College of Professional Studies

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Nontraditional Students' Lived Experiences and Obstacles to Persistence:

A Phenomenological Investigation

By

Kimberly Coleman

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

PhD in Strategic Leadership and Administrative Studies

Marywood
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College of Professional Studies

The PhD Program

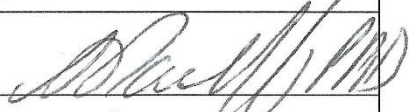Nontraditional Students' Lived Experiences and Obstacles to Persistence:
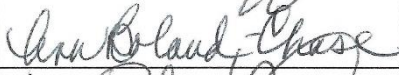
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Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to understand the lived experiences and barriers to persistence of nontraditional students pursuing their bachelor's or master's degree at small colleges and universities in Northeast Pennsylvania. With a growing nontraditional student population (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018) and a retention rate that is significantly lower than that of traditional students (Allen-Drewry, 2017; Lovell, 2014; Markle, 2015), a deeper understanding of protective factors and obstacles that influence nontraditional student persistence is vital. The results of the study encompass seven themes, ranging from students' life circumstances prior to entering college, academic challenges, feelings of "otherness," commitment to coursework, and factors influencing persistence. Barriers to persistence were categorized and investigated using Patricia Cross' three barriers to adult learning, including dispositional, situational, and institutional barriers. Additionally, the study highlights the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, its effect on the nontraditional student experience, and related considerations for remote learning moving forward.

Ultimately, the information gleaned from this study may improve nontraditional students' self efficacy and provides action steps for students, faculty, staff, and administrators to reduce the likelihood of nontraditional student departure. Best practices for nontraditional student persistence may also benefit institutions of higher education seeking to implement realistic, low-resource interventions to better support and retain this underrepresented population.

Table of Contents

List of Tables

List of Figures

Chapter 1

The Problem and Its Setting

The traditional college student population, entering college between 18-24 years old, has been the centerpiece of college campuses for years. As the presumed majority of college students, they have received the primary attention of campus personnel in terms of residence hall accommodations, academic advising, student support services, class scheduling, and more (Chen, 2017). However, whether or not campuses recognize the change, an increase in the nontraditional, or "adult learner," population has caused a shift in campus demographics. Left without specialized support or resources to service adult learners (Chen, 2017; Hittepole, 2018), this population is negatively impacted by various obstacles to their success as they balance competing life priorities (Osam et al., 2017). For example, adult learners often have work schedules to balance, have various familial responsibilities, or may be enrolling in college post-retirement (Council for Adult and Experiential Learning, 2015; Grabowski et al., 2016).

Nontraditional students are a diverse group of individuals and are therefore difficult to quantify. Typically, nontraditional students are defined as those who fall outside of the 18 to 24 year old age range. However, age is not the only defining factor, as there are cases in which a younger student may display characteristics indicative of adulthood. These may include financial independence, having a child or spouse, serving as a single caregiver, attending school part time, and/or being employed full time (Acrobatiq, 2017; Chen, 2017; Denning et al., 2018; Nadworny & Depenbrock, 2018; US Department of Education, 2017; Thompson-Ebanks, 2017). For the purpose of this qualitative study, a nontraditional student, also known as an "adult learner," is defined as an individual who is age 25 years or above at the date of matriculation. Each participant in the present study is currently enrolled as a full time student in a bachelor's or

master's level degree program for a minimum of two semesters at their institution. A nontraditional student may also be an individual who possesses one or more of the characteristics indicative of adulthood as indicated above.

With a shift in demographics among the college student population, it is important that faculty, staff and administrators within higher education institutions intentionally recognize this group and begin to better address their unique needs - particularly because this trend is projected to continue (Chen, 2017; CLASP, 2015; Hittepole, 2018; Iloh, 2017; NCES, 2015). In 2013, there were 12 million nontraditional college students enrolled in post-secondary institutions across the country, accounting for approximately 60% percent of the total college student population (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). As of 2018, the National Center for Education Statistics (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018) estimated that college students above 25 years old will increase by approximately 8% between 2015 and 2026.

Interestingly though, previous collegiate enrollment trajectories are now less reliable due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which has created an unprecedented shift in life as we know it. Showing its true face in March 2020, this worldwide pandemic caused massive unanticipated disruption to our economy, healthcare field, education system and beyond, and will undoubtedly impact the future educational plans of adult learners. During previous recessions, it was common for individuals to turn to higher education to earn degrees in a promising field to secure a good job or career (Jaschik, 2020). This may be the case following the COVID-19 pandemic, meaning that the number of nontraditional students seeking to pursue higher education may be even higher than previously anticipated. In a commentary on the changing market for higher education post-pandemic, Schroeder (2020) remarks that companies will experience an increased demand for improved technical services, causing an even greater need for lifelong learning. He predicts

that the dire need for advanced technical skills will propel online education forward, particularly if these educational programs produce skills that directly align with employer desires (2020). If colleges and universities can provide a product that is desirable to both students and employers, then there is a large opportunity for higher education institutions to attract students of all ages in even greater numbers than before.

However, there are other indications that alternative methods of education, such as online training programs, may be more attractive to individuals of all ages and life circumstances. These non-degree-producing online training programs are often more cost-effective and may be more closely related to future job prospects when compared to the time and resources needed to complete a four-year degree or beyond (Jaschik, 2020). This perspective demonstrates that colleges and universities must adjust to the needs of the market at this point in history. Nontraditional students must now decide whether or not they should persist to degree completion, while others are weighing the cost/benefit analysis of pursuing a college degree altogether.

The COVID-19 pandemic remains, however, its effects on higher education enrollment are already visible. In the Spring 2021 semester, higher education enrollment declined by 3.5% (603,000 individuals) nationally, compared to Spring 2020 (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2021). This decline was seen among the undergraduate student population only, as graduate student enrollment increased by 4.6% (124,000 individuals) in Spring 2021. Adult learners grew by 2-3% at four-year colleges, whereas traditional students, primarily at two year colleges, were the population least likely to enroll or persist through their studies (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2021). This delay in college enrollment may result in a larger increase of nontraditional student enrollment in the future, or it may result in fewer

individuals earning college degrees. In either of these scenarios, underrepresented minorities have been disproportionately impacted by both the COVID-19 pandemic in terms of the death tolls as well as unemployment (The Guardian, 2021). Properly supporting these populations through financial, academic, or psychological means is an important factor to consider as institutions slowly return to "normal" and may have a shifting student composition.

With the impacts of the COVID-19 crisis to also consider, it is now more important than ever that the needs and desires of nontraditional students are well understood and closely considered as higher education institutions make decisions about their futures. This is especially true for the nontraditional student population because this group's retention figures are lower than that of traditional students (Lovell, 2014; Markle, 2015). These low percentages suggest that higher education institutions frequently lack the supports needed to properly foster the success of this population. Of the students who complete their program of study, nontraditional students are also less inclined to graduate within six years of schooling (2014).

