# Genio

# The New Majority Learner report
# 2025

# Contents

# Introduction

What comes to mind when you think of the 'typical' higher education student? A review of the demographic shifts over the last twenty years indicates it might not be what you think.

Non-traditional learners now constitute the New Majority in higher education in the United States. 40.2% of students are over the age of 22 and 69.3% work while studying. Part-time learners constitute 39.2% of the student population and the number of neurodiverse learners has increased by 267% since 2004. The conventional concept of a college student is **no longer accurate.**

In this report we'll delve into the multifaceted characteristics of the New Majority and how the makeup of the student body has changed over the last twenty years, examine the factors driving their enrollment growth, explore the _**unique challenges and opportunities**_ they present, and analyze the strategies institutions can employ to effectively serve this burgeoning population.

Amidst the backdrop of an impending _**enrollment cliff,**_ as population growth stalls and traditional demographics explore alternative learner pathways and question the value of a college level qualification, higher education institutions need to evolve their approach to attract, retain, and support a changing student population to ensure their long term viability.

> **"**_The overall immediate college enrollment rate in 2022 was not measurably different from the rate a decade earlier in 2012. However,_ **_the total number of undergraduates enrolled decreased by 13% over this period._"**
>
> **National Center for Education Statistics**

The key to achieving this lies in pivoting toward the needs of the New Majority. These demographics will help plug enrollment and retention gaps, evolve the culture of education by seeking to balance learning with other parts of their life and, above all, have a desire to develop into lifelong learners. A failure to cater to them will leave colleges lagging behind in an increasingly competitive market.

But attracting and retaining these students requires a paradigm shift in how higher education institutions operate. They are often **time poor** (working while studying, adults juggling family responsibilities, career demands, and financial challenges), **underprepared** (first-generation college students, international students from a different education culture, veterans, or individuals from underrepresented communities) or **face individual barriers** to their learning (physically disabled, neurodiverse or have English as an additional language).

Should they fail to do so, they risk perpetuating a cycle of disengagement. Where poor learning experiences lead to self-blame, frustration, and reduced effort, creating a downward spiral that impacts individuals, institutions and society at large. Institutions have long been aware of these challenges and have looked at resolving it in abstract terms, such as the Tinto Model. However, for the New Majority, there is a need for **real, practical change.**
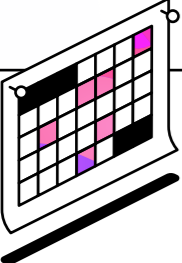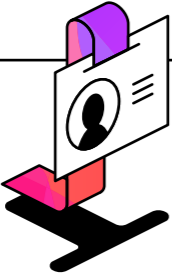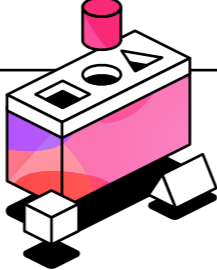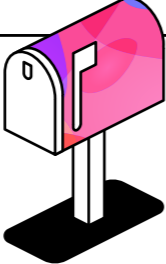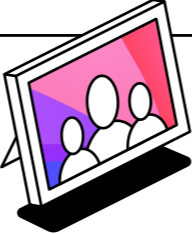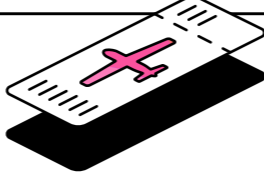
Learning is a personal journey where success requires active effort, intentional engagement, and finding a system that works for you as an individual. By understanding and embracing the needs of the New Majority, institutions can provide the tools and support for learners to take control of their learning thereby increasing retention rates, improving the student experience and ensuring their own sustainability; all while contributing to a more prosperous future for each and every learner.
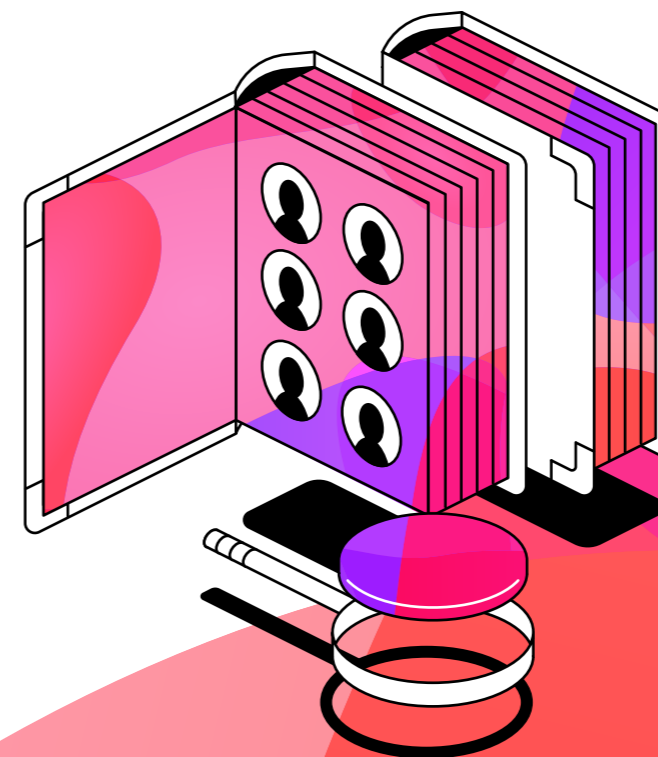
# Who are the **New Majority?**

To know how to serve New Majority learners, institutions must first understand who these individuals are. Only by comprehending their background, environment and lived experience can they truly begin to support them on campus and beyond.

The _Education Design Lab_ has conducted significant research into these demographics and identified a number of characteristics that indicate a non-traditional learner. **They include:**

Across the board, individuals within these defined characteristics have been historically **underserved by traditional education.** There are many possible reasons for this, whether they faced barriers to entry, challenges with affordability or lack of funding and support, a lack of study skills, ingrained stigma, or inaccessible practices, non-traditional learners have been disadvantaged compared to their peers.

> **"College was never designed for the success of these learners,** and was often designed to purposefully keep them out."**
>
> **Education Design Lab**

Now, as traditional demographics explore _alternative learner pathways and question the value of a college level qualification,_ non-traditional learners are becoming a larger percentage of the student population. This is why we're defining them as the New Majority. For institutions, this emphasizes the need to re-evaluate their propositions and tailor their offerings.

While each of these identifying characteristics can place an individual within the New Majority, it is critical to also note the regularity of intersectionality of these traits. For many, their identity extends beyond one individual characteristic, reinforcing the scale, and the nuance, of the New Majority.

For example, we can infer that veterans are likely to be enrolling as older students, aged over 22. Or that immigrant learners are likely to also fall into the ESL category. Likewise, students facing economic hardship will likely be working while studying to provide more security for themselves and their dependents.

This intersectionality creates a complex environment and makes it difficult to come up with one true percentage of the student population that this group represents (for more information on our calculations, take a look at our methodology section). As such, being proactive in your approach to evolving higher education offerings in line with the shifting needs and requirements of the modern learner, institutions can ensure they are equipping, empowering and encouraging all students.

**Part-time** students

**Working** students

Learners facing **economic hardship**

Learners who are **parents**

**First-generation** college attendees

**Veterans**

**Transfer** students

**Older** students (enrolled 22+)

**Disabled** students

**Neurodivergent** students

Those with English as an **additional language**

**Immigrants**, or children of immigrants

# Understanding the New Majority's **three key challenges**

Non-traditional learners are firmly establishing themselves as the New Majority across the United States. And their complex, interwoven characteristics create a nuanced picture for higher education professionals to comprehend.

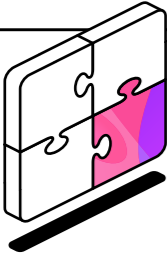The thing institutions need to realize is that learning is an inherently **personal** journey. That success requires active effort, intentional engagement, and finding a system that works for each learner as an individual. Those working in higher education have it within their power to facilitate this, and make the necessary changes to avoid a cycle of disengagement across their cohort.

Historically, higher education has overlooked the fact that **everyone** struggles with engagement, focus, and retention, not just students with diagnosed learning differences. This is particularly prevalent when it comes to content delivery. A survey from the **American Psychological Association** found that almost 75% of students claim to suffer from moderate to severe psychological stress; which can make finding solutions difficult.

We have identified patterns, grouped into three overarching themes, that can help institutions understand how to break the cycle and serve the varied needs of the New Majority, to ultimately create engaged and effective learners. Those groups are based on traits that often align with one another to form the lived experience, and shared challenges, of these learners.

