

Nontraditional Students - How to Address an Employment Gap

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), 73 percent of undergraduate college students are nontraditional. This percentage is based on a student falling into one or more of the following categories: being a part time student, are 25 years or older, working full time, being financially independent, one who didn't immediately continue education after graduating from high school, one who has children or dependents other than their spouse, being a single parent and or having a GED rather than a high school diploma.

Because nontraditional students commonly experience events that lead to gaps in employment, writing a resume can be more challenging for this population. Examples of life events that can lead to employment gaps include: committing to be a stay-at-home parent, personal illness or injury, serving as a caretaker for a family member, employment lay-off, and/or delaying or withdrawing from college because of financial hardship. This tip sheet addresses how to explain such gaps to employers.

Explaining the Gap

The key is to be honest and upfront on your resume in a professional manner without getting too personal. For example, if the gap stems from a personal injury or is due to being a caretaker for a family member, avoid divulging specific details about the illness or injury on your resume. Instead, the statement should briefly acknowledge the gap and emphasize your interest in returning to work. This tip sheet addresses how to explain the gaps and clarifies what is appropriate to share.

When formatting your resume use a reverse chronological versus a functional style. You may be inclined to use a functional or skills resume to hide gaps in your employment; however, most employers are not fond of that format. To help fill the gaps take into consideration any part-time employment, volunteer experience or courses you took during those time periods. Each are valuable experiences to include on your resume and offer a great opportunity to market the transferable skills you developed. Keep in mind the skills that employers always seek which include: balancing multiple priorities, working in a fast-paced environment, problem resolution, meeting deadlines and effective communication. The position description will help you determine which skills to highlight.

Three strategies are described below for how to address your employment gaps while also communicating your skills and highlighting how you've remained engaged professionally. The strategies focus on: 1.) adding an explanation to a professional summary, 2.) referencing the gap as an occupation on your resume or 3.) acknowledging the gap in a cover letter. Regardless of which strategy you choose, make sure you're prepared to make the connection between the skills you developed and the employer's needs.

1

By adding a brief statement to your Professional Summary, you quickly alert the employer to why there is a gap in your employment. Professional summaries are most helpful for experienced professionals who want to demonstrate how their experience and skills from a variety of past roles apply to a specific type of position. It is not appropriate to list a professional summary on the resume of a traditional college student's resume.

Brenda Buckeye
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Professional Summary

- Motivated and enthusiastic team player/leader with exceptional communication skills and the ability to build relationships.
- Skilled presenter able to understand and convey information to audiences of all sizes in a manner that is appealing and well understood.
- Developed and designed product-marketing plans and program strategies for prospective business owners, property management and customers.
- Eager to return to the workforce after 6 years of being fully engaged as a stay-at-home parent.

2

The second example displays how experience as a stay-at-home parent or caregiver for a loved one can be listed as an “occupation” on your resume. Briefly mention the reason for the gap and include a couple of notable contributions that you accomplished during that time period. This option can also be used if you’re applying for a job where your skills and experience as a stay-at-home parent or caretaker are highly applicable, such as working with children or in human services.

Stay at Home Parent

July 2015 – present

- Eager to return to the workforce after taking a two-year leave of absence from my career to raise a family.
- Maintained membership with the Society of Human Resources Management (SHRM) in order to remain engaged and aware of the latest industry trends
- Active member of the PTA, selected as membership chair based on demonstrated use of effective leadership and communication skills

3

The final example is an appropriate alternative if you’re not comfortable listing your experience as a stay-at-home parent or caretaker on your resume. Use your cover letter to acknowledge the gap and address your desire to re-enter the workforce while also describing your experience and the skills that you have to offer the employer.

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Dear Mr. Brown,

As a polished customer service professional offering 5+ years of comprehensive client care, I am ready to seek new challenges and opportunities. After taking a two-year leave of absence to serve as a caregiver for an elderly family member, I am eager to transition back into a customer service role with a high performing organization.

