall interpretation of the data.

Directions for Future Research

As a result of the information gathered in this study, opportunities exist for further exploration of the experiences of nontraditional students in relation to communication strategies within their universities. The label nontraditional should be challenged, and more inclusive language should be used by universities to ensure that all students feel that they are being heard and that their presence is valued. Some designations for nontraditional students that have circulated through academic and business sectors are post-traditional students, new contemporary students, and adult learners. Further research can encourage the premise that if nontraditional student success is contained in the mission statement, it must be put into practice. In other words, if a university's mission states that persistence and graduation rates for nontraditional students is a priority, what then is being done to meet that goal should be a part of that mission, too. This researcher contends that improved communication strategies that target and engage nontraditional students is a key factor in the future of the university, both fiscally and academically.

Conclusion

Understanding the diversity of the undergraduate student population is always a matter of great importance for a university, both for the vitality and growth of the institution, as well as the success of its students. Persistence toward graduation is an important consideration for universities and as nontraditional students currently make up as much as 85% of the population, it is critical to understand their unique experiences, especially from a strategic communication standpoint. The nontraditional students that participated in this study gave valuable information that may contribute to greater success

for the future of all students, with particular information related to their communication needs that emphasize a desire for greater sensitivity to the expressed needs of nontraditional students. Feedback from participants revealed important data indicating some successful and unsuccessful strategies of communication at the university of study, and provided insight for improvements to be made in the future for this researcher's university and others throughout the United States.

Additional services, such as those detailed in this study's case studies, can have a direct impact on the persistence and subsequent graduation of 'at risk' students. It is important to note that all students need support in one form or another, but more situation-specific resources can be created for nontraditional students to ensure that is the case. If, in fact, the goal of a university is to make sure its students succeed, then these types of programs are one method of ensuring this is so. Just that extra amount of focus and, in this case, targeted communication strategies, can assist nontraditional students in many positive ways, including helping them know what to do, who can help them, why they should persist toward graduation, and how they can best accomplish their goals.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Survey Instrument

Interview Guide:

Persistence between first- and second-year nontraditional students focusing on technology barriers.

Introductions / Purpose of Study

Present Informed Consent / Notify Participant of Research Results

Demographic Questions

1. Where are you from?
2. What is your degree of study?
3. Are you a full-time or part-time student?
4. What is your status? (Freshman, Sophomore, etc.)
5. What is your age? (optional)

Introductory

1. Why did you choose to continue your education?
2. Why did you choose this university?
3. What is the top challenge you face while attending school?
 - a. Personally
 - b. Academically / School requirements

Individual Feeling and Beliefs

1. Do you feel supported in your pursuit of your degree at your university?
 - a. If no, please explain.
 - b. If yes, please explain.
2. Do you feel you have the tools you need to be successful at school?
 - a. If no, please explain.
 - b. If yes, please explain.
3. Do you feel like you have a 'voice' at this university? Why or Why not?
4. Do you think that you receive enough information from your university via all of the communication channels you have available? (email, text, website, portal, social media) Why or why not?

School and Faculty/Administration

1. How do you feel about your university overall as a place to pursue your degree?

2. Do you feel that the faculty is available to you when you have concerns or questions? Why or why not?
3. Do you feel you receive the feedback you need in a timely manner? Give an example.
4. Do you feel valued as a student here? Explain.

Support systems

1. How do you feel about the availability and use of the computer systems to complete your coursework / research / registration, etc.?
2. Do you utilize any campus resources that are available to use to support your goals?
3. Do you feel that the university provides you with enough information in regard to financial aid and scholarships?
4. How can this university better prepare you to succeed?

Appendix B: Informed Consent

Dear Student Participant:

I am a graduate student from Youngstown State University. I am conducting a study to investigate student perceptions of communications at YSU among nontraditional students. In this study, you will be asked to participate in an interview and answer questions about your status as a student, your experiences with various communications utilized by and from YSU. I will also need to collect demographic information such as age, student Banner ID number, preferred gender, and year in school, determined by credits completed at the time of the study, and your nontraditional status. You will meet with me for one session and your participation should take about 30 minutes.