With an awareness of the likely demographics, we can explore how they are demonstrated as lived experiences through the following three New Majority learner personas.
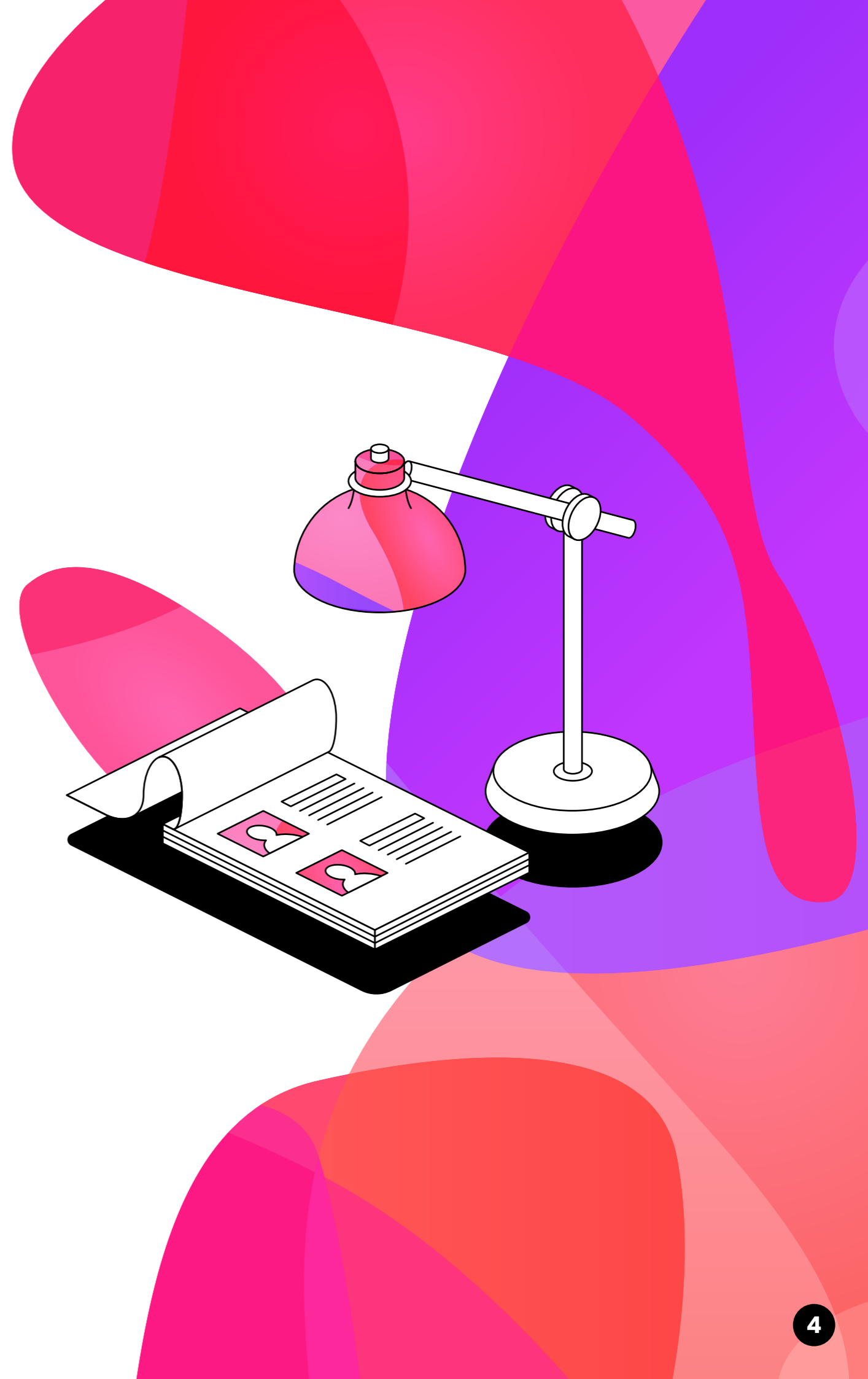
The **time poor** learner

The **underprepared** learner

The learner **with barriers**

| Persona | | Demographics | Challenges | Goals |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **The time poor learner**<br><br>*"Having Long COVID and 4 children, studying is hard. However, with Genio, **I can go right back to my lecture notes** to confirm that what I remember is correct. Genio has been a life saver and the reason I have the GPA I have today."*<br><br>**Student, Stockton University** | | **Primary**<br>• Working<br>• Parents<br>• Carers<br>• Apprentices<br>• Athletes<br>**Secondary**<br>• Part-time students<br>• Economic hardship<br>• Vocational courses<br>• Homeless<br>• Enrolled at 22+ years | • Unable to devote enough time to studying due to other responsibilities<br><br>• Worrying about finances or other responsibilities leading to distraction from studies<br><br>• Being distracted by children or other dependents | Balance their time effectively so they can succeed in their studies whilst maintaining other responsibilities |
| **The underprepared learner**<br><br>*"As a first time freshman, I was incredibly nervous that I wouldn't be able to keep up with professors and that I would fall behind. Genio helped me feel like a **competent and effective** college student."*<br><br>**Student, University of Central Arkansas** | | • First-generation<br>• First years<br>• Veterans<br>• Recently incarcerated<br>• Without high school diploma<br>• International student | • Lacking the necessary study skills to succeed in Higher Education<br><br>• Feeling disadvantaged compared to peers<br><br>• Lacking confidence in academic settings | Successfully integrate into HE study and achieve their potential |
| **The learner with barriers**<br><br>*"I have certain disabilities that affect my ability to take notes like the average student. Genio is so well-designed, **I can process and take notes on material at the same time, real time!** I am confident in attending and leaving class with a full understanding."*<br><br>**Student, University of Southern California** | | **Primary**<br>• Disability<br>• Mental health challenges<br>• Language barriers<br><br>**Secondary**<br>• Veterans<br>• International students<br>• ESL students | • Issues with concentration, attention and cognitive overload<br><br>• Experiencing stigma<br><br>• Lack of confidence<br><br>• Feeling stressed about studying | Study like their peers without barriers without standing out, and achieve their potential despite barriers |

# The New Majority in
# **higher education**

# The New Majority in
# **higher education**

Using a combination of the **_National College for Education Statistics_** database, the National Postsecondary Student Aid Survey **_(NPSAS)_** and **_IPEDS_** data, we have researched how often New Majority characteristics arise, how prevalent the defined non-traditional learners persons are and how geographic and temporal variations manifest across the US.

From the data (visualized overleaf), it is clear to see that non-traditional learners do indeed constitute the New Majority.

Over 40% of students are over the age of 22, a marked shift from the long standing notion that freshmen arrive straight from high school. Similarly, nearly 20% of those now studying in higher education have children, a change which brings a whole raft of different learning challenges to those parenting while seeking additional qualifications.

Part-time students also constitute 39.2% of the learner population, indicating the volume of people approaching education in a different manner to full time learning. Concerningly, studies from the **_National Student Clearinghouse Research Center_** have found they have a much lower credential completion rate of 33.7% compared to 67.2% for full time peers meaning for those schools with large part-time populations, retention and persistence will be key focus areas for success.

The report also identified that, regardless of income level, students from more affluent neighborhoods had sharply higher completion rates than those from lower income neighborhoods, further emphasizing the intersectionality of non-traditional learner traits and the need to provide adequate support to improve the likelihood of course completion.

In the following pages we'll dive into the details for some of the other identifying New Majority learner characteristics.
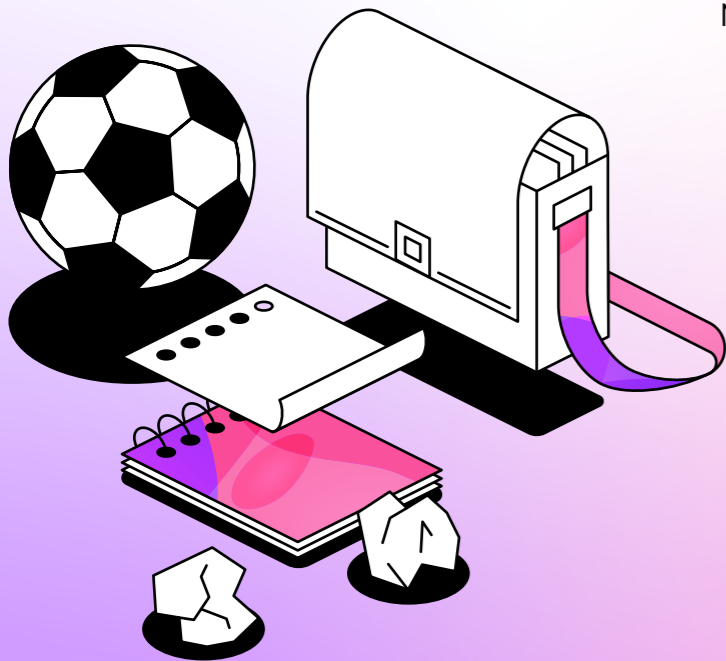
## Characteristics of the New Majority Learner

### The time poor learner

| Working | Part-time | Children | Economic hardship |
|---------|-----------|----------|-------------------|
| 69.3% | 39.2% | 19.2% | 16.9% |

### The underprepared learner

| Age 22 plus | First-Generation | Transfer-in | Veteran |
|-------------|------------------|-------------|---------|
| 40.2% | 29.6% | 6.4% | 3.3% |

### The learner with barriers

| Immigrants | English as an additional language (ESL) | Neurodivergent | Disability |
|------------|------------------------------------------|----------------|------------|
| 25.0% | 17.7% | 16.5% | 4.3% |