Several studies have addressed various obstacles to nontraditional student retention (Hosik, 2019; Iloh, 2017; Johnson et al., 2016; Markle, 2015; Moreau & Kerner, 2015; Osam et al., 2017) which include a range of situational barriers, institutional barriers, and dispositional barriers (Cross, 1981) but no studies have been uncovered which address the lived experiences of the underrepresented adult learner population at small institutions in northeast Pennsylvania. Additionally, the present study will highlight the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and its effect on the nontraditional student experience during the abrupt mid-semester nationwide shift to an online-only learning environment. Ultimately, this study will provide greater insight into the various dimensions of an adult learner's life and will therefore provide the ability for

institutions to conduct targeted interventions to better accommodate this often-neglected student population.

With a growing nontraditional student population, projections that 70% of jobs will require education beyond high school by 2027 (Goldie Blumenstyk, 2020), and several obstacles to nontraditional student success (Lovell, 2014; Markle, 2015), the lack of consideration for the nontraditional student population is a significant issue that necessitates action and further investigation.

Thus, this qualitative study will examine the lived experiences and barriers to persistence for undergraduate and graduate nontraditional students at small colleges and universities in northeast Pennsylvania. With a deeper understanding of both supports and obstacles to success that influence nontraditional student persistence or departure, this information will benefit institutions seeking to create targeted interventions to better support this population.

Theoretical Framework

Two theories guide this research, including Knowles' theory of andragogy and Schlossberg's theory of marginality and mattering. The primary framework, Knowles' theory of andragogy, is an adult learning theory that was originally developed to contrast with pedagogy, how children learn. There are six core andragogical principles, which are depicted in Figure 1 (Knowles et al., 1998).

Figure 1

Six Core Andragogical Principles (Knowles et al., 1998)

Goals and Purposes for Learning

Individual and Situational Differences

Andragogy:
Core Adult Learning Principles

1 Learner's Need to Know
  -why
  -what
  -how

2 Self-Concept of the Learner
  -autonomous
  -self-directing

3 Prior Experience of the Learner
  -resource
  -mental models

4 Readiness to Learn
  - life related
  - developmental task

5 Orientation to Learning
  - problem centered
  - contextual

6 Motivation to Learn
  - intrinsic value
  - personal payoff

Institutional Growth

Subject Matter Differences

Situational Differences

Societal Growth

Individual Learner Differences

Individual Growth

Andragogy

In the center of Figure 1 are the six core principles that provide the basis for depicting how adults learn. To effectively teach new concepts to an adult learner, it is important to understand that an "adult" is considered a self-directed individual who possesses the capacity to take responsibility for their actions and make their own decisions (Knowles et al., 2005). According to Knowles et al. (1998), having attained this level of developmental maturity, an adult learner will be the most successful in the learning process if they:

1. Understand why the particular content is important to their everyday lives.

2. Are encouraged to be a self-directed, active participant during the learning process (i.e. the individual contributes to lively classroom discussion rather than passively experiencing a traditional class lecture).

3. Are aware that their prior experiences allow for deeper connections and meaning-making. However, it is important to note that there are cases in which previous knowledge may be a barrier to learning if the new knowledge does not align with one's former beliefs.

4. Possess an open-minded mentality and are ready to learn.

5. Actively participate in solving problems and finding solutions.

6. Are motivated to learn due to an intrinsic reward, such as improvement to one's quality of life, overall satisfaction, or self-esteem.

External to the core principles are individual and situational differences, which include aspects such as subject matter differences, individual learner differences, and environmental differences. For nontraditional students, these "differences" or external factors that impact student learning, may be one's race or cultural background, their first generation status, socio-economic status, familial or work responsibilities, and/or other personal factors. Each of these circumstances inevitably impacts a person's prior knowledge, motivation for learning, and overall worldview.

Marginality and Mattering

The supporting theoretical framework used in this analysis is Schlossberg's theory of marginality and mattering, which are two opposite constructs, yet they lie on a continuum with one another, as depicted in Figure 2. Schlossberg states that when an individual undergoes a transition in their life, a feeling of marginality is likely to occur because they do not yet feel comfortable with their new role. Mattering, on the other hand, simply refers to an individual's perception that their existence makes a difference to someone else (1989). A person's desire to feel a sense of belonging, connectedness, and that they "matter" to others is central to the human condition.

Figure 2

Continuum of Community (Schlossberg, 1989 as cited in Squarespace, n.d.)

Marginality	Mattering
Silence	Identification
Ignorance	Attention
Fear	Importance
Separateness	Dependence
Avoidance	Appreciation
Shunning	Pride
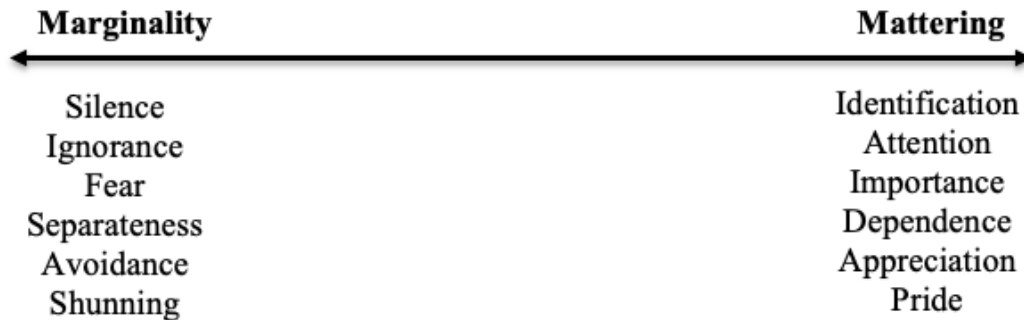
In the case of an individual's transition to college, Schlossberg states that students can only be successful if they feel as though they matter at their institution. Fortunately, feelings of marginality can often be alleviated through participation in activities that foster a sense of community, but the process and timeline are variable from person to person. Ultimately, the concept of marginality and mattering is important to institutions of higher education because if a student feels marginalized or perceives that they do not belong, then negative outcomes will ensue and there is a higher likelihood that they will depart from the institution (Schlossberg, 1989). Nancy Schlossberg discusses five specific aspects of mattering which are central to fostering a sense of belonging in students within the collegiate setting. These include:

1. Attention – physically being noticed by others, including faculty, staff, or peers

2. Importance – the perception that another person cares about one's actions

3. Ego-extension – the notion that another person will be proud or disappointed by one's actions

4. Dependence – the desire to feel needed by others

5. Appreciation – the desire for gratitude or recognition

It is presumed that the participants' experiences align with both theories mentioned above. This includes the framework outlined in Knowles' theory of andragogy, which states that adults are self-directed individuals who have the capacity to take personal responsibility and be active participants during the learning process (Knowles et al., 1998; 2005). Adult learners, therefore, are more successful when they can transfer meaning from what they are learning in the classroom to their life outside of school. If a nontraditional student lacks this maturity, then their learning will be skewed and deficits are likely to be blamed on other people due to their lack of self-reflection or inability to take personal responsibility.

