

A Request to the Xerox Foundation
for \$8,500 to Create an Interactive Website
to Support Adult Learners
and the Educators of Adult Learners:

NTSU Online



The Non-Traditional Students' Union

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December 22, 2005

Education is a companion which
no misfortune can depress,
no crime can destroy,
no enemy can alienate,
no despotism can enslave.

Joseph Addison,
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

The population of non-traditional age students in the United States is growing rapidly, yet institutions of higher education are still seen as being primarily for the young. This perception creates unnecessary difficulties for adult learners, their fellow students and their instructors. The Non-Traditional Students' Union of Amherst, Massachusetts (*NTSU*) proposes the creation of a virtual community on the Internet for the support and edification of adult learners and their educators. There is much evidence to suggest that positive peer support is vital to academic and career goal success. Therefore, the primary purpose of this virtual community would be to provide the opportunity for interaction and mutual support between individuals concerned with the education of adult learners.

In the context of this proposal, the terms "adult learner" and "non-traditional student" refer to students in undergraduate higher education who have reached the minimum age of 24, and have had their formal education interrupted for at least one year. In some cases, these terms may include students who are younger, but who have children or other dependants of their own.

Table of Contents

Executive Summar	iii
Table of Contents	iv
Project Description	1
Background	3
Statement of Problem	5
Project Detail	12
Methods	15
Staffing	16
Available Resources	16
Needed Resources	16
Budget	16
Cost Breakdown	17
Examples of Similar Projects	18
Evaluation Plan	19
Time Line	Appendix A
Time Line Chart	Appendix B
Sources	Appendix C

1. PROJECT DESCRIPTION

The Non-Traditional Students Union (NTSU), based in Amherst, Massachusetts, performed a feasibility study on the development of a non-commercial website that would offer information, support and advice to adult learners and educators who teach adult learners in the United States. We have concluded that a website dedicated to the support of non-traditional students and their educators is a unique and viable idea. The site would be an effective tool for serving our target population, (adult learners and their educators) and could be built and published for a very reasonable cost. Once initial funding is secured, maintenance funding may be available from various public and private institutions that serve adult learners in exchange for mention and links.

The primary purpose of the proposed website is to create a virtual community. Bulletin boards, real time chats, topic specific forums and newsletters with articles contributed by those who frequent the site can each offer a kind of camaraderie and mutual support that is often missing in the lives of non traditional learners and their teachers. It is this aspect of real support for real individuals through a peer network as well as the encouragement of mutual support and education for instructors of adult learners and the learners themselves that makes this proposed website (*NTSU Online*) unique.

NTSU Online will include advice columns, book reviews, stories of successful non-traditional learners and links to sites with information vital to college success. Among those would be sites that offer reviews on basics for students who have been out of academia for a period of time (such as how to form a thesis statement, do citation for a research paper, and prepare for tests). Other sites of interest to adult learners and their educators may include sites that describe models of adult development over a lifespan. It

should also include critiques of various adult learner opportunities such as continuing education, distance learning, prior learning portfolios and reviews of specific programs, and address the challenge of integrating the non-traditional student into the traditional classroom. . The site will include links to programs geared toward adult learners, and scholarship programs for the non-traditional student including links and tips for completing and filing routine forms such as the FAFSA. It should include career change advice and tips for job search and resume styles for those who are changing fields or who have been out of the job market for a period of time. For instructors of adult learners it will offer advice for integrating the non-traditional student into the traditional classroom, as well as information regarding adult developmental stages.

NTSU is a volunteer organization with a committed membership. Much of the labor involved in the building and maintenance of the site will be done with volunteer labor or at cost by friends of NTSU. In addition, we intend to utilize student interns at low cost for many of the tasks involved in the publishing and promotion of the site. In addition to volunteer labor, NTSU plans to pay a part time web manager for a flat rate of \$300 per month (\$3600 a year). The domain name **NTSUOnline.org** is currently available for registration and would serve the purpose of giving the website a recognizable name.

2 BACKGROUND

Until the end of WWII, it was unusual to find college students who were not of traditional age (18 to 25). Towards the end of the war, in response to the needs of returning military personnel, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed the "Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944," commonly called the "GI Bill of Rights." One of the benefits of the GI bill was to make higher education available and affordable to military personal who were readjusting to civilian life and in need of improved civilian job skills. Students who took advantage of the GI Bill for education purposes were primarily men in their mid 20s to early 30's. These men already had experience of the adult world, had proven their ability to learn, and had mastered skills specific to their military role. The habit of responsibility and a proven track record of learning made many of them excellent college candidates. Some of the women, too, who had been in the military or who had held responsible jobs as part of the war support industry chose to continue working outside the home, and so sought to improve their education and professional prospects. This era also saw the beginning of the community college movement. In a relatively short period, higher education went from being primarily for the young and privileged to being assessable to most.

