

Special Analyses





Contents

Private Schools: A Brief Portrait	2
Nontraditional Undergraduates	25

Private Schools: A Brief Portrait

Martha Naomi Alt and Katharin Peter

INTRODUCTION

Private schools are owned and governed by entities that are independent of any government—typically, religious bodies or independent boards of trustees. Private schools also receive funding primarily from nonpublic sources: tuition payments and often other private sources, such as foundations, religious bodies, alumni, or other private donors. In contrast, state and local education agencies (districts) and publicly elected or appointed school boards govern public schools. At some schools, parent/teacher organizations or similar groups also play a role. Public schools receive nearly all their funding from local, state, and federal governments, supplemented occasionally by grants/donations from corporations and foundations, and parent- or student-initiated fundraising activities.

Choice is another defining characteristic of private schools: families choose private education, and private schools may choose which students to accept. In contrast, public school districts generally assign students to particular schools, and those schools usually accept all students assigned. However, public school systems are expanding school choice options through magnet and charter schools, open enrollment, and similar offerings, and, in a few instances, through publicly funded vouchers. Families with sufficient financial resources have always been able to choose a public school by choosing where to live, but school choice options are also increasingly available for others. Thus, public school districts are sometimes selective about who attends specific schools, and families may have some choice within the public sector as well. The proportion of public school children attending a chosen school (rather than the school assigned by residence location) has increased in recent years (*indicator 29*). In 1999, for example, 16 percent of public school students in grades 1–12 attended a school the family had chosen, up from 12 percent in 1993.

Nonpublic governance and enrollment choice are features that all private schools share, but there is wide variation within the private sector on many measures. This analysis highlights some elements of diversity among private schools (detailing some differences among three broad groups of private schools: Catholic, other religious, and nonsectarian) and notes several aspects that differ between the public and private sectors overall. More detail about the types and affiliations of private schools and their staffs, as well as additional comparisons between the public and private sectors, can be found in Broughman and Colaciello (2001); Baker, Han, and Keil (1996); Henke et al. (1996, 1997); McLaughlin (1997); and in a forthcoming NCES report on private schools.

Although this analysis compares *averages* for the private and public sectors (and for three private school types), no inferences can be drawn from these data about causality. Any number of variables distinct from school sector and type may contribute to inputs and outcomes. For example, student characteristics such as socioeconomic status (SES), prior achievement and support for learning at home, and motivation level may influence student outcomes, independent of the sector of school attended. Characteristics of schools such as enrollment size, community type, and student body composition may also affect outcomes, regardless of school sector. Further research may attempt to identify which variables contribute to certain outcomes—for example, a study may compare achievement of private and public school students while controlling for characteristics like SES—but that is beyond the scope of this brief analysis.

The data presented are from the NCES Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS:1999–2000), the National Assessment of Educational Progress High School Transcript Study of 1998 (NAEP:1998), the NAEP:2000 student achievement tests, and

Private Schools: A Brief Portrait

Continued

the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988, “Fourth Follow-up” (NELS:1988/2000). Further information on these surveys can be found at <http://nces.ed.gov/surveys/>.

SCHOOLS AND STUDENTS

In 1999–2000, approximately 27,000 private schools, with 404,000 full-time-equivalent (FTE) teachers, enrolled 5.3 million students (table 1). These schools accounted for 24 percent of all schools in the United States, 10 percent of all students, and 12 percent of all FTE teachers.¹ Private schools have maintained their share of total school enrollments throughout recent decades at roughly 10–11 percent, with growth rates parallel to those of public schools (U.S. Department of Education 2001b). Schools that had some of grades 1–12, or equivalent ungraded classes, are included in the SASS:1999–2000 data and discussion that follow; these schools may or may not also offer kindergarten or preschool grades. Analysis of public sector SASS:1999–2000 data includes traditional public and public charter schools and their staffs (and excludes Bureau of Indian Affairs-funded schools and their staffs).²

Seventy-nine percent of all private schools had a religious affiliation in 1999–2000: 30 percent were affiliated with the Roman Catholic Church, and 49 percent with other religious groups (figure 1). The remaining 22 percent were nonsectarian. Although Catholic schools accounted for 30 percent of the total number of schools, they enrolled 48 percent of all private school students. Each of these three types of private schools can be further disaggregated into three more specific types. In addition, private schools may belong to one or more associations, reflecting either a particular religious affiliation, a special program or pedagogical emphasis, or some other element of the school. Broughman and Colaciello (2001) show in table 15 the numbers of schools that belong to a wide range of associations.

School location and level

Private schools in 1999–2000 were located primarily in central cities (42 percent) and the urban fringe or large towns (40 percent) (table 2). About 18 percent of private schools were found in rural areas. In contrast, 24 percent of all public schools were in central city locations, 45 per-

Table 1.—Percentage and number of schools, students, and full-time-equivalent (FTE) teachers in each sector and in each of three private school types: 1999–2000

Sector	Percentage of total:			Number:		
	Schools	Students	Teachers (FTE)	Schools	Students	Teachers (FTE)
Public	75.7	89.6	87.8	84,735	45,366,227	2,905,658
Private	24.3	10.4	12.2	27,223	5,262,849	404,066
Private school type	Percentage of all private:			Schools	Students	Teachers (FTE)
Catholic	29.8	48.4	37.6	8,102	2,548,710	152,102
Other religious	48.7	35.6	37.9	13,268	1,871,851	153,071
Nonsectarian	21.5	16.0	24.5	5,853	842,288	98,893

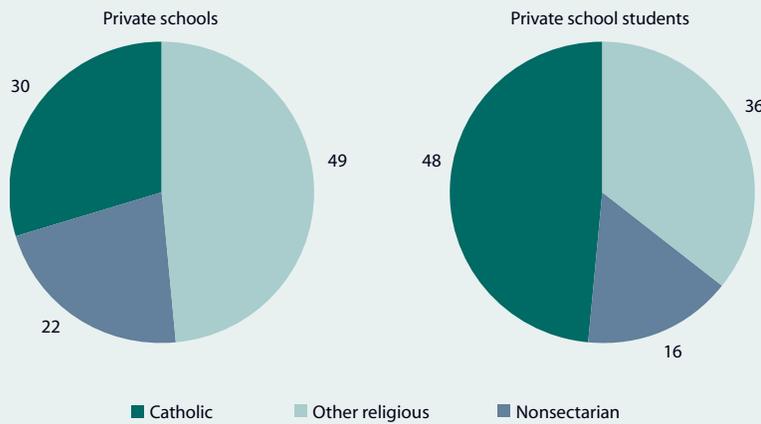
NOTE: Percentages may not add to 100.0 due to rounding.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, NCES. Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS), “Public, Public Charter, and Private School Surveys,” 1999–2000.

Private Schools: A Brief Portrait

Continued

Figure 1.—Percentage distribution of private schools and students enrolled, by private school type: 1999–2000



NOTE: Percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, NCES. Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS), "Public, Public Charter, and Private School Surveys," 1999–2000.

Table 2.—Percentage distribution of schools according to community type and level, by sector and private school type: 1999–2000

Sector and type	Community type			Level		
	Central city	Urban fringe/ large town	Rural/ small town	Elementary	Secondary	Combined
Public	24.1	44.6	31.3	71.4	24.6	4.0
Private	42.4	39.9	17.7	60.8	9.5	29.7
Private school type						
Catholic	46.5	41.3	12.2	82.1	13.9	4.1
Other religious	37.6	38.6	23.8	52.9	6.0	41.2
Nonsectarian	47.4	40.9	11.7	49.5	11.4	39.1

NOTE: Percentages may not add to 100.0 due to rounding.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, NCES. Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS), "Public, Public Charter, and Private School Surveys," 1999–2000.

cent in the urban fringe or large towns, and 31 percent in rural areas. Most schools—61 percent of private and 71 percent of public—were elementary, but 10 percent of private schools and 25 percent of public schools were secondary. Fi-

nally, a much higher proportion of private schools (30 percent) were combined schools (usually grades K–12 or 1–12), compared with only 4 percent of public schools.

Private Schools: A Brief Portrait

Continued

School and class sizes

Some research suggests that small/intermediate-sized schools and relatively small classes can have advantages, including possibly leading to higher achievement (Klonsky 1995; Raywid 1995; Lee and Smith 1997), although some of the findings are debated.³ This research has found that placing students in small groups tends to foster close working relationships between teachers and students, thus enhancing learning (Lee and Smith 1993) particularly among at-risk students and those in the early grades (Lee and Smith 1995; Krueger and Whitmore 2001). Fairly small schools are also believed to promote teachers' commitment to collaborative work and to support the development of a "professional community of learners" that Newmann and Wehlage (1995) consider useful for high student achievement. In addition to the possible advantages of small schools, they may have some disadvantages as well, such as providing a narrower set of programs and services. The smallest high schools may not be able to offer advanced courses because they have too few students, a shortage of qualified teachers, or both. The data in *indicator 27*, which examines the proportions of

students who completed advanced science and mathematics courses in high schools of different sizes, shows that moderate-sized high schools may provide advantages.

■ *On average, private schools have smaller enrollments, smaller average class sizes, and lower student/teacher ratios than public schools.*

School size is typically related to the population density of the local area and its age distribution of children; for private schools, local demand for a school's instructional philosophy also contributes to size of enrollment. The average private school had 193 students in 1999–2000, while the average public school had 535 students (table 3). Among private schools, 80 percent had enrollments of fewer than 300, compared with 29 percent of public schools. Within the private sector, Catholic schools had larger enrollments than other types of schools. About 43 percent of Catholic schools had 150–299 students in 1999–2000 (a higher proportion than in the other two school types), and another 38 percent had 300 or more students. In comparison, 11–12 percent of other religious schools and nonsectarian schools had

Table 3.—Average number of students enrolled and percentage distribution of schools according to enrollment size, by sector and private school type: 1999–2000

Sector and type	Average school enrollment	Percentage distribution of schools by size				
		Fewer than 50 students	50–99 students	100–149 students	150–299 students	300 or more students
Public	535	4.0	4.3	4.6	16.2	70.9
Private	193	26.1	16.4	12.1	25.8	19.6
Private school type						
Catholic	315	1.1	7.4	10.3	42.7	38.4
Other religious	141	36.8	19.9	11.0	20.6	11.7
Nonsectarian	144	36.4	20.8	17.1	14.3	11.4

NOTE: Percentages may not add to 100.0 due to rounding.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, NCES. Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS), "Public, Public Charter, and Private School Surveys," 1999–2000.

Private Schools: A Brief Portrait

Continued

300 or more students. About 36–37 percent of other religious and nonsectarian schools had fewer than 50 students. Such small schools were rare, however, among Catholic schools (1 percent) and in the public sector as a whole (4 percent).

The average class size reported by teachers was larger in public schools than in private schools for both self-contained (the norm for elementary grades) and departmentalized classes (typical in middle and upper grades). Teachers in Catholic schools had an average of 23 students in their departmentalized classes, and in public schools the figure was 24 students (table 4). In both Catholic and public schools, however, departmentalized classes were larger than in other religious and nonsectarian schools, where the average class sizes were 17 and 15 students, respectively.

The schoolwide student/teacher ratio tends to be smaller than the average size of self-contained or departmentalized classes (shown in table 4) mainly because the student/teacher ratio includes any pull-out, enrichment, and other special classes. Private schools had an average of 13 students per FTE teacher, compared with an average of 16 students per teacher in public schools. Furthermore, 36 percent of private

schools had a student/teacher ratio lower than 10:1, compared with 10 percent of public schools.

Special instructional approaches and programs

Private schools may be established specifically to implement a particular instructional approach, such as Montessori, or a specific curricular focus. Some public schools have adopted special approaches as well, but the public sector included a smaller proportion of such schools than did the private sector in 1999–2000 (20 versus 28 percent) (figure 2). However, public schools were more likely than private schools to offer many specialized programs and courses—for example, gifted/talented programs; Advanced Placement (AP) and college credit courses; and career academies, vocational courses, and work-based learning. About 13–14 percent of schools in each sector offered a foreign language immersion program. (Figure 2 shows the percentages of all schools that had a specific instructional approach, a gifted program, and foreign language immersion, while the other measures in figure 2 are restricted to schools with grades 9–12.)