# Working students

72.0%  72.9%  60.9%  59.5%  69.3%

2004 — 2008 — 2012 — 2016 — 2022
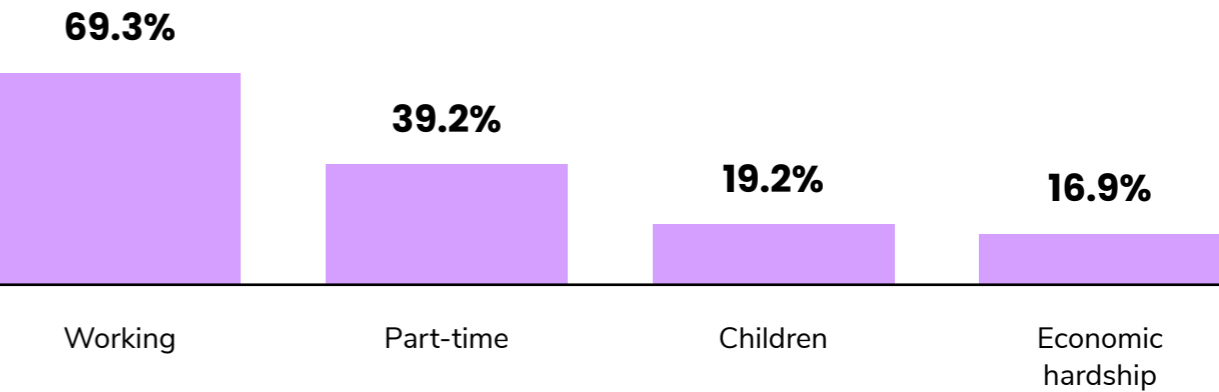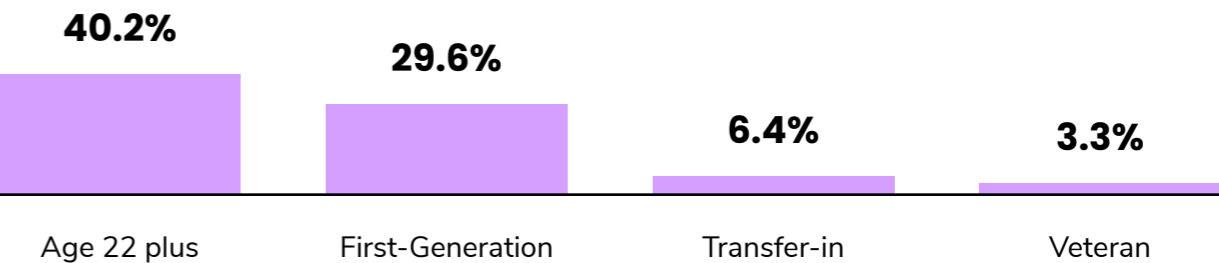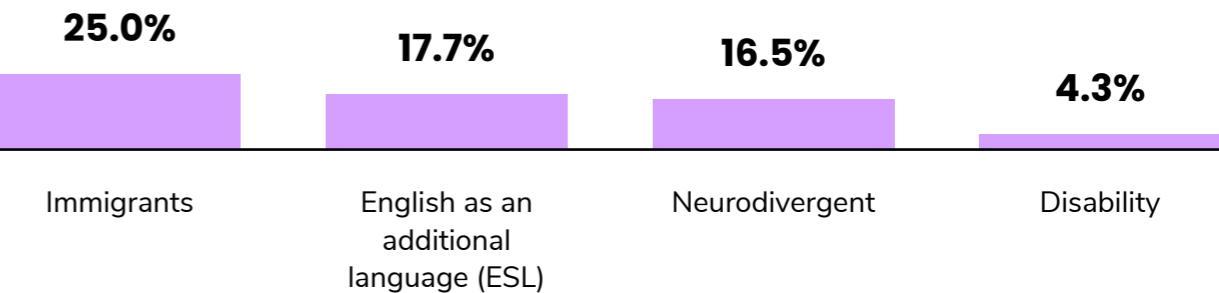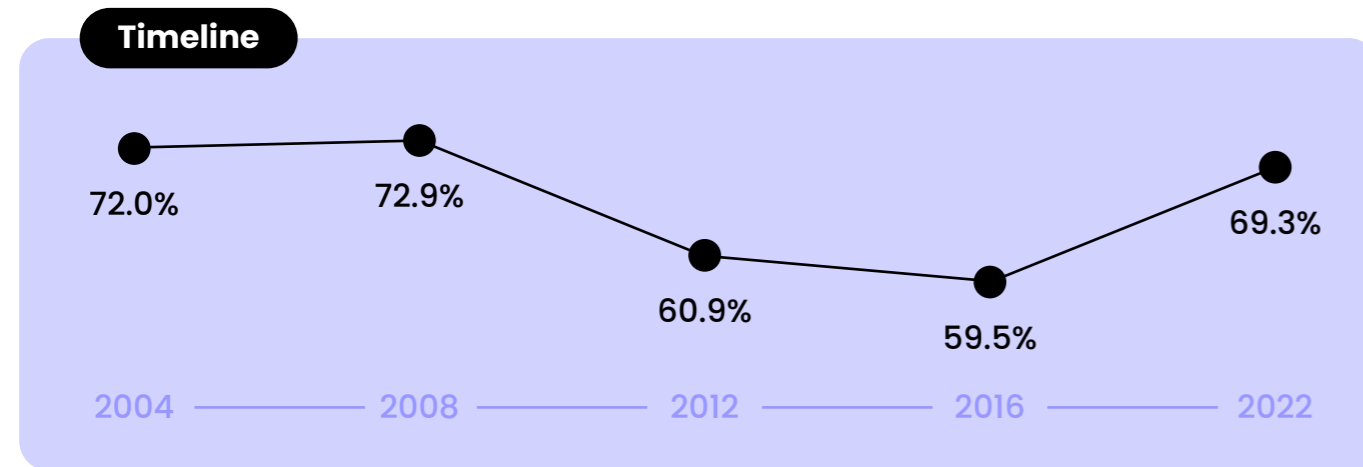
The most commonly occurring characteristic of the New Majority is learners who **work while studying.**

As a percentage, they are consistently more present despite seeing a 4% decrease since 2004. Still, figures remain high, with the most recent data indicating that 69.3% of students are working while studying.

Taking a more detailed look into the latest __NSPAS data,__ 30.45% of students are working part-time while a staggering 40.63% classed themselves as in full-time employment. Looking at a more granular level, full-time employment has increased by 61% since 2016, with 39% of students at an Associate Carnegie classification working over 31 hours per week.

From an institutional perspective, this means students are **time poor**, and likely find themselves trying to absorb their course material in a range of environments such as a break room at their place of work or during their commute. Nowhere is this more of a concern than in North Dakota and Montana who have the highest percentage of working students than any other state at 71.9%.

Not only can this create a situation where there is a conflict of interests, it can increase pressure on learners to keep up with their grades as well as meet expectations at work to fund their studies. This is especially true for **first-generation** college students, who are substantially __overrepresented among working students compared to their peers.__

This reality requires numerous forms of support to help guide students through such complex scenarios but also an openness to evaluating and measuring performance, comprehension and knowledge in new ways that better suit the New Majority.

Perhaps the most striking difference between working and non-working students, at 4-year colleges in particular, is the __$18,871 difference in the average annual income of their parents.__ For those institutions, having an awareness of financial stability of their students is critical for maintaining completion and retention rates, with working students being more susceptible to leaving their program for monetary reasons, rather than a lack of academic talent.

# Economic hardship

22.1%  16.9%

2016 — 2022

Understanding the experience of working students cannot be separated from **economic hardship's** undoubted influences on learners.

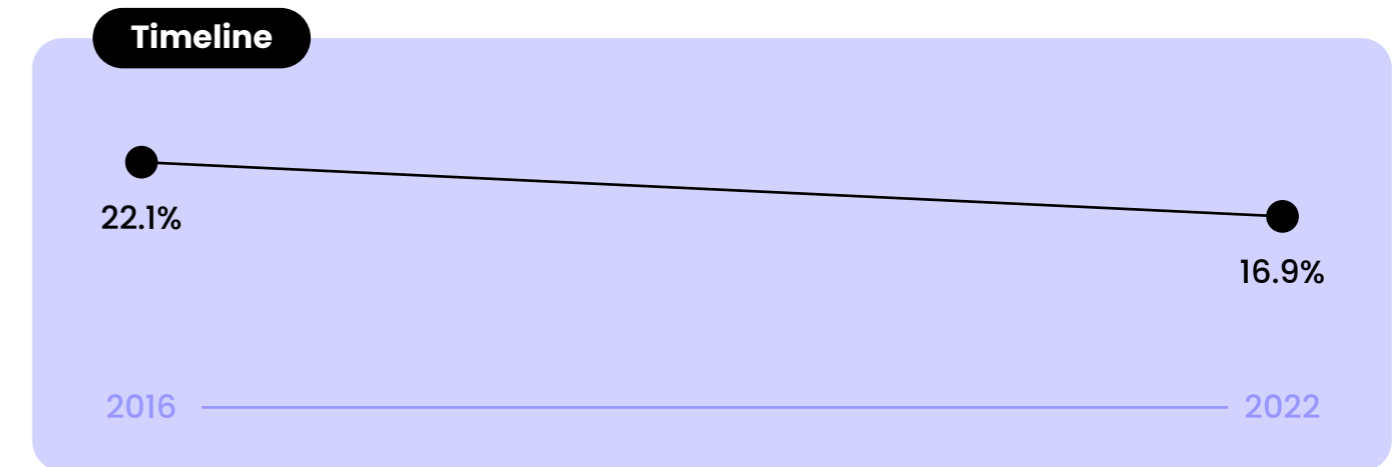Since 2016, the percentage has trended down to the tune of 24% yet 16.9% of students still experience this as their reality. Maryland has the lowest percentage, 13%, whereas New Hampshire reports a figure over twice as high at 27.8% of their student population.

Research by the __Cowen Institute__ discovered that, over the past three decades, the average cost of college tuition in the U.S. has tripled. That would, in theory, allow us to infer that more students would also be struggling to keep up with these rise in costs.

Institutions therefore must ask themselves, is it that there is less support for financially at risk students as budgets have not risen in line with tuition costs? Is it that the barriers to entry are simply so significant that economically disadvantaged students are no longer applying? Or is it that a lack of engagement with education has led to lower grades and a lower chance of qualifying for scholarships.

__80% of first-generation students reported that they used financial aid,__ in contrast with 65% of their peers yet some of the most influential factors impacting college access and college persistence rates are __economic in nature.__ Clearly there is a discrepancy here meaning that some learners are missing opportunities to access higher education on account of the required investment.

With the __impending enrollment cliff,__ institutions can't afford to miss out on students on account of prohibitive costs of entry. Therefore, to better serve this non-traditional population, doors must be opened to explore avenues of support that allow talented individuals to fulfil their potential, rather than be disenfranchised on the grounds of financial insecurity and a need to prioritise employment over education.