Throughout the second half of the 20th Century various trends in the job market, as well as innovations in educational opportunity supported the growth in the numbers of adult learners. The feminist movement of the 1960's and 70's propelled many adult women, no longer satisfied with home and family or pink collar jobs, back to school. At about that same time the rapid growth of technology required a more highly specialized workforce. The early 1970's saw the beginning of increased respect for experiential

learning that could be translated into an academic context, as with the University of Massachusetts, Amherst's University Without Walls program. By the mid 70's rapid inflation began to influence family budgets and make two income families the norm. The "Welfare to Work" programs begun in the 90's have encouraged people who had not previously thought of themselves as college material to consider both technical training and academics. In addition to these social and economic influences already mentioned, the dramatic improvements in health care over the last 50 years and the resulting increased life expectancy has helped to mold a population of elders who are increasingly less apt to retire in the traditional sense. Many workers who reach customary retirement age choose to continue to work, but make career changes as they enter this later stage of their lives and personal development.

According to information compiled by the National Center for Education Statistics (1995) enrollments of students age 25 and older, with the majority being over the age of 30, saw an increase of 171% in the years between 1971 and 1991. Career motives seem to be the primary force behind this rise, but many adult students say that personal development is a factor as well.

In *A Guerilla Manual for Adult College Students* (Booklocker 2003) author Mike Doolin states: "Right at this minute more than 7.5 million people over the age of 25 are working on a college degree. This is about half of all college students in the country." Other authors are beginning to address the subject of adult learners in the traditional classroom. In *The Slam and Scream: And Other Powerful Strategies and Career Moves for Secretaries, Assistants, and Anyone Else Who Has Had Enough* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux 1996) and *Traditional Degrees for Nontraditional Students: How to Earn a Top*

Diploma from America's Great Colleges at Any Age (Farrar, Straus and Giroux 2000)

author Carole Fungaroli Sargent speaks glowingly of her experience and the experience of her colleges with career change and a return to college as an adult learner. Far from focusing on distance learning, continuing education, community colleges or programs specifically geared to non traditional students, Sargent focuses on the advantage to both the student and the college community when adult learners are integrated into the traditional classroom. In her introduction, Sargent says of the adult learners she encountered: "They enjoyed the great American college campus -- ivy walls, a cappella choral groups, football, mascots, caps and gowns, Professor Kingsfield, Mr. Chips and all." Clearly, support for meeting academic and entry-level career goals is no longer something that can be presumed to be primarily for those in late adolescence or early adulthood. Whether the student chooses to learn in a traditional classroom, an adult learners' program or, as is most often the case, in a combination of these options, we must find ways to support learners throughout all life stages. This support must not be limited to special programs, continuing education or community colleges. Though there is room for improvement, these groups already do a more effective job of serving adult learners than do most four year colleges and universities in their mainstream programs. Education and support for the adult learner must also have impact where the need is greatest: with educators and educational program planners in traditional colleges and vocational schools as well as with the students themselves.

Much has been done over the past half century to support both the concept and the reality of education at any age. However, the missing piece is often community. Virtual community and its advantages are what *NTSU Online* will be designed to generate.

3. STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

Despite the fact that adult learners in college and vocational schools constitute approximately 50% of all students in higher education (and if current trends continue, may soon become the majority), support for non-traditional students outside of specialized adult learner programs can be difficult to find. The reasons are partly logistical. Adult learners do not tend to live in dormitories or other forms of student housing, where networking with fellow students is easily facilitated. They are often part time students with family and job responsibilities. They take night and weekend classes, use distance learning, independent studies and portfolios of life learning that can be transferred into college credit more often than do traditional students. While these educational options can be a blessing to a student who has off campus employment and a family to consider, they also isolate the student from many of the support opportunities and events available on campus. Even when it is possible for the adult learner to take advantage of these opportunities, they are most often geared exclusively toward younger students.

When the focus of these events is on the traditional age student, advice and reinforcement specific to the needs and challenges of older students is often lacking, diminishing the value of these proceedings not only for the older student, but for everyone involved. A style of social and support event design and planning that fosters inclusively is possible, and should be encouraged. While alternative opportunities have their place, and should continue to be available, their existence has inadvertently reinforced the artificial division between the traditional and non-traditional learner. As more adult learners are effectively integrated into the traditional college community, these barriers will begin to diminish.