Among private schools, nonsectarian ones were the most likely to use a specific instructional ap-

Table 4.—Average class size, student/teacher ratios, and percentage of schools with a student/teacher ratio less than 10:1, by sector and private school type: 1999–2000

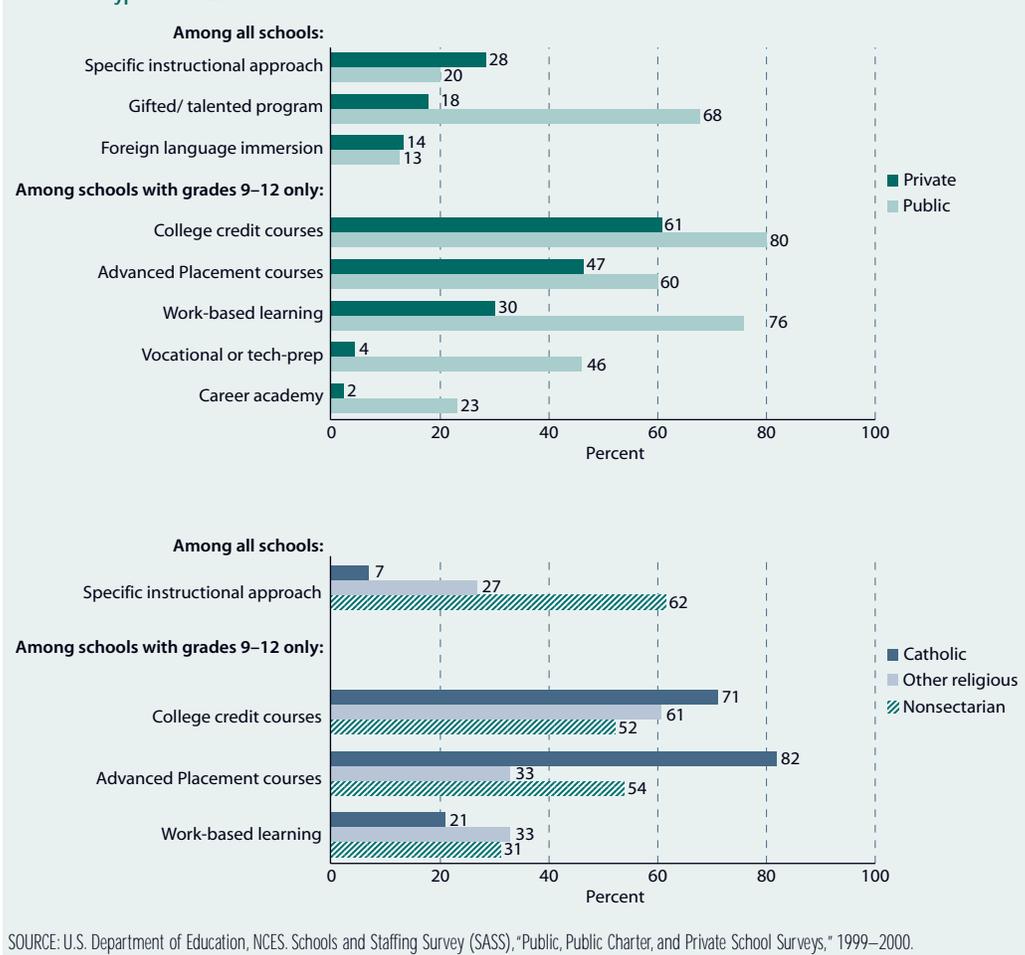
Sector and type	Average class size		Student/teacher ratio	Percent of schools with a student/teacher ratio less than 10:1
	Self-contained	Departmentalized		
Public	20.9	23.6	15.6	9.7
Private	18.9	18.8	13.2	35.8
Private school type				
Catholic	23.6	23.2	17.2	8.4
Other religious	17.1	16.8	12.5	38.5
Nonsectarian	15.4	14.8	9.1	67.5

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, NCES. Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS), "Public, Public Charter, and Private School and Teacher Surveys," 1999–2000.

Private Schools: A Brief Portrait

Continued

Figure 2.—Percentage of schools offering particular instructional approaches or special programs, by sector and private school type: 1999–2000



SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, NCES. Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS), "Public, Public Charter, and Private School Surveys," 1999–2000.

proach (62 percent), compared with other religious (27 percent) and Catholic schools (7 percent). Large proportions of Catholic high (or combined) schools provided AP and college credit courses (82 and 71 percent, respectively), higher percentages than those in either other religious or nonsectarian schools. Catholic schools with grades 9–12 were less likely than other religious schools to have work-based learning programs.

Demographic characteristics of students

Racial/ethnic and socioeconomic diversity in schools offer academic and social benefits in a society where students need to work well in heterogeneous groups in school, jobs, and social settings (e.g., Coleman et al. 1966; Eaton 2001; Schofield 2001). In addition, research suggests that diversity in a school's enrollment can help low-income and minority students increase their

Private Schools: A Brief Portrait

Continued

achievement and attainment, reduce dropout rates, and improve critical thinking skills and the ability to understand opposing viewpoints. (Syntheses of research on these topics can be found in St. John 1975; Cook 1984; Wells and Crain 1994; and Schofield 1995.) Student populations in private and public schools and in different types of private schools vary on some basic demographic measures, including race/ethnicity, limited-English proficiency (LEP) status, and the family's socioeconomic background.

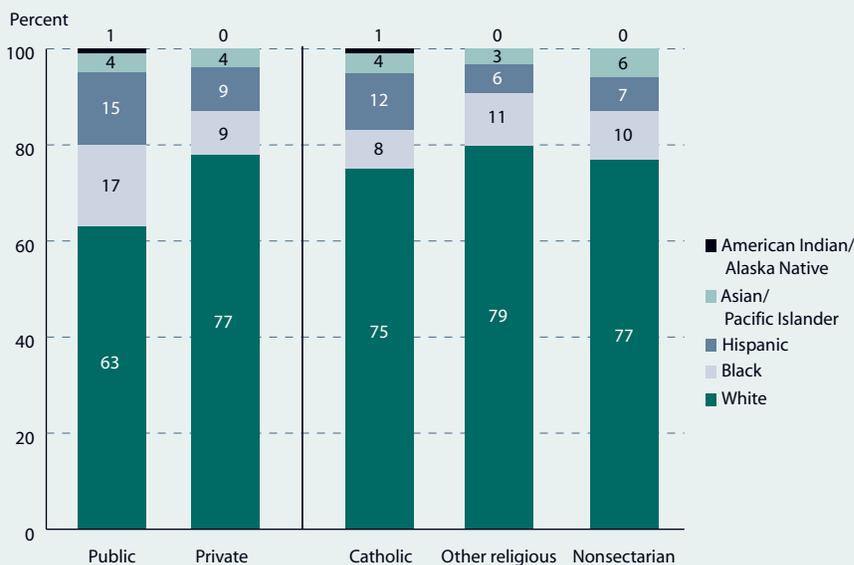
■ *There are differences in the racial and ethnic diversity in public and private schools.*

In 1999–2000, 77 percent of all private school students were White, compared with 63 percent of all public school students (figure 3). The private school sector as a whole had lower propor-

tions of Black and Hispanic students than the public school sector as a whole, and no difference was detected between the sectors in the proportion of Asian/Pacific Islander students. Some earlier research (Greene 2001) found that individual private school students were more likely than those in public schools to be in racially mixed classrooms. Enrollment patterns in public schools more closely replicated neighborhood segregation in housing. In Catholic schools, 12 percent of students were Hispanic, a higher proportion than in the other types of private schools.

Public schools were more likely than private schools to have any minority students in 1999–2000, as well as to have high concentrations of minority students (more than 30 percent) (table 5). Although many private schools had a racially diverse student body, about 14 percent had no minority students, compared with only 4 percent

Figure 3.—Percentage distribution of students according to race/ethnicity, by sector and private school type: 1999–2000



NOTE: Percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding. Estimates of 0 are less than 0.5 percent.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, NCES. Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS), "Public, Public Charter, and Private School Surveys," 1999–2000.

Private Schools: A Brief Portrait

Continued

Table 5.—Percentage distribution of schools according to concentration of minority students, by sector and private school type: 1999–2000

Sector and type	None	1–10 percent	11–30 percent	31–50 percent	51 percent or more
Public	3.9	35.8	20.2	12.8	27.3
Private	13.9	36.1	23.3	7.9	18.7
Private school type					
Catholic	4.7	49.5	19.2	5.3	21.4
Other religious	24.0	30.4	21.4	9.1	15.0
Nonsectarian	3.8	30.7	33.4	8.9	23.2

NOTE: Percentages may not add to 100.0 due to rounding.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, NCES, Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS), "Public, Public Charter, and Private School Surveys," 1999–2000.

of public schools. Catholic and nonsectarian schools were about as likely as public schools to have some minority students (95–96 percent of each group did), contrasted with 76 percent of other religious schools. Relatively few other religious schools had 51 percent or more minority students (15 percent), compared with Catholic (21 percent), nonsectarian (23 percent), and public schools (27 percent).

■ *Private schools are less likely than public schools to enroll LEP students or students who are eligible for the National School Lunch Program.*

Limited-English proficient students may introduce other students to different cultures and languages and help native English speakers learn foreign languages. Nonetheless, teaching LEP students also adds complexity to educators' tasks and creates new staffing and training challenges for schools. In 1999–2000, 13 percent of private schools had any LEP students, who accounted for an average of 7 percent of total enrollment in these schools (figure 4). In contrast, 54 percent of public schools had any LEP students, and they accounted for 10 percent of the student population on average in these schools. Private schools do not participate directly in federally funded LEP programs and so they may be less likely than pub-

lic schools to identify and count the number of LEP students enrolled.

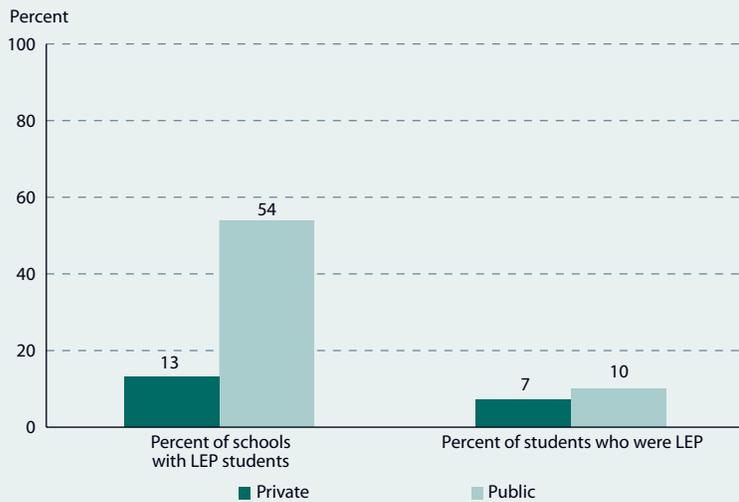
Although direct measures of SES are not readily available, the Schools and Staffing Survey collects information on the proportion of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunches. (The eligibility rate for the National School Lunch Program is a reasonable proxy for the incidence of school poverty in public schools but a less reliable measure in private schools. Approximately 25 percent of private school respondents in 1999–2000 did not know whether any of their students were eligible.⁴) Virtually all public schools (99 percent) had students eligible for subsidized lunches, about twice the percentage for private schools (49 percent) (table 6). Among schools participating in the subsidized lunch program, 42 percent of students at public schools and 10 percent at private schools, on average, were eligible.

Catholic schools were much more likely than the other two types of private schools to have any students eligible for subsidized lunches (69 percent versus 38–40 percent). Among private schools that participated in the program, nonsectarian schools had a higher average proportion of students eligible for free lunches than did Catholic and other religious schools (30, 7, and 6 percent, respectively).

Private Schools: A Brief Portrait

Continued

Figure 4.—Percentage of schools serving LEP students and, in those, percentage of students who were LEP, by sector: 1999–2000



SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, NCES. Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS), "Public, Public Charter, and Private School Surveys," 1999–2000.

Table 6.—Percentage of schools that had any students eligible for free or reduced-price lunches and, in participating schools, the average percentage of students who were eligible, by sector and private school type: 1999–2000

Sector and type	Percentage of schools with any eligible students	Percentage of students eligible
Public	98.8	42.5
Private*	49.5	10.4
Private school type		
Catholic	68.9	6.9
Other religious	38.3	6.3
Nonsectarian	39.7	29.5

*About 25 percent of private school respondents did not know whether any students enrolled would be eligible for the National School Lunch Program.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, NCES. Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS), "Public, Public Charter, and Private School Surveys," 1999–2000.

SCHOOL CLIMATE AND STAFF PERCEPTIONS

Research has examined the links between teachers' perceptions of a school's professional climate, on the one hand, and teachers' effectiveness and job satisfaction on the other (for example, see Mitchell, Ortiz, and Mitchell 1987; Rosenholtz

1991). In one extensive study of Catholic high schools, a range of attributes were found to contribute to school effectiveness, including the staff's communal organization to advance shared goals; principals having primary decisionmaking authority for most school management matters; teachers' commitment to the academic, spiritual,

Private Schools: A Brief Portrait

Continued

and social development of students (which encompassed providing extra help when needed and supporting extracurricular activities); and an atmosphere of mutual respect among everyone in the school (Bryk, Lee, and Holland 1993). Elements of staff opinion and school climate discussed here include teachers' sense of shared purpose, collegiality, and cooperative efforts; teachers' evaluations of principals' leadership and support; and principals' top goals for the school.

