

ENVISIONING VIRGINIA TECH

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# **BEYOND BOUNDARIES**

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## CONSIDERING STUDENT POPULATION TRENDS FOR VIRGINIA TECH'S FUTURE

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## Considering Student Population Trends for Virginia Tech's Future

Understanding an institution's student body is an important feature in planning its future campus setting. For example, a school that is largely populated by commuter students but wants to become more residential will need to invest in more residence halls and student amenities while a school that caters to or wants to expand its non-traditional student population with fully formed off-campus lives may be more interested in different kinds of investments better suited to this population.

Looking forward with the traditional student population, the United States Census Bureau (2015b) estimated that there were more than 23 million individuals under the age of 5 in the United States in July 2014. This population would be in the 18-24 year old traditional undergraduate student age range in 2032, and is an increase of nearly 25% compared to the same demographic group in 2000 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2001). In addition to preparing for this traditional student population and its needs, universities preparing for the future also will have to consider the significant non-traditional student population of part-time and adult learners. Both tasks will be difficult as we are still attempting to learn the needs of today's student populations. This section focuses on historical trends regarding student demographics among various types of educational institutions.

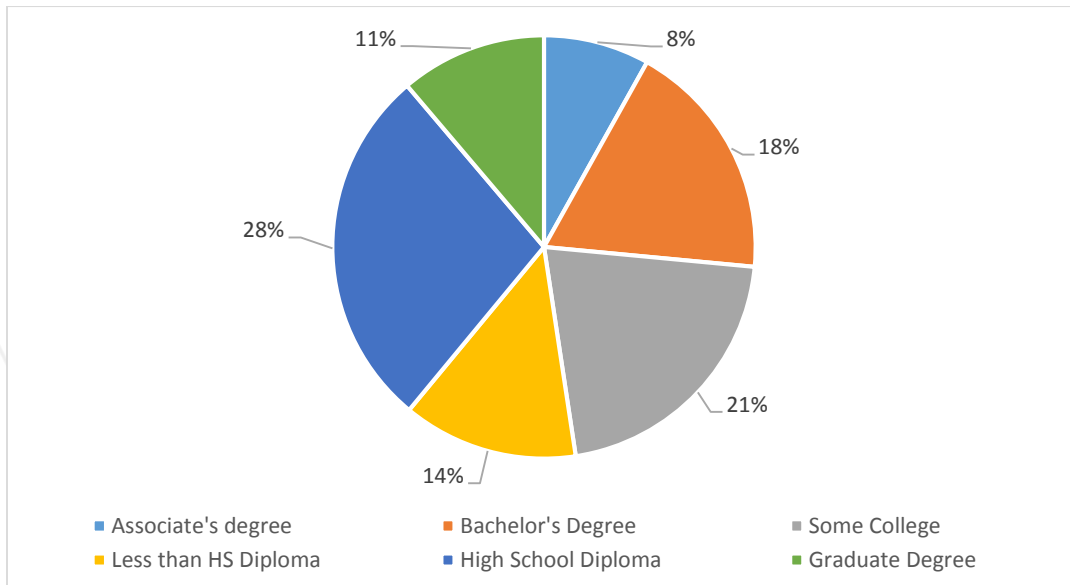
There does not appear to be a single unifying definition of what is considered the traditional path to undergraduate studies, though some common themes appear full-time enrollment in college directly following high school graduation and being between the ages of 18 and 24. In contrast to this "traditional" college path, the National Center for Education Statistics identifies non-traditional students according to meeting one or more of the following criteria:

- Delays enrollment into postsecondary education,
- Attends part time,
- Financially independent,
- Works full time while enrolled,
- Has dependents other than a spouse,
- Is a single parent, or
- Did not obtain a standard high school diploma (Horn & Carroll, 1996, p. i).

Many of these factors can hinder the ability of students to participate fully in what is termed the "college experience," and introduce new challenges for institutions seeking to meet the needs of this diverse group in order to help them matriculate in a timely manner.