Another artificial barrier that has been reinforced by specialized adult learner programs is the social barrier between the traditional and non-traditional student. As fellow students, these individuals have as much in common as they do differences. Where differences do exist, they can often be used by the students and instructors to the benefit of the entire class. In an effective educational milieu, students learn as much from each other as they do from instructors or texts. Public education on overcoming these perceived barriers would be a positive byproduct of *NTSU Online*.

In recent years, educational psychologists have begun to realize that developmental stages continue to occur and change throughout a person's entire lifetime. Learning styles alter over each individual's life span. Teaching methods geared towards people in late adolescence are not always the most effective for the adult. By understanding these differences, both the student and the instructor can take simple steps to adapt a teaching and learning style that will not detract from the class over all.

The inclusion of instructors is a vital aspect of this virtual community. The relationship between the adult learner and his or her instructor is unique, and should be mutually beneficial. In the relatively anonymous setting of an online community, ideas, opinions and personal experience can be exchanged between students and educators without breaching issues of confidentiality and boundaries.

The conclusion of David L. Crawford's article *The Role of Aging in Adult Learning: Implications for Instructors in Higher Education* (New Horizons for Education <http://www.newhorizons.org/lifelong/higher_ed/crawford.htm>) states:

It seems beneficial for faculty in the higher educational setting to be aware of differences between the older learner and the traditional college age student. The differences are somewhat subtle, so it will take effort on the part of the instructor to understand and implement strategies appropriate to the nuances of the adult learner. Even though it takes time and energy to explore for the optimal environment and teaching methodology, the payoff could be well worth the effort if the result is an enjoyable and satisfying learning experience for the student. While it may be true that adults will learn in spite of the professor's shortcomings, faculty that choose to ignore learner differences run the inherent risk of mediocrity in their teaching.

Administrative and support personnel need to be educated in the specific needs of older adults. Sustaining students in higher education and seeing them successfully through to graduation and on to graduate school or the job market is a challenge for all post secondary schools. However, the particular forms these challenges take in the lives of the adult learner need to be addressed. Among those specific stressors are:

- **Economics:** Paying for post secondary education is a challenge for most people. In the case of the older student, they are unlikely to have parental support. They have adult financial obligations. They may feel embarrassed or guilty for putting their families through leaner times. If an older adult student is faced with the prospect of taking educational loans, they must face the fact that the time they have to recoup that investment is shorter than that of the traditional student.

- **Family stressors:** Friends and family may not be supportive of the adult learner's choices. For adult students who have a child in postsecondary school, the question of whose needs take priority is always a concern. When considering the barriers to college students getting their homework and projects done on time, we do not normally consider hurdles common to the adult. Needing to help a child with their homework, rescuing a teenager whose car has broken down, planning and preparing regular family meals and attempting to help mend broken hearts are not usually items on a traditional college student's to-do list.
- **Health Issues:** The population of older students is likely to have to face increased medical costs and concerns associated with aging. While cramming and late nights may be a fact of college life, (however much we try to encourage others ways of getting the job done), adding the pressure of late nights, lack of sleep, shaky nutrition and the nervous tension that accompanies the challenges of higher education may take a more severe toll on the older student.
- **“Peer” stressors:** Despite statistical realities, college is still seen as being for the young. Social expectation holds that image firmly in place. Younger students may not welcome older students easily. Older students may take a patronizing attitude toward the younger. Older students may lack respect for younger students' class contribution, and

younger students may see older students as preoccupied with recounting life experience as learning examples. For adult learners with high school and traditional college age children, making the psychological shift from parent to peer in youth culture can be awkward. Adult learners who do not have older children may feel lost in youth culture.

