

**Some Key Takeaways from SAS OUE's December 3, 2021 panel**  
***Voices of Diversity: Non-Traditional Students at Rutgers***

On December 3, the SAS Office of Undergraduate Education hosted the second of this year's four *Voices of Diversity* student panels. The program was initiated last year with support from a RU-NB Diversity, Inclusion, and Community Engagement grant, and is designed to provide students with a platform to share with faculty their perspectives as students with diverse and intersectional identities. The Student Advisory Board -- a team of 17 undergraduate students that represent the breadth and richness of the SAS community, including a range of majors and class years -- develops the panel topics for the year, selects panelists based on the essays of de-identified applicants, and composes the questions for the panels.

Thank you to the Student Advisory Board and the volunteer panelists for the tremendous amount of time, energy, and mental and emotional labor that went into designing, preparing for, and participating in *Voices of Diversity*. We are also grateful to the SAS-OUE Teaching & Learning team for their work on this initiative, and especially to Jenevieve DeLosSantos for organizing this panel and serving as an advisor to the Student Advisory Board members. Finally, thank you to Jason Moore, Director of Access and Academic Strategy in the Office of the Chancellor-Provost, and Rachel Joseph, Senior Program Coordinator in the Office of the Chancellor-Provost, for their excellent work in moderating this panel.

Although all of the students on this panel were adult learners, they came from a wide range of backgrounds and experiences. During the panel they discussed issues they experience as an international student, as mothers, as veterans, as employees, and more generally as students returning after prolonged absences from schooling. Although it is not possible to include all of the valuable perspectives and insights the panelists shared in this brief document, the following is a summary of some key themes and take-aways from the panel.

Please look out for upcoming announcements about our two *Voices of Diversity* panels in Spring 2022!

## *Voices of Diversity: Non-Traditional Students at Rutgers*

**Adult learners experience many challenges; some are similar to challenges faced by most students, and others are unique to their circumstances as non-traditional students.**

*"I'm back and it's very difficult—I want to share how wonderful and difficult it is at the same time."*

- (Re)entering college after a prolonged period without schooling is difficult.

*"I was out of school for five or six for years and when I came back, I had to start from zero. Not many professors realized that... Some students don't understand your language... I needed an introduction, and it would have helped if professors had given us some idea of where they expected us to be at the beginning of the class...I need to know learn your language before I can learn what's actually happening."*

- Several panelists described the difficulty of being a mother and student, especially during the pandemic when children were home and doing remote schooling. Sometimes the students found it too difficult to continue, even when professors were flexible and accommodating (and many were).

*"I felt like there was a lack of contingency—if my kid got Covid, what would happen? I know as a student what would happen, but what if they're quarantined, and I have to stay home?"*

*"I don't know what it is about summer at Rutgers, but things always go down for me—personally, not class-wise. One summer my child was very sick, I had a paper due, and I brought my sleeping child on my shoulder to hand in the paper. My professor said, 'You're nuts, go to the doctor!' I had gallbladder surgery that same summer. And summer session courses are quick—one week is half a semester. My one professor was awesome and told me to stay at home as long as I could and just keep writing my essays. But another said, 'This is math, I can't do a lot for you. Just catch up when you can.'"*

*"Last semester, every weekend, I felt a dilemma as a mother between spending time with my daughter and writing essays...This negatively affected my relationship with my teenage daughter last semester, but I couldn't share this with my professor because I knew they would understand, but there was nothing to change—I had to write this essay."*

- Challenges of balancing work and school, (an issue that is certainly not limited to adult learners)

*"My biggest problem is the time/money paradox. There is no viable way to pursue a moderate approach or middle road.... I do well when I take three classes per semester, but that's below the necessary credit load for financial aid, so I have to work a lot to pay tuition. But if I take more courses, that's too much. It is structurally impossible to take three courses and work forty hours per week."*

- Adult learners' level of prior knowledge and experience can make it difficult to know where they stand/fit in with their peers and to productively engage in class discussions.

*“Sometimes I have a lot of advanced knowledge, and this leads to boredom or I disrupt the professor’s flow in class. But other times, I’m completely ignorant of what’s commonplace knowledge among my peers; sometimes I’m just way off—there’s pop philosophy/literature (or YouTube) knowledge in my head that’s considered pseudoscience by scholars... So, a lot of times, you’re just searching for validation and editing. You want to know that what you’re thinking isn’t stupid, and you need to know when it is. I’m constantly searching for validation from my professors about my knowledge to know that it’s not stupid.”*

- Challenges related to learning English as an adult student.