*Learners are **missing opportunities to access higher education** on account of the required investment.*

# First-generation students

**Timeline**

37.9%  39.2%  37.1%

27.1%

29.6%

2004 ———— 2008 ———— 2012 ———— 2016 ———— 2022
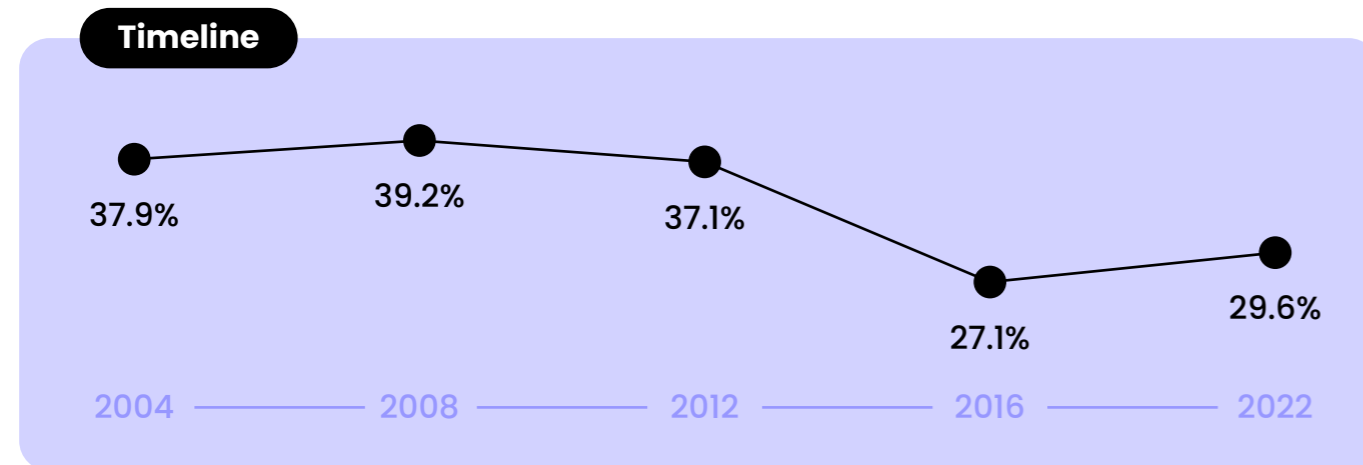
Although the trend for first-generation students in higher education has actually decreased by 22% since 2004, they still constitute 29.6% of students. There could be a number of reasons for this, including fewer opportunities for non-privileged students, yet there remains a need to better serve this facet of the New Majority. Oregon (10.4%) has experienced this decline to a greater extent than any other state yet West Virginia and Utah sit above the national average with totals at 35.7% and 33.8% respectively.

Research from the _**Pell Institute**_ has shown that many students see college as a path to economic mobility and stability, viewing their degree as a source of pride and a means to uplift their families.

This has a knock-on effect on the learners themselves, with many experiencing significant personal growth during college which, if successful, can lead to self-discovery, resilience, and **a lifelong love of learning.**

> _First-generation students often **arrive in college underprepared** for the academic rigour of education_

For first-generation learners however, the _**Cowen Institute**_ found that, "family support appears to be a major influencing factor on college persistence, with many studies discussing the barriers faced by underrepresented students in terms of social and cultural capital to describe family and other support structures for students".
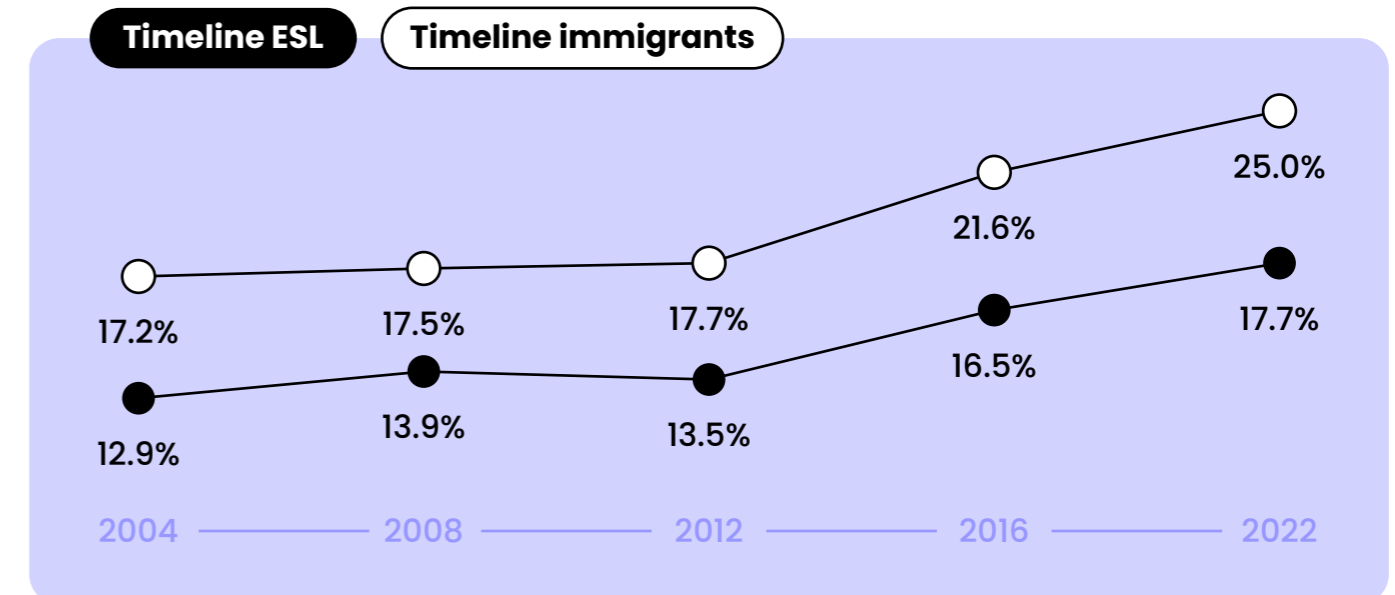
This reinforces the findings of the _**Pell Institute**_ that indicated how first-generation students often arrive in college underprepared for the academic rigour of education and feel a sense of separation from their faculty and peers. They are unaware of the more intense nature of college compared to high school with difficulties further exacerbated by the pressure first-generation students feel from families and communities to succeed.

Institutions therefore need to understand that students who do not have parents with college degrees are less likely to have the cultural capital, and therefore the support network, to help learners navigate the hidden curriculum of college. This is particularly pertinent for community colleges who serve _**a much higher percentage of first-generation students**_ (64%) compared to their four-year counterparts (47%).

# ESL and immigrant students

**Timeline ESL**   **Timeline immigrants**

25.0%

21.6%

17.2%  17.5%  17.7%

16.5%

17.7%

12.9%  13.9%  13.5%

2004 ———— 2008 ———— 2012 ———— 2016 ———— 2022

Due to an undeniable intersectionality of ESL and Immigrant characteristics, we shall explore these traits in tandem to better understand their shared experiences. Between 2004 and 2022, the number of ESL students increased by 37% to 17.7% of the population. A similar increase can be found among Immigrant students, who increased by 45% to account for 25% of the 2022 higher education population; however we may expect this figure to **decrease over the next few years.**

Across the US, Massachusetts (19.1%) and Illinois (18.6%) sit above the national average for ESL learners while DC and Vermont have seen the largest population increases of 9.6% and 6.3% respectively. Vermont has also seen an 8.7% increase in immigrant students yet it is Idaho with the most significant immigrant percentage change, a total of 9.5%. Despite these increases, California (26.3%) and Florida (26.1%) host the most substantial immigrant population as a percentage of their total.

For institutions, this demographic shift represents a need to better serve relatively underprepared New Majority learners who have previously been educated in a different country or their native language. This is often experienced in relation to having the requisite study skills to learn, meeting comprehension standards and having an opportunity to revisit content beyond the lecture hall, reinforcing their understanding of the material.

Moving to a new country, or studying in a non-native language, can be both challenging and mentally overwhelming. A lack of sufficient support services could not only drive disengagement, but lead to a lack of persistence as barriers to learning simply become too substantial to overcome.

Interestingly though, when looking at completion percentages, ESL students return a higher success rate compared to their peers, 21.8% to 19.5%. This suggests that for institutions, this demographic is motivated to achieve their academic goals and that the provision of support will only serve to increase their chances of doing so.

# Disability

2.5%  2.6%  3.1%  4.3%

2008 — 2012 — 2016 — 2022
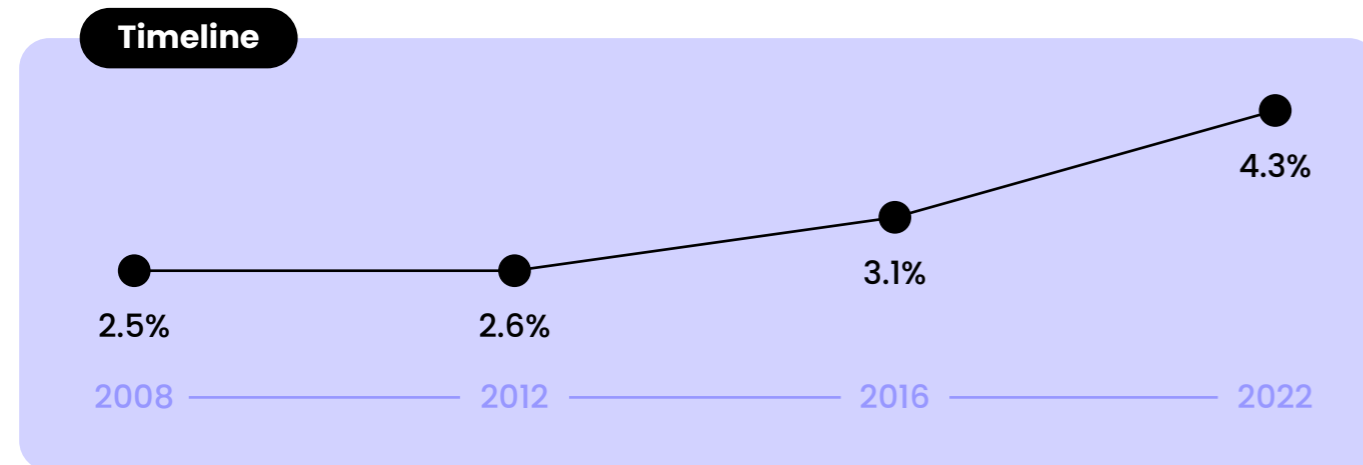
While the figure of 4.3% may appear relatively low compared to other characteristics of the New Majority, it has seen a 72% increase since 2008. This indicates a growing trend that more and more disabled students are accessing opportunities that were previously not available to them.

Perhaps most alarming though, according to the _National Center for Education Statistics,_ 65% of students don't report their disability, particularly if it is not visible, to their school. This means the population of disabled students is actually significantly higher than the statistics would suggest.