In an active illustration of this concept, a phenomenological study was conducted on students at a small, private institution who petitioned to remain in school following poor academic performance that constituted dismissal from the institution. These students demonstrated an andragogical shift in their ability to take self-responsibility and make active changes to reflect on themselves as learners and implement tangible changes to promote academic success that they did not previously demonstrate (Jones, 2019). The maturity to make notable changes to better facilitate the learning process is reflective of the level of developmental maturity that an adult learner needs to possess to be successful in the learning process. Without this self reflection and corresponding action, the students would not have been eligible to progress and this situation would have led toward attrition.

The emphasis placed on connecting real-life situations to classroom learning was illustrated in a qualitative study on recent nontraditional graduates and dropouts as well. Nearly all of the dropouts indicated that their faculty did not facilitate connections to the material and further elaborated on generally poor teaching practices and a lack of engagement with the students. It was presumed that their negative experience with their faculty contributed to their

decision to depart from the institution (Kroeninger, 2018). Adult learners who do not find their courses applicable are less inclined to be engaged in the learning process and are therefore less likely to persist.

The present study was analyzed utilizing the assumption that Schlossberg's concepts of marginality and mattering are indicative of the needs of nontraditional students. It is presumed that nontraditional students value feeling as though they are a part of a community. Future ideas for implementation to better service this student population and best practices from institutions across the country are grounded by the notion that a sense of mattering fosters a favorable environment in which students of all demographics and backgrounds are more inclined to persist (Schlossberg, 1989).

Ultimately, the present study uses the premise that college students of any age have the desire to matter and belong. Although Schlossberg's theory was created in the 1980s, its framework still holds true today. Studies have found that adult learners deem great importance in feeling a sense of belonging to confidently proceed in the learning process (Sogunro, 2015). This need to feel accepted may be attributed to personal dispositional barriers that take the form of self-imposed doubts, such as fear of failure, attitudes about their intellectual capacities, among others (Osam et al., 2017). Unfortunately, these psychological factors can greatly damage a student's self-concept and can hinder their sense of belonging, even if other students do not perceive them any differently (Harrington, 2017).

Conceptual Framework

Knowles' theory of andragogy and Schlossberg's theory of marginality and mattering have interacting components that highlight underlying factors that impact the nontraditional student college experience. As depicted by Figure 3, there is a continuous balance between a

student's sense of their marginality or mattering due to several internal and external factors,

which ultimately influence their decision to depart or persist.

Figure 3

The Intersection of Andragogy and Marginality & Mattering (Coleman, 2020)
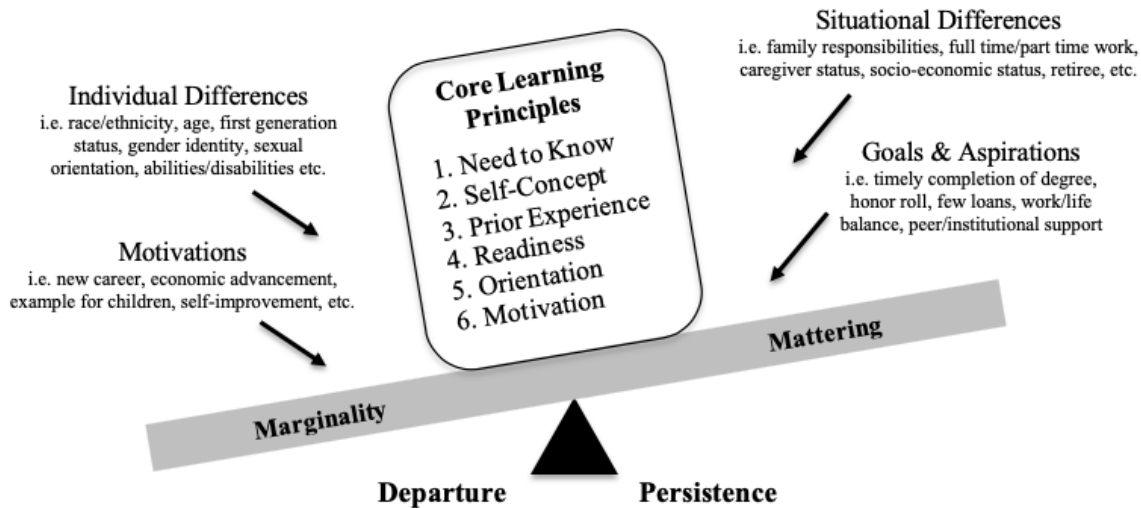
When considering nontraditional students' motivations for pursuing higher education,

their reasons for enrollment tend to differ from the traditional student. Traditional students tend

to follow a natural and somewhat expected educational trajectory, whereas nontraditional

students are often motivated by the hope that a college degree will provide greater financial

support for themselves and their families (Bohl et al., 2017; Grabowski et al., 2016; Hunter-

Johnson, 2017). The extrinsic motivation of financial gains or improved quality of employment

(2017), coupled with the intrinsic motivation to do well, expand their knowledge base and skill

sets, or set a positive example for their children often inspire nontraditional students to work hard

to achieve their set outcomes (Bohl et al., 2017; Cruise, 2017; Shrestha, 2017; Hittepole, 2018;

Johnson et al., 2016; Kroeninger, 2018; Warden & Myers, 2017).

Although Knowles' core learning principles serve as an important foundation for a positive academic experience, the external factors occurring in a student's life typically have a greater impact on their college experience as a whole. These environmental factors, including individual differences regarding background and upbringing, intrinsic and extrinsic motivators or aspirations, and situational differences (often dependent upon one's personal life) are each bound in a complex interplay of factors that contribute to one's sense of marginality or mattering and ultimate decision to depart or persist.

Interestingly, although the constructs are opposed, the perception of marginality evokes concerns about mattering (Schlossberg, 1989). This is important because these feelings of marginality and mattering are nearly universal. Transitions occur within every life stage and cause some sense of discomfort due to a change in roles. For a nontraditional student entering college, there is unfamiliarity due to several factors, including entrance into a new environment, sudden academic expectations resulting in a schedule change and an often rigorous course load, and the potential to feel "out of place" among traditional-aged students. Without supports from the institution to combat often inevitable feelings of marginality, nontraditional students are unlikely to persist long enough to overcome the marginality and develop a sense of mattering (Bohl et al., 2017).

For example, utilizing a scenario from the present study, a new nontraditional adult student may be an intrinsically motivated, mature student who seeks to learn skills in the classroom that she is eager to apply to her part time job. However, if she feels alienated from her peers due to her age and is dismissed by her professor when she informs him that she needs to miss a class due to a lack of childcare, she begins to feel marginalized, which begins to tip the scale in a negative direction. Both theories contributing to the conceptual framework describe

two very different, yet vitally important, aspects of student success in that Knowles focuses primarily on factors inside of the classroom and Schlossberg focuses on factors outside of the classroom.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative study is to understand the lived experiences of bachelor's and master's level nontraditional students at small colleges and universities in northeast Pennsylvania. Additionally, the present study will highlight the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and its effect on the nontraditional student experience. It is perceived that what can be learned from the nontraditional student perspective will provide a greater understanding of the barriers and challenges that face this student population.

