“College kids” is a phrase beloved by lawmakers working on higher education policy and reporters covering campus life.

A quick review of recent news finds the phrase in headlines and stories ranging from dorm life (“Tips for moving college kids into dorms”) to state college attendance patterns (“Why are so many college kids fleeing the state?”) to relaxing federal regulations on college fraud (“Scammed college kids”) to public reporting on football injuries (“College kids get NFL treatment”). Even some faculty and administrators use the phrase that recalls their own halcyon days of lounging in the dorm, racing across the quad, and preparing for Thursday night parties at the frat.

But the reality is very different from the infantilizing “college kids” jargon. Fewer than 20% of undergraduates today are traditional-aged students (18-22 years old) living on campus, attending full-time, with mom and dad most likely paying the bills. According to the U.S. Department of Education, about 75% of all undergraduates have one or more “non-traditional” characteristics—commuting to college, working, attending part-time, paying for their own education. About 27%
of undergraduates are over age 24. About 25% of undergraduates are also parents. Such characteristics are so prevalent today that many universities now talk about serving the “post-traditional” student. Whether 18 or 48, the majority of undergraduate students today are not “kids” but adults with serious responsibilities that compete for their time, attention, and financial resources while they are trying to earn degrees.

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In her paper on The Adult Student, reporter Goldie Blumenstyk of The Chronicle of Higher Education observes that, for too long, both colleges and policymakers have shaped their programs, services, rules, and regulations according to the characteristics of traditional students while largely ignoring the majority of students with very different characteristics and attendance patterns. As one example with serious policy ramifications, for decades the U.S. Department of Education (USDE) has calculated the “graduation rate” based on full-time first-time students remaining at the same college where they first enrolled. Students who transfer to another college—more than one-third of today’s undergrads—are treated as “drop-outs” under this formula even if they complete elsewhere in four years. Students who finish degrees beyond the traditional four- to six-year timeframe (which is true for many older students) are also considered drop-outs even if they ultimately finish their degrees. USDE is working on a new formula, but current federal data collection fails to capture the remarkable differences in the post-traditional population, and this failure leads to bad policy decisions.

Increasingly, advocates for improving the educational attainment of the U.S. population point to the urgency of unmasking the myth of “college kids” to get more adults to complete degrees. More than 80 million American adults do not have college degrees, and of that number about 35 million have earned some college credits but did not persist through degree completion. Meanwhile, demographic changes presage a decline in the collegiate enrollment of traditional-aged students immediately out of high school across the next decade. While colleges and universities are starting to take the post-traditional student markets more seriously, their ability to enroll millions more adult students will require serious changes in programs and delivery formats, as well as federal and state policy changes.

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To understand the changing collegiate student population and the need to adapt policies and programs to their needs, consider these stories, composite examples of today’s college students drawn from our experience at Trinity Washington University:

Joe is a 43-year-old office manager who struggled with math in high school. After high school, Joe went to work instead of college, and he spent the next 25 years moving through a series of low-paying administrative jobs. His bosses said he was smart, but without a college degree he could not move up into management positions. Because of his bad experiences with math in high school, he shunned the thought of going back to school, but finally, in his early 40s, the constant
rejections in the job market convinced him he had to try again. At a college with good adult student support, Joe was stunned to realize that he could do math! He enjoyed learning again and soon made the Dean’s List. But his progress toward a degree remains slow since his work schedule, some health issues, and the need to care for his elderly mother have required him to take semesters off.

Joe’s situation is typical for the nearly 80 million American adults (persons aged 25-65) who do not have college degrees. According to the Georgetown Center for Education and the Workforce, nearly two-thirds of today’s jobs require some postsecondary education, and possession of a college degree is essential to move up the employment ladder. Too many adults like Joe waste precious time thinking that they cannot succeed in school or believing that their employers will promote them anyway once they prove their abilities. While some employers may do just that, many more employers adhere to strict job classifications that include mandatory postsecondary credentials. Working professionals like Joe also face competing demands on their time, from inflexible work schedules to coping with mid-life health problems to needing time off to care for elderly parents. Adult students need colleges that can provide support and strategies to manage these complicated life issues along the way to graduation.

Octavia is a 32-year-old mother of three, an immigrant from Guatemala who loves her job as an aide in a child care center in Washington, D.C. She was dismayed, however, when D.C. passed a law requiring child care workers to obtain at least associate’s degrees. She was fearful of going to college for many reasons—cost, time constraints, and her less-than-proficient English. But a partnership between her employer and a local university helped her get into a program designed to support her needs, including language coaching and some classes delivered at her work site. With the help of a grant from the local government, she is on her way to completing her associates degree.

