

College students increasingly take unconventional route

By Jeffrey J. Selingo, Chronicle of Higher Education

When the filmmakers behind the animated summer blockbuster *Monsters University* needed inspiration for their fictional campus, they visited three of the nation's best-known colleges: Harvard, MIT, and UC Berkeley.

Such name-brand campuses, having provided the backdrop for Hollywood productions, help shape our collective vision of college as a place where you go once in your life (often at age 18) and move through in a linear fashion over four years.

But that straight pathway isn't the one taken by about half of the students enrolled in college today, an enrollment pattern that Clifford Adelman, a noted higher-education researcher, says dates back to at least the 1970s. Even so, we still call students "nontraditional" if they attend college later in life or part-time, or if they attend multiple institutions.

Today's students are swirling through higher education more than ever before. They attend multiple institutions—sometimes at the same time—extend the time to graduation by taking off time between semesters, mix learning experiences like co-op programs or internships with traditional courses, and sign up for classes from alternative providers such as Coursera or edX, which offer free massive open online courses, or StraighterLine, which offers cheap introductory courses online.

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