- **Teacher-student stressors:** Adult students tend to expect respect for life experience. They do not automatically take what an instructor says as “truth” and are not afraid to challenge answers. They tend to be more casual in their relationships with instructors and in some ways have more in common with their instructors than with their fellow students, and so boundary issues may become awkward. Adult students may expect, and indeed may require, more facilitated learning, particularly if they are entering a field of study new to them or have been out of school for a number of years. Adult students also tend to be more keenly aware of the ways in which their instructors work for *them* and the attitudes that result from this awareness can be mistaken for pushiness or disrespect.
- **Organizational challenges:** Post secondary schools are built for the young, both in terms of physical and organizational structure. Steep inclines, long stairways and offices that cannot be accessed by elevator can sometimes be as much of a problem for older students as for the disabled. The hours during which support services are available often do

not meet the adult learner's needs. Emergency counseling services may be staffed by interns half the non-traditional student's age. Libraries often close early on Saturday night when younger students are involved with their social lives. For the adult learner who is the parent of a teenager, this may be the ideal time to be away from home doing research. These same libraries are often open late on Sunday nights when traditional students are pulling their work together for the coming week, and non-traditional students are dealing with meal plans, laundry, and the multitude of minor tasks that go into running a household. This kind of culture based scheduling become particularly problematic when traditional and non-traditional students are attempting to work together in study groups or on team projects. Not all of these hurdles can be avoided, but knowing they exist can help everyone involved deal with them as they arise.

- **The adult learner's self-awareness and understanding of the educational culture:** While it is true that teachers and school administrators need to be aware of the needs of non-traditional students, the students themselves often do not understand what their challenges are and why they find college an awkward fit. One of the goals of *NTSU Online* will be to inform both students and educators concerning the challenges that face the adult learner, and how best to meet them. NTSU firmly believes that the education of the larger postsecondary

school community regarding these issues is as much the responsibility of the non-traditional student as it is the responsibility of the instructors and administrators of their schools. For non-traditional students to meet this responsibility they need specific awareness of, and language for, the issues that must be addressed.

4. PROJECT DETAIL

As previously stated, the primary purpose of *NTSU Online* is to create a virtual support community for adult learners and educators of adult learners. Since we are targeting two closely related but separate populations, there are specific objectives for each population.

Goal #1 – To offer information, advice and support in an interactive online setting for non-traditional students

- Objective 1.1 – To provide a forum for dialogue between non-traditional students throughout the United States as a way of helping these students to complete their educational and career goals, and get the most out of the process.

- Objective 1.2 – To offer articles and advice on topics of interest to all students in higher education, but with a specific focus on the non-traditional student, such as time management, sources of funds for education, and basic study skills.
- Objective 1.3 – To facilitate supportive relationships between students in a format that allows for wide variations in schedules, and geographic location.
- Objective 1.4 – To create a repository of information by and about adult learners that will help the learners themselves and their educators better understand their unique needs and gifts.
- Objective 1.5 – To inform non-traditional students concerning effective ways of asking for what they need, and getting those needs met.

Goal #2 – To offer educators the opportunity to learn from the experience of adult learners what methods are most effective for teaching adults in various stages of development.

- Objective 2.1 – To encourage educators to view *NTSU Online* as a resource for information regarding adult learners’ needs.
- Objective 2.2 – To provide the opportunity for educators, in a relatively anonymous forum, to dialogue with adult learners as they develop lesson plans and teaching methods that are effective for adults in both an adult focused setting and an integrated classroom.
- Objective 2.3 – To offer educators the opportunity to build virtual community and support with other educators and students.
- Objective 2.4 - To offer educators the opportunity to give their advice and feedback to student visitors to the site, and, to offer those same educators the opportunity to tell “their side” of the story

5. METHODS

Website

NTSUOnline.org will offer a virtual meeting place for non-traditional learners and their educators to exchange information, experiences and opinions related to the goal of a successful education experience. Features of the website should include:

- An electronic bulletin board organized into topic threads, with a search feature to allow visitors to read archived posts that may address their concerns and questions.
- Real-time chat capability with the potential to creating separate rooms for various discussions of concern to the *NTSU Online* target audience.
- Scheduled, moderated chats with experts in the field of education and successful non-traditional students that are moderated and the logs posted for future reference.
- Articles by educators and students that offer advice, encouragement, success stories and cautionary tales.
- An electronic newsletter published on a monthly basis, which will deliver highlights of current site information as well as encourage users to return to and participate in the *NTSU Online* community.
- Resource recommendations: Lists, links to and reviews of websites, articles, books, organizations and other resources that could be of assistance to the *NTSU Online* community.

6. STAFFING

NTSU Online will be staffed primarily with volunteers initially from the NTSU Amherst organization, and eventually by volunteers from the virtual community itself. The exception to volunteer staffing would be a part time webmaster contracted to help with the technical aspects of keeping the site functioning and updated.

7. AVAILABLE RESOURCES

NTSU Online has office space, the use of a computer and printer, and use of a telephone and fax in the NTSU Amherst office.

8. NEEDED RESOURCES

NTSU online will need to pay its contracted webmaster and pay for consumable goods such as paper, ink, postage and other office supplies. *NTSU Online* will also need to pay for domain registration and hosting.