Within this study, "experiences" are defined as events and interactions that the nontraditional students feel influence their time in college. The nontraditional student population in this study is comprised of full time undergraduate or graduate nontraditional students, defined as individuals age 25 or above at the date of matriculation who are enrolled in a full time course load (minimum of 12 credit hours per semester), that have been enrolled for a minimum of two semesters at their current institution. A student may also identify as "nontraditional" if they display one or more characteristics indicative of adulthood. For the purpose of the present study, these include being financially independent, having a child or spouse, serving as a single caregiver, and/or being employed full time (Acrobatiq, 2017; Chen, 2017; Denning et al., 2018; Nadworny & Depenbrock, 2018; U.S. Dept. of Education, 2017).

Central Question

The following question will be investigated: "What are the lived experiences and barriers/challenges to persistence for nontraditional students who attend a small higher education institution in Northeast Pennsylvania?"

The semi-structured interview questions revolve around the following themes:

- Description of each student's overall experience as a nontraditional student/adult learner

- Challenges that have influenced each student's collegiate experience

- Impact of the transition to an online learning environment due to the COVID-19 pandemic

- Influence of dispositional, situational, and institutional barriers (Cross, 1981)

Definition of Terms

Lived experience: The understanding of a particular phenomenon directly from those who have lived it (Mapp, 2013). In the present study, "lived experiences" may include influential people, situations, or encounters that have had a significant perceived impact on a student's progress toward degree completion.

Barriers: An intangible obstacle that impedes or separates (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). In the current study, a "barrier" to persistence may include any personal, situational, educational, or other struggles that interfere with a student's progression through college to any extent. The term "challenges" is used synonymously with "barriers."

Persistence: "The percentage of students who return to college at any institution for their second year" (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2018). In the present study, the term "persistence" is used to describe students' intent to graduate from college. For this reason, this term will also include "retention," which is "the percentage of students who return to the same institution" (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2018).

Undergraduate student: A "student registered at an institution of postsecondary education who is working in a baccalaureate degree program or another formal program below the baccalaureate, such as an associate's degree, vocational, or technical program" (National Center of Education Statistics, 2020). In the current study, "undergraduate" includes any student in pursuit of a bachelor's degree.

Graduate student: A student pursuing a "degree awarded for successful completion of a program generally requiring 1 or 2 years of full-time college-level study beyond the bachelor's degree"

(National Center of Education Statistics, 2020). In the current study, "graduate" includes any student in pursuit of a master's degree.

Nontraditional student: An individual who is age 25 years or older (Brinthaupt & Eady, 2014), is independent for financial aid purposes, has one or more dependents, is enrolled part time, is a single caregiver, does not have a traditional high school diploma, has delayed postsecondary enrollment, and/or is employed full time (Acrobatiq, 2017; Chen, 2017; Denning et al., 2018; Nadworny & Depenbrock, 2018; U.S. Dept. of Education, 2017). For the purpose of this study, a "nontraditional student," used synonymously with "adult learner," possesses one or more of the following characteristics:

- Age 25 years or older at matriculation
- Independent for financial aid purposes
- One or more dependents
- A single caregiver
- Does not have a traditional high school diploma
- Delayed postsecondary enrollment
- Employed full time

(Note: The requirement of full time status for the present study contrasts with the definition of nontraditional student status within the literature review. This is to ensure that the participant has sufficient knowledge of their university and has a significant academic load of which to balance with other aspects of their life.)

Attend: Full time enrollment constitutes a minimum of 12 course credits each semester (National Center of Education Statistics, 2020). In the current study, "attend" means those who are enrolled full time, at 12 or more credits.

Small: Institutions with 4,000 or fewer full time students (National Association of College and Business Officers, n.d.). In the present study, a "small" institution will be a college or university with less than 4,000 total undergraduate students.

Institution: A college or university (National Association of College and Business Officers, n.d.). In the present study, a "higher education institution" refers to a college or university.

Northeast Pennsylvania: "NEPA" is the geographic region which "includes the Pocono Mountains, the Endless Mountains, and the industrial cities of Scranton, Wilkes-Barre, Pittston, Hazleton, Nanticoke, and Carbondale. A portion of this region constitutes a part of the New York City metropolitan area" (Northeastern Pennsylvania, 2019). In this study, NEPA will only include Lackawanna, Lehigh, and Luzerne Counties.

Experiences: Events and interactions that the participants feel influence their time in college.

First generation: An individual whose parents did not enroll in secondary education (Nunez et al., 1998). In the present study, a first generation student is an individual who is the first in their family to attend college.

COVID-19: A term used to describe "novel coronavirus disease 2019," which is the illness related to the worldwide pandemic, spanning much of the years 2020 and 2021. The illness is caused by a virus causing "severe acute respiratory syndrome" (Texas Medical Center, 2020). In the present study, COVID-19 serves as the impetus for the abrupt shift to a widespread online learning environment within higher education beginning during the midpoint of the Spring 2020 semester, continuing through the Spring 2021 semester, and in many cases, beyond.

Pandemic: "A worldwide spread of an infectious disease" (Texas Medical Center, 2020). In the present study, the term "pandemic" is used synonymously with the term "COVID-19."

Marginalization: "A process that results in groups being peripheralized on the basis of such variables as a person's identity, experiences, associations, and environments. This multidimensional concept creates a situation in which certain individuals are given limited access to social power; such disparity results in the individual being excluded from tangible and intangible resources, as well as being subject to differential treatment" (Englund, 2019, p. 165 as cited in Hall, Stevens & Meleis, 1994).

Delimitations

The study is delimited to students who are full time bachelor's and master's level nontraditional students and those who have experienced a minimum of two semesters at their current institution. Of the 22 student participants, one part time student auditing a course participated in this study. Participants may have transferred to the institution as long as they had been enrolled at their current institution for a minimum of two full semesters. The study is delimited to two primary campuses where the adult learners are a minority group on the campus compared to their traditional counterparts, however, transfer student participants reflected upon their experiences at previous institutions as well, therefore, representing ten campuses. The analysis is delimited to the participants' perceptions.

Assumptions

During the present study, it was assumed that all participants are able and willing to describe their experiences before their enrollment at the institution as well as their current

experiences and perceptions as a college student. It is anticipated that this occurred truthfully, accurately, and with appropriate self-awareness.

Significance of Study

Research has shown that the retention rate of nontraditional students is significantly lower than that of traditional students for a variety of reasons (Allen-Drewry, 2017; Lovell, 2014; Markle, 2015). This particular qualitative analysis is notable because nontraditional students are assumed to be an underrepresented group at small institutions like the ones in the present study. Unlike many other underrepresented groups, adult learners often do not have an identifiable support network, such as a particular support service office or student organization that functions to support their needs and allow for camaraderie outside of the classroom.