Like many college students of all ages today, Octavia is a first-generation student. “First gen” programs put a lot of emphasis on students right out of high school, but millions of first-generation students are older, holding down jobs and raising families while learning to navigate the strange new territories of college campuses. As Blumenstyk’s study points out, older Latino and African American students face particular barriers, and they must have support systems tailored to their particular needs—time management skills, language coaching, transportation options, and math and writing tutoring. Universities can be effective with older first-generation students by working with employers to create sensible pathways back to school, including course delivery in the workplace, hybrid and online options, and credit for prior learning.

Keisha is a 24-year-old single mom who started college right out of high school when she was 18, drifting through the first year without much focus, leading to poor grades and loss of her scholarship. She transferred to a local community college and accumulated general education credits, but she could not decide on a career path. Along the way she had a baby, found a new job as a receptionist in a medical office, and decided she would like to be a nurse. She is returning to college with hopes of enrolling in a nursing program once she finishes prerequisites, but she has concerns about the amount of her federal financial aid eligibility she has already used up. She will need other forms of financial aid to finish her nursing degree.
Federal financial aid policy embeds many disincentives for adult students like Keisha. Federal student loans and Pell Grants allow only 12 semesters of participation eligibility; many adults who return to college to pursue a new career direction discover that their earlier participation in federal financial aid programs has used up much of their eligibility. Even if eligibility is not a problem, adults also struggle with the federal regulation that requires “half-time” enrollment to qualify for federal aid; “half-time” usually means six credits or two courses per semester, but many working adults cannot take two courses at the same time.

With prospects for any significant changes in federal financial aid policy unlikely for the foreseeable future, universities need to find other sources of support for students like Keisha who will exceed her federal aid eligibility time limits before she completes her degree. Many employers provide tuition assistance, and since Keisha is already working in a medical office, her employer might provide tuition benefits. Alternatively, with the help of the university’s Office of Career Services, she might be able to leverage her medical office experience to find work in a hospital that pays tuition benefits for nursing education. Grants and scholarships might also be available from outside sources; colleges can do more to raise scholarship support for adult students, especially in specific professional fields.

Jasmine is already emancipated at age 19. Her mother passed away while she was in high school; her father was never in the picture. Her grandmother helps as much as she can, but with three younger siblings also in her grandmother’s care, Jasmine knows resources are scarce. Jasmine is determined to earn her degree in criminal justice so she can get a good job in law enforcement. But for now, she takes odd jobs that earn low wages and spends nights couch surfing among friends; she has even spent some nights sleeping in her boyfriend’s car. She wishes she could stay in the dorm, but her scholarships cover only tuition. Sometimes she has skipped meals in order to have enough money for a week’s worth of Metro cards. She’s determined to make it to graduation, but some days that seems like a distant dream.

Food and housing insecurity are real issues for post-traditional students. A 2018 study by Dr. Sara Goldrick-Rab of Temple University found that as many as one-third of college students experience food insecurity, bellying the stereotype of “college kids” with endless pizza deliveries. More than 600 colleges and universities now include food pantries as part of their student life programs, and some are part of the “Swipe Out Hunger” program that allows students to donate their unused meal card swipes to help students who need food. Some institutions have adapted standard housing contracts and meal plans, creating affordable commuter student options for dining, options to live in residence for shorter periods of time than the standard semester, housing for single parents, and emergency housing for homeless students. Some colleges are reconsidering the standard practice of closing residence and dining halls on break periods during or between semesters, since the assumption that resident students can “go home” for spring break or winter holidays is no longer true for increasing numbers of students. Adapting food service contracts and campus housing policies to the needs of post-traditional student populations is a major challenge for business officers, deans of students, and campus service providers alike.

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Joe, Octavia, Keisha, and Jasmine are all part of the changing face of higher education. Like these four examples, college students today have a wide age span, hold down various kinds of jobs, have children, pay their own tuition bills, need flexible schedules, attend part-time as well as full-time, earn credit at multiple institutions, have complicated family situations, sometimes suffer hunger and homelessness, and follow pathways to degrees that are rarely in a straight four-year timeline. College leaders and public policymakers need to work together to ensure that everything from financial aid policies and prior credit evaluation to curriculum design and campus services support the new majority of post-traditional students. Their academic success is vital to enable their advancement in today’s workforce, improve the economic security of their families, and be part of achieving national goals for greater educational attainment for all Americans.