The importance of understanding the community college as a vital aspect of the higher education landscape has never been more needed, nor more difficult. The American community college is a unique higher education institution greatly influenced by many internal and external forces. Community colleges are open-access institutions drawing a diversity of students including those who are first-generation and underprepared, face socioeconomic challenges, have personal immigrant histories, seek employment or transfer pathways, and/or are nontraditional learners with complex work and family demands. Many community college faculty members are not doctorally prepared, are part-time faculty, and possess fewer pedagogical tools than university faculty. Externally, community colleges are considered responsible for the health and economic stability of their area and for regional efforts to remediate existing educational achievement gaps. The complex nature of community colleges and their students have a direct impact on the successful persistence and completion of students (Cohen and Brawer 2008). In this chapter, we suggest that service-learning can be leveraged within this dynamic setting and we focus on practices that students and faculty use to help navigate the complexity of the nontraditional student experience specifically.

The Nontraditional Student Universe

To more clearly understand how service-learning can be effectively used with nontraditional students, it is critical to develop a nuanced articulation of the nontraditional student universe. There is no commonly accepted way to define and, thus,
count individuals who do not fit the traditional student demographic (generally accepted as 18–22 years old, first-time attendees at college). Without a universal definition, some institutions use age as the primary criteria for defining nontraditional learners, counting those students who are over 25 years of age as adults, and therefore, nontraditional. Others define this population by characteristics that are not limited to age. The definition conversation is complicated further by the dearth of research with this population, the value and relevance of adult-learner literature to the discussion, and the often-used paradigm that separates younger and older students.

We engage with these complications by remaining flexible in terminology and references throughout the chapter. We advocate for the use of characteristics to define these learners as a promising practice, but given the reality of the current dialogue, we intertwine terminology of and research about nontraditional students and adult students as a way to provide a more complete picture of these learners and their experiences.

Even the term “nontraditional” is quickly becoming an outdated concept as many institutions engage a majority of students who are either adult learners as defined by age or nontraditional as defined by characteristic. This shifting tide is reflective of a decrease in the number of traditional-age students in the current populations of many states and places a greater emphasis on the academic success of nontraditional learners (Complete College America 2011). Broadly defined, nontraditional students comprise almost three-quarters of all American undergraduates (National Center for Education Statistics 2011). However, many in higher education continue to promote practices, policies, and normative values based on a traditional student model. While this is problematic at all institutions, those working for community colleges must begin to see nontraditional learners as the new traditional student.

As already discussed, defining the universe of nontraditional learners has been fraught with challenges. An age-based definition limits the ways we account for the diversity of experiences among community college students. Instead, we advocate for a more universal use of the classification system defined by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). The NCES defines nontraditional students as having one or more of the following seven characteristics: delayed enrollment in postsecondary education; part-time enrollment; financial independence of parent(s); working full time while enrolled; having dependents other than a spouse; are single parents; and/or lacking a standard high school diploma (NCES 2002). NCES further defines nontraditional students on a continuum of minimally nontraditional (i.e., students who present one nontraditional characteristic), to moderately nontraditional (i.e., students who present two to three characteristics), to highly nontraditional (i.e., students who present four or more characteristics) (NCES 2002). While many campuses will continue to use age as the defining characteristic of nontraditional students, we find greater value in using NCES criteria since they can be applied to students regardless of their age, and thus allow for a broader understanding of students enrolled in community colleges.

In addition to specific characteristics, nontraditional students also have unique experiences in college. Importantly, these students often have a unidimensional experience and location within their colleges: the classroom and the classroom