Further, nontraditional students are defined broadly and often possess characteristics that constitute their nontraditional status without visible "clues" provided to other students, faculty, or staff. For example, an older adult student may be outwardly apparent to their classmates, but a young woman who is also the primary caretaker for an older parent or young child would not be recognized by others unless the situation was disclosed. For those who are students of color, identify as male, or have a low socioeconomic status, the risk for dropout is higher (Chen, Ziskin, & Torres, 2020) which may further compound the risk of attrition when compared to nontraditional status alone.

Additionally, nontraditional students are often first generation students as well. In fact, Kame & Ishitani (2019) found that approximately 67% of nontraditional students are considered to be first generation, which further compounds the risk of dropout. In a national study conducted using data from the National Center for Education Statistics (2019), it was found that the dropout rate for first year, first generation nontraditional students was approximately 13

times higher than that of their traditional peers. These figures demonstrate the need for a particular focus on these at-risk populations.

Finally, this study sheds light on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and its effect on nontraditional students in particular. Research indicates that nontraditional students often balance multiple life roles, making online or hybrid classes desirable due to their flexibility (Cruez, 2017; Hunter-Johnson, 2017; Singh, 2019). However, with the abrupt shift to an online learning environment, sudden widespread unemployment, disruptions to childcare, and health-related concerns for oneself or family members, the COVID-19 pandemic made a substantial impact on the lives of adult learners. Although the present study will focus on the experience of adult learners during a time of normalcy, the significant impact of the COVID-19 pandemic cannot be neglected. Additionally, collegiate life will not remain the same post-pandemic, so the positive and negative aspects of the online learning model for nontraditional students must be addressed.

What can be learned from the nontraditional student perspective will provide a greater understanding of the barriers and challenges that face this student population. Nontraditional students' lived experiences coupled with best practices for serving this underrepresented population will be of assistance to any college or university wishing to better accommodate this population.

Chapter 2

Review of the Literature

To fully identify the barriers to nontraditional student persistence, Patricia Cross' three barriers to adult learning are utilized, which include dispositional, situational, and institutional barriers. Dispositional barriers are necessary to consider because they represent the various internal struggles and anxieties that adult learners often face through returning to school later in life, which commonly have psychological underpinnings. Dispositional barriers may come into effect if an individual perceives that they are "too old" to enroll in college, lacks confidence in their abilities, or does not enjoy the academic work required to be a student (1981).

Situational barriers are impediments that arise in a person's life at a specific time. In the case of nontraditional students, these situational barriers may include the cost of education, familial responsibilities, lack of time, or difficulties with transportation (Cross, 1981). Certain situational barriers may also be related to ingrained social structures and expectations that impact these students.

The third category includes institutional barriers, which are practices and procedures that prevent participation in educational activities. Examples within the institutional realm include inconvenient course scheduling/availability, the complexities of a full time course load, and the length of time required to complete an academic program (Cross, 1981). Each of these barriers is well-documented in the literature as circumstances or mindsets which serve as challenges for adult learners and will therefore be used to organize a review of the literature.

Situational Barriers

Situational barriers are obstacles that impact nontraditional students due to a specific life circumstance, which may range from a financial situation, family responsibilities or caregiver status, or hardships related to expectations imposed by society.

Social Class and Finances

Scholars within the field of sociology are often interested in one's social class and its effects on society's distribution of wealth, power, and resources. The ability to attend college is often viewed as a luxury that results in upward social mobility. This is often an accurate outlook, given that a college degree can provide access to a higher paying job, future long-term career, and additional social capital (Busher et al., 2014). Nontraditional students find motivation in these factors (Grabowski et al., 2016), but they are frequently at a disadvantage because many adult students enter college with a lower socioeconomic status than their traditional counterparts (Zarifa et al., 2018). With a low SES and several non-academic obligations, nontraditional students often struggle to successfully persist through their college years.

In a large-scale study of 1,940 colleges across the country, a sample of 15,090 undergraduate students completed an interview focused on the influence of social class and their ability to graduate from college within four years (Zarifa et al., 2018). Results found large differences between adult learners and traditional students, indicating that only 16% of nontraditional students were able to graduate in four years, as compared to 46% of their traditional peers (2018). Further, one's social class, age, children, and marital status were all factors that significantly impacted one's ability to graduate both on time and graduate in general. Nontraditional students described their struggles of balancing work, school, and family, and named their financial situation as a significant stressor in their lives (Moreau & Kerner, 2015).

Unfortunately, it is often the case that those from low SES backgrounds are forced to choose work instead of school to care for their families, therefore resulting in higher drop-out rates or sporadic patterns of enrollment. The participants in a study on adult learners' self-perceptions in England aligned with these findings (Busher et al., 2014). One's low socio-economic status caused greater difficulties academically, but the students' struggles with their socio-political and economic situations actually increased their motivation to change their life path and improve their place in society (2014).

Societal Expectations and Motivational Factors

For many adult women, the expectation that they must get married, have children, and stay at home to raise their family was presumed for decades. With a gradual shift in societal norms, many women now have the opportunity to pursue higher education in the hopes of securing a career of their choosing (Osam et al., 2017). For working women and men, these individuals may seek a degree to advance professionally, increase their income, or develop additional skill sets (2017). However, taking on the additional obligation of higher education is not without complications and can unequally affect women and men. Although society's outward expectations of women have changed, the underlying stereotypes and traditional gender roles remain and exist as a situational barrier for women, primarily.

In a study conducted on 494 men and women to determine factors influencing nontraditional student persistence, it was found that over one-third of participants considered withdrawing from school (Markle, 2015). The reasoning for this depended on the gender of the individual in question. Men were more likely to continue with their classes to obtain a higher-paying job upon receiving their degree. They did not want to "waste time" in school without reaping their future reward of a better job but simultaneously did not want to quit their current

job to pursue their education. This is consistent with the traditional notion of the male gender role in Western society, in which the man is viewed as the primary source of financial support for their family.

Women, on the other hand, more frequently considered withdrawing from their college or university because of their competing life demands. Many felt as though they were not investing enough time or effort into *any* area of their life - including their schoolwork, family, job, and other responsibilities. The women in the study set high expectations for themselves to excel in all areas, but they perceived themselves to be floundering in all of them (2015), thereby inducing feelings of stress (Warden & Myers, 2017) and much personal guilt (Bailey, 2017; Hittepole, 2018; Moreau & Kerner, 2015). This sentiment was echoed in Moreau & Kerner's (2015) study on student parents' experiences as well. Women shared that both parenthood and academia are ongoing responsibilities that could always be improved if time allowed. However, despite the stress, in both Markle's (2015) interviews and in Lovell's (2014) study on persistence, women commonly described their motivation to persist as wanting to be a good role model for their children.