*“At Rutgers, I have a double challenge. I am an adult and also a new English learner. My most challenging experience is speaking English and taking notes during class. If I have a meeting in-person or Zoom with an instructor, I always feel so stressed. Sometimes I don’t understand, if the instructor speaks so fast. Maybe the best thing about COVID for me is the need for remote lessons—I’m able to listen to recorded courses again and again to take notes and understand better. Sometimes I thought during class I could ask classmates to take his/her notes but I couldn’t do that—I give up every time. This is my challenge.”*

### **The panelists also shared a number of positive experiences at Rutgers.**

- One student returned to Rutgers through the academic amnesty program and shared that he was inspired by the support and guidance provided by the advising deans in that program, who led him to pursue his love of learning and subjects that he was truly passionate about rather than just trying to finish his degree.

*“Originally when I applied for [academic] amnesty, I had a vague idea that I’d get a health science degree... by the end of my meeting [with a dean in the academic amnesty program], I was chomping at the bit to get back into philosophy and linguistics.”*

- All of the students expressed passion for and deep engagement with their chosen fields of study, which represented a wide range of disciplines, including social sciences, humanities, and STEM.

*“Before Rutgers University, in Turkey, I started studying journalism... Four years ago, I was entering my senior year and moved to the US with my husband and daughter. I didn’t know English. I started to learn English to continue my education. I went to the visitor center at Rutgers to get information about applying to the school, and I told my family (and especially myself) that I will do my best to come to this school as a student. This was only a dream for me at that time. I couldn’t read, write, speak, or understand English. I studied so hard to be a student at Rutgers. And then I was finally accepted in 2020 as a transfer student.... What motivated me to pursue this education? Six years ago, when I saw the Venus de Milo in Paris, I was wonderstruck. I was studying journalism in Turkey and had no idea about ancient or Hellenistic art—I felt a deficiency and hunger for knowledge about extraordinary art... Therefore, I dedicated myself to investigate the influence of ancient sculpture on Renaissance art.”*

*“I was a medic in the Navy, moved cross-country with two dogs and a two-week-old baby so my husband could go to law school, and got tired of seeing patients as an EMT. I went to an intro*

*Chemistry class, and I fell in love and decided I wanted more—the way the instructor explained things so I could understand...”*

- Students also greatly appreciated professors interacting with them outside of class and as people, and how accommodating and caring many faculty have been.

*“One professor last spring just shot the breeze with me intellectually. We’d Zoom while I was in my ambulance. After years of blue collar and office jobs and returning during the isolation of Covid, I felt like I needed to participate in intellectual discussion. I realize there are limitations—but the fact that she did that for me was particularly golden.”*

*“Early-on, my most challenging experience was when my daughter had a grand mal seizure close to the end of the Spring 2018 semester. She was transported two hours away, and I was in the hospital with her for five days—she’s fine now, but I was terrified at the time. My teachers at the time---I emailed all of them—they converted their classes to asynchronous remote for me—just for me. It was very accommodating and gracious of the professors and allowed me to graduate on time.”*

- The panelists shared that it is often very helpful to share information about themselves and their experiences with instructors and peers.

*“Sometimes, if I have the opportunity to share my status with my instructors and peers, I appreciate it. I usually send emails to my instructors at beginning of each semester in order to explain my educational experience, condition, and status. I strongly recommend this to all non-traditional students—it always helps me. Professors know me and understand my challenges...”*

*“From my first class on to even my Master’s program, my kids would come in and my peers would love my kids and wave to them. When we transitioned to Zoom, my kids made it known that I had kids... And my peers were very supportive.”*

*“I tell my peers a lot. Especially in Chemistry, I feel like that the community is very close. We have GroupMes, etc. I sometimes share pics of my kid on there—we’re becoming friends. It helps them understand why my group work isn’t as good sometimes, and sometimes provides comedic relief. I share it with everybody.”*

## **The panelists also discussed how they felt about the term “non-traditional student.”**

- Some panelists were uncomfortable with the term and/or felt that it unnecessarily and inappropriately separated them from other students.