The U.S. Census 2013 population estimate for adults over the age of 25 was 210,910,615. As Figure 1 indicates, roughly 63% of the adult population has not received any form of post-secondary degree of associate's degree or higher. As post-secondary credentials become more important in the job market (Carnevale, Smith, & Strohl, 2013), many individuals contemplate going or returning to college after having established their lives, both personally and professionally. This could result in increasing numbers of adult learners entering or re-entering the college environment to attain these credentials.

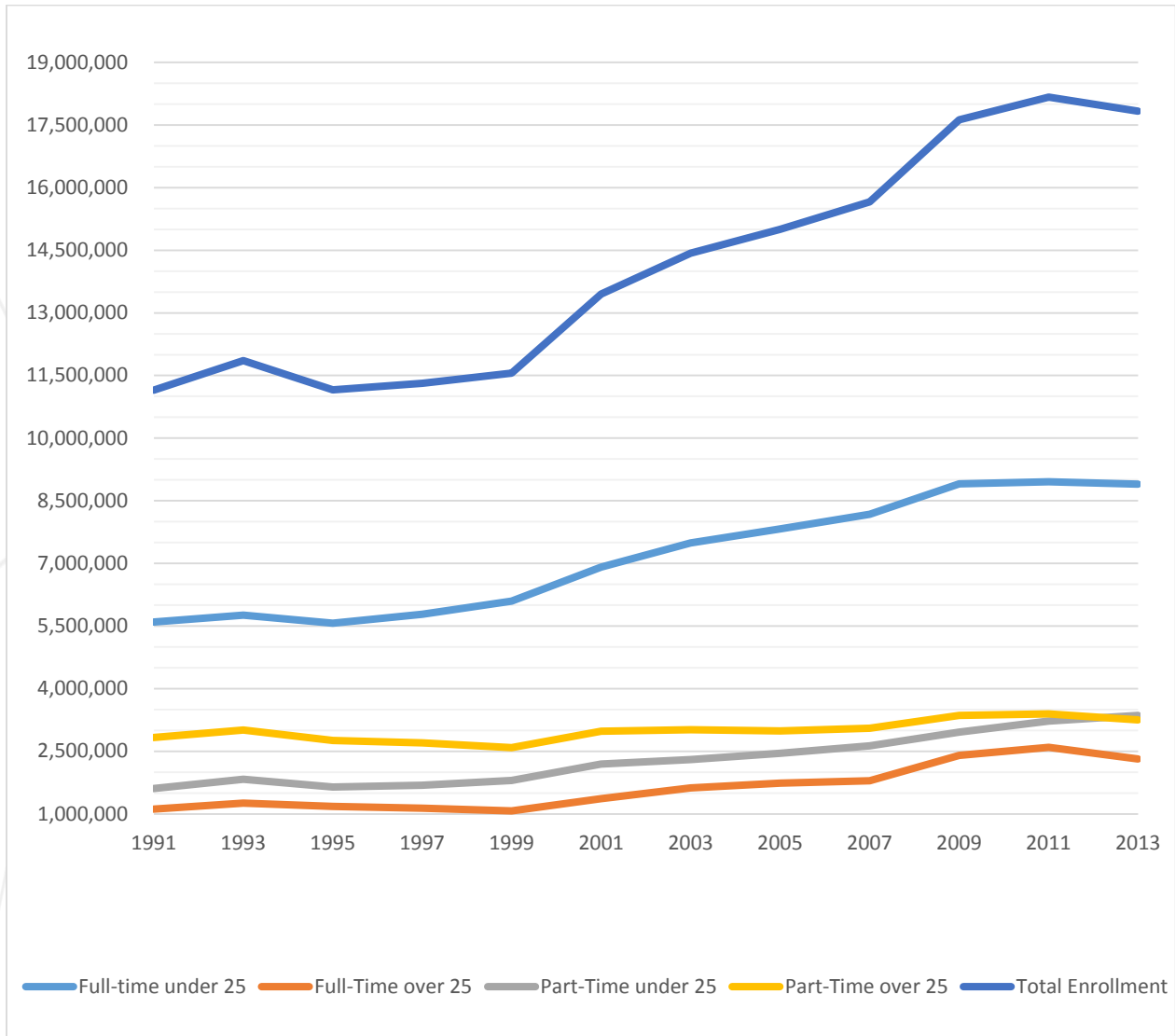
Figure 1. US Adult Population, 25 and Older: Educational Attainment, 2013



