Motivating and Engaging Today’s College Students:
Insights from Phi Theta Kappa’s NerdNation
There has been a lot of negative press about the state of higher education in the United States - students not prepared for the very jobs they thought they were learning about, students not attaining enough practical experience before they graduate, tuition and course-material costs skyrocketing, and the student loans they have to repay. So why are people enrolling at all? And once they are in college, what keeps them going to completion?

As a global education company, Cengage Learning wants to get to know college students better.

This white paper encapsulates what we discovered from 116 students we interviewed at NerdNation in spring 2014, in Orlando, FL.

An annual convention, NerdNation is part networking, part education, part awards show, and part pep rally. It’s put on by Phi Theta Kappa, a national honor society that recognizes and encourages scholarship among two-year college students, and provides opportunities for advisor and student engagement that result in long-term chapter and student success. To be eligible for Phi Theta Kappa membership, a student must have completed at least 12 hours of associate degree course work with a cumulative 3.5 GPA.

Over 4,100 students attended 2014 NerdNation, giving us a chance to engage with them and learn about their experiences with student life. More specifically, we wanted to know about their goals, what engages them in their courses, what digital tools they’ve used, and what advice they would give to college-bound high school students.
Demographics

We interviewed 116 students, representing mostly community colleges, some technical schools, and some four-year colleges and universities.

- Nontraditional students are 25 or older when they go back to school.
- Traditional students are 18 years old and going to college right out of high school.

We spoke to a variety of students: 61% traditional, and 39% nontraditional.
It is worthwhile to note the proportion of nontraditional students. They make up a wide-ranging population of adult students 25 and over, who often have family and work responsibilities that can interfere with the completion of their educational objectives. The National Center for Educational Statistics predicts that by 2021, 43% of the 23.9 million students enrolled in undergrad courses will be nontraditional students.

**Actual and projected numbers for enrollment in all post-secondary, degree-granting institutions**

![Bar chart showing enrollment numbers by age group and year.](chart.png)
Of the nontraditional students we spoke to, many of them had one or more of the following characteristics:

- Most are married with children, and work at least part-time.
- Some are the first in their family to get a college degree.
- Some dropped out of high school and are getting their GED *and* a college degree now.
- Some are international students (Mexico, Ethiopia, Morocco, Germany, Turkmenistan).
- A few are lifelong learners with multiple degrees.
- A handful joined the military first, then came to college later.

With such a large proportion of students having such busy lives, it becomes that much more imperative that students have access to course materials and tools where they are.
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Their Goals
We asked the students about their goals: Why are they attending college and what do they hope to do down the road? For the vast majority, their initial goal is to get their Associate’s degree (84%). Only about 20% planned to stop with their Associate’s and look for a job in their field of study.

Many have long-term goals in mind, with 62% saying they want to transfer their credits and attend 4-year colleges and/or universities for additional degrees, including Bachelor’s, Master’s and Doctoral.

What are their goals?

“I got that one-on-one interaction with my professors if I needed, and I was able to make friends quickly and just get involved on campus, which was one of the goals that I had.”

Amy Reinhardt
sophomore, Johnson County Community College, KS

“I love to meet different people, and our college is really small, so you can know each other, like you know all the faculty and all the students.”

Ani Mamediva
freshman, Elgin Community College, IL

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**What Engages Them**

One of the key predictors of whether a student will stay in a class and graduate is how involved and engaged they are – with their course work, with their instructors, and with other students. Of all these elements, the instructor is at the heart of the student experience. Students consistently talked about how meaningful a course is for them when they have passionate instructors who not only care about the material, but are about making sure their students do as well. Instructors who incorporate games, experiences, discussion, and group projects while in the classroom are likely to have more engaged students.

**What engages them?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>60%</td>
<td>Passionate/Involved Instructors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16%</td>
<td>Class Discussion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13%</td>
<td>Hands-on Approach</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12%</td>
<td>Multimedia/Visuals</td>
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<tr>
<td>12%</td>
<td>Love of Learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11%</td>
<td>Engaging with other Students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10%</td>
<td>Real-Life Application/Examples</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10%</td>
<td>Subject Matter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9%</td>
<td>Critical/Higher-Level Thinking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7%</td>
<td>Group Work (In Class)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

"I love the energy. I love learning. I love that the professors are very challenging. They don’t sit there and just throw knowledge at you. It’s engaging you, making it tangible for you.”

Aubrey Fletcher
sophomore, Community College of Rhode Island

"I had the option of either doing online classes or in the classroom, and I just wanted the classroom experience. I have met some teachers that have just been phenomenal.”

Carl Speakes
freshman, Tyler Junior College, TX

"Whether the course is economics, law, or human resources, I get most motivated when my professor is telling me how I can apply this in real life and adding their personal stories.”

Olya Homonduh
Cornell University, NY
Distractions

Whether traditional or nontraditional, today’s college students have a lot on their plates.

In a survey we conducted ahead of NerdNation, we asked students about the other activities and priorities that compete with school. The majority have at least a couple time commitments outside of their course work.

Commitments

- Full load of classes: 55%
- Part-time job: 44%
- Care-giving responsibilities (child, parent, other): 34%
- Volunteer position: 28%
- Full-time job: 28%
- Other: 22%

Other activities

- Honorary club: 39%
- Academic group or organization: 39%
- Workstudy: 22%
- Special interest group/club: 16%
- Religious/spiritual group: 12%
- Internship program: 12%
- Service learning/civic group: 9%
- Other: 9%
- Student government: 6%

“I would say my three children, my dogs, my noisy house; it’s all very distracting. But, once I get in that zone, I think you could have World War Three going on and I would still be studying for that nursing exam.”