Faculty Member Perceptions

As nontraditional students struggle with competing life demands, the majority of faculty members are also attuned to this complexity (Cruez, 2017; Zerquera et al., 2018). In a research study, faculty member participants recognized nontraditional students' varying responsibilities, but often perceived that the students were more motivated by their family roles and financial situations than they were by self-enrichment, which was interpreted by the students in a negative manner (2018).

This finding contrasts with Brinthaupt & Eady's (2014) study on faculty members' attitudes and behaviors toward nontraditional students at large public institutions and community colleges in the southeastern United States. The faculty within this study reported predominantly positive experiences with their nontraditional students in terms of the students' ability to manage their time, their ability to find practical ways to synthesize course material, and in their diversity of thought, likely due to life experience. Professors shared that nontraditional students tend to fit in well with the other students and described adult learners as a positive contribution to the class.

In a separate study, five faculty members were interviewed about their experiences with nontraditional students. Similarly, they recognized and were sympathetic to the struggles of nontraditional students' competing life demands, and three elaborated on the difficulties that financial struggles can have on the students, ranging from issues with basic expenses to securing childcare (Cruez, 2017). There may be a limitation to these findings, however, because it is likely that professors who volunteered to participate in the mentioned studies may be more inclined toward adult learners and therefore did not provide a representative sample revealing the "typical" viewpoint or faculty treatment toward nontraditional students.

Through utilizing the nontraditional student perspective, Markle's (2014) study revealed criticism toward faculty members in that female students described frustration at select professors who they perceived to be patronizing in terms of their parental duties, whereas men did not share the same conclusions. Unfortunately, the study did not specify whether these faculty members were women or men, which poses as a limitation. However, regardless of the faculty member's gender, this judgment is likely the result of a mother's increased responsibilities as the primary caretaker, aligning with traditional gender roles expected in our society.

Gender Differences

A notable point of interest in Markle's (2014) mixed-methods study was found, which radiated through nearly every female participant's interview. Each woman commented that attending college was far more difficult for them, as a woman, than it is for a man. This feeling was shared by several women in Moreau & Kerner's (2015) qualitative study as well.

Family Responsibilities

Motherhood is not the only family-related struggle for nontraditional students. A myriad of other family-related issues can become situational barriers for these adult learners as well. These may include difficulties due to loved ones' lack of support, hardships finding childcare, necessary devotion to other family commitments, other obstacles related to one's spouse or partner (Bohl et al., 2017; Hunter-Johnson, 2017), or complexities managing time and resources due to being a single parent (Allen-Drewry, 2017).

Cultural Priorities

In a qualitative study exploring barriers to pursuing and completing higher education among 100 nontraditional students in the Bahamas, it was found that a support system, including a supportive spouse or partner, is extremely important for successful persistence. The Bahamian culture espouses a "family comes first" (Hunter-Johnson, 2017, p. 180) mentality, which places family needs above individual needs, including one's academic responsibilities. This study was unique because it addressed the importance of family within the Bahamian cultural group. Close family bonds are prominent in various cultural groups and so higher education faculty and staff must consider a student's cultural background and upbringing if a student is struggling to balance their home life and academic life.

Childcare

Possessing a support system is primary to many adult learners, particularly those with young children. The need for childcare emerged as a prominent desire for both mothers and fathers attending classes in several studies (Allen-Drewry, 2017; Bailey, 2017; Bohl et al., 2017; Hunter-Johnson, 2017; Lovell, 2014-2015; Osam et al., 2017). In Hunter-Johnson's study of Bahamian students, several students mentioned that they wished that they did not feel as alone in terms of securing reliable childcare for their children. In fact, it has been shown that those with access to childcare are three times more likely to graduate (Chen, 2017), demonstrating the substantial difference that reliable childcare can make in a student's ability to persist. The ability of an institution to offer a babysitting service to their student parents would certainly show support for this population and provide these students with a service to tangibly assist in their academic success.

Single Parents and Financial Strains

Considering the range of situational barriers, it is also important for higher education institutions to consider their student populations and appropriately provide services to aid in student success. For example, according to the National Center for Health Statistics (2017), nearly 40% of all births belong to single parents. Of these births, it is more frequently the case that the parents are single mothers (rather than fathers), and commonly, these parents qualify as low-income as well (Sallee & Cox, 2019). Lovell's (2014) study on student persistence, as well as Lin's (2016) literature review on female adult student obstacles, align with these statistics. Student-parents with children under six years old exhibited increased academic difficulties, including reduced levels of motivation, more negative classroom experiences, and lower persistence rates, when compared to parents with older children (Lovell, 2014; Lin 2016).

For those who are single parents, the challenge of raising a family while attending school becomes even more difficult. In a study of single parent classroom experiences, the largest challenge was the issue of time management, followed closely by childcare and finances (Allen-Drewry, 2017). For each of these reasons, institutions must reach out to this struggling population of single parents with young children who appear to be overwhelmed and are likely to lack resources. Without targeted outreach, it is unlikely that these students will persist.

Ultimately, it is clear that some situational barriers to nontraditional persistence may be different for men and women. Whereas men tend to be motivated to achieve economic mobility, females experience an increased struggle as they balance their personal expectations with society's expectations as mothers/caretakers.

Dispositional Barriers

There are many dispositional barriers at play when considering nontraditional student behavior within higher education institutions. A variety of factors play a role in a nontraditional student's ability to persist to graduation, including their motivation behind earning their degree, their sense of belonging and perceived self-efficacy at the institution, and their ability to cope with stress among their multiple life demands.

Nontraditional Student Motivational Factors

Adult learners are typically self-directed individuals who have their eyes set on the "prize" of obtaining their degree. As students who are typically financially independent, they view their education from a business-like mindset, in which they find great value in obtaining tangible skills from their courses and respect the opinion of their instructors, who are respected as experts in their field of study (Bergman, Gross, Berry, & Shuck, 2014; Grabowski et al., 2016). In a study measuring the top eight motivational factors among adult learners, the top three

aspects included (1) quality of instruction, (2) quality of curriculum, and (3) practicality of classroom material (Sogunro, 2015). The author suggests that these factors are critical in engaging nontraditional students and motivating them to truly master course concepts. When nontraditional students have a positive relationship with their professors, these motivational factors are even more salient and foster persistence (2014). Students have been expressed feelings of discouragement when they have no formed relationship with their faculty and have been known to desire their faculty's acknowledgment that they are "different" than their traditional counterparts (Allen-Drewry, 2017).

These factors, which serve as extrinsic motivators, certainly play a role in moderating the success of students in the classroom, but other studies have shown that intrinsic motivators play the largest role in helping students persist through their degree (Johnson et al., 2016; (Kroeninger, 2018; Quiggins et al., 2016). This feeling of intrinsic motivation was further evidenced by nontraditional students' self-reported levels of their internal locus of control, which measures individual perceptions of whether or not they are in charge of their own destiny (Quiggins et al., 2016).