The upwards trend, combined with an absence of self-advocacy owing to fear of stigmatization, emphasizes the importance of moving beyond accommodations and a regulatory driven support system, to becoming **accessible by design.**

In doing so, institutions will not only meet Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) compliance regulations, but also catch the _**missing 65% of students who haven't advocated for their needs.**_ Building robust practices enables this growing minority to access higher education in a way that was historically impossible.

On a state level, this is pertinent at both ends of the spectrum. For Connecticut's 7.1% disabled student population, the need to act appears much more urgent. Whereas Idaho (2.2%) may need to look more closely at the barriers to entry that are preventing this segment of the New Majority from accessing higher education in the first place or self-advocating to get the support they need.

> _The population of disabled students is actually **significantly higher** than the statistics would suggest_

# Neurodiversity

4.5%  5.6%  7.5%  15.1%  16.5%

2004 — 2008 — 2012 — 2016 — 2022
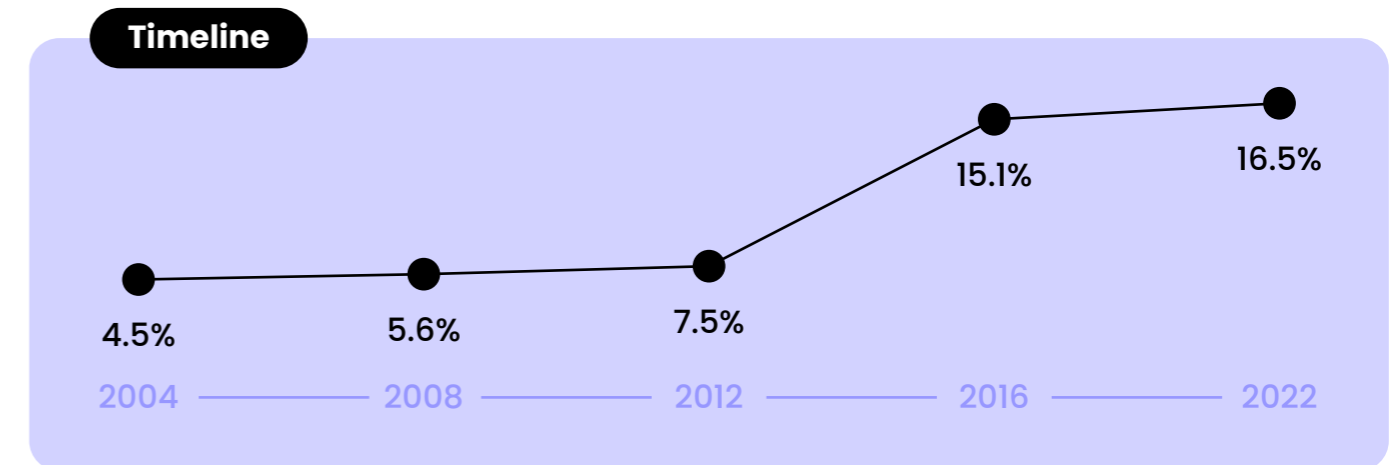
Compared to all other defining characteristics of the New Majority, it is **neurodiversity** that has seen the sharpest rise.

16.5% of learners identified as neurodiverse in 2022 marking a 267% increase since 2004. Utah (18.2%) and Arizona (17.5%) have experienced this increase most keenly, with their neurodiverse populations being the highest across the US.

The question for institutions to answer is: how is this experienced, for both students and teachers, in a learning environment? Often misunderstood as a lack of focus, neurodiversity is inherently interwoven with core learning challenges around attention, as defined in the learners with barriers persona. Traditional course delivery methods such as lectures can overlook near universal challenges with engagement, focus, and retention. For neurodiverse students, the need for an alternative is **more vital than ever.**

Poor learning experiences can be exacerbated by neurodiversity, leading to self-blame, frustration, and reduced effort which ultimately ends in a downward spiral of disengagement. The _NSPAS data_ indicates that this leads to a lower course completion rate, with neurodivergent students being 26% less likely to complete compared to their peers.

Learning isn't just about teaching; it's about empowering learners to actively engage with information. Therefore, when looking to better understand and equip neurodiverse learners, there is a critical need to recognize learning as an active, personal process and provide the tools and support for them to take control.

> _Neurodiversity is **inherently interwoven** with core learning challenges_

# How can higher education institutions **support** the New Majority?

Armed with the knowledge of who the New Majority are, institutions can begin to explore exactly how non-traditional learners can be best supported and how each department must adapt to respond.

How will it affect the faculty members delivering lectures? How can those working in student success look to maximize course completion rates? What can academic advising do to scale their services in line with increased demand?

The focus on the learner must be at the centre of all of these discussions. That integral alignment that learning is a personal journey and isn't just about teaching, but equipping, encouraging and empowering learners to actively engage with information.

*To quote Emily Nordmann,* Senior Lecturer and the Deputy Director Education for the School of Psychology and Neuroscience at the University of Glasgow, institutions should look to **raise the floor, not the ceiling.**

# Adopting a **success first** model

The current model of student support often operates with a focus on individual interventions. This leads to narrow assistance, within a compliance driven framework, rather than seeking to provide support at a broader scale. For example, students with registered disabilities must seek accommodations through the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), even if their peers would also find value in the offering.

The emphasis on regulation, and ticking boxes, can unintentionally restrict the scope of services to ensuring students meet minimum requirements for participation. This often leads to scenarios where institutions already have a lot of the right tools, they will simply be siloed in specific departments, rather than spread across campus for everyone to leverage.

This approach overlooks the broader goal of enabling all students to thrive academically and achieve their full potential. And while accommodations are essential, factors such as social support and a sense of belonging play an equally significant role in student success, and are relevant to more students than only those with registered accommodation needs.

Perhaps the most problematic facet of a regulatory approach is the reliance on self-advocacy. This is a _new reality for learners entering higher education_ compared to the mandated support students received in high school or help from parents to apply for it.

According to the **_National Center for Education Statistics,_** among those who responded that they did have a disability while attending college, only one-third of students actually informed their college. That means there is a missing 65% of disabled students in Higher Education who do not receive the accommodations that they would benefit from.

Alongside a lack of self-advocacy, there are several reasons cited for this drop off including a **_lack of belief that the college has useful resources to offer,_** waiting times to receive support and an expectation that by disclosing their situation, they **_would be treated differently by faculty._**

> "_We recognize that student success goes beyond academic performance and other historical metrics. **Now we're prioritizing the overall wellbeing of our students** and looking to address their mental, emotional, and social health alongside their academic growth._"
>
> **April Belback, Associate Vice Provost for Student Success and Advising at the University of Pittsburgh**

Whatever the motivation, the status quo is clearly unsustainable for supporting those students who require additional support to succeed. Within the context of an increasingly non-traditional learner demographic, and an understanding of the intersectionality of the associated traits and characteristics, institutions can safely assume that the scale of this lack of advocacy and support extends to other defining New Majority traits.

## The 3 key components of a success driven model

▶ **Equip**
By providing the right tools & technology to help students with their personal learning process, institutions make learning more accessible for all. Likewise, providing data-driven insights will allow individuals to make decisions leading to further educational enhancements.

▶ **Empower**
By starting with early, proactive engagement and personalised support plans, institutions can directly help learners to develop their study skills.

▶ **Encourage**
By collaborating across departments and taking a strength-based approach, institutions can encourage students to learn from each other, fostering a stronger, more collaborative environment across campus.

Therefore, there is merit in looking beyond providing a baseline, and investing in long term success for all, rather than through a lens of regulatory compliance. This is becoming **_accessible by design._**

In her thesis, **_Dr Shelley Moore_** employs a bowling analogy to explain what a more appropriate, alternative approach could be so as to provide equity, rather than equality. Adopting a campus-wide, success driven approach moves beyond a transactional model of service delivery and centers instead on the student's holistic development. It recognizes that students have individual and varied needs and aspirations, and that success encompasses more than just academic achievement.

By prioritizing success, institutions can empower students to actively participate in their learning, develop self-advocacy skills, and build resilience in the face of challenges.

Expanding access will allow institutions to improve New Majority student outcomes including increased retention rates, graduation rates, and overall academic achievement.

Additionally, students' wellbeing is enhanced with increased self-esteem, self-efficacy, and a sense of belonging. These improvements contribute to a strengthened campus community, fostering a more supportive environment for all students, especially those within New Majority demographics.

As a result, the institution's reputation is enhanced, gaining recognition as a leader in providing high-quality student services and more successful graduates. Ultimately, these efforts have a positive societal impact by contributing to a more dynamic and skilled workforce.

# Deploy **assistive technology**

Central to scaling efforts to break the disengagement cycle for New Majority learners, is the application of technology. _2024 research from the US Department of Education_ explored not only the importance of assistive technology (AT), but also, its role throughout a student's educational lifecycle.

They found that "the AT needs of a child do not necessarily stop when they transition out of high school." In other words, colleges must be proactively engaging with their communities to support the compulsory creation of a transition plan for children turning 16 in line with their post-secondary goals.

Research has also demonstrated positive outcomes including increased postsecondary education enrolment and academic outcomes, positive vocational outcomes and improved independent living skills. Therefore, introducing technology such as speech to text or captions has a demonstrable, positive impact on the learning experience of all students.