Teachers' control over teaching practices and influence on school policies

- *Private school teachers are more likely than public school teachers to report having a lot of influence on several teaching practices and school policies.*

For most teaching practices—selecting teaching techniques, evaluating and grading students, disciplining students, choosing course content and skills to teach, and selecting textbooks and materials—private school teachers were more likely than public school teachers to report having a lot of influence on school policymaking (table 7). (Public schools are often required to follow the decisions of state and/or district offi-

cially regarding curricular content and textbooks.) However, though differences between the sectors were found, some of these policies were common in both types of schools: more than 85 percent of teachers in public and private schools thought that they had a lot of control over selecting teaching techniques, evaluating and grading students, and determining homework quantity. Few differences were detected among the three private school types on most measures in table 7, but nonsectarian school teachers were more likely than Catholic or other religious school teachers to report having a lot of control over the content and skills to teach and selecting textbooks and materials.

In four areas of school policy linked closely with teaching—establishing curriculum, setting student performance standards, setting discipline policy, and evaluating teachers—the sector differences were substantial (table 8 and figure 5). For example, 68 percent of private school teachers said they had a lot of influence on establishing curriculum, compared with 44 percent of public school teachers. In addition, private school teachers were more likely than public school teachers to say that they had a lot of influence on setting student performance standards (63

Table 7.—Percentage of teachers who thought they had a lot of control over various teaching practices, by sector and private school type: 1999–2000

Sector and type	Selecting teaching techniques	Evaluating and grading students	Determining homework quantity	Disciplining students	Choosing content and skills to teach	Selecting textbooks, materials
Public	87.4	89.1	87.9	73.3	56.7	54.1
Private	92.5	92.4	87.3	85.5	75.0	70.6
Private school type						
Catholic	93.8	93.7	89.7	86.8	73.1	69.4
Other religious	91.5	91.5	84.8	85.8	70.4	64.5
Nonsectarian	92.3	91.7	87.5	83.0	85.0	81.8

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, NCES. Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS), "Public, Public Charter, and Private School Teacher Surveys," 1999–2000.

Private Schools: A Brief Portrait

Continued

Table 8.—Percentage of teachers who thought they had a lot of influence on various school policies, by sector and private school type: 1999–2000

Sector and type	Establishing curriculum	Setting student performance standards	Setting discipline policy	Inservice training content	Evaluating teachers	Hiring full-time teachers	School budget decisions
Public	44.3	37.6	30.4	32.5	8.2	14.5	14.0
Private	67.5	62.5	47.9	35.5	18.6	14.1	9.9
Private school type							
Catholic	59.0	56.2	45.1	33.5	13.7	9.8	6.9
Other religious	68.0	65.3	50.7	35.0	17.0	11.4	11.0
Nonsectarian	79.4	67.6	47.6	39.3	28.4	24.6	12.6

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, NCES. Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS), "Public, Public Charter, and Private School Teacher Surveys," 1999–2000.

versus 38 percent) and on student discipline policy (48 versus 30 percent). In contrast, no difference was detected between the two sectors for teachers' reported influence on teacher hiring decisions (about 14 percent for each). In addition to hiring decisions, teachers in both sectors were unlikely to think they had a lot of influence on the content of inservice training, school budget decisions, or evaluating teachers. (However, the sectors did differ on these matters; for example, 19 percent of teachers in private schools versus 8 percent in public schools thought they had a lot of influence on teacher evaluation.)

Teachers in nonsectarian schools were more likely than Catholic or other religious school teachers to say they had a lot of influence on establishing curriculum, evaluating teachers, and hiring full-time teachers (table 8 and figure 6). In addition, nonsectarian school teachers were more likely than Catholic school teachers to report having a lot of influence on setting student performance standards and on deciding teachers' inservice training content.

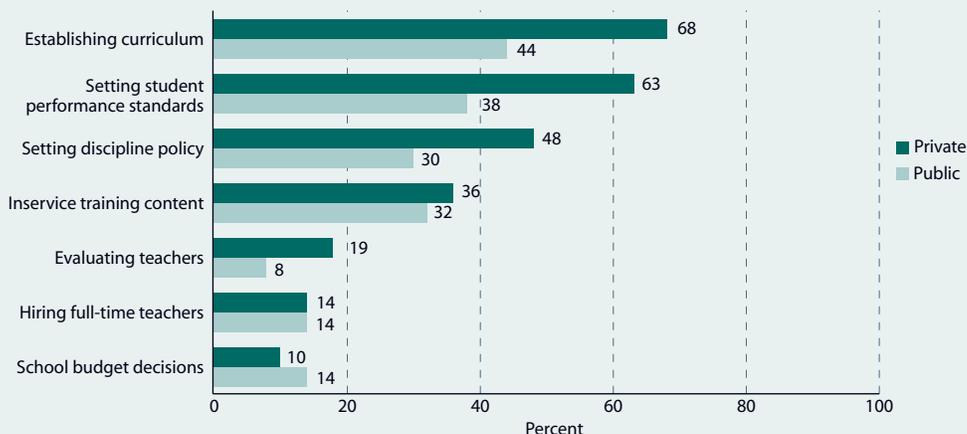
Teachers' ratings of school climate and management

A school's professional climate, in particular the existence of a strong shared purpose among staff members and cooperative interactions among people at the school, is likely to contribute to its effectiveness. As an illustration, Newmann and Wehlage (1995) found that when teachers feel a sense of community at their schools, they can better communicate consistent goals to students and collaborate more effectively on raising student achievement. Similarly, another study (Bryk and Driscoll 1988) found that teachers who work toward shared goals express higher job satisfaction and have lower absentee rates than do other teachers. Among the elements that shape a school's climate are several examined in this section: the extent to which the staff shares a commitment to the school's central mission, teachers collaborate and share ideas, parents support teachers' work, the principal provides clear direction and priorities to the staff, and the administrators communicate expectations clearly and enforce rules of student conduct.

Private Schools: A Brief Portrait

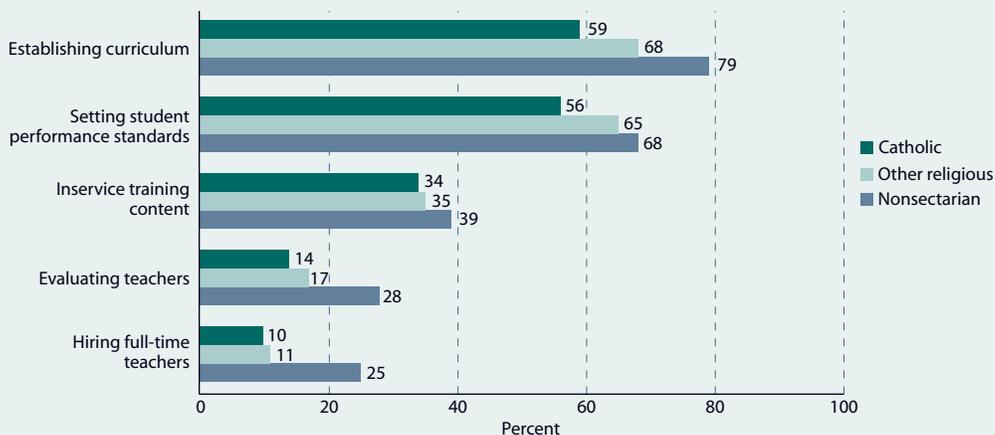
Continued

Figure 5.—Percentage of teachers who thought they had a lot of influence on various school policies, by sector: 1999–2000



SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, NCES. Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS), "Public, Public Charter, and Private School Teacher Surveys," 1999–2000.

Figure 6.—Percentage of teachers who thought they had a lot of influence on various school policies, by private school type: 1999–2000



SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, NCES. Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS), "Public, Public Charter, and Private School Teacher Surveys," 1999–2000.

Private Schools: A Brief Portrait

Continued

■ *Private school teachers are more likely than public school teachers to report being satisfied with teaching at their school.*

Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS:1999–2000) data indicate that teachers in private schools for the most part have positive views about their jobs and the extent of staff cooperation and collegiality at their school. For example, private school teachers were more likely than public school teachers to “strongly agree”⁵ that they were generally satisfied with teaching at their school (66 versus 54 percent) and with their class size (60 versus 36 percent) (table 9). In addition, greater proportions of private school than public school teachers agreed that teachers consistently enforce rules of behavior, that most colleagues shared their beliefs about the school’s central mission, and that cooperative effort among the staff was high. Moreover, teachers at private schools (42 percent) were much more likely than teachers at public schools (16 percent) to state that they received a great deal of support from parents for their work. No differences were detected between sectors or among private school types in the percentage who agreed that they con-

sciously coordinated course content with other teachers.

Teachers at other religious schools agreed with five positive statements about their school’s professional climate and working conditions at higher rates than those of teachers at Catholic and nonsectarian schools. Topics of these statements concerned satisfaction with teaching at the school in general, colleagues’ shared beliefs about the school’s mission, staff cooperative effort, support from parents, and teachers’ consistent enforcement of rules.

■ *A majority of private school teachers express positive opinions about their principal and their school’s management.*

Most private school teachers agreed that their principal enforced school rules, expressed expectations for staff, and clearly communicated the kind of school he or she wanted (table 10). A majority of private school teachers also agreed that the administration was supportive and encouraging and that necessary materials were available. For each of these aspects, as well as thinking that staff members were recognized for

Table 9.—Percentage of teachers who strongly agreed with various statements about the school’s professional climate and working conditions, by sector and private school type: 1999–2000

Sector and type	I am satisfied with teaching at this school	I am satisfied with my class size	Most colleagues share school’s mission	Staff cooperative effort is high	I receive lots of parent support for my work	I consciously coordinate courses with other teachers	Rules are consistently enforced by teachers
Public	53.7	35.8	33.2	33.9	15.6	38.0	22.8
Private	66.4	60.0	59.9	56.0	42.4	39.3	37.8
Private school type							
Catholic	62.9	46.5	55.3	50.2	40.0	37.4	36.8
Other religious	71.3	67.7	72.3	63.5	48.1	41.4	41.9
Nonsectarian	64.1	68.0	47.4	53.1	37.1	38.8	33.0

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, NCES. Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS), “Public, Public Charter, and Private School Teacher Surveys,” 1999–2000.

Private Schools: A Brief Portrait

Continued

Table 10.—Percentage of teachers who strongly agreed with various statements about the school's principal and management, by sector and private school type: 1999–2000

Sector and type	Principal enforces school rules	School goals are communicated clearly	Administration is supportive and encouraging	Necessary materials are available	Principal expresses expectations for staff	Staff are recognized for good work	Principal often discusses instructional practices
Public	47.4	48.1	41.8	37.2	49.7	25.7	11.0
Private	62.7	61.3	59.8	60.2	56.5	39.8	15.4
Private school type							
Catholic	59.2	59.1	56.1	53.2	55.9	36.5	14.1
Other religious	68.3	66.4	67.3	64.0	60.5	45.7	18.1
Nonsectarian	59.4	56.5	53.6	64.5	51.1	35.7	12.9

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, NCES. Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS), "Public, Public Charter, and Private School Teacher Surveys," 1999–2000.

doing a good job, public school teachers were less likely than private school teachers to agree with the positive statement. Indeed, no more than 50 percent of teachers in public schools agreed with any of these statements.

Within the private sector, teachers at other religious schools were more likely than those at the other two private school types to agree with several statements regarding school management: that the administration was supportive and encouraging, that their principal enforced school rules, that school goals were communicated clearly, and that staff members were recognized for doing a good job. Forty-six percent of other religious school teachers agreed with the last statement, compared with about 36 percent of teachers in the two other school types.

Principals and school leadership

Principals' instructional leadership can include observing teachers in the classroom and providing constructive evaluations, requiring teachers to work collaboratively, providing substantive training in teaching methods, and working directly with teachers to develop new curricula or

teaching techniques. In one study (Larsen 1987), high-achieving schools had principals who visited classrooms and talked to teachers frequently about instructional methods and content. These principals also explained the school's goals clearly to staff and learned from other schools' notable curricula and methods. Despite the presumed usefulness of strong instructional leadership (Louis and Miles 1990; Leithwood 1992), principals for the most part are not discussing instructional practices often with teachers (table 10, last column), perhaps because of overwhelming demands for their time (Pierce 2000). Elmore (1999–2000) found from his observations that "few administrators of any kind or at any level are directly involved in instruction. Principals who develop the skills and knowledge required to become instructional leaders do so because of their own preferences and values—and often at some cost to their own careers."