In this same study, nontraditional students were significantly more likely to demonstrate a high internal locus of control, which suggests that they display accountability and take an active role in making decisions that will put them on a positive path, rather than waiting for environmental factors to determine their trajectory. This finding is supported in a quantitative study of 139 nontraditional undergraduate students at a small agricultural school in Texas. Here, students reported high levels of an internal locus of control (Quiggins et al., 2016), meaning that these students felt personally in control of their own destiny. A strong internal locus of control

demonstrates maturity in that students do not feel as though outside influences determine their fate, but that hard work and responsible decision-making attribute to success.

The deep-seated motivation that drives from within, coupled with inspirational professors who are able to integrate course material are two ingredients that create a recipe for nontraditional student success. Due to a thirst to acquire relevant knowledge, adult learners tend to value their professors' opinions and appreciate interactive classroom environments that facilitate learning (Sogunro, 2015). As a whole, they want to learn and express frustration at immature younger students who do not appear to take their academics seriously (2015) or spend too much time prioritizing their social life over academics (Bohl et al., 2017). Ultimately, these adult students care about their studies and tend to perform well academically. The results of a study on 145 nontraditional students at various higher education institutions across the country supported this notion, reporting an average nontraditional student GPA of 3.55 (Denning et al., 2018).

Nontraditional students' evident dedication to their courses does not go unnoticed. Although these students commonly receive and aspire to have good grades (Brinthaupt & Eady, 2014) and are actively engaged in classroom discussion, at times, younger students place judgment on older students. Psychologically, these judgments can detrimentally affect adult learners and can create additional difficulty assimilating into their peer group (Markle, 2015). In a study of 139 college students enrolled at a large, public institution in the Midwest, peer support emerged as a significant predictor of nontraditional students' academic achievement (Johnson et al., 2016), indicating that feelings of alienation can be psychologically damaging to nontraditional student success.

Importance of a Sense of Belonging

Within the field of psychology, Schlossberg's theory of marginality and mattering states that students can only be successful if they feel as though they matter at an institution (Schlossberg, 1989). This theory was supported in a qualitative study measuring nontraditional student persistence over three years, in which many participants considered withdrawing because they felt "out of place" compared to their peers. They mentioned that their younger classmates did not have as many worries, which the participants perceived as an easier and more fruitful college experience (Markle, 2015). One individual mentioned that she felt completely isolated from the rest of her peers and the university in general. Interestingly, this study took place at an online institution, where one's social integration would presumably be less evident than in an on-campus classroom. Students in Bohl et al.'s (2017) qualitative study also identified feelings of isolation and marginalization due to their age as an apparent difference compared to traditional students in the classroom.

Sogunro's (2015) study supports the finding that adult learners deem great importance in feeling a sense of belonging to confidently proceed in the learning process. These self-imposed dispositional barriers, manifesting as self-doubts (like fear of failure or attitudes about intelligence), can greatly damage a student's self-concept and can hinder their sense of belonging, even if other students do not perceive them any differently (Harrington, 2017).

Adult learners' emphasis on the importance of social integration has been well-documented (Denning et al., 2018; Johnson et al., 2016), but campuses' student engagement practices commonly used to build student relationships are often not attractive or conducive to nontraditional students (Bohl et al., 2017). These offerings, such as evening and weekend programming, tend to cater to the traditional 18 to 24 year old population and unintentionally

perpetuate the feelings of separation between adult learners and the remainder of the student body (Chen, 2017).

Self-Efficacy Among Adult Learners

In addition to a lack of social integration, feelings of low self-confidence in the academic realm may cause difficulties for nontraditional students as well (Bohl et al., 2017; Lin, 2016; Zerquera et al., 2018). If a student does not feel as though they are "smart" enough for the classroom, it is likely that their grades will suffer. In a quantitative study of both traditional and nontraditional undergraduates from a small Southeastern college, it was found that self-efficacy, or the belief that we are equipped to persevere and succeed, can significantly predict a student's academic achievement (Warden & Myers, 2017). There is promise in this finding because self-efficacy is a relatively fluid concept that instructors may be able to instill in their students if a personal approach is taken. Still, there is a limitation to this finding because a person's self-efficacy is established over time. An intervention by one professor is helpful in a single course but is not likely to have a long-term effect that is sustainable throughout a student's college career and beyond.

One reason that nontraditional students often possess a lack of self-efficacy may be the result of many years spent outside of the school setting. Traditional students enter higher education directly after completing high school, and so they are inherently more comfortable taking multiple classes demanding consistent academic expectations. For many adult learners, these students often enter college after spending years in the workforce or after raising a family. They are not as familiar with the rigors of college coursework and often feel ill-prepared for this sudden undertaking (Bohl et al., 2017; MacDonald, 2018). Being a first generation nontraditional college student can even further compound this issue. These students may have additional

difficulties adequately understanding the academic expectations of postsecondary education since they have not been previously exposed by family members. These first generation students are also more likely to be low income students (Cruez, 2017), and students from low socioeconomic backgrounds are less likely to persist (Jones, 2019).

Although adult learners are committed to working hard (Sogunro, 2015; Zerqurea et al., 2018), their self-doubts may not be unfounded. In a qualitative study measuring faculty perceptions of nontraditional graduate students at several commuter-based institutions across the country, Zerquera et al. (2018) found that faculty members shared concerns that nontraditional students are not academically prepared for the quantity and quality of coursework in the collegiate setting. These nontraditional students were often enrolled in remedial courses, particularly struggled in the STEM fields (science, technology, engineering, and math), and did not possess an accurate understanding of the college environment. This study, however, did not distinguish between academic majors, those with a disability, or first generation student status - all of which are important factors to consider.

Sogunro (2015) suggests that it is crucial to provide frequent, detailed feedback to adult learners within the classroom. Through a cycle of consistent, constructive feedback on behalf of the professor, enhanced motivation from the student, and subsequent increased academic performance; adult learners are receptive to and are driven by this process. Iloh (2017) further recommends a strengths-based approach when discussing adult learners. He urges that the term "nontraditional" marginalizes this population and insists that they are outsiders, therefore perpetuating the feelings of being different, which can inhibit student success.

Within the field of psychology, this phenomenon, termed "stereotype threat" is common. Stereotype threat occurs when members of a marginalized group are repeatedly judged and told

that they are less worthy than others. Upon repeatedly hearing this message, it gradually becomes internalized, and the individuals begin to perform to lower standards than they otherwise would have under normal conditions (Spencer et al., 2016). Harrington's (2017) recommendation that using the term "barriers" to nontraditional student success aligns with Iloh's (2017) notion that terminology of this nature can be psychologically damaging, thereby causing a stereotype threat among the adult learner population. Jones' (2019) research on nontraditional graduate students who overcame academic dismissal and successfully completed their degrees also suggests utilizing a developmental model for advising rather than one that utilizes labels such as "at risk." In doing so, a more productive support network is displayed based on the needs and life circumstances of each student.