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American FactFinder (2015)

Figure 2 shows the overall undergraduate student population in the United States grew 50% between 1991 and 2013 from 11,855,510 to 17,830,779 among both part-time and full-time students at nearly 4,000 two and four-year public, not-for-profit, and for-profit institutions. The sharpest upward trajectory (+53%) for the total number of undergraduate students was between 1999 and 2009, with 68% of the increase in students coming from the full-time student population. However, over this period of time, the 18-24 year old, full-time undergraduate student group remained at roughly 50% of the total undergraduate population. The over-25, full-time student population grew the fastest, with a 108% increase from 1,113,579 in 1991 to 2,319,074 in 2013, but had the smallest share of students in 2013 at 13% compared with the part-time student populations, which each have approximately 18% of the total undergraduate student population.

Figure 2. Undergraduate Student Population by Age and Enrollment Status at 2- and 4-year Degree-Granting Institutions, 1991-2013



Source: Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS)

In addition to this demonstration of the relationship between age and part- or full-time enrollment relative to total enrollment, Table 1 provides details on whether adult learners are represented equally across public, not-for-profit, and for-profit institutions and whether they are more concentrated at the baccalaureate or associate’s degree levels. This table demonstrates that while a third of all undergraduate students may be over the age of 25, those students make up much lower percentages of students at both public and not-for-profit baccalaureate institutions. Likewise, students over age 25 are overrepresented at the associate’s degree level and at for-profit institutions.

Table 1. Undergraduate Enrollment by Institutional Level and Age, 2009-2013

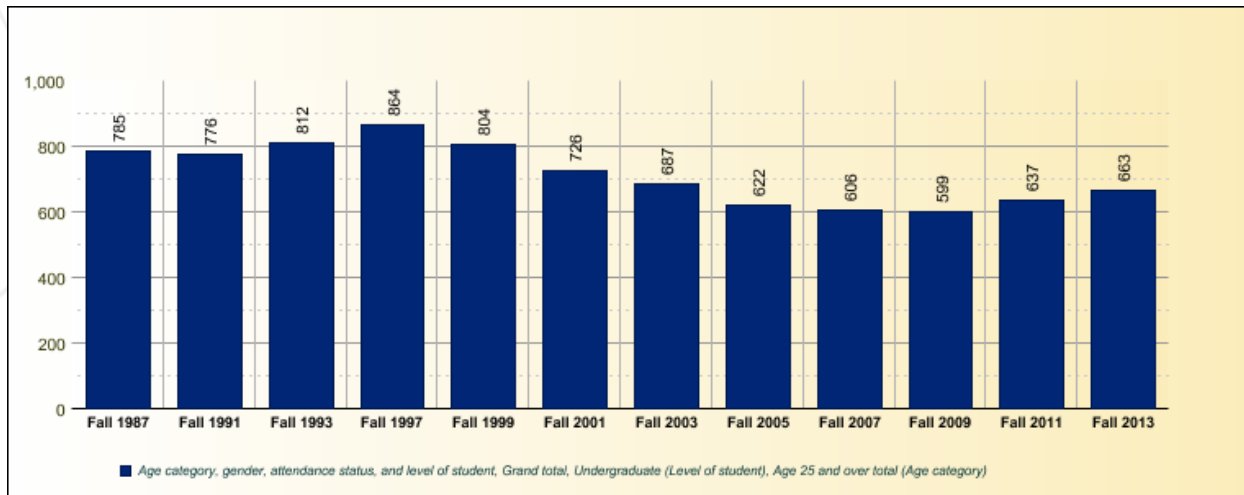
Undergraduate Enrollment												
	2009			2011			2013					
	Number of Institutions	Total Enrollment	Median % 18-24	Median % 25-64	Number of Institutions	Total Enrollment	Median % 18-24	Median % 25-64	Number of Institutions	Total Enrollment	Median % 18-24	Median % 25-64
Public, primarily baccalaureate	578	5,685,971	77	19	578	5,907,538	78	19	587	5,999,428	79	18
Not-for-profit, primarily baccalaureate	1227	2,548,604	80	16	1243	2,664,306	81	15	1263	2,704,538	81	15
For-profit, primarily baccalaureate	167	436,153	41	58	200	517,134	31	69	232	507,751	29	70
Public, associate's & certificates	918	6,727,917	51	39	921	6,827,197	51	39	925	6,560,912	52	36
Not-for-profit, associate's & certificates	82	30,640	47	51	83	31,262	44	54	87	31,732	44	54
For-profit, associate's & certificates	528	358,814	44	56	591	391,348	42	58	610	321,910	43	57
Total Undergraduate Enrollment*	3,558	15,859,995	60	34	3,682	16,413,102	58	35	3,776	16,205,249	59	33