> **"Assistive technologies are crucial for supporting diverse learners.** _Proactively incorporating accessibility features, like captioned videos and screen-reader compatible text, benefits not only students with disabilities, but also those with auditory processing difficulties, ESL students, and anyone seeking to enhance their learning experience.__"_
>
> **Michelle Traster, Adaptive Technology Specialist at Missouri Western State University**
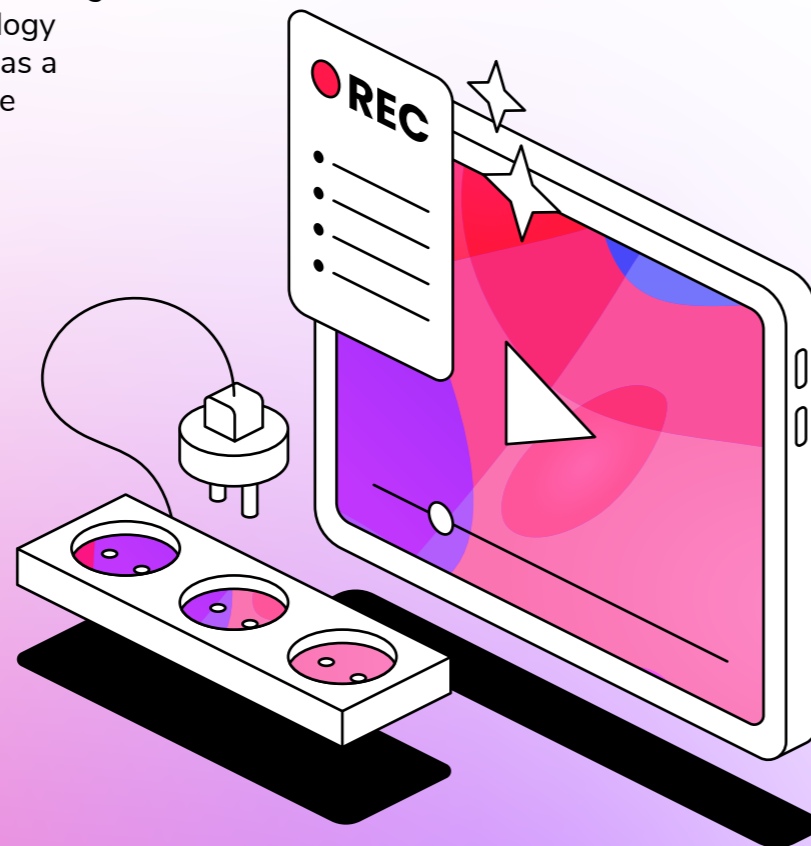
# Embrace **online learning**

The rise of the New Majority in higher education has not only reshaped the student body; it's driven a profound transformation in how education is delivered and accessed. This demographic shift, combined with post-pandemic trends, is fueling an unprecedented surge in demand for online learning.

For the New Majority, online learning offers unparalleled flexibility and accessibility. It dismantles many of the barriers we've highlighted, allowing previously disenfranchised students to pursue their educational aspirations. The asynchronous nature of many online programs empowers individuals to learn at their own pace, seamlessly integrating education into their busy lives, a critical factor for those juggling work, family, and other commitments.

Institutions must embrace cutting-edge technologies and pedagogical approaches to create engaging and interactive online learning experiences. Critical to this is addressing the digital divide. Not all students have equal access to technology and reliable internet connectivity, whether that be through innate barriers such as visual impairment, or economic hardship making laptops, or wifi, unaffordable. Institutions that actively bridge this gap by providing equipment and ensuring that online courses are designed with accessibility in mind can gain an edge in an increasingly competitive market.

Failure to do so risks exacerbating existing inequalities and limiting opportunities for those who already face significant challenges. Fostering a sense of belonging and community is essential, while providing additional support is vital to creating successful online learning experiences for all.

This is not just about adapting to a changing demographic; it's about utilizing online learning to build a more equitable and accessible education system that serves everyone.

> **"**_The goal is for accessibility to become second nature and not a daunting task that must be completed. It's important to dispel the notion that accessibility provides an unfair advantage when in reality, it serves to level the playing field._ **Accessibility by design benefits everyone**_, not just those who directly use the resources.__"_
>
> **Heather Dibblee, Disability & Accessibility Specialist at Anoka-Ramsey Community College**

# Utilize **early warning systems**

Analytic models and early warning systems have **_proven vital for supporting non-traditional learners_** and their persistence efforts. They help identify at-risk students and provide colleges with a broad picture of retention and persistence within their institutions, highlighting areas for further development, investment, and growth.

However, in order for them to effectively serve students, it is important to view them often as a measure of a symptom, not an illness. They can help identify students needing additional support but the next step should likely include a level of personal contact with the student, either through a dedicated staff support supervisor or a peer mentor, to gain a deeper understanding of the unique circumstances faced by the student.
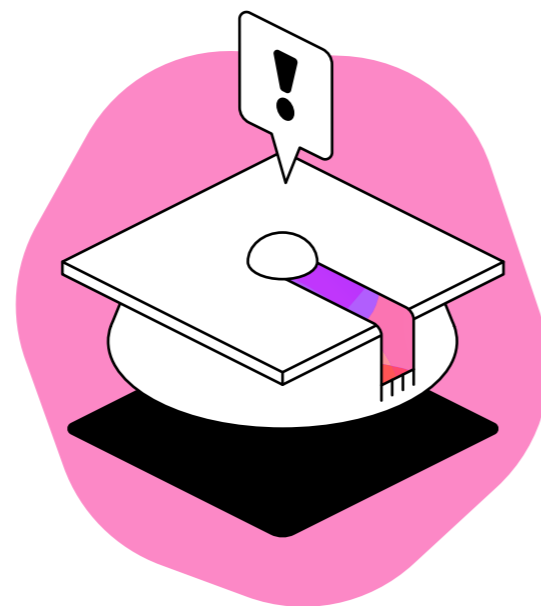
> **"**_We knew we had a challenge before us and we knew we needed to do something. We didn't have any organised framework or established way to identify who was at risk and determine the effectiveness of our retention efforts._
>
> **With our new early warning system, notifications were sent to the student's advisor and the student's academic and personal counsellor.** _In relation to academic performance, students with no alerts generally have a GPA of about 3.0. Students with one to three alerts might have a GPA down to about 2.0, and students with more than three alerts see GPA drop from one to below one._**"**
>
> **Monte Schaff, Dean of Enrollment Management at United Tribes Technical College**

# Develop **first-generation programs**

First-generation student programs can be a powerful tool for supporting New Majority learners by providing targeted support on new and potentially overwhelming subject areas. This includes navigating financial aid, understanding academic expectations, and building social networks on campus. By offering tailored resources and guidance, institutions can help these students overcome obstacles and thrive in college.

Creating a sense of community is a crucial aspect of this, especially for those that may feel isolated or out of place. Programs can connect students with peers, mentors, and faculty who share similar backgrounds or experiences. This network of support can then provide a safe space for students to share their challenges, seek advice, and build relationships that contribute to their overall wellbeing.

First-generation students may need additional guidance in choosing majors, planning careers, and accessing research or internship opportunities. Programs can offer specialized advising to help students navigate these decisions and achieve their academic and professional goals. By providing personalized support and resources, institutions can empower first-generation students to make informed choices about their future.

Financial literacy is often a significant challenge for first-generation students. Many come from families with limited experience in navigating college finances, and the complexities of financial aid can be overwhelming. Programs can offer workshops or individual counseling to help students understand their options, manage their budgets, and avoid excessive debt. This knowledge is essential for students to make sound financial decisions and maintain their focus on academics.

By promoting a culture of inclusivity, belonging and celebrating the unique contributions of first-generation students, institutions can send a powerful message of support and encouragement.
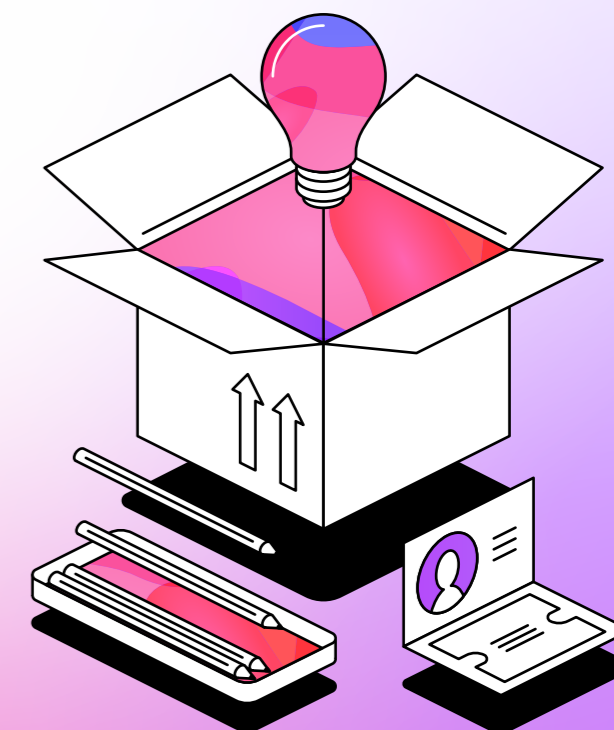
# Introduce **study skills courses**

In a similar vein to supporting first-generation students, many characteristics of the New Majority learner will find themselves lacking the requisite study skills for higher education. Arriving on campus with differing learning experiences and backgrounds, these courses can be instrumental in equipping students with the tools and strategies they need to succeed in a demanding academic environment.

By focusing on essential skills like time management, note taking, critical thinking, and examinations, these courses can empower students to become more effective and confident learners.

One of the key benefits of study skills courses is their ability to level the playing field for students from diverse backgrounds. New Majority learners may come from high schools with varying levels of academic rigor or may have taken non-traditional paths to college. Study skills courses can bridge these gaps by providing a common foundation in essential learning strategies. This ensures that all students, regardless of their prior academic experience, have the opportunity to develop the skills necessary to thrive in college.

