

Number of the Week: “Non-Traditional” Students Are Majority on College Campuses

By Ben Casselman

29%:The share of college undergraduates who are traditional students.

The word “college” tends to call to mind images of fresh-faced young students studying, living and, yes, partying on or near leafy suburban campuses. But that picture only describes a small fraction of the nation’s 18 million undergraduates—even though such students dominate the public debate over the value of a college education.

First of all, more than 40% of all undergraduates in the 2011-2012 school year were enrolled in community colleges and other two-year institutions, according to [Education Department data](#). Of the ones in four-year programs, more than one in five attend school part-time. That leaves a bit more than 8 million students who are enrolled full-time in four-year schools, or 45% of all undergraduates.

That figure hasn’t changed much in recent years. But what has changed is where they’re going to school. In 2001, less than 4% of full-time, four-year students attended for-profit schools. A decade later, that figure was nearly 11%, and has almost certainly continued to rise. That leaves 7.3 million full-time students in four-year programs at public or nonprofit colleges.

One final factor: age. More than two million of the remaining students were over age 21 in the fall of 2011, the traditional age of a first-semester senior. Nearly a million were at least 25, and nearly half a million were in their 30s or older.

Put it all together and there were just over 5 million “traditional” students—full-time students of standard college age enrolled in four-year public or nonprofit colleges—in the fall of 2011. That’s just 29% of all undergraduates.

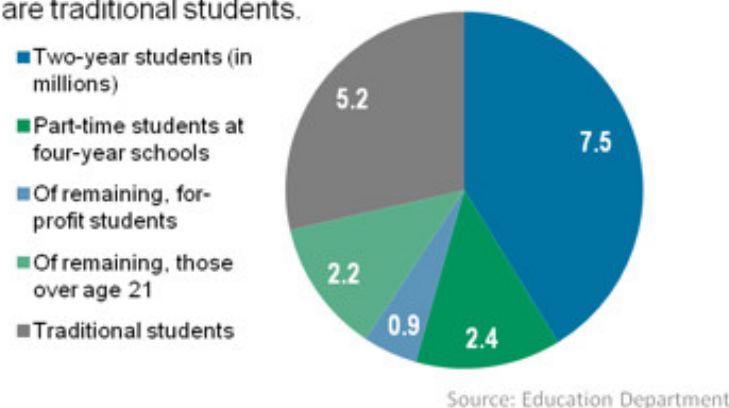
Even that probably overstates the figure. More than half a million students are enrolled in schools that don’t grant degrees at all, meaning they aren’t officially considered undergraduates. And even many full-time, four-year students attend commuter schools rather than colleges with traditional residential campuses. A [2011 study](#) from [Complete College America](#), an Indiana nonprofit, estimated that just a quarter of students are enrolled full-time in residential colleges.

The distinction is important. In recent years, rising college costs, soaring student debt levels and high rates of unemployment among recent college graduates have all led to [questions](#) about the value of a college degree. But that debate has tended to focus on a certain type of student—one that isn’t representative of the broader population.

Two-year students, for example, are far less likely than their four-year counterparts to study subjects such as English, history or visual arts, and much more likely to be in technical training or in career-oriented fields such as health care, according to education department data. Among four-year students, there’s a similar split by

In Class, Off-Campus

Only a fraction of the nation’s 18 million undergraduates are traditional students.



age: Older students are disproportionately likely to major in business, computer science and engineering.

Similarly, the public conversation has often focused on college graduates with heavy debt loads. Less attention has been given to part-time students—more than a third of all undergraduates—who tend to have lighter debt loads but are far **less likely to graduate**. Student loan default rates, meanwhile, are much **higher among for-profit colleges** than other institutions.