\* Will not add precisely due to additional institutional categories with n<20 not included in breakout

Source: Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS)

Shifts in the undergraduate age demographics at four-year, residential-oriented institutions such as Virginia Tech’s SCHEV-approved aspirational peers appear to not be as drastic, or, in the case of Virginia Tech, occurring at all. As shown in Figure 3, the absolute number of undergraduate students over the age of 25 at Virginia Tech peaked in 1997 at 864 students (4.1%) over the last thirty years and has fallen in the years since to 663 of all Virginia Tech undergraduate students (2.75%) in 2013 (IPEDS).

Figure 3. Total Number of Virginia Tech Undergraduate Students 25 and over



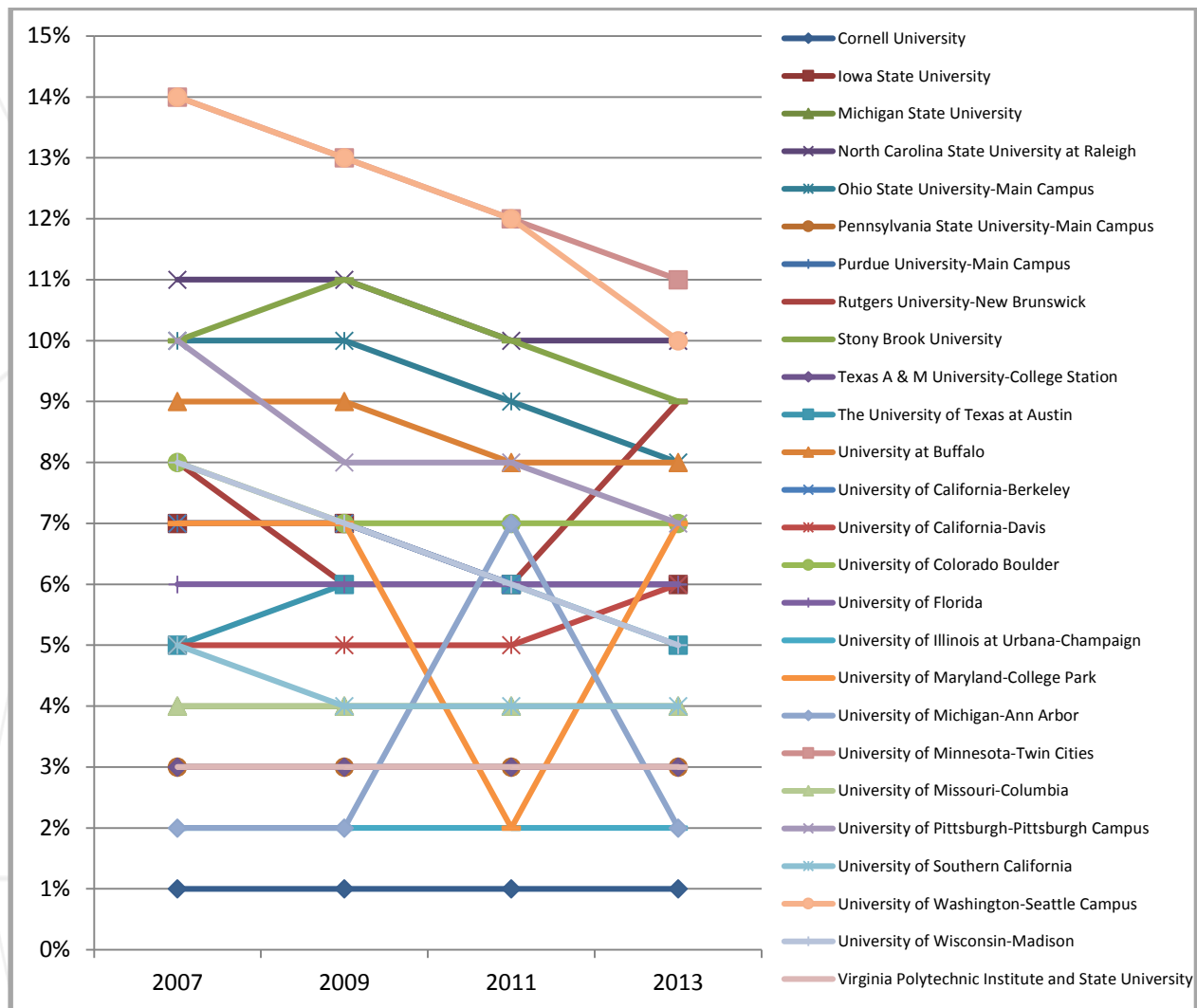
Source: Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS)