Moreover, study skills courses can help New Majority learners develop a sense of self-efficacy and confidence in their academic abilities. Many non-traditional students may harbor doubts about their ability to succeed in higher education. By mastering effective study techniques and strategies, these students can gain confidence in their ability to tackle challenging coursework and achieve their academic goals. This newfound confidence can have a profound impact on their overall college experience and future aspirations.
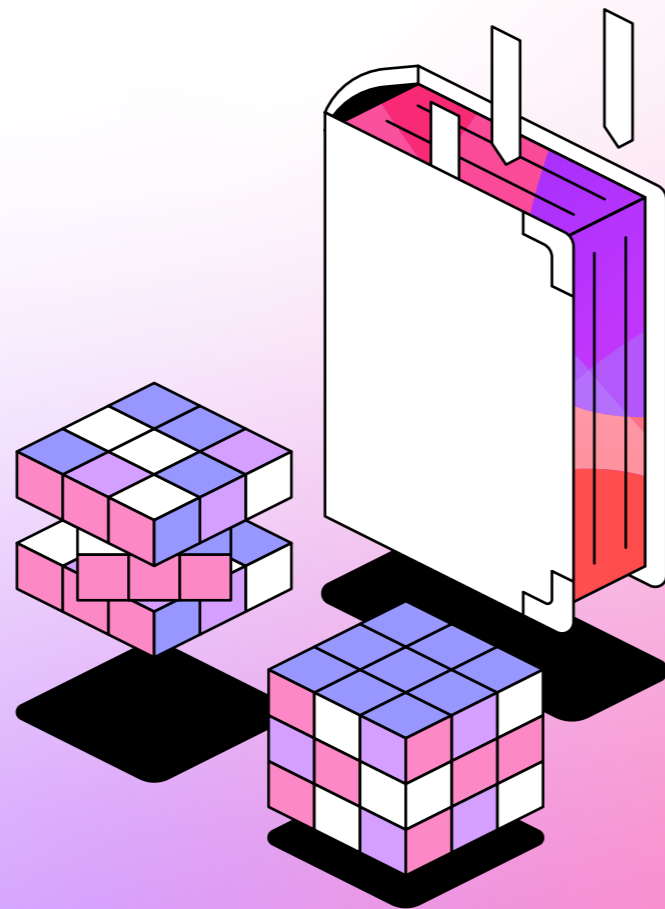
# Explore student **funding opportunities**

Naturally, introducing new approaches and technologies can put a strain on resources. At a time when budget purse strings are tightening, knowing what support is available could make the difference in effectively supporting the New Majority.

Where new initiatives pose a significant hurdle for educational institutions, grant funding is worth exploring. Each institution and individual will have a unique set of circumstances that could unlock different sources of funding. To provide a flavor of the type of support that could be available, here are three examples:
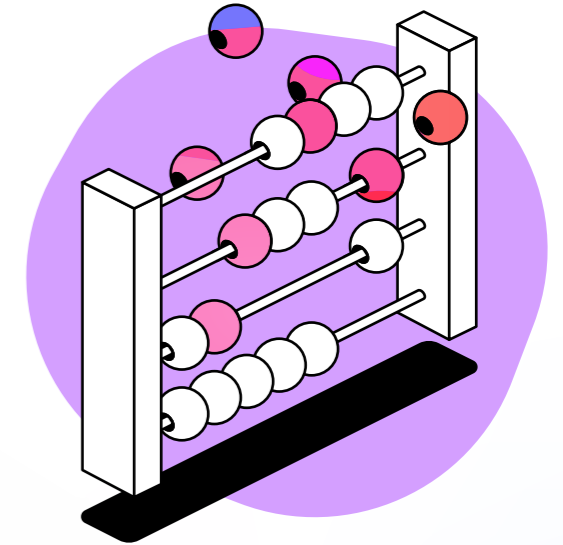
▶ **Strengthening Institutions Program**

Aims to support higher education institutions in becoming self-sufficient and expanding their capacity to serve low-income students. Grants typically range from $400,000 to $550,000 per year.

▶ **VETSTART (CEVSS)**

The focus of this grant aims to support institutions prioritizing veteran student support. Requirements include monitoring rates of veteran student enrollment, persistence, and completion and providing supportive instructional services.

▶ **Student tech fees**

Implementing a dedicated student tech fee can generate a consistent revenue stream for AT projects. Some institutions charge students per credit hour to raise funds for technology initiatives so it could be worth looking at. Also, student government/council may have a technology budget to support all students and offices typically apply to access a proportion of these funds.

# How **each department** can support the New Majority

Having reflected on practical avenues for supporting the New Majority at an institutional level, here we'll provide an overview as to what the rise of non-traditional learners means for a range of people on campus and how they can adapt to meet their evolving needs.

For all, building strong partnerships across departments and with senior campus stakeholders can create a more supportive learning environment for students in the New Majority. Utilizing data to track student outcomes and assess the effectiveness of programs can guide continuous improvement efforts, leading to innovative solutions and the promotion of a shared responsibility for the overall success of the student population.

# Faculty

## ▼ Short term

### Accessible content delivery

Ensure you're following UDL and accessibility standards in your teaching methods to support students who may have a harder time understanding or processing than others.

### Supportive mentorship

Provide guidance, address academic challenges, and connect students with resources. Offer flexibility and understanding for students facing external pressures such as childcare or work commitments, or those who need accommodations.

### Empowerment

Lean on your institution for support in creating an engaging learning environment that promotes active learning and student success. Embrace active learning, differentiated instruction, and personalized learning.

*"If we adopt a collaborative approach we can bridge the gap between departments. Secondly, we need to prioritize UDL in everything from curriculum design to tech platforms and empower both educators and students with tech literacy. **By working together, we can create a truly inclusive learning experience where every student thrives."***

**Timothy McHenry, Technical Director at Missouri State University**

## ▼ Longer term

### Varied teaching and technology

Teaching students how to use technology to do their work will better set them up for success beyond your classroom. Work with your Technology or IT department to better understand how you can integrate technology with appropriate ways to leverage AI to augment, rather than replace, learning.

### Community building

Foster a sense of belonging through collaboration and opportunities for interaction beyond the classroom, such as group projects or study groups. Support for first-generation students who may not get it elsewhere is especially important.

### Authentic assessment

Explore alternative assessment methods (real-world applications, pre-course assessments, or presentations) that accurately reflect learning and allow for different demonstrations and applications of knowledge.

### Faculty professional development

Take up professional development opportunities focused on technology integration and demographic understanding to equip yourself with necessary skills to navigate our changing world.

# Student Success

## ▼ Short term

### Different motivations

Acknowledge a range of motivations for pursuing higher education, including employment, certifications, upskilling, and personal enrichment.

### Flexible learning

Financial circumstances are often listed as the primary reason for drop-outs, but this could be due to their difficulty working and studying at the same time. Accommodate busy lives with flexible scheduling options, online courses, and accelerated programs.

### Academic support

Bridge academic gaps with study skills courses, tutoring, writing centers, and developmental education programs.

### Holistic support

Address social and emotional challenges with comprehensive support services, including counseling, mentoring, and peer support groups.

## ▼ Longer term

### Broaden success metrics

Move beyond course completion to include qualitative measures like skill development, personal growth, wellbeing and confidence to recognize the different goals of the New Majority and how engaged they are.

### Career-focused support

Provide robust career services (counseling, job search assistance, internships) and align programs with workforce needs through industry collaboration and work-based learning.

### Personalized learning

Tailoring support plans to the individual needs and goals of each student can enhance their sense of agency and motivation. These plans should include the use of technology as well as strategies for developing self-advocacy skills, accessing campus resources and building social connections.

*"**I believe that (students) having independence is key.** It helps build their confidence and teaches them to rely less on others. Students may have relied on others for many things in high school, but in college, they are expected to be independent adults. We offer a comprehensive support system that addresses various challenges students face, including time management, study skills, organization, and even navigating the logistics of college life."*

**Amy Pryor, Disability Specialist at Towson University**

# Academic Advising

## ▼ Short term

**Recognize interconnected needs**

Acknowledge the interplay between academic success, personal wellbeing, and professional development for New Majority learners.

**Understand unique challenges**

Be sensitive to the complexities of balancing academics with work, family, and other commitments, including financial concerns, time management, and different goals.

**Build trusting relationships**

Create a safe space for students to share concerns, practice active listening, and demonstrate empathy and genuine interest in their wellbeing.

## ▼ Longer term

**Early intervention**

Proactively identify potential challenges, which may include innate barriers, being time-poor, or being underprepared, monitor academic progress, and provide timely support and resources to prevent students from falling behind.

**Include technology in tutoring**

Teaching students how to use technology to do their work will better set them up for success beyond your classroom. Work with your Technology or IT department to better understand how you can integrate technology into tutoring and explore ways to leverage AI to augment, rather than replace, learning.

**Individualized approach**

*Recognize unique learning journeys* and tailor academic advising strategies to meet specific needs and circumstances.

# Disability Services

## ▼ Short term

**Address unmet needs**

Recognize and address the needs of students who may not qualify for traditional support but still require assistance, such as those struggling to access childcare.

**Harness your expertise**

Utilize the knowledge and experience of disability services professionals to inform broader Student Success initiatives for all New Majority learners across campus.

**Strength based approaches**

Focusing on students' strengths and abilities can foster a sense of confidence and self-efficacy. By recognizing and celebrating their accomplishments, institutions can encourage students to strive for even greater success.

**Holistic support**

Collaborate with other departments to address financial aid, childcare, career counseling, and other needs, particularly for students with co-occurring challenges like learning disabilities coupled with financial constraints.

## ▼ Longer term

**Meet the surge in demand with connected support**

Factors like increased awareness, reduced stigma, improved diagnosis, the working student population, and veterans' unique needs all contribute to this rise. Advocating for cross-department collaboration, and access to budget, will help meet the needs of those beyond your remit.

**UDL benefits everyone**

Embrace UDL to create accessible learning environments that benefit all students, regardless of ability. Think of it like a wheelchair ramp that also helps people with strollers, designed for a specific need, but beneficial to many.

**Technology for accessibility**

Utilize online learning platforms, digital resources, assistive technology, and training to enhance accessibility and support learning. Ensure that any use of AI is to augment, not replace the learning process.

---

*"Many students face challenges such as language barriers, financial constraints, and lack of academic support. **UDL provides a framework for addressing these challenges and creating a more inclusive learning environment.** Florida has requirements for higher education institutions, emphasizing student success, retention, and graduation rates. UDL aligns with these goals by providing tools and strategies to support all students."*

**Michelle Shaw, Director of Student Accessibility Services at Florida Atlantic University**

# Conclusions

The emergence of the New Majority Learner in higher education presents challenges and opportunities alike. These students bring unique needs and perspectives to the classroom, challenging longstanding conventions that drive a requirement for change.