*“I want to say that I’m not a fan of having the ‘non-traditional’ title there... I feel like every student coming in will be non-traditional in some way. Especially because I work with the police, I see that a lot of other students are having trouble too. There’s a lot of adjustments happening for first-year students in dorms—that has to also affect their learning. Students are working, especially in today’s economic climate. So, a lot of students worry about money, and home issues. I think that in a sense, every single person coming through college will be non-traditional in some way.”*

*“For the non-traditional term, I usually ask myself how I am non-traditional because I am a full-time student, taking five classes this semester, and doing all the requirements for graduation. The condition itself, not the term, of being an adult learner affects my life.”*

- Other panelists identified with and felt comfortable with the term non-traditional student.

*“I’m on the opposite end; I saw myself as non-traditional. I didn’t go straight from high school to college. I came straight out of the military and had lots of other responsibilities. I was not in the dorms, not on campus 24/7, and not reliant on a meal card. I had a degree beforehand, other bills and responsibilities, my kids, and real-world experience already. That was okay with me—it put me in a category that was different from most of my peers—10-15 years older. I had differences, but it didn’t make it different in social life; I was still friends with them, but I wasn’t going to go to their parties and stuff.”*

*“It’s fine. I see it as shorthand for being old, broke, and working way too much.”*

**The panelists offered specific suggestions for additional supports and resources for non-traditional students, both in general and from instructors in particular.**

#### Suggestions for general resources/supports

- Although the libraries on campus are wonderful, it is sometimes challenging to have to be there physically to study and work on research. Unfortunately, the library only offers a three-hour hold option for some books. It would be very helpful to be able to take these books home to study.
- More opportunities for community work and clubs/organizations geared toward non-traditional students and their schedules.
  - Many graduate school, scholarship, and internship applications require or ask about community work and involvement in clubs and organizations, but it is very difficult to participate in those because they often meet at night and on weekends.
  - Opportunities often seem geared toward younger students (e.g., study abroad, RA-ships, cultural experiences). It would be helpful to have some aimed at older students that would better fit with their experiences and needs.

*“A lot of scholarships and internships are asking about community work. I know the importance of community work/clubs, but I have no chance to take these responsibilities because I spend much more time on my classwork and have to spend time with family. Most community activities are afterschool—at night and on campus. I would love to attend these types of events, but being a mother-student makes this very difficult. I always feel this dilemma as a student and mother-student. I live in Princeton. When class finishes, I have to check the train schedule to return back home.”*

*“I know I need it for grad school, but I hesitate and think I can’t do it because of time or think it’s more geared for younger students. I would like a list of things that are compatible with non-traditional students.”*

- More access to child care on all campuses for Rutgers students.
- Better access to/less expensive parking options. \$400/semester to park in one lot is unreasonable, unaffordable, and extremely inconvenient.

*“There are serious transportation issues. The number of parking tickets is insane. Now I live an hour away, and I know I’m responsible for that decision. But I have a one-hour class and an hour and fifteen minutes of traffic. Should I park illegally or far away? Do I go to class or do I just stay home and try to catch up with a book on my own?”*

- Additional opportunities for gaining particular career-related skills without majoring/minoring in a field.

*“I would like opportunities to gain computation competencies without being a comp sci major/minor. Cognitive science, statistics, and programming knowledge seem to be necessary background... I want to be able to have a bootcamp or something that gets you to a level of competency that some of my 19-year old peers seem to have.”*

#### Suggestions for instructors in particular

- Flexibility and understanding for adult learners; offer additional extensions when possible and do not require advance notice for requests for accommodations and extensions.

*“Lots of professors want advance notice for extension requests, but if I knew I would need it, I would have changed my work schedule so I wouldn’t need it!... But writing extension request emails, it sounded like excuse-making even to me...So front-loading, saying ‘Hey, my work/life schedule is crazy. I’m letting you know the first day of the semester so four weeks from now, there’s some validity to that. I’m going to start doing that next semester—it’s a recent realization.”*

- It is helpful when students can take classes online and when in-person courses are recorded for students who aren’t able to attend or wish to re-watch the class lecture. This is true for many students—not just non-traditional students.
- Post syllabi at least two weeks before class starts to allow students to see what will be expected of them.
- Offer opportunities for students to review materials/get up to speed before the semester starts and at the beginning of the semester.