■ *Most principals are not engaging teachers on instructional practices on a frequent basis—in either sector.*

Most private school teachers thought their principal performed well in enforcing rules, commu-

Private Schools: A Brief Portrait

Continued

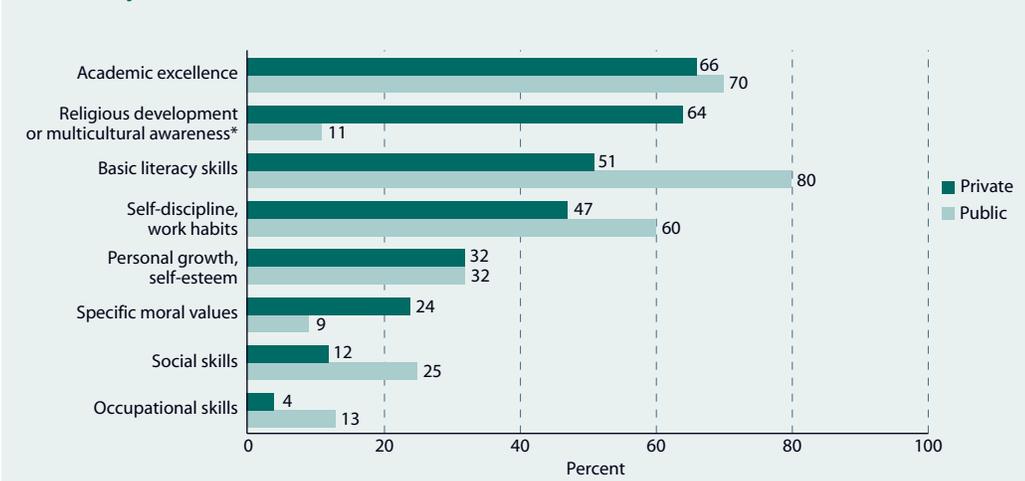
nicating expectations and goals, and supporting teachers, as discussed above. However, SASS:1999–2000 data indicate that private schools did not show much of an advantage in principals’ leadership on instruction. Teachers in both sectors were unlikely to report that the principal often discussed instructional matters with them: 15 percent in the private sector and 11 percent in the public sector agreed that their principals did so (table 10).⁶ Teachers in other religious schools were more likely to say that their principals frequently discussed instruction than those in either Catholic or nonsectarian schools.

The principal’s top-priority goals, if communicated effectively to teachers and other staff, can influence both daily practices and the professional climate at the school. Public school principals in 1999–2000 were most likely to name among their top three goals building basic literacy skills in core areas like reading, writing, and mathematics (80 percent) (figure 7). Other goals cited fre-

quently by public school principals were encouraging academic excellence (70 percent) and developing self-discipline and good work habits (60 percent). Principals in private schools were about equally likely to include academic excellence (66 percent) and fostering religious/spiritual development⁷ (64 percent) among their highest three goals. Literacy skills (51 percent) and developing self-discipline (47 percent) were also included often as top three goals in private schools.

The percentage of all private school principals who included religious development as a top goal disguises the large differences across school types for this measure: principals in Catholic and other religious schools cited religious development more often than any other goal (80–82 percent of these principals cited it), while hardly any nonsectarian school principals did so (1 percent) (figure 8). At both types of religious schools, academic excellence was included as a high-priority goal by 66–69 percent of the principals (second after religious development), followed by two other

Figure 7.—Percentage of principals who rated each of eight educational goals among the three most important for their school, by sector: 1999–2000



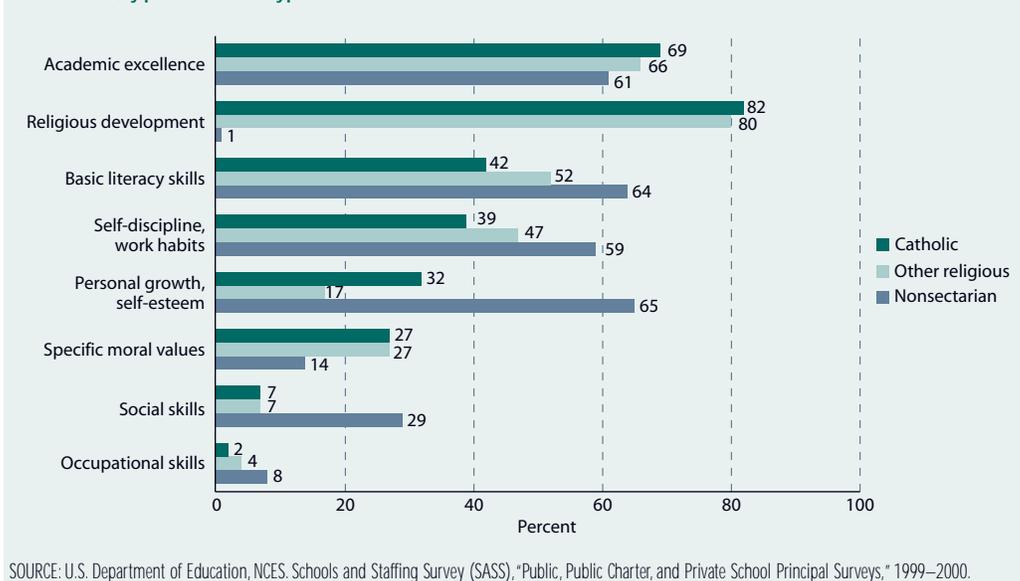
*Private school principals were given “religious or spiritual development” to rate, while public school principals were given “multicultural awareness” instead.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, NCES. Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS), “Public, Public Charter, and Private School Principal Surveys,” 1999–2000.

Private Schools: A Brief Portrait

Continued

Figure 8.—Percentage of principals who rated each of eight educational goals among the three most important for their school, by private school type: 1999–2000



SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, NCES. Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS), "Public, Public Charter, and Private School Principal Surveys," 1999–2000.

goals: building literacy skills (42–52 percent) and developing self-discipline (39–47 percent). Promoting self-discipline was included more frequently than teaching specific moral values by Catholic and other religious school principals.

Nonsectarian school principals had a somewhat different pattern of priorities: between 59 and 65 percent included developing personal growth/self-esteem, literacy skills, academic excellence, and promoting self-discipline among their top three goals. In addition, nonsectarian school principals were more likely than those at the other two school types to include social skills development (29 versus 7 percent at Catholic and other religious schools). About 59 percent of nonsectarian school principals included developing self-discipline among their top three goals, more than the 47 percent at other religious schools, which in turn was more than the 39 percent at Catholic schools. Principals' ratings for teaching basic literacy skills followed a similar pattern by school type. About 27 percent of both Catholic and other

religious school principals included teaching specific moral values, roughly twice the 14 percent for principals of nonsectarian schools.

ACADEMIC COURSETAKING AND STUDENT OUTCOMES

Student achievement, high school graduation requirements, and courses completed

■ *Private school students generally perform higher than their public school counterparts on standardized achievement tests.*

As with earlier results from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), private school students performed higher than public school students on the NAEP:2000 tests.⁸ Their average scores were above those of public school students on the 4th-grade reading test and on the 4th-, 8th-, and 12th-grade science and mathematics proficiency tests (table 11). See *indicators 7, 10, 11, and 12* for detailed data on student performance, including differences by many variables beyond school sector.

Private Schools: A Brief Portrait

Continued

Table 11.—Average science, mathematics, and reading scale scores for 4th-, 8th-, and 12th-graders, by sector: 2000

Sector	Scale score		
	Grade 4	Grade 8	Grade 12
Science			
Public	148	149	145
Private	163	166	161
Mathematics			
Public	226	274	300
Private	238	287	315
Reading			
Public	215	—	—
Private	234	—	—

—Not applicable.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, NCES. (2002). *The Nations Report Card: Science 2000* (NCES 2002–451); (2001) *The Nations Report Card: Mathematics 2000* (NCES 2001–517); (2001) *The Nations Report Card: Reading 2000* (NCES 2001–499).

Applying high academic standards—both requiring students to complete high-level, challenging courses and pushing students to strive and excel in their work—is a central schooling component that many experts recommend (Newmann 1992; Bryk, Lee, and Holland 1993; Gamoran et al. 1997). Earlier research has found not only that private high school students take more advanced mathematics courses than those in public high schools but also that the type of private school may matter (Lee et al. 1998). Students at Catholic high schools in that study completed more advanced mathematics than students in “independent, selective” private schools, even after adjusting for measures including prior achievement in mathematics, school selectivity, and family SES. (The independent, selective schools cited are a subset of the nonsectarian group discussed here; one difference is that the latter includes special education schools. Students in Catholic schools in the study varied more in academic skill and family SES than did students in the more selective independent schools.)

■ ***Private high schools typically have more demanding graduation requirements than do public high schools.***

Compared with public schools, private schools required more coursework (in 4-year high school programs) in 1999–2000 in social studies, mathematics, science, foreign language, and computer science (table 12).⁹ Private schools required on average 3.1 years of mathematics, while public schools required 2.7 years, for example. The figures for foreign language study also differed: 1.5 years at private schools but 0.5 years at public schools. In addition, about 40 percent of private schools required some form of community service for high school graduation, four times the rate for public schools (10 percent). Nonsectarian schools required an average of 3.3 years of mathematics, compared with 3.0–3.1 years for the other two types of private schools. Catholic schools were quite likely (73 percent) to require some community service for graduation, more so than the other two types.

Private Schools: A Brief Portrait

Continued

Table 12.—Average years of high school study required for graduation in selected subjects, and percentage of public and private schools* that had a community service requirement, by sector and private school type: 1999–2000

Sector and type	Average years of study required						Percent that require community service
	English	Social studies	Mathematics	Science	Foreign language	Computer science	
Public	3.90	3.10	2.73	2.41	0.46	0.52	9.9
Private	3.94	3.33	3.13	2.67	1.51	0.88	39.8
Private school type							
Catholic	3.96	3.15	3.05	2.59	1.81	0.87	73.1
Other religious	3.92	3.39	3.09	2.68	1.35	0.92	30.7
Nonsectarian	4.02	3.28	3.32	2.71	1.79	0.74	41.9

*Restricted to schools that grant high school diplomas (district data on requirements were applied to public schools). Columns 1–4 were further restricted to schools reporting for 3- or 4-year high school programs, and columns 5 and 6 to schools reporting for 4-year high school programs.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, NCES. Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS), "Public School District, and Public, Public Charter, and Private School Surveys," 1999–2000.

- *Private school graduates are more likely than their peers from public schools to have completed advanced-level courses in three academic subject areas.*

Findings from the NAEP High School Transcript Study of 1998 (*indicator 27*) show that 1998 private high school graduates were more likely than public high school graduates to have completed advanced courses in science and mathematics (figure 9). Advanced science courses include chemistry, physics, and advanced biology; advanced mathematics courses include trigonometry, precalculus, and calculus. In a parallel pattern, private school graduates were about twice as likely as their public school counterparts to have completed the third (or higher) year of study in a foreign language (55 versus 28 percent) (*indicator 34*, U.S. Department of Education 2001a). Completing intermediate-level and even advanced courses is often required for admission to selective colleges and universities.

Educational attainment

- *Private school students are more likely than public school students to complete a bachelor's or advanced degree by their mid-20s.*

Data from the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988, "Fourth Follow-up" (NELS:1988/2000) show that students who had attended private school in 8th grade were twice as likely as those who had attended public school to have completed a bachelor's or higher degree by their mid-20s (52 versus 26 percent) and far less likely to have had no post-secondary education (figure 10). Even students from low-SES backgrounds attained higher levels if they had been private school students in 1988. Specifically, 7 percent of students in the lowest SES quartile who had attended public school in 1988 had earned a bachelor's degree by 2000, whereas 24 percent of their private school peers had done so (table 13). In addition, for students whose mother's expectation (in 8th grade) was for them to attain an associate's degree or less, those who had at-

Private Schools: A Brief Portrait

Continued

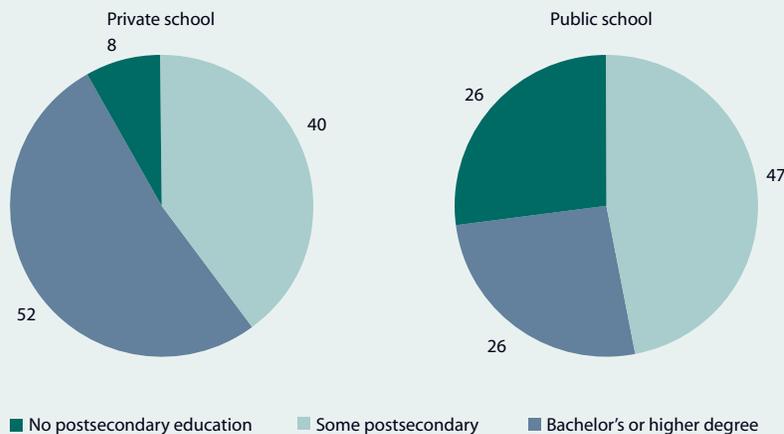
Figure 9.—Percentage distribution of 1998 high school graduates according to highest level of science and mathematics courses completed in high school, by sector



NOTE: Percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding. Estimate of 0 is less than 0.5 percent.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, NCES. National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) High School Transcript Study, 1998.