Figure 4 shows that the general trend of the percent of undergraduate enrollment for students between the ages of 25 and 64 among Virginia Tech and its SCHEV-approved peer institutions has either maintained at low levels or decreased between 2007 and 2013. At 2.75%, Virginia Tech is on the lower end of the range of peer institutions. The highest percentage of undergraduate students outside of the traditional 18-24 age range was a mere 14% for the top two institutions, University of Minnesota-Twin Cities and University of Washington-Seattle Campus in 2007. The lowest percentage was Cornell, which remained at just 1% of undergraduate students being outside of the 18-24 age range between 2007 and 2013. The total undergraduate enrollments at most of these institutions were increasing during the same period in which the percent of undergraduate students aged 25-64 was declining or remaining stagnant.

An important finding that emerged through further investigation of non-traditional student populations at Virginia Tech’s SCHEV peer institutions was that there are much higher percentages of part-time and/or adult learners at satellite campuses of these institutions. For example, approximately 80% of the undergraduate student population at both Pennsylvania State University-World Campus and University of Maryland-University College were between the ages of 25 and 64, and approximately 75% attended courses only part-time in 2013. At the main Penn State campus, only 3% of students were over 25 and only 3% attended courses part-time. At University of Maryland--College Park, the statistics for both populations were less than 10% in 2013 (IPEDS). One possible explanation for this schism is that

universities and university systems are electing to expand access to education and perform more local service to the community, as has been the traditional purview of land-grant institutions as the “people’s universities” (OECD, 2007, p. 36) through separate campuses rather than expanding access through their main flagship campus. A potential benefit of this choice for the flagship campus is the impact on prestige and rankings by concentrating their most competitive students and prestigious faculty at one campus.

Figure 4. Virginia Tech and Its SCHEV Peers Undergraduate Enrollment, Percent Age 25-64



Source: Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS)

### Conclusion

As Virginia Tech looks towards its 175<sup>th</sup> anniversary, questions regarding what kind of student body it intends to serve must be answered. At present, the university is serving an almost-exclusively “traditional” student body, which is typical of many residential colleges and of its peer institutions. The university will almost certainly continue to recruit and be attractive to this population, which is likely to grow in the future based on current Census projections. There are also opportunities to expand its role as

the “people’s university” to educate more of the non-traditional student populations as part of its land-grant mission. Universities have varied in how they approach this issue, ranging from specific programs to target working adults like University of Wisconsin’s competency-based degree program, Flexible Option, to University of Maryland’s University Campus or Penn State’s World Campus. Future decisions and priorities for the university will be based on the student population Virginia Tech wants to attract and educate as different types of students will require different forms of support.



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