*“Even having videos (I know it takes a lot out of profs) that say, ‘I’m going to give you a mini-intro to what I’m about to teach that will help you understand what I’m saying and be caught up.’ When I first taught my child to speak, I had to show her a ball many times. Why isn’t that same opportunity afforded to me? While you may understand, go ahead and ‘dumb it down’ a little bit to help me understand. I know classes then build—but spend the first day asking what do we understand/what do we remember, and then we can start from there and then build up.”*

- Offer more flexibility for non-traditional students, especially those with children, for scheduling exams.

*"It is very hard to get my children to school and then come to campus and find parking and get to an 8 am exam on time."*

*"Do you also have to take time away from my kids? I have weekend tests, so that whole weekend is now gone for my child. It's actually my child that I'm missing out on. Not just my weekend."*

- When assigning work, make sure that the workload is commensurate with the number of credits for the course.

*"This whole semester, it's been test after test and assignment after assignment. A couple of days I stayed up all night and then went to class and wasn't sure if I'd be able to sleep because I still had more work to do for a single 2.5-credit course. It's not just me with kids—I try to prioritize school and other peers do too, but it can't always be the number one thing. You [instructors] can't think that school's the only thing we're doing because there's a billion other things we're doing."*

- Ask questions at the beginning of the semester to get to know your students. This provides an opportunity for adult learners to explain their situations, but is also a valuable opportunity for other students in the course.
- Be understanding when student-parents (during non-pandemic times) occasionally need to bring their children to class.

*"One professor told the entire class that he didn't care if they brought their kids. So, my kids came and sat in the aisle and were really interested in his presentation. Most of the time, professors were accommodating and understood—I'd sit in the back with them [my children], they'd be on a tablet and quiet and chill out. I would drop everything and leave if something happened, and the professors understood. However, I have sometimes encountered, 'Bringing your kids to class is unprofessional.' I'm a single mom, and I don't have babysitter on standby all the time. Bringing my kids to class once or twice a semester because I can't avoid it is unavoidable. Please keep that in mind—it's what I have to do."*

- Use trauma-informed pedagogical strategies and offer content warnings and opportunities for students to leave the class when needed.

*"I'm a disabled vet and have service-connected PTSD involving interpersonal violence.... Most classes would announce at the beginning of the semester if they felt there would be something disturbing in the class. For some courses, it's the entire class. I have had to walk out before and have seen other people do so.... Be more trauma informed about trauma survivors like myself."*

- Be sensitive to what adult learners may be feeling about entering/returning to college.

*"My suggestion is less pragmatic; more the spirit of the thing. Everyone listening is a professor with a passion. Imagine having that passion, but being alone with it in a blue collar/non-academic world."*

*Imagine how lonely and painful it would be. To have no one to help you navigate, and then suddenly being thrown back into an environment where you are able to do that [focus on your academic and intellectual interests]. I'm so excited to be able to do that—but imagine what it would be like to not get to study what you're passionate about for 10 years and how almost deforming that would be."*

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**What our faculty say they learned and will implement in their teaching to increase equity (based on post-panel survey):**

- Early and clear presentation of course goals--before term time (perhaps on video).
- Flexibility.
- Publish syllabus early.
- Giving an introduction video beforehand introducing some of the ideas and language I will use in the course.
- Policies and practices for making course participation more accommodating for parents (particularly).
- It sounded to me that professors/lecturers need to treat all students (not just non-traditional) like adults and like people. If I went to my boss and requested a reasonable extension, or if my child were sick, etc. that would be taken into consideration.
- I'm thinking of making some introductory videos students can watch before the first class, to get everyone on board.
- Understanding that even asking a Non-Traditional to come in for in-person advising can really mess up their very delicately balanced plans with work, families, and other necessities - the commute, parking, and bus travel for a 20 minute appointment is not worth the fuss.
- You can always extend a bit more grace. Chances are, it will be greatly appreciated
- Making syllabus available earlier and providing "background" material.
- Releasing early readings can be helpful.
- Record my lectures and let my students know in advance if I may be covering a "triggering" topic.
- Making lectures more accessible (e.g., always recording), posting syllabi earlier, announcing class-wide the ways I can accommodate parents/caregivers regardless of how many of my students are in that role.
- Try to make "this is where you should be" videos so students have an idea of where the class is starting.
- I will open my canvas page two weeks in advance, so that students know what is expected of them in terms of materials (my syllabi are already posted on our dept. site); trigger warnings at the beginning of the course, as opposed to just before the relevant class; no Monday deadlines