Figure 10.—Percentage distribution of 1988 8th-graders according to their educational attainment, by sector of 8th-grade school: 2000



NOTE: Percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, NCES. National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988, "Fourth Follow-up" (NELS:1988/2000).

Private Schools: A Brief Portrait

Continued

Table 13.—Percentage of 1988 8th-graders with various backgrounds who had completed a bachelor's or higher degree by 2000

Student characteristics	Sector of 8 th -grade school		Studied calculus by 12 th grade	
	Private	Public	Yes	No
Total	52.2	26.1	81.9	25.4
Family socioeconomic status				
Lowest quartile	24.4	6.6	70.9	6.1
Middle two quartiles	38.6	22.3	68.5	21.8
Highest quartile	69.1	56.9	91.0	53.9
Mother's expectation for student's attainment				
Less than bachelor's degree	29.5	7.2	56.7	8.1
Bachelor's degree or higher	56.1	34.6	83.8	33.0

NOTE: The number in row 2, column 1 shows that, among students whose family SES was in the lowest quartile, 24.4 percent of those who had attended private school in the 8th grade had completed a bachelor's or higher degree by 2000.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, NCES. National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988, "Fourth Follow-up" (NELS:1988/2000).

tended private school completed a bachelor's or higher degree at a rate about four times that of public school students (30 versus 7 percent). Furthermore, students who came from a low-SES family but had completed a calculus course in high school were much more likely than those who had not studied calculus to earn a degree by their mid-20s (71 versus 6 percent). Students in private schools are more likely than those in public schools to take challenging courses like calculus, and private schools are more likely to require them, as discussed in the preceding section.

CONCLUSION

In addition to differences between schools in the private and public sectors, within each sector, schools vary in size, level, community type, and student populations. Differences in internal management practices, staff cohesiveness, top-priority goals, and professional climate also appear between and within each sector. Some characteristics of private schools vary widely according to the type of school, while others do not.

Private schools overall have fewer students than public schools, and minorities are a lower percentage of the student population. Catholic schools tend to be larger and have greater diversity in enrollment than other types of private schools. Teachers in private schools report that they have wide latitude in deciding how and what to teach, as well as a fairly strong influence on many school policies. Nonsectarian schools, in particular, may give teachers greater influence in shaping their school's activities. In contrast, though the majority of teachers in each private school type agreed with positive statements about staff cooperation and the school's management, teachers at other religious schools were more likely than other private school teachers to agree strongly with many of these statements. Teachers at other religious schools were particularly likely to give their administrators high marks, and to report that their colleagues shared similar beliefs about their school's central mission and that rules were enforced consistently. Principals at the three types of private schools had different top priorities for their schools, but at least 60 percent in each school type included academic

Private Schools: A Brief Portrait

Continued

excellence. Public school principals most often cited teaching basic literacy skills as one of their top three goals (80 percent included it), while 51 percent of private school principals did so.

Achievement tests in reading, mathematics, and science show higher average scores for private school students. In addition, private schools tend to require more years of core academic subjects for high school graduation than do public schools, with some variation across school types. Graduates of private high schools have on average completed more advanced courses than public school graduates in science, mathematics, and foreign language. Finally, students who had attended private school in 8th grade were twice as likely as those who had attended public school to have completed a bachelor's or higher degree by their mid-20s, and far less likely to have had no postsecondary education.

Private schools have advantages from the outset that many public schools cannot match, stemming from the choice by students and their families to participate in private education. However, requiring students to tackle difficult course material, developing consistent commitment from staff to meet clearly communicated goals, and maintaining a school climate that extols learning may well contribute to better achievement at schools in either sector.

NOTES

¹An additional number of students are schooled at home, outside of the private and public school sectors. In 1999, the estimated number of home-schooled students was 850,000 (Bielick, Chandler, and Broughman 2001).

²A public charter school is a public school that, in accordance with an enabling statute, has been granted a charter exempting it from selected state or local rules and regulations. A public charter school may be a newly created school or it may previously have been a public or private school. Traditional public schools include all public schools except public charter schools and Bureau of Indian Affairs-funded schools that are operated by local public school districts. Traditional public schools include regular, special education, vocational/technical, and alternative schools. They also include schools in juvenile detention centers, and schools located on military bases and operated by the Department of Defense.

³Some other research has questioned the value of decreasing class sizes in raising achievement, particularly in light of the often high costs of implementing such changes. Hanushek (2000) argues that the quality of additional teachers hired to reduce class sizes is the important variable, rather than smaller class sizes per se. O'Connell and Smith (2000) and Finn and Achilles (1999) found that smaller class size does not substantively change how teachers teach, although the evidence on that question is mixed; see Holloway (2002) for a summary of research on the topic.

⁴Schools that do not participate in federally funded programs like the school lunch program are less likely to know how many students would be eligible because the school's funding is not affected by tracking eligibility.

⁵"Agree" and "agreed" are used hereafter for brevity, but all the data discussed in this section reflect the percentage of teachers who said they strongly agreed with the statement mentioned.

⁶These two percentages do differ but also indicate that principals in both sectors were unlikely to engage teachers on instructional practices often.

⁷Private school principals rated "fostering religious or spiritual development" as one of the eight goals, while public school principals instead rated "promoting multicultural awareness or understanding."

⁸For earlier data about several subjects, see previous editions of two recurring NCES publications: *The Condition of Education* and *The Nation's Report Card*.

⁹Differences for some of the subjects were small but nevertheless statistically significant.

Private Schools: A Brief Portrait

Continued

REFERENCES

- Baker, D., Han, M., and Keil, C.T. (1996). *How Different, How Similar: Comparing Key Organizational Qualities of American Public and Private Secondary Schools* (NCES 96-322). U.S. Department of Education, NCES. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.
- Bielick, S., Chandler, K., and Broughman, S.P. (2001). *Homeschooling in the United States: 1999* (NCES 2001-033). U.S. Department of Education, NCES. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.
- Broughman, S.P., and Colaciello, L.A. (2001). *Private School Universe: 1999-2000* (NCES 2001-330). U.S. Department of Education, NCES. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.
- Bryk, A.S., and Driscoll, M.E. (1988). *An Empirical Investigation of the School as Community*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Bryk, A.S., Lee, V.E., and Holland, P.B. (1993). *Catholic Schools and the Common Good*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Coleman, J.S., et al. (1966). *Equality of Educational Opportunity*. U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, Office of Education. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.
- Cook, T.D. (1984). What Have Black Children Gained Academically From School Integration? Examination of the Meta-Analytic Evidence. In T.D. Cook and D. Armor et al. (Eds.), *School Desegregation and Black Achievement*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, National Institute of Education.
- Eaton, S.E. (2001). *Blurring the Race Boundary: Black Adults Raised in Urban Neighborhoods and Schooled in White Suburbia*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Elmore, R.F. (1999-2000, Winter). Building a New Structure for School Leadership. *American Educator*, 23(4): 6-13.
- Finn, J., and Achilles, C. (1999). Tennessee's Class Size Study: Findings, Implications, Misconceptions. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 21(2): 97-109.
- Gamoran, A., Porter, A.C., Smithson, J., and White, P.A. (1997). Upgrading High School Mathematics Instruction: Improving Learning Opportunities for Low-Achieving, Low-Income Youth. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 19(4): 325-338.
- Greene, J.P. (2001, Summer). The Surprising Consensus on School Choice. *The Public Interest* (144): 19-35.
- Hanushek, E.A. (2000). Evidence, Politics, and the Class Size Debate. In *The Class Size Policy Debate*. Working Paper Number 121 (October). Washington, DC: Economic Policy Institute.
- Henke, R.R., Choy, S.P., Chen, X., Geis, S., and Alt, M.N. (1997). *America's Teachers: Profile of a Profession: 1993-94* (NCES 97-460). U.S. Department of Education, NCES. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.
- Henke, R.R., Choy, S.P., Geis, S., and Broughman, S.P. (1996). *Schools and Staffing in the United States: A Statistical Profile, 1993-94* (NCES 96-124). U.S. Department of Education, NCES. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.
- Holloway, J.H. (2002). Do Smaller Classes Change Instruction? *Educational Leadership*, 59(5): 91-92.
- Klonsky, M. (1995). *Small Schools: The Numbers Tell a Story. A Review of the Research and Current Experiences*. Chicago: Illinois University. (ERIC ED386517)
- Krueger, A.B., and Whitmore, D.M. (2001, January). The Effect of Attending a Small Class in the Early Grades on College Test Taking and Middle School Test Results: Evidence from Project STAR. *The Economic Journal*, 111: 1-28.
- Larsen, T.J. (1987, April). *Identification of Instructional Leadership Behaviors and the Impact of Their Implementation on Academic Achievement*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Washington, DC. (ERIC ED281286)

Private Schools: A Brief Portrait

Continued

Lee, V.E., Chow-Hoy, T.K., Burkam, D.T., Gevert, D., and Smerdon, B.A. (1998, October). Sector Differences in High School Course Taking: A Private School or Catholic School Effect? *Sociology of Education*, 71: 164–187.

Lee, V.E., and Smith, J.B. (1993, July). Effects of School Restructuring on the Achievement and Engagement of Middle-Grade Students. *Sociology of Education*, 66(3): 164–187.

Lee, V.E., and Smith, J.B. (1995). *Restructuring High Schools for Equity and Excellence: What Works*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Lee, V.E., and Smith, J.B. (1997). High School Size: Which Works Best, and for Whom? *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 19(3): 205–227.

Leithwood, K.A. (1992, February). The Move Toward Transformational Leadership. *Educational Leadership*, 49(5): 8–12.

Louis, K.S., and Miles, M.B. (1990). *Improving the Urban High School: What Works and Why*. New York: Teachers College Press.

McLaughlin, D. (1997). *Private Schools in the United States: A Statistical Profile, 1993–94* (NCES 97–459). U.S. Department of Education, NCES. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.

Mitchell, D.E., Ortiz, F.I., and Mitchell, T.K. (1987). *Work Orientation and Job Performance: The Cultural Basis of Teaching Rewards and Incentives*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Newmann, F., and Wehlage, G. (1995). *Successful School Restructuring*. Madison, WI: Center on Organization and Restructuring of Schools.

Newmann, F.M. (1992). *Student Engagement and Achievement in American Secondary Schools*. New York: Teachers College Press.

O’Connell, J., and Smith, S. (2000). *Capitalizing on Small Class Size*. Eugene, OR: ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management. (ERIC Digest No. 136)

Pierce, M. (2000, September/October). Portrait of the “Super Principal.” *Harvard Education Letter*: 6–7.

Raywid, M. (1995). *The Subschoools/Small Schools Movement—Taking Stock*. Madison, WI: Center on Organization and Restructuring of Schools.

Rosenholtz, S.J. (1991). *Teachers’ Workplace: The Organizational Context of Schooling*. New York: Teachers College.

Schofield, J.W. (1995). Review of Research on School Desegregation’s Impact of Elementary and Secondary School Students. In J.A. Banks and C.A.M. Banks (Eds.), *Handbook of Research on Multicultural Education*. New York and London: Macmillan and Prentice-Hall International.

Schofield, J.W. (2001). Maximizing the Benefits of Student Diversity: Lessons From School Desegregation Research. In G. Orfield (Ed.), *Diversity Challenged: Evidence on the Impact of Affirmative Action*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Publishing Group.

St. John, N.H. (1975). *School Desegregation: Outcomes for Children*. New York: Wiley & Sons.

U.S. Department of Education, NCES. (2001a). *The Condition of Education 2001* (NCES 2001–072). Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.

U.S. Department of Education, NCES. (2001b). *Digest of Education Statistics 2001* (NCES 2002–130). Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.

Wells, A.S., and Crain, R.L. (1994). Perpetuation Theory and the Long-Term Effects of School Desegregation. *Review of Educational Research*, 64: 531–555.

Nontraditional Undergraduates

Susan P. Choy

Today's undergraduate population is different than it was a generation ago. In addition to being 72 percent larger in 1999 than in 1970 (with fall enrollment growing from 7.4 to 12.7 million), proportionately more students are enrolled part time (39 versus 28 percent) and at 2-year colleges (44 versus 31 percent), and women have replaced men as the majority (representing 56 percent of the total instead of 42 percent) (*indicator 5*). There are proportionately more older students on campus as well: 39 percent of all postsecondary students were 25 years or older in 1999, compared with 28 percent in 1970 (U.S. Department of Education 2002b).