9. Budget

As a start up project, costs for this website can be kept to a minimum. There are a number of open source servers, bulletin board and chat systems available on the Internet. A domain name can be purchased for under \$10 per year, and hosting for a site of this type should not exceed \$50 per month, even with generous bandwidth. The most costly portion of this project would be the initial site setup, which could be done by skilled student interns for approximately \$1,000.

Personnel and tools for routine website maintenance are estimated at \$300 per month. Initial site promotion is budgeted at \$1000, the bulk of which would pay for a mass mailing to selected educational institutions in the United States. An additional \$500 is budgeted for ongoing promotion. Space in the current Non Traditional Student Union office in Amherst and use of their computer is available, as is their internet connection. However, *NTSU Online* must pay for consumable items such as paper, ink, envelopes and postage. Since *NTSU Online* is a virtual community, hardcopy publications and mailings will be kept to a minimum. Most of our information will be delivered in an electronic format.

Cost Breakdown:

Line Item	Monthly Cost	Annual Total
Domain registration and hosting	\$50.	\$650.
Website design and initial setup	n/a	\$1000.
Website Management	\$300.	\$3600.
Promotion	n/a	\$1500.
Supplies	\$125	\$1500.
TOTAL		\$8,250.

10. Examples of successful website with similar features

It is interesting to note that some of the most active and feature-rich websites geared toward the non-traditional student are based in the United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand. Many US based adult education websites are commercial, and therefore promote one specific program specifically geared towards adult learners. However, some non-commercial sites based in the United States that address some of *NTSU's* concerns include:

Learning as an adult: Andragogy <<http://www.studygs.net/adulted.htm>>

A well-designed page of study guide strategies for adult learners and lesson planning tips for instructors.

Lifelong Learning <http://www.newhorizons.org/lifelong/front_life.html>

The website for *New Horizons for Learning*, a quarterly journal that addresses learning and teaching strategies for adult learners. It includes articles on adult development, neuroscience, and current trends in education as well as a section from adult learners themselves: "Student Voices."

The Adult Higher Education Alliance (AHEA) < <http://www.ahea.org/>>

AHEA is a national organization whose goals and objectives closely match those of *NTSU*. However, it lacks the online community-building component.

11. Evaluation Plan

The effectiveness of *NTSU Online* will be continuously monitored based on site traffic, newsletter subscription and feedback from visitors to the site. If the number of registered users, posters and newsletter subscribers continue to grow steadily and online interactions between users is positive, *NTSU Online* can reasonably be considered effective. Another indicator of success will be the number of times *NTSU Online* is referenced and linked by other electronic and hardcopy publications, and the quality of those references.

12. Personal perspective

As a non-traditional student who began working towards her current education and career goals in my late 40s, I have a very personal stake in the success of this project. Over the years, I have experienced both well-planned programming and support for adult learners, as well as situations that seemed designed to create as many hurdles as possible for any student who fell outside the traditional category. From my own experience, and my observation of the experience of other non-traditional students, I am convinced that it is necessary to expand the opportunities for students and educators to build a support network that will have a positive impact on adult learners and the educational institutions they attend.

Research suggests that the single most important factor in success for students in higher education is community. This is no less true of the non-traditional student. By creating virtual community, we would not only provide a kind of direct support that would have an affirming impact on its own; we would encourage the development of community

that includes non-traditional students in their local area. In doing so, we would help to ensure the success of adult learners in higher education. In turn, ensuring this success would have positive impact on each student's larger educational community.

Evelyn Lee Barney

Non-Traditional Students' Union

APPENDIX

Time Line

- October 2005

Research on needed and available support for adult learners in higher education was begun. While pockets of excellent support were found, a nation wide standard of support specifically designed for the non-traditional student is lacking.

- December 2005

Investigation of possible funding sources was begun. While a number of organizations mentioned non-traditional students as a population they were willing to support, most were geographically limited. The Xerox foundation, with its broad base of types of organizations funded, seemed the best opportunity.

Along with funding sources, we investigated the potential costs of this project. It seems that a website is both an efficient and cost effective way of meetings many of the needs of our target population.

- January 2006

Proposal submitted to The Xerox Foundation.

- March 2006

Search for both contract and volunteer personnel.

- June 2006

Development and design of the website as a team will begin. Press release and other public relations projects will begin, as resources and opportunity arise.

- August 2006

Official launch of NTSU Online at NTSUOnline.org