I anticipate that the risk you will encounter by participating in this study will be no more than that which you may encounter in everyday life. However, it is possible that some of the questions asked may bring up sensitive subjects for you (especially those related to academic performance). If at any point you wish not to answer a question or are uncomfortable with the line of questioning, please let me know and I will move on from that question or line of questioning, minimizing your risk for emotional distress. Additionally, if at any point you are concerned for your emotional well-being, you can immediately halt your participation in the study. Although not anticipated, if the study triggers a severe emotional reaction, I will immediately contact YSU's Student Counseling Services to ensure you can talk through the reaction with a licensed professional in a safe and confidential environment. This study will also ask you to consent to audio recording your participation. However, you do not have to consent to this recording if it makes you uncomfortable. If you do consent to have your participation audio recorded, I intend to take every measure possible to ensure your confidentiality by omitting all names from our transcriptions and by storing the audio recordings from this session in a secure, password-protected cloud storage location only accessible to the researchers in the study.

There are no immediate benefits to you from being in this study. However, study results will be used to help the university identify and address issues related to communication methods for nontraditional students, and allow for changes to be implemented to improve the experience of nontraditional students in relation to communications at YSU.

Your privacy is important to me and I will handle all information collected about you in a confidential manner. I will report the results of the project in a way that will not identify you. I do plan to present the results of the study to the academic committee for my thesis at Youngstown State University and within relevant academic journals and at relevant academic conferences but again, no information presented will compromise your confidentiality.

You do not have to be in this study. If you don't want to, you can say no without losing any benefits that you are entitled to nor will you incur any punishment. If you do agree to participate in the study, you can stop participating at any time. If you wish to withdraw from the study completely at any time, just tell me or the contact person listed below.

If you have questions about this research project, please contact Principal Investigator Dr. Shelley Blundell at sblundell@ysu.edu. If you have questions about your rights as a participant in a research project, you may contact the Office of Research Services at YSU (330-941-2377) or at YSUIRB@ysu.edu

I understand the study described above and have been given a copy of this consent document. I am 18 years of age or older and I agree to participate.

Signature of Participant

Date

I agree to have my participation in this study audio recorded by those conducting the study.

Signature of Participant

Date

Appendix C: Recruitment Instrument

Hello, my fellow students!

I hope this finds you well. My name is Sonja Hixenbaugh, and I am a graduate student in the Master of Arts in Professional Communication degree program at Youngstown State University. I am conducting research for my thesis pertaining to non-traditional students. I am examining communication strategies in higher education that target and engage non-traditional undergraduate students.

I am recruiting participants who are **non-traditional undergraduate students** currently enrolled at YSU. Participants should be 25 years or older and be available to participate in a 30-minute phone interview to discuss your experience and perceptions of communication channels at YSU. Your participant identity will be kept confidential during and beyond the study.

This research project has been approved by the YSU Institutional Review Board under Protocol number 130-20, and will be conducted under the supervision of my thesis chair, Dr. Shelley Blundell.

If you would like to volunteer or have any questions about my study, you can contact me via email: shixenbaugh@student.ysu.edu.

Thank you in advance and I look forward to talking with you soon.

Kind regards,

Sonja Hixenbaugh
Graduate Candidate, Professional Communications
330-240-2122

Appendix D: IRB Protocol 130-20

Shelley Blundell

From: Karen H Larwin
Sent: Friday, March 13, 2020 6:55 PM
To: Sonja Hixenbaugh; Shelley Blundell
Cc: ckcoy@ysu.edu
Subject: Re: Protocol 130-20 (ltr)

Dear Investigators,

Your protocol entitled Examining organizational communication strategies in higher education that target and engage non-traditional undergraduate students has been reviewed and is deemed to meet the criteria of an exempt protocol. You will use convenience sampling to recruit students 25 years and older. Data will be collected qualitatively through ethnographical observation, student interviews, and follow-up surveys. You will record interviews with the participant's permission. You will not connect identifying information to the data; you will store the data for at least 3 years in a secure way.

The research project meets the expectations of 45 CFR 46.104(b)(2) and is therefore approved. You may begin the investigation immediately. Please note that it is the responsibility of the principal investigator to report immediately to the YSU IRB any deviations from the protocol and/or any adverse events that occur. Please reference your protocol number 130-20 in all correspondence about the research associated with this protocol.

Good luck with your research.