The “traditional” undergraduate—characterized here as one who earns a high school diploma, enrolls full time immediately after finishing high school, depends on parents for financial support, and either does not work during the school year or works part time—is the exception rather than the rule. In 1999–2000, just 27 percent of undergraduates met all of these criteria.¹ Thus, 73 percent of all undergraduates were in some way “nontraditional.”² Comparable data for a generation ago are not available, but the fact that much of the change in demographic characteristics and enrollment patterns described above occurred in the 1970s (U.S. Department of Education 2002b) suggests that this is not a recent phenomenon.

While traditional undergraduates are generally able to direct most of their energy toward their studies, older students, parents (especially single parents), and students who work full time have family and work responsibilities competing with school for their time, energy, and financial resources. Difficulties in obtaining child care and class schedules that do not mesh with work schedules are just two of the barriers that nontraditional students may encounter. In addition, some of the older students who did not

pursue a postsecondary education when they were younger may have made this decision because they were not prepared academically. Consequently, they may struggle when they enroll later. Nontraditional students who enter postsecondary education seeking a degree are, in fact, less likely than traditional students to attain a degree or remain enrolled after 5 years (Horn 1996). To design effective programs and services to help nontraditional students reach their degree goals, policymakers and postsecondary administrators need information on how many students are affected, the details of their enrollment patterns, and the nature of their persistence problems.

The first part of this discussion of nontraditional students uses the National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS:2000) to describe their demographic characteristics, enrollment patterns, how they combine school and work, and their participation in distance education. The second part examines the relationship between nontraditional status and persistence using the Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Studies (BPS), which followed cohorts of students enrolling in postsecondary education for the first time in 1989–90 and in 1995–96. Unless a specific type of institution is specified, the data refer to students at all types of postsecondary institutions (less-than-2-year, 2-year, and 4-year).

DEFINITION OF NONTRADITIONAL STATUS

The term “nontraditional student” is not a precise one, although age and part-time status (which often go together) are common defining characteristics (Bean and Metzner 1985). An NCES study examining the relationship between nontraditional status and persistence in postsecondary education identified nontraditional students using information on their enrollment patterns, financial dependency status, family situation, and high school graduation status (Horn 1996). Specifically, in this study, a

Nontraditional Undergraduates

Continued

nontraditional student is one who has any of the following characteristics:

- Delays enrollment (does not enter post-secondary 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;³
- 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

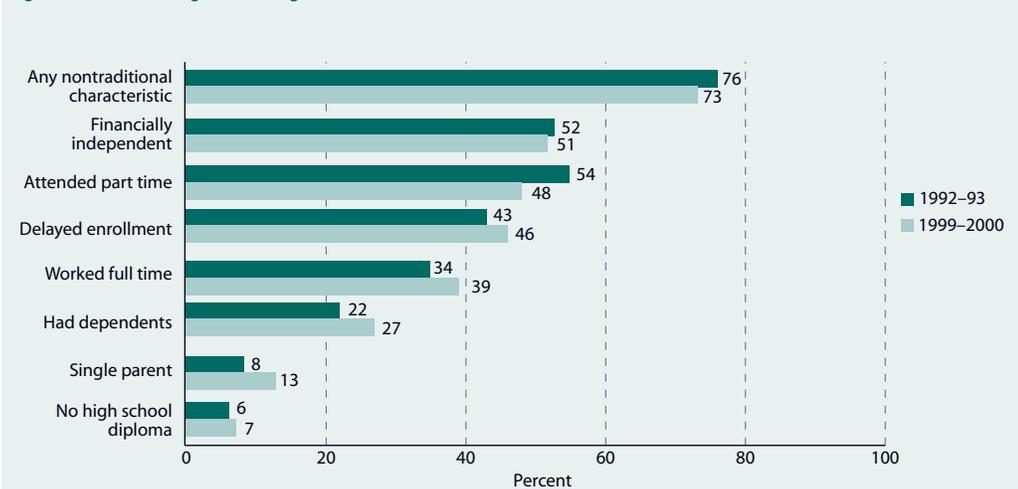
school completion certificate or did not finish high school).

Horn (1996) defined “nontraditional” on a continuum based on the number of these characteristics present. Students are considered to be “minimally nontraditional” if they have only one nontraditional characteristic, “moderately nontraditional” if they have two or three, and “highly nontraditional” if they have four or more.

■ *Almost three-quarters of undergraduates are in some way “nontraditional.”*

As indicated earlier, 73 percent of all undergraduates in 1999–2000 had one or more of these characteristics. Figure 1 shows the percentage of undergraduates with each nontraditional characteristic. In 1999–2000, financial independence was the most common nontraditional characteristic (51 percent), followed by part-time attendance (48 percent), and then delayed enrollment (46 percent).

Figure 1.—Percentage of undergraduates with nontraditional characteristics: 1992–93 and 1999–2000



SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, NCES. National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS:2000).

Nontraditional Undergraduates

Continued

- *In the undergraduate population, there are about as many highly nontraditional students as there are traditional students.*

In 1999–2000, 27 percent of all undergraduates were traditional, and 28 percent were highly nontraditional (table 1). Another 28 percent were moderately nontraditional and 17 percent were minimally nontraditional. The character of the undergraduate population varied markedly by type of institution. Public 2-year and private for-profit institutions have much larger proportions of moderately and highly nontraditional students than 4-year institutions, and much smaller proportions of traditional students. At both public 2-year and private for-profit institutions, 89 percent of the students were at least minimally nontraditional, compared with 58 percent at public 4-year institutions and 50 percent at private not-for-profit 4-year institutions.

- *The percentages of students with some nontraditional characteristics have changed in recent years.*

Between 1992–93 and 1999–2000, the percentages of students who delayed enrollment, worked full time, had dependents, and were single parents all increased (figure 1). The percentage of

undergraduates attending part time decreased, a trend that is projected to continue.⁴ There were no measurable changes between the 2 years in the percentages who were financially independent or did not have a high school diploma.

INTERRELATIONSHIPS AMONG NONTRADITIONAL CHARACTERISTICS

Table 2 shows the percentages of all undergraduates with each nontraditional characteristic by type of institution and how the characteristics identified as nontraditional are interrelated. Some of the characteristics occur together by definition; for example, a single parent always has dependents and, at least for purposes of assessing eligibility for financial aid, is always considered to be financially independent. Therefore, a single parent will always have at least three nontraditional characteristics. Other nontraditional characteristics, such as full-time employment and part-time enrollment, occur together frequently, but not always: among students who worked full time, 73 percent attended part time.

Among students who were minimally nontraditional (had only one nontraditional characteristic), part-time attendance was the most common

Table 1.—Percentage distribution of undergraduates according to their student status, by type of institution: 1999–2000

Type of institution	Traditional	Minimally nontraditional	Moderately nontraditional	Highly nontraditional
Total	27.4	16.6	28.3	27.7
Public 2-year	10.5	14.3	35.0	40.2
Public 4-year	42.5	20.0	23.1	14.4
Private not-for-profit 4-year	50.0	14.7	16.4	19.0
Private for-profit	11.3	14.7	38.5	35.4

NOTE: Total row includes students at types of institutions not shown here. Percentages may not add to 100.0 due to rounding.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, NCES. National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS:2000).

Nontraditional Undergraduates

Continued

Table 2.—Percentage of all undergraduates with each nontraditional characteristic, by type of institution, and percentage of nontraditional undergraduates with each nontraditional characteristic, by nontraditional characteristic and status: 1999–2000

Type of institution, non-traditional characteristic, and nontraditional status	Financially independent	Attended part time	Delayed enrollment	Worked full time	Had dependents	Single parent	No high school diploma*
All undergraduates							
Total	50.9	47.9	45.5	39.3	26.9	13.3	6.5
Type of institution							
Public 2-year	63.7	69.5	58.7	53.8	34.5	16.4	9.8
Public 4-year	37.6	33.3	31.5	25.5	17.6	9.2	2.4
Private not-for-profit 4-year	36.7	27.6	34.0	28.5	18.8	8.6	3.2
Private for-profit	72.9	21.5	67.8	40.8	44.3	26.6	15.6
Nontraditional undergraduates							
Nontraditional characteristic							
Any nontraditional characteristic	67.8	63.8	60.9	54.0	35.8	17.7	8.7
Financially independent	100	66.2	66.4	57.3	52.8	26.1	10.1
Attended part time	70.3	100	58.8	62.0	36.2	15.7	8.0
Delayed enrollment	74.1	61.7	100	52.0	39.7	19.6	9.2
Worked full time	72.0	73.3	48.4	100	40.7	16.6	7.1
Had dependents	100	64.5	67.6	58.2	100	49.4	11.6
Single parent	100	56.6	68.0	55.4	100	100	14.1
No high school diploma	78.7	58.6	76.1	46.2	47.6	28.7	100
Nontraditional status							
Minimally nontraditional	15.2	36.2	22.8	22.8	0	0	2.2
Moderately nontraditional	68.0	63.8	42.2	51.5	18.7	3.8	5.2
Highly nontraditional	99.4	80.4	76.3	75.0	79.6	38.6	15.1

*Student did not finish high school or completed with a GED or certificate of completion.

NOTE: Total row and nontraditional characteristic and status rows include students at types of institutions not shown here. Students may appear in more than one column. Percentages in the “minimally nontraditional” row (only one nontraditional characteristic) do not add to 100.0 due to rounding.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, NCES. National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS:2000).

reason for being in this category (36 percent). Delayed enrollment (23 percent) and working full time (23 percent) were next. Most of the minimally nontraditional students were 24 years or younger (otherwise they would be financially independent, a characteristic of only 15 percent of minimally nontraditional students).

Among moderately nontraditional students (two or three nontraditional characteristics), 68 percent were financially independent, 64 percent

attended part time, 52 percent worked full time, and 42 percent delayed enrollment. Relatively fewer had dependents (19 percent).

A large majority of highly nontraditional students (80 percent) had dependents. In addition, three-quarters or more were financially independent (as they would be automatically if they had dependents), attended part time, worked full time, and had delayed enrollment in postsecondary education.

Nontraditional Undergraduates

Continued

ENROLLMENT PATTERNS

- *Nontraditional students are particularly likely to choose 2-year institutions.*

Among traditional students, 52 percent enrolled in a public 4-year institution, and another 27 percent enrolled in a private not-for-profit 4-year institution (table 3). Relatively few (17 percent) chose a public 2-year institution. The enrollment pattern of nontraditional students is different. Students who were even minimally nontraditional were much more likely than traditional students to attend a 2-year institution (39 percent), and the more nontraditional they were, the more likely they were to do so. Among highly nontraditional students, 64 percent attended a public 2-year institution.

COMBINING SCHOOL AND WORK

- *Two-thirds of highly nontraditional students consider themselves primarily employees.*

Among traditional students, 30 percent did not work while enrolled, and another 67 percent worked but still considered themselves to be primarily students (figure 2). The remaining 3

percent considered themselves primarily employees who enrolled in school. In sharp contrast, 67 percent of highly nontraditional students and 37 percent of moderately nontraditional students considered themselves primarily employees. Even minimally nontraditional students were more likely than traditional students to consider themselves primarily employees (10 versus 3 percent).

- *Working while enrolled has both benefits and limitations.*

Working while enrolled can have benefits. Among employed undergraduates who considered themselves primarily students, 26 percent thought that working helped them with their coursework, and 55 percent thought it helped prepare them for a career (table 4). There were generally no measurable differences between traditional and nontraditional students, with the exception that highly nontraditional students were slightly more likely than traditional or minimally nontraditional students to find that working helped them with their coursework.