Reference: Flexjobs.com. “SAHMs: How to Handle an Employment Gap in Job Applications,” <https://www.flexjobs.com/blog/post/sahms-how-to-handle-an-employment-gap-in-job-applications/>. June 2014

Regardless of which strategy you use to address the gap, the key is to not simply explain why but to also focus on the skills you developed during that time. If you took online courses, obtained a certification or professional license, were a freelance worker, volunteered or had a part-time job, include those experiences on your resume. The content you choose to include and the sections selected to organize the content is up to you. Beyond the education and experience sections there are a variety of others to consider. Examples include “Course Projects,” “Specialized Training & Skills,” and “Professional License & Certification” sections. Include the section(s) that will allow you to effectively display the strongest qualifications you have related to the employer’s needs.

Resume writing can be overwhelming, perhaps even more so when you are a nontraditional student with employment gaps. The resume sample below illustrates a skills-focused resume that addresses an employment gap. Use this tip sheet to create a resume draft. Once that is prepared stop by the Arts and Sciences Center for Career & Professional Success during resume walk-in hours to have it reviewed or submit to us online for review. (Details about walk-in hours and the online review option are found at ascareerservices.osu.edu.)

SCARLET N. GRAY	
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PROFESSIONAL SUMMARY	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Committed to improving the lives of children, families and communities • Offer over 12 years of human service and educational experience • Experience working with people from a variety of ages, ethnicities, education levels and professional backgrounds • History of assessing customers' needs and seeking the most effective action plan • Eager to return to the workforce after a 2-year leave of absence to raise a family 	
EXPERIENCE	
Stay at Home Parent - Notable Contributions	July 2012 – present
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maintained membership with the Human Service Chamber of Franklin County in order to remain engaged and aware of the issues that impact human service agencies. • Active member of the PTA, selected as membership chair based on demonstrated use of effective leadership and communication skills. • Sought continuing education opportunities and secured relevant training and e-learning certifications. 	
Directions for Youth & Families - Outreach Counseling Program	Columbus, OH May 2011 – July 2012
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assessed students to identify those who needed a higher level of care than the scope of practice provided. • Motivated students to have a positive approach towards studies • Deliver lectures on personality development and arranged group discussion programs. • Develop positive relationships with students, staff, and parents. • Collaborated with school staff to recommend full assessments from school psychologists. • Supervision was based on multi-generational, family systems, object relations, and psychodynamic concepts. • Made appropriate referrals and filed CPS reports as needed. 	
North Central Mental Health Services, Inc.	Columbus, OH Jan 2008 – May 2010
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contributed to managerial team activities on a regular basis • Assisted in establishment of consistent customer service policies and procedures. • Oversaw regulation and coordination of a variety of community services. • Maintained and updated customer activity records as required • Furnished assistance with staff evaluations and assessments. 	
Capital University - Admissions & Retention Office	Columbus, OH April 2004 – June 2016
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supervised student case load management (assess the progression, retention, completion and re-entry of students) • Remained in contact with former students through emails and phone calls at regular intervals to stay informed on their career growth. • Monitored data integrity in management systems for registration, demographic, and communication history of students. • Updated database of current and former students. 	
Career Services Office 100 Denney Hall, 164 Annie & John Glenn Avenue (614) 292-6961 ascareerservices.osu.edu	

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St. Vincent Family Center

Therapist Trainee

Columbus, OH

Jan 2002 – Nov 2003

- Led youth leader group covering concepts such as self-esteem to reinforce and support patients' treatment progress.
- Monitored patients' activities and behaviors while also mentoring and providing emotional support.
- Completed necessary paperwork and effectively communicated with staff to ensure the safety and proper treatment of the youth.

EDUCATION

The Ohio State University

Master of Arts in Educational Studies, Counselor Education

Columbus, OH

May 2003

GPA: 3.4

Bachelor of Arts, Major in Sociology

May 2001

GPA: 3.7

SPECIALIZED TRAINING & SKILLS

Nonprofit Management Certificate, Columbus State Community College
Social and Community Services Certificate, Capella University, School of Public Service Leadership
 City of Columbus, Citywide Training and Development Courses: *Business Writing, Assertive Communication, PowerPoint Presentations: Scripting & Narrating Your Presentation*

PROFESSIONAL MEMBERSHIPS

- Membership in American School Counselor Association (ASCA)
- Earned Anxiety and Stress Management Specialist designation
- Membership in Association for Child and Adolescent Counseling (ACAC)

CERTIFICATIONS & COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

Certification, Imagery-In-Movement Expressive Art Therapy
 CPR Certification – American Red Cross
 Habitat for Humanity Volunteer, April 2015 – present

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