Karen

Karen H. Larwin, Ph.D.
Associate Professor, YSU IRB Chair &
Distinguished Professor
Counseling, School Psychology, & Educational Leadership
Beechlv College of Education
Youngstown State University
One University Plaza
Youngstown, Ohio 44555-0001

"If you can't explain it simply, you don't understand it well enough." -Einstein

Leadership is not about titles, positions or flowcharts. It is about one life influencing another."
— John C. Maxwell

 Date
 Protocol Number

CLAIM OF EXEMPTION APPLICATION

Request for designation as Exempt for a research project involving no risk to human subjects

A. INVESTIGATOR INFORMATION			
<p>Please list all study personnel involved in the conduct of this study. All study personnel must complete required training in human subject research and provide to the IRB office documentation verifying completion of the requirement. The IRB will not review a study without such forms on file for all research personnel. Only YSU faculty, staff, students, or registered volunteers are considered YSU affiliated and thus covered by the YSU IRB review. All non-affiliated study personnel must have their participation reviewed by the appropriate IRB. (Attach a separate sheet if more space is needed.)</p>			
STUDY TITLE	Examining organizational communication strategies in higher education that target and engage non-traditional undergraduate students		
PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR OR FACULTY ADVISOR	Dr. Shelley Blundell	Phone Extension 1839	Email Address sblundell@ysu.edu
DEPARTMENT	Communication		
CO-INVESTIGATOR OR STUDENT INVESTIGATOR	Sonja Hixenbaugh	Phone Extension 330-240-2122	Email Address shixenbaugh@student.ysu.edu
CO-INVESTIGATOR OR STUDENT INVESTIGATOR		Phone Extension	Email Address
CO-INVESTIGATOR OR STUDENT INVESTIGATOR		Phone Extension	Email Address
B. SPONSOR/FUNDING INFORMATION			

Will this project be supported by an external funding agency?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> X No
If yes, please identify the source and contact information		
Agency:	Contact Person:	Phone: Email:

C. LOCATION OF RESEARCH			
Where will the study take place?	YSU <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> X	Other Facility: Kent State University	
If not at YSU, attach a letter of cooperation on the letterhead of the facility and provide contact information. If there are multiple facilities, attach an additional page with the information for each. Request sent to Josh Rider at Kent State – See Appendix III: Approval to conduct research at Kent State University notice			
Facility Name: KSU	Contact Person: Josh Rider	Phone:330-672-0501	Email: jrider@kent.edu

D. RATIONALE FOR EXEMPT CATEGORY CLAIMED
The information must include a brief specific description, <u>written in lay terms</u>, of the procedure(s) involving the human subjects in sufficient detail to demonstrate to the IRB reviewer that the research protocol meets the requirements for each category of exemption claimed in this human subjects research protocol. Complete <u>all</u> of the following :
Describe the background of the study and the objectives of the research project. This research project will focus on organizational communication strategies that target and engage nontraditional undergraduate students. The objective is to increase awareness of the growing nontraditional population, the challenges they face in university environments, and the communication plans that are used to support them.
Provide the rationale for the use of the selected subject population and plans for recruitment (include the number of subjects, inclusions/exclusions). Obstacles for nontraditional students can be unique to their population for a variety of reasons, and organizational communication strategies can be effective in retention and attainment. Model programs demonstrate what a successful program can look like. The strategies that are employed by these successful programs can provide a framework to emulated by other universities. Students who are 25 years and older account for approximately 43% of students enrolled on campuses throughout the United States. YSU specifically has a nontraditional student population of 26% of those enrolled. In order to study nontraditional students, the subjects will be 25 years and older and will be recruited using information obtained from YSU and Kent State University staff. Non-probability convenience sampling with be the method of selection.
Will your subjects be compensated? How? No