Working can interfere with school as well as provide benefits. Undergraduates who worked but considered themselves primarily students

Table 3.—Percentage distribution of undergraduates according to the type of institution attended, by student status: 1999–2000

Student status	Public less-than-2-year	Public 2-year	Public 4-year	Private not-for-profit less-than-4-year	Private not-for-profit 4-year	Private for-profit
Total	0.7	44.9	33.4	0.8	14.9	5.2
Traditional	0.2	17.3	52.1	1.0	27.3	2.2
Minimally nontraditional	0.5	39.3	41.0	0.9	13.5	4.7
Moderately nontraditional	0.9	55.5	27.2	0.6	8.6	7.1
Highly nontraditional	1.2	64.2	17.2	0.8	10.1	6.6

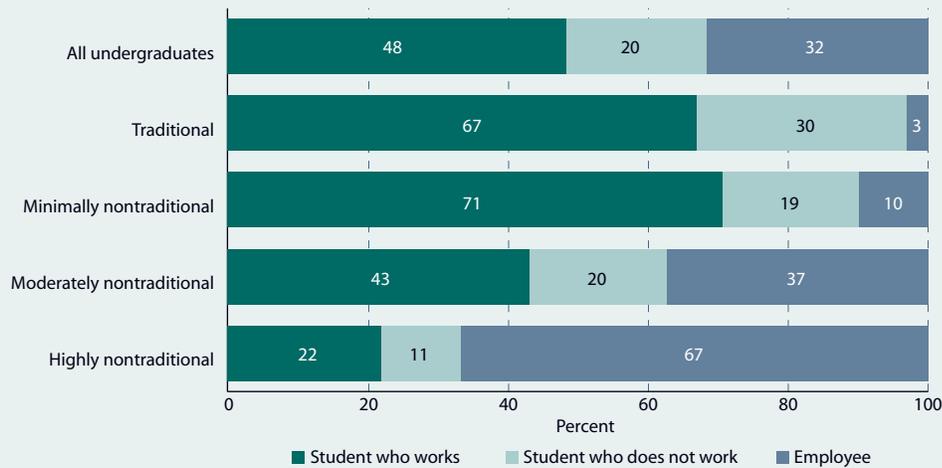
NOTE: Percentages may not add to 100.0 due to rounding.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, NCES. National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS:2000).

Nontraditional Undergraduates

Continued

Figure 2.—Percentage distribution of undergraduates according to their primary role, by student status: 1999–2000



SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, NCES. National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS:2000).

Table 4.—Percentage of undergraduates working while enrolled but considering themselves primarily students who reported various effects of working, by student status: 1999–2000

Student status	Helped with		Limited				Had negative effect on grades
	Coursework	Career preparation	Class schedule	Number of classes	Class choices	Access to library	
Total	25.7	54.8	46.1	38.6	32.9	30.1	34.6
Traditional	24.7	53.9	29.0	19.6	19.0	18.3	24.7
Minimally nontraditional	24.4	56.3	47.4	37.6	31.8	29.8	34.8
Moderately nontraditional	26.4	54.8	57.9	54.2	45.0	38.2	43.4
Highly nontraditional	29.7	54.1	72.0	67.5	53.5	50.4	47.1

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, NCES. National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS:2000).

sometimes found that working limited their class schedule (46 percent), the number of classes they could take (39 percent), their choice of classes (33 percent), or their access to the library (30 percent). Nontraditional students who worked were more likely than their traditional counter-

parts to report each of these limitations, and in each case, the more nontraditional they were, the more likely they were to report these problems. Among highly nontraditional students, the proportions reporting these limitations ranged from about one-half to almost three-quarters.

Nontraditional Undergraduates

Continued

Students sometimes report that working has a negative effect on their grades. Highly and moderately nontraditional students (47 and 43 percent, respectively) were more likely than minimally nontraditional students (35 percent) to report this effect, and traditional students (25 percent) were the least likely to do so.

- *For most nontraditional students, gaining skills, earning a degree, and personal enrichment are important considerations in their decision to enroll.*

Students who considered themselves primarily employees were asked if certain factors were important considerations in their decision to enroll in postsecondary education while working. Regardless of how nontraditional they were, 73 percent or more reported that personal enrichment or interest in the subject, gaining skills to

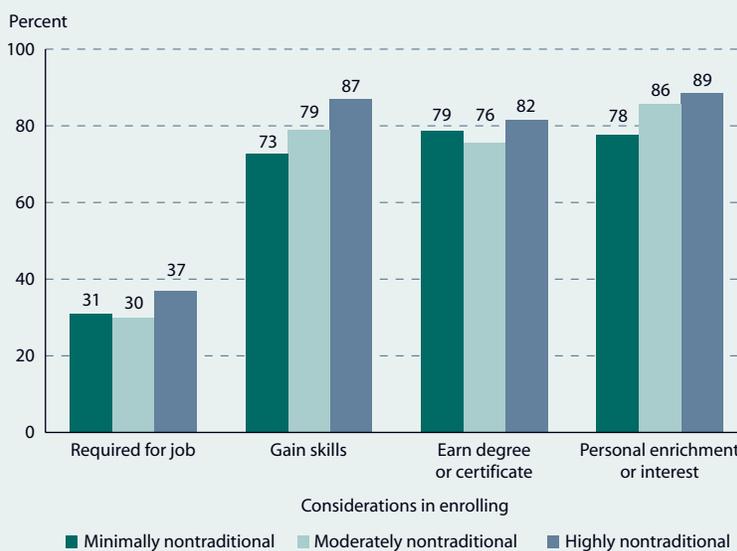
advance in their job or for a new career, and completing a degree or certificate program were important considerations (figure 3). Far fewer (30 to 37 percent) indicated that obtaining additional education required for their job was an important consideration. Too few traditional students considered themselves primarily employees (3 percent) to make comparisons (figure 2).

DISTANCE EDUCATION

Participating in distance education may allow nontraditional students to overcome some of the difficulties they encounter in coordinating their work and school schedules or in obtaining the classes they want.

- *Moderately and highly nontraditional students are more likely than other students to participate in distance education.*

Figure 3.—Among nontraditional undergraduates who considered themselves primarily employees, percentage who reported each factor to be an important consideration in their decision to enroll, by factor and nontraditional status: 1999–2000



SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, NCES. National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS:2000).

Nontraditional Undergraduates

Continued

In 1999–2000, 8 percent of all undergraduates participated in distance education at the institution in which they were enrolled or at both the institution at which they were enrolled and somewhere else (table 5 and *indicator 38*). Among those who participated, 29 percent were enrolled in programs available entirely through distance education. Moderately or highly nontraditional students were more likely than either traditional students or minimally nontraditional students both to participate in distance education and to be in programs available entirely through distance education.

Among all students who participated in distance education, 60 percent participated via the Internet, 39 percent through prerecorded television or audio, and 37 percent through live television or audio. There were no statistically significant differences between traditional and nontraditional students in the mode they used to participate.

PERSISTENCE AFTER 3 YEARS

The seven characteristics associated with nontraditional status—financial independence, part-time attendance, delayed enrollment, full-time work,

dependents, single parenthood, and lack of a high school diploma—have sometimes been called “risk factors” because they are related negatively to persistence (staying in school or earning a degree) (Horn 1996; Horn and Premo 1995). This section uses longitudinal data to examine the relationship between nontraditional characteristics and persistence and attainment after 3 years for students who enrolled in postsecondary education for the first time in 1995–96.⁵

Persistence is best studied in relation to students’ goals. Some students enroll for a limited number of courses without intending to earn a degree or certificate. Without knowing the students’ specific goals, it is impossible to know whether they were achieved. Therefore, only students with a degree or transfer goal are included in this discussion of persistence. However, 88 percent of the 1995–96 beginning postsecondary students were in this category (BPS:1996/1998). Students’ nontraditional status here refers to their status when they first enrolled and does not take into account any subsequent changes such as having children or shifting enrollment or employment status.

Table 5.—Percentage of undergraduates who participated in distance education and among those who did, percentage whose entire program was available through distance education and percentage using each mode of participation, by student status: 1999–2000

Student status	Among those who participated				
	Participated in distance education	Entire program was taught through distance education	Participated via live TV or audio	Participated via pre-recorded TV or audio	Participated via Internet
Total	7.6	29.0	37.3	39.3	60.1
Traditional	5.3	20.6	39.5	35.4	60.4
Minimally nontraditional	6.2	22.1	38.5	36.8	57.8
Moderately or highly nontraditional	9.3	32.8	36.4	40.9	60.5

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, NCES. National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS:2000).

Nontraditional Undergraduates

Continued

One would expect nontraditional students to take longer than traditional students to complete their programs because enrolling part time is one of the most common nontraditional characteristics (table 2). Consequently, comparing their degree attainment rates after only 3 years is not particularly useful. In contrast, comparing the percentages of traditional and nontraditional degree seekers who left postsecondary education without a degree and had not returned (at least within 3 years) is both appropriate and useful.

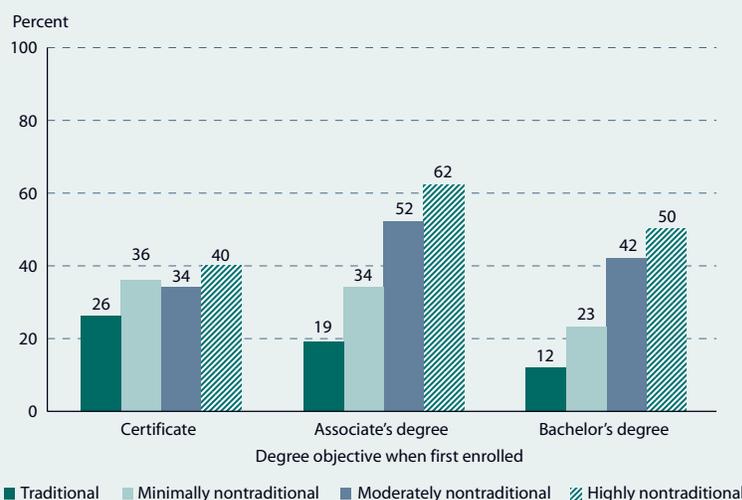
■ *Nontraditional students are much more likely than traditional students to leave postsecondary education without a degree.*

Among students seeking a bachelor's degree, 50 percent of highly nontraditional students were no longer enrolled (for any degree) 3 years later, compared with 12 percent of traditional students

(figure 4). Similarly, among those seeking an associate's degree, 62 percent of highly nontraditional students left without any degree, compared with 19 percent of traditional students. Even minimally nontraditional students seeking a bachelor's or associate's degree were more likely than their traditional counterparts to leave. Apparent differences at the certificate level were not statistically significant.

In addition to being more likely than traditional students to leave postsecondary education without any degree, nontraditional students who had initially planned to earn a bachelor's degree (including those who started at a less-than-4-year institution) were less likely than their traditional counterparts to be still enrolled at a 4-year institution 3 years later (table 6). While 76 percent of traditional students were still enrolled in 4-year institutions, the percentage dropped to 51 percent for minimally nontraditional students and

Figure 4.—Percentage of 1995–96 beginning postsecondary degree seekers who had not attained any degree and were not enrolled in 1998, by initial degree objective and student status



SOURCE: Berkner, Horn, and Clune (2000), tables 5.1d, 5.2d, and 5.3d. Data from U.S. Department of Education, NCES. Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study, "First Follow-up" (BPS:1996/1998).

Nontraditional Undergraduates

Continued

Table 6.—Percentage distribution of 1995–96 beginning postsecondary students with a bachelor’s degree objective when they first enrolled according to their status in 1998, by student status

Student status	Highest degree attained			No degree		
	Certificate	Associate’s	Bachelor’s	Enrolled at a less-than-4-year institution	Enrolled at a 4-year institution	Not enrolled
Total	1.5	2.7	0.7	12.5	63.2	19.4
Traditional	0.8	2.1	0.6	8.2	76.4	12.0
Minimally nontraditional	1.9	3.6	1.8	19.6	50.5	22.6
Moderately nontraditional	3.6	3.6	0.5	21.8	28.3	42.1
Highly nontraditional	4.8	3.9	(#)	15.4	25.6	50.4

#Estimate less than 0.05.

NOTE: Percentages may not add to 100.0 due to rounding.

SOURCE: Berkner, Horn, and Clune (2000), table 5.3d. Data from U.S. Department of Education, NCES, Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study “First Follow-up” (BPS:1996/1998).

even lower percentages for moderately and highly nontraditional students (28 and 26 percent, respectively).

PERSISTENCE AND ATTAINMENT AFTER 5 YEARS

While a 3-year follow-up is useful for examining persistence, a longer interval is needed to assess attainment. For this purpose, 1989–90 beginning postsecondary students were studied using the 1994 follow-up, which occurred approximately 5 years after they had first enrolled.

Persistence and attainment by degree goal

Students who began their postsecondary education in 1989–90 indicated their degree objectives when they first enrolled. Table 7 shows how many had achieved that objective by 1994 and for those who did not, whether they were still working on that degree, had changed their degree objective, or had left without earning the degree. Those who had changed their degree objective may or may not have been enrolled in 1994.

- *Compared with their traditional counterparts, nontraditional students seeking bachelor’s and associate’s degrees are less likely to attain their degree goal within 5 years and more likely to leave postsecondary education.*

Among nontraditional students whose goal was to obtain a bachelor’s degree at any time, 31 percent had earned one by 1994, compared with 54 percent of traditional students. The attainment rate for highly nontraditional students was 11 percent. Because many nontraditional students enroll part time, one would expect them to take longer than traditional students to complete a bachelor’s degree. If time-to-degree were the only issue, one would expect to find more nontraditional than traditional students still enrolled, but there was no statistically significant difference in the percentages still enrolled after 5 years (23 and 20 percent, respectively). Compared with traditional students, nontraditional students were more likely to change their degree objective (13 versus 7 percent) or leave without a degree (33 versus 19 percent).