To foster their success, institutions must adapt and embrace a holistic approach that equips, empowers, and encourages all learners, not just those defined as non-traditional, to thrive. This begins with recognizing that learning is a personal journey requiring active effort and engagement and a willingness to challenge established norms.

Traditional education systems can sometimes focus on content delivery as the primary way to improve learning, overlooking the universal challenges of engagement, focus, and retention. For the New Majority, this creates barriers rather than pathways to success.

Consider the single parent returning to education, overwhelmed by inflexible schedules and inaccessible resources. Or the ESL student, who is adapting to learning in an additional language, straining to pay attention yet left behind by an inability to return to the content because they've struggled to take effective lecture notes. This can lead to feeling inadequate, left behind, and discourages active participation in learning.

For colleges looking to break this cycle of disengagement, they must adapt their offerings to better reflect the lived experience of those in higher education today, equipping students with the tools, empowering them with the study skills, and encouraging them with the support they need to take control of their learning.

> **"***Technology like Genio is **not only helping people with disabilities, but people that experience external forces,** like having work or needing to take care of kids and all that; it also helps people who have other things on their plate too.***"**
>
> **Chris Releford, Cybersecurity Major at University of St Thomas, Houston**

Moving to a success driven model, and fostering a supportive environment that understands, and caters for the needs of time poor learners, underprepared learners and learners with barriers is paramount.

When students feel supported and valued, they are more likely to engage with the learning process and achieve their full potential. Knowing that there is an _**impending enrollment cliff**_ for higher education only emphasizes the need for colleges to evolve in their approach and cater more toward the non-traditional students, whose presence constitutes an ever increasing portion of their population.

Technology plays a vital role in this transformation. By providing increased control over the learning process, the right technology can empower both educators and learners to actively engage with information.

For learners, this means reduced stress, improved confidence, and greater academic success.

For institutions, this translates to increased retention, an improved student experience, and a more inclusive learning environment.

Investing in the success of the New Majority learner is not just an ethical imperative, it's an investment in our collective future. By empowering these students, institutions can pave the way for a more equitable and effective learning experience for all, benefitting society as a whole by creating a skilled, engaged and educated population.

As someone with the ability to influence the future of your institution, we're calling on you to make a positive change to a more encompassing approach to education. Not only can you benefit your institution, you'll be elevating the learning experience, and unlocking education, for a group of students historically left as an afterthought.

The New Majority are here to stay. It's up to you to mold their learning experience for generations to come.

# Methodology

This report offers a comprehensive analysis of the evolving landscape of higher education, focusing particularly on the rise of the New Majority Learner in the United States. To achieve this, our research team embarked on a rigorous data collection and analysis process, drawing insights from key sources and employing innovative methodologies.

## Data sources and timeline

Our investigation tapped into two primary data sources: the Integrated **Postsecondary Education Data System** (IPEDS) and the **National Postsecondary Student Aid Study** (NPSAS). IPEDS, with its institution-level data, served as the cornerstone of our research, while NPSAS provided valuable aggregated insights, allowing for breakdowns by factors like Carnegie Classification and state residency.

To capture historical trends, we delved into datasets spanning two decades, analyzing the most recent data from 2022 (IPEDS) and 2020 (NPSAS), alongside corresponding data from 2004, 2008, 2012, and 2016 to align with previous NPSAS survey cycles. Recognizing the distinct characteristics of undergraduate and postgraduate students, we utilized both NPSAS undergraduate and postgraduate surveys.

## Defining the New Majority Learner

The definition of the New Majority Learner was adapted from the groundbreaking work of the **Education Design Lab.** This framework recognizes that today's student body is multifaceted, encompassing individuals who identify with various attributes. These attributes, which evolved over the years reflected in the data, include factors such as:

- Socioeconomic status: Pell Grant eligibility, first-generation status
- Race and ethnicity: Underrepresented minority groups
- Family structure: Single-parent households
- Age: Adult learners (22+)
- Disability status: Students with disabilities
- Language background: English as a Second Language (ESOL) learners

Likewise, these attributes are by nature intersectional, i.e. students that are formally registered as students with disabilities may also identify as having "serious difficulty concentrating, remembering, deciding", or be aged 22+ and/or veterans, and so on.

While aspiring to include all attributes defined by the Education Design Lab, limitations in the available data meant certain factors, such as the number of incarcerated or formerly incarcerated students, could not be incorporated.

## Bridging IPEDS and NPSAS together

To create a robust and comprehensive dataset, we integrated data from both IPEDS and NPSAS. Leveraging IPEDS's institution-level data as a foundation, we incorporated NPSAS data by employing a Carnegie Classification-based estimation method.

This involved breaking down NPSAS aggregated estimates by Carnegie Classification and multiplying them by the corresponding student counts reported by IPEDS for each institution. This approach allowed us to generate a final dataset enriched with actual values from IPEDS where available and estimated values derived from NPSAS for attributes not captured in IPEDS.

## Estimating overall New Majority prevalence

Calculating the overall percentage of New Majority Learners at each institution required a nuanced approach. We employed a method based on correlations between attributes, enabling us to estimate intersectionality and minimize double-counting. This ensured a more accurate representation of the unique and varied student populations within each institution.

While our analysis encompassed a wide range of attributes, certain factors were not included in the final dataset due to being added after the overall New Majority estimates were calculated, e.g. homelessness.

This meticulous methodology underscores Genio's commitment to delivering data-driven insights that empower institutions to better understand and serve the needs of the New Majority Learner. By shedding light on the evolving demographics and challenges faced by this new and varied student population, Genio aims to provide a valuable roadmap for navigating the future of higher education

The table overleaf details the specific data collection points across the research period, noting when changes to classifications, or additional data points, were included.

| | 2004 | 2008 | 2012 | 2016 | 2022 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Age 22 plus** | ▶ | ▶ | ▶ | ▶ | IPEDS: Students aged 22+. Where institution data from this year are missing (even years have about 50% fewer respondents for this part of the survey), the percent from the previous year is applied to this year's student numbers where available |
| **Part-time** | ▶ | ▶ | ▶ | ▶ | IPEDS: Part-time enrollment |
| **Transfer-in** | | | ▶ | ▶ | IPEDS: Transfer-in degree/certificate-seeking undergraduate enrollment |
| **First year** | ▶ | ▶ | ▶ | ▶ | IPEDS: Full-time, first-time, degree/certificate seeking undergraduates (GRS Cohort) |
| **Disability** | | ▶ | ▶ | ▶ | IPEDS: Undergraduates who are formally registered as students with disabilities, using actual percentage if more than "More than 3 percent" or 2% if "3 percent or less" |
| **Veteran** | ▶ | ▶ | NPSAS: Veteran status = Yes | ▶ | IPEDS: Number receiving Post-9/11 GI Bill Benefits - undergraduate students; Department of Defense Tuition Assistance Program benefits - undergraduate students |
| **ESL** | ▶ | NPSAS: English is the primary language = No | NPSAS: English primary language spoken = Spanish; Another language | NPSAS: Primary language spoken = Spanish; Another language | NPSAS: First language learned to speak = Spanish; Another language |
| **Economic hardship** | | | | NPSAS: Financial security: $2,000 within the next month = Certainly could not come up with the $2,000 | NPSAS: Financial security: $500 within the next month = Probably could not come up with the $500; Certainly could not come up with the $500 |
| **Immigrants** | NPSAS undergraduate: as --> NPSAS postgraduate: Immigrant status = Resident aliens or eligible non-citizens; Foreign born citizen; US born citizen, foreign born parent(s) | ▶ | ▶ | ▶ | NPSAS: Immigrant generational status = First generation immigrant; Second gen immigrant (both parents foreign-born) |
| **First-generation** | ▶ | ▶ | ▶ | ▶ | NPSAS: Parents' highest education level = Do not know either parent's education level; Did not complete high school; High school diploma or equivalent; Vocational/technical training |
| **Neurodivergent** | NPSAS: Difficulty: Learning, remembering, or concentrating = Yes | NPSAS: Disability: Main type of condition or impairment = Specific learning disability or dyslexia; Attention deficit disorder (ADD); Mental, emotional, psychiatric condition; Depression; Developmental disability; Brain injury | ▶ | ▶ | NPSAS: Disability: serious difficulty concentrating, remembering, deciding = Yes |
| **Working** | NPSAS: Weeks worked while enrolled = All; Most; Half; Less than half (i.e. not No job) | NPSAS: Job: Weeks worked while enrolled = All; Most; Half; Less than half (i.e. not No job) | NPSAS: Job: Had job in 2011-12 (excluding work-study) = Yes | NPSAS: Job: Had job while enrolled in 2015-16 (excl. work-study) = Yes | NPSAS: Job: Had job while enrolled in 2019-20 (excl. work-study/fellowship) = Yes |
| **Parents** | ▶ | ▶ | ▶ | ▶ | NPSAS: Dependents: Has dependent children = Yes |
| **International** | ▶ | ▶ | ▶ | ▶ | NPSAS: Citizenship = Foreign or international student |
| **Homeless** | | | | ▶ | NPSAS: Homeless or at risk of homelessness |
| **No HS diploma** | ▶ | ▶ | ▶ | ▶ | NPSAS (undergraduate only): High school degree type = No high school degree or certificate |

# About the authors

### Dave Tucker, Founder and co-CEO of Genio

Dave is an entrepreneur and innovator of learning technology. With over 15 years experience in Higher Education technology, he has driven the development of award-winning products, helping students to overcome common learning challenges and support independent learning across the globe.

### Jacob Goodwin, Content Manager at Genio

Co-author of this report, alongside Dave Tucker, Jacob is dedicated to increasing awareness of real issues in Higher Education and providing tangible solutions. His work focuses on creating accessible and impactful content that informs and empowers both students and educators alike.

### Sam Alexander, Revenue Operations Analyst at Genio

Sam's expertise in data sourcing, analysis, and interpretation was crucial in uncovering the insights presented in this report. His data research and analysis methodology provided a solid foundation for the report's findings and recommendations.

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