<p>Describe the methods to be used for data collection and data analysis.</p> <p>Data will be collected qualitatively through ethnographical observation, student interviews and follow-up surveys. Data will be analyzed using qualitative content analysis.</p>
<p>Describe the risks and benefits, if any, to the subjects.</p> <p>We anticipate that the risk participants will encounter by participating in this study will be no more than that which they may encounter in everyday life. However, it is possible that some of the questions asked may bring up sensitive subjects for them (especially those related to academic performance). If at any point they wish not to answer a question or are uncomfortable with the line of questioning, they can let the interviewer know and the interviewer will move on from that question or line of questioning, minimizing their risk for emotional distress. Additionally, if at any point the participant is concerned for their emotional well-being, they can immediately halt their participation in the study. Although not anticipated, if the study triggers a severe emotional reaction, we will immediately contact YSU’s Student Counseling Services to ensure the participant can talk through the reaction with a licensed professional in a safe and confidential environment. This study will also ask participants to consent to audio recording your participation.</p> <p>However, they do not have to consent to this recording if it makes them uncomfortable. If they do consent to have their participation audio recorded, we intend to take every measure possible to ensure their confidentiality by omitting all names from our transcriptions and by storing the audio recordings from this session in a secure, password-protected cloud storage location only accessible to the researchers in the study. There are no immediate benefits to participants from being in this study</p>
<p>What steps will be taken to protect the privacy (anonymity and/or confidentiality) of the subjects.</p> <p>The identity of each participant in the study will be known to only the principal and co-investigators. Findings will be reported in such a way that no individual participant will be identifiable and participant identities will be kept confidential beyond the study.</p>
<p>What plans do you have for data retention and document storage?</p> <p>Information related to the study will be securely stored within password protected cloud storage space on Microsoft OneDrive, to which only the PI and the CI have access.</p>
<p>You must notify the IRB immediately if an adverse event should occur during your project, however unlikely. What other procedures will you use to manage and adverse event if one should occur?</p> <p>In the event of an adverse situation all subjects will be contacted via their preferred point of contact by the principal investigator and/or co-investigators. In the unlikely event that an adverse situation makes participants identifiable, there is no potential harm to participants anticipated if this information is revealed.</p>
<p>E. SURVEYS AND QUESTIONNAIRES, IF APPLICABLE</p>
<p>Please attach a copy of each survey, questionnaire, or other instrument that you intend to use in this study.</p>
<p>Is the Instrument you are using self-generated? If not, identify the source of the document. Instrument is self-generated – Please see Appendix I: Interview Guide.</p>

<p>Describe the setting and mode of administering the instrument (e.g., by phone, one-on-one, group) Quiet office on the first floor of Meshel Hall at YSU and the in Center for Adult and Veteran Services at Kent State University, administered by Co-Investigator in one-on-one settings for the interviews.</p>
<p>F. ANALYSIS OF EXISTING DATA, IF APPLICABLE</p>
<p>Existing data is data that was collected before the research is proposed and must have been collected for reasons other than the proposed research project.</p>
<p>Describe the database or data to be analyzed.</p>
<p>If publicly available, give the name of the database and identify the holder of the data. If not, provide documentation that you have permission to access the data.</p>
<p>How and when was the data originally collected and how large will your sampling be?</p>
<p>Will you be recording identifiers (information items that could potentially identify human subjects)? Describe them.</p>
<p>G. INFORMED CONSENT</p>
<p>Ethical and regulatory guidelines ensure that potential subjects must be fully informed about the research in a manner comprehensible to them and then be allowed to choose whether to participate in the research. Attach an Informed Consent Form of your own design, according to the YSU Guidelines for Fully Informed Consent for each subject population, or a Waiver of Informed Consent Request Form. The IRB has provided a template containing the Elements of Informed Consent/Assent (per 45 CFR 116) on the YSU IRB website: http://cms.ysu.edu/administrativeoffices/research/human-subjectsinstitutional-review-board. Using the template is strongly suggested in order to eliminate errors and revisions.</p>
<p>If the subjects are children under 18 years of age, you must provide for both written Informed Consent of the parent or guardian and for Assent of the child.</p>
<p>Informed Consent for an anonymous survey can take the form of a statement preceding the survey that includes the Elements of Informed Consent and states that completion of the survey implies consent.</p>



March 3, 2020

Institutional Review Board

Youngstown State University

1 University Plaza

Youngstown, OH 44555

To Whom it May Concern,

I am writing this as a letter of support for the study (Examining organizational communication strategies in higher education that target and engage nontraditional undergraduate students.) that Sonja Hixenbaugh will be conducting at Kent State University. It is my believe that this will advance the work of institutions of higher education in working with the target population and will be beneficial to the whole.

If you have any questions, please don't hesitate to reach out to me directly. My contact information is below.

Sincerely,


XXXXXXXXXXXX

Joshua Rider

Interim Assistant Dean of Students and

Director, Center for Adult and Veteran Students

Kent State University

330-672-0510

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Center for Adult and Veteran Services

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