Nontraditional Undergraduates

Continued

Table 7.—Percentage distribution of 1989–90 beginning postsecondary students with a reported degree objective according to their persistence and attainment of that degree objective by 1994, by student status

Student status	Attained degree objective	Did not attain degree objective		
		Enrolled toward degree objective in 1994	Changed degree objective, enrolled in or not enrolled in 1994	No change in degree objective, not enrolled in 1994
Bachelor's degree objective				
Total	44.5	21.2	9.6	24.7
Traditional	53.9	19.7	7.2	19.2
Nontraditional	31.3	23.2	12.9	32.5
Minimally nontraditional	42.4	22.5	8.6	26.6
Moderately nontraditional	16.9	25.4	17.0	40.7
Highly nontraditional	11.2	21.7	25.0	42.1
Associate's degree objective				
Total	35.5	8.7	17.2	38.7
Traditional	53.4	8.4	15.8	22.4
Nontraditional	26.7	8.8	17.8	46.6
Minimally nontraditional	37.2	5.8	21.7	35.3
Moderately nontraditional	24.5	6.4	16.5	52.6
Highly nontraditional	15.6	16.0	14.4	54.0
Certificate objective				
Total	55.8	4.5	8.7	31.0
Traditional	61.3	4.8	10.7	23.2
Nontraditional	54.0	4.4	8.1	33.5
Minimally nontraditional	55.4	6.3	11.3	26.9
Moderately nontraditional	56.6	6.4	8.4	28.7
Highly nontraditional	50.3	1.1	5.7	42.9

NOTE: Degree objective means having ever had the specified degree objective. Therefore, it is possible for a student who changed objectives to appear more than once in the table. For example, a student with an initial objective of a bachelor's degree who changed his or her objective to an associate's degree would appear under "changed degree objective" in the bachelor's degree section of the table and would also appear in the associate's degree section. Percentages may not add to 100.0 due to rounding.

SOURCE: Horn (1996), table 13. Data from U.S. Department of Education, NCES. Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study, "Second Follow-up" (BPS:1990/1994).

Similarly, nontraditional students seeking an associate's degree were less likely than their traditional peers to earn the degree (27 versus 53 percent) and more likely to leave without the degree (47 versus 22 percent). Among nontraditional students, those seeking an associate's degree were more likely than those

seeking a bachelor's degree to leave without a degree (47 versus 33 percent). The same was not true for traditional students, who left at approximately the same rate regardless of their degree objective. (The difference between 19 and 22 percent was not statistically significant.)

Nontraditional Undergraduates

Continued

For certificate seekers, differences in persistence and attainment rates were not statistically significant except for those of highly nontraditional students. These students were more likely to leave without a certificate (43 percent) than were other nontraditional students (27 to 29 percent) or traditional students (23 percent).

Timing and type of departure

For postsecondary administrators designing programs to help keep nontraditional students in school, it is important to understand when students most frequently leave postsecondary education. Figure 5 shows the annual attrition rates of students who began their postsecondary education in 1989–90—that is, the percentage who left without returning, transferred downward, or stopped out for more than 4 months.

- *Nontraditional students are most at risk for leaving during their first year, regardless of their degree objective.*

Among nontraditional students seeking bachelor's degrees, 27 percent interrupted their enrollment in their first year, compared with 14 percent of traditional students (figure 5). The annual attrition rate was lower in subsequent years but remained higher than the rate for traditional students until the fourth year. Among those seeking an associate's degree, 46 percent of nontraditional students left in their first year, compared with 23 percent of traditional students. The gap closed somewhat in the second year, but not after that. Among certificate seekers, nontraditional students were more likely than traditional students to leave in their first year (43 versus 23 percent). There was no difference thereafter, but many certificate programs do not require more than a year to complete.

- *Nontraditional students who leave are as likely as their traditional peers to take a break in their enrollment.*

Although one might expect students with family and work responsibilities to be more likely than their traditional peers to take breaks in their enrollment, that was not the case. Among nontraditional and traditional students who left their first institution, the percentages who left but returned later were similar (26 and 28 percent, respectively) (figure 6). The rest of the leavers were different, however. Traditional students who left their first institution were more likely than their nontraditional peers (40 versus 27 percent) to transfer downward (in part because more started at 4-year institutions). In contrast, nontraditional leavers were more likely than traditional ones to leave without returning (47 versus 32 percent).

Influence of individual nontraditional characteristics on persistence and attainment

- *With the exception of single parenthood, each of the nontraditional characteristics has a direct or indirect association with persistence and attainment.*

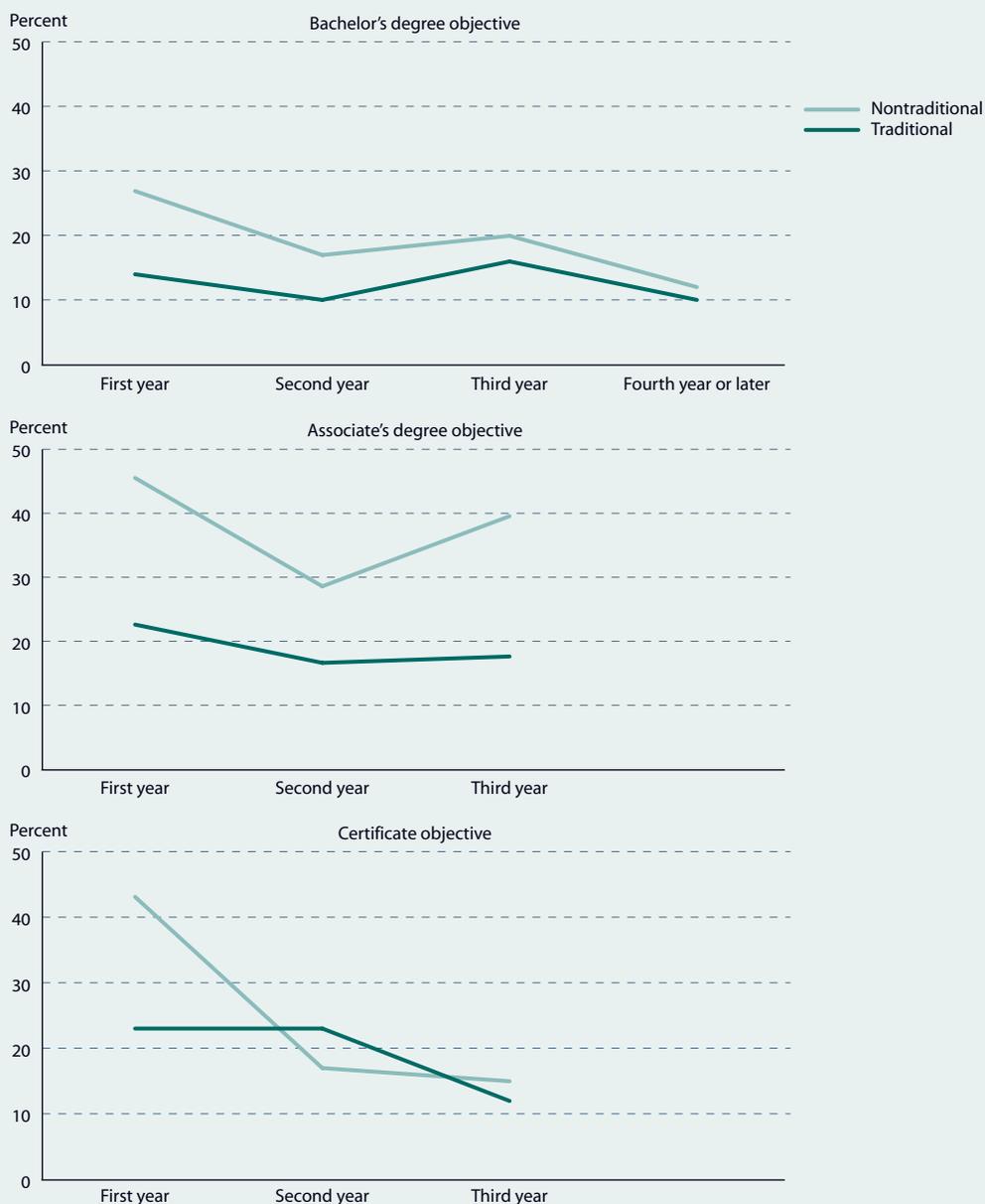
Horn (1996) investigated the relationships between the various nontraditional characteristics and persistence and attainment, taking into account the effect of other variables also likely to affect persistence, including sex, race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and the control and level of institution. This analysis showed that, controlling for the covariation of these other factors, the following nontraditional characteristics remained negatively associated with persistence: delaying enrollment, enrolling part time, being financially independent, and having a GED or other certificate of completion.

The remaining three nontraditional characteristics—working full time in the first year of enrollment, having dependents, and being a single parent—did not have an independent association with persistence. Further analysis

Nontraditional Undergraduates

Continued

Figure 5.—Annual attrition rates of 1989–90 beginning postsecondary students, by initial degree objective: 1994



NOTE: Represents the percentage of students who interrupted their enrollment each year based on the number still enrolled at the beginning of that year. An "interruption" means leaving without returning, transferring downward, or stopping out for more than 4 months and then returning to the same or higher level of institution.

SOURCE: Horn (1996), table 14. Data from U.S. Department of Education, NCES. Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study, "Second Follow-up" (BPS:1990/1994).

Nontraditional Undergraduates

Continued

Figure 6.—Percentage distribution of beginning postsecondary degree seekers who left their first institution according to the type of leaving, by student status: 1994



¹From a 4-year to 2-year institution, for example (with or without taking time off).

²Left school for a period of 4 or more months and then returned to the same level of institution.

SOURCE: Horn (1996), table 15. Data from U.S. Department of Education, NCES. Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study, "Second Follow-up" (BPS:1990/1994).

demonstrated, however, that working full time and having dependents predicted part-time and delayed enrollment and therefore indirectly affected persistence. Only single parenthood did not have a measurable independent direct or indirect effect.

CONCLUSION

The “traditional” student is not typical. Fully three-quarters of all postsecondary students in 1999–2000 had at least one nontraditional characteristic. The most highly nontraditional students (those with four or more nontraditional characteristics) were concentrated in public 2-year institutions, with two-thirds enrolled in this type of institution.

Two-thirds of highly nontraditional students perceived their primary role to be that of an

employee, suggesting that school did not have first claim on their time and energy. Among highly nontraditional students who considered themselves primarily students, many found that work limited their class and scheduling options.

Among beginning postsecondary students seeking bachelor’s and associate’s degrees, nontraditional students were much more likely than traditional students to leave without earning any degree. They were most at risk of dropping out in their first year. Compared with their traditional counterparts, nontraditional beginning students who left their first institution were more likely to leave postsecondary education altogether and less likely to transfer downward. The percentages who interrupted their enrollment were similar for the two groups.

Nontraditional Undergraduates

Continued

NOTES

¹This includes undergraduates at all types of postsecondary institutions (less-than-2-year, 2-year, and 4-year).

²U.S. Department of Education, NCES. National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS:2000).

³Undergraduates are normally considered financially dependent unless they are 24 years or older, married, a veteran, have dependents of their own other than a spouse, or are an orphan or ward of the court.

⁴The numbers of both full- and part-time students are projected to increase over the next decade, but full-time enrollment is expected to grow at a faster rate (*indicator 5*).

⁵Among 1995–96 beginning postsecondary students, 45 percent were traditional students, 19 percent were minimally nontraditional, 19 percent were moderately nontraditional, and 16 percent were highly nontraditional (NCES 2000–154).

REFERENCES

Bean, J., and Metzner, M. (1985). A Conceptual Model of Nontraditional Undergraduate Student Attrition. *Review of Educational Research*, 55(4).

Berkner, L., Horn, L., and Clune, M. (2000). *Descriptive Summary of 1995–96 Beginning Postsecondary Students: Three Years Later* (NCES 2000–154). U.S. Department of Education, NCES. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.

Horn, L. (1996). *Nontraditional Undergraduates, Trends in Enrollment From 1986 to 1992 and Persistence and Attainment Among 1989–90 Beginning Postsecondary Students* (NCES 97–578). U.S. Department of Education, NCES. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.

Horn, L.J., and Premo, M.D. (1995). *Profile of Undergraduates in U.S. Postsecondary Education Institutions: 1992–93, With an Essay on Undergraduates at Risk* (NCES 96–237). U.S. Department of Education, NCES. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.

U.S. Department of Education, NCES. (2002a). *The Condition of Education 2002* (NCES 2002–025). Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.

U.S. Department of Education, NCES. (2002b). *Digest of Education Statistics 2001* (NCES 2002–130). Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.