Heather Duncan
junior, Fort Scott Community College, KS

“Social media is definitely a distraction. And what I have to do and what should be done now based on what could wait a little bit, so I think my time management is a distraction for me.”

Danette Unruh
sophomore, Butler Community College, KS
At NerdNation, we asked students what distracts them from their studies...

**Distractions**

- **32%** Social Media
- **22%** Family & Kids
- **22%** People Talking
- **14%** Phone
- **15%** TV
- **8%** Music

Between time commitments and distractions, getting coursework done can become difficult. Cengage Learning can help students meet their school obligations by giving them the tools they need to get the work done where it’s most convenient for them.

“I have a four-year-old and a one-year-old, and it is nearly impossible to study. And my mind is always running on my to-do list for the day. So it’s hard to shut that off and just focus on school.”

Morgan Young
sophomore, Skagit Valley College, WA
What They Like MOST About Their College Experience

Given these competing priorities, school work can easily end up on the back burner. But the students at NerdNation were positive about their college experiences so far. The key themes we heard most:

- **Phi Theta Kappa**
- **Being involved and active on campus**
- **Interaction with instructors and students**
- **Learning new material**
- **Smaller class sizes and community**
- **Subject material**
- **Proving to themselves that they could do it**

These are the elements that drove our interviewees to go to college, stay in college, and succeed in college. The theme that emerges is “connections” -- whether with other people or the subjects they’re learning, for students, the more they connected, the happier they were with school.
What They Like LEAST About Their College Experience

On the flipside, we asked students about their college dislikes.

Not surprisingly, cost was mentioned a great deal. In fact, the majority of the complaints involved financial obligations. More and more students are paying for college themselves, without support from their parents. Many are working at least part-time, which can get in the way of doing their homework and having a social life.

- Students who have taken any courses online (23%) consistently mentioned a decrease in interaction with instructors, which kept them at a distance at times. While they enjoyed the convenience of the “anytime/anywhere” aspects of an online course, they still prefer the opportunity for face-time with their instructors, which keeps them motivated and engaged.

- Another issue at hand was timely grading. We were told that lag time between homework/test submission and grading limits students’ ability to correct issues before it’s too late.

- As noted earlier, passionate and involved instructors are key to students’ engagement levels. A few described how disconnected instructors made difficult it for students to enjoy the course. When students have trouble making personal connection with their instructors, they get frustrated and can disengage and disconnect from the course.

- Another pain point for students has been their textbooks. This mainly comes into play when students are required to purchase a textbook only to have their instructor use only a small portion of it—or worse, none of it.
Experience With Digital Course Materials

We asked students about their experience with digital course materials. By now, most students – 96% of our PTK interviewees – have had some experience, whether it’s taking an online class, using a digital homework solution, or using an eBook as a text. Of those who have used digital materials, 78% considered it a “positive” experience, and the rest either preferred print – they considered themselves “old school” – or were still on the fence about it.

Experience with Digital Overall

Over half have used their school’s LMS or a digital homework solution – some students grouped these together as “digital homework” – and of those, 85% liked the experience. With the Learning Management Systems, their experience hinges on how extensive their instructors used it, with more students saying how they liked being able to have an instant connection with their instructor. For those taking online classes, the LMS is their main avenue of communication with their instructor.

The comments about digital homework solutions were mostly positive. Many said it was like having another teacher in front of them, and getting instant feedback is a huge plus. They also like the self-paced environment these solutions give them. Many students talked about being able to do homework problems multiple times before getting them correct – and that having the extra practice boosted their confidence.
Student Experience with Digital Formats

Over \( \frac{2}{3} \) of interviewees have used an eBook for their class, and some 75% of them called it a positive experience. Those unsure at first, said the convenience and portability won them over. Many like the searchability and interactivity of these textbooks, with quite a few medical/nursing students saying how they enjoy the simulations and videos. They like to see how systems work in 3-D, without the expense of a cadaver lab or other materials.
Online classes were a mixed bag. Just under 25% have taken on online class with the majority rating it a positive experience overall.

For the most part, our interviewees spoke positively about digital, and prefer a hybrid course to going totally online. They prefer to have some direct interaction and face-time with their instructors – beyond the e-mail and discussion boards.

**College Preparedness**

Students were asked whether they felt high school prepared them for college. Of the 116 students interviewed, only 42 (37%) felt high school prepared them. Many interviewees said they wished they had been warned about how independent they were going to have to become. In high school parents and teachers prodded them along; in college, it was all up to them, which required some serious adjusting.
Did High School Prepare them for College?

Many students indicated they hadn’t taken high school seriously enough or developed strong study habits to prepare them for the rigor of college.

Given all the rich experiences these students have had so far in college, we asked them what advice they would give to high school students today.

- Study skills and time management were cited most as the major adjustments they had to make.
- Even the 9% who felt they received some preparation, mainly in terms of college prep courses, said the subject material was represented, but the study skills and time management were still lacking.

Overall, students said college is when they realized they were on their own – it was up to them to figure out how to juggle everything and get their coursework done. For many, it’s also up to them to pay for part or all of their college education, making them the true owner of their future.

“Know that it’s going to be more work than high school, but it’s more rewarding. And it’s up to you, how much you make of it.”

Elsie Courtney
sophomore
New River Community College, VA
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