Interrole Conflict and Stress

It has been well-documented that nontraditional students endure higher levels of stress when compared to their traditional peers (Warden & Myers, 2017). This can be attributed to their competing life demands, often termed "interrole conflicts." These interrole conflicts may include aspects such as family responsibilities, a full or part time job, financial obligations, personal health or health of a family member, and more (Hittepole, 2018; Osam et al., 2017; Warden & Myers, 2017).

In a quantitative study conducted on 1,187 college students to determine the differences in life stress, level of anxiety, depression, and alcohol use between traditional and nontraditional college students, results indicated that nontraditional students endured significantly more life stress, anxiety, and depression (Hosik, 2019). The results of this study illustrate that mental health is a large area of concern for students of *all* ages and types and should indicate to colleges and universities that proactive outreach is needed to ensure positive wellbeing for all of their

students. Without specific services to aid students in proper mental health, students are less inclined to successfully balance their multiple life roles and persist to graduation due to the dispositional barriers that could be resolved with proper intervention (2019).

The ability to retain students from year to year is important to a well-functioning institution. In a study of nearly 500 students at a large public university in the Southeast, interrole conflict was used to examine the factors influencing persistence among nontraditional men and women. Interestingly, GPA and confidence in graduating were positively related to persistence. This finding corroborates the studies previously discussed, demonstrating the importance of self-efficacy and a sense of belonging among nontraditional students. The results also indicated that interrole conflict often leads women to either reduce their course load or withdraw completely. Fortunately, these women usually find the motivation to persist and graduate from their institution (Lovell, 2014). Discrepancies between genders based on our societal norms serve as a situational barrier, discussed in the previous section.

Institutional Barriers

Colleges and universities are struggling with fewer students enrolling in higher education across the country (National Student Clearinghouse, 2019). Small, private institutions are feeling this strain in particular, often because they are tuition-driven and therefore function on a leaner staffing structure. However, regardless of their status, all institutions should be concerned with the retention of their students, as this number is indicative of the health of the university and the satisfaction of their students. Maintaining retention at one's home institution and high persistence numbers across the country remains an ongoing initiative for colleges and universities, but should be of particular concern regarding the nontraditional student population,

whose graduation rates are far lower than that of traditional students (Denning et al., 2018;

Markle, 2015).

In theory, institutional barriers should be the least prominent barrier to adult learner

success because it is the only barrier that is directly within the college or university's control.

Higher education institutions must be aware of their unique student population and make

appropriate accommodations to support their respective needs.

Changing Demographics Within Higher Education

The landscape of higher education is shifting, and colleges and universities must

recognize this change (Iloh, 2017). According to the National Student Clearinghouse (2019), in

spring 2019 alone, higher education enrollment declined by 300,000 students nationally. With

the recent public health crisis due to COVID-19, the enrollment projections for higher education

are largely unpredictable at this time as well. While previous recessions have created an impetus

for an increase in higher education (Jaschik, 2020), we cannot be certain that the same will hold

true today (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2021). Additionally, with fewer

high school students across the country and an active job market, institutions who neglect to

acclimate to these changing student demographics will have great difficulties succeeding in the

21st century (2017), which is evident in the number of institutions closing their doors each year

(Inside Higher Education, 2019; Sedmak, 2019; Wong, 2019).

Higher education institutions must look at national trends to make necessary adjustments

on their campuses as well. For example, according to the American College Health Association

(2015), only 34.5% of students live in on-campus housing. At many institutions, a residency

requirement forces students to remain on campus as an underclassman, suggesting that the

national percentage of resident students is not an accurate depiction of those who have freely

chosen an on-campus residence. When considering the 43% of full time students who are employed during college (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017), coupled with the number of students who live on campus, it is clear that student needs and desires for education are changing (Denning et al., 2018).

Additionally, institutional barriers to education such as admissions credentials, financial aid issues for part time students, and relevant course curriculum are factors well within each university's control that must be adapted to fit the changing student demographic (Grabowski et al., 2016; Osam et al., 2017). Adjustments to policies require courageous leadership and effective strategic planning but are necessary for an institution to succeed in the competitive postsecondary educational environment. Part time student financial aid complexities are not addressed in the present study due to the requirement that participants maintain full time status. However, the cost of college is an institutional barrier applicable to nearly all students and is amplified if financial aid is not available. The impact of financial aid is a critical factor when considering retention, given that there is a significant relationship between socioeconomic status and successful persistence to degree (Bergman, Gross, Berry & Shuck, 2014). For those who are financially independent, these individuals are at an increased risk for dropout compared to those who are supported financially through other means (Chen, Ziskin, & Torres, 2020).

Faculty-Student Relationships and Course Offerings

Increasing retention and persistence rates among nontraditional students should be of concern to colleges and universities - both for the welfare of their students and for the institution's longevity. To successfully retain their students, institutions of higher education must be attuned to each subset of students and should cater to their respective needs. For

nontraditional students, in particular, one of these needs is for memorable interactions with their

professors both inside and outside of the classroom.

In a study of motivational factors among 203 nontraditional students, the need for

interactive classrooms was evident (Sogunro, 2015). When professors encourage lively

discussion and demonstrate acceptance of an array of viewpoints, nontraditional students'

motivation to learn increases and they are more likely to persist. Outside of the classroom, one-

on-one interactions are also meaningful to adult learners who value personal connections and

meaningful discussions with their professors. These relationships have been shown to increase

students' academic motivation and may serve as an effective retention strategy (Trolian et al.,

2016; Zerquera et al., 2018), likely because the students feel valued and are engaged with the

course material.

Although it is the hope that all professors develop personal connections with their

students, a university's leadership should encourage this approach to instill these values

throughout the institutional culture. The institution's size and culture surely matter in the depth

of faculty-student interactions. In a study identifying faculty perceptions of nontraditional

students, Zerquera et al. (2018) found that faculty within smaller campuses had closer

relationships with their students than faculty at larger institutions. Through juggling multiple life

roles and having additional life experience, adult learners do not find value in feeling "like a

number" and are less likely to persist when they do not feel a personal connection to their

professors (2018; Allen-Drewry, 2017).

Another factor found to increase retention rates and timely graduation are flexible course

options for students (Grabowski et al., 2016). Without the option of online, evening, or hybrid

courses, nontraditional students are more inclined to feel overwhelmed, frustrated, and may be more likely to consider college departure (2016; Hittepole, 2018).

Contributions to Diversity

The value of diversity is also an important factor to consider with the nontraditional population. Adult learners, who inevitably have a multitude of life experiences, bring a diverse perspective to the classroom that can provide depth to class discussion (Englund, 2019). Traditional students, who are younger and have not had the time to learn many of life's lessons, have the opportunity to learn from their fellow peers who may relate to course content differently. Faculty members often notice this benefit, and in a qualitative study, frequently shared that nontraditional students' ability to draw on their prior life experiences aided in each student's success in the classroom (Zerquera et al., 2018), which is an idea in direct alignment with Knowles' theory of andragogy (Knowles et al., 1998). In Bohl et al.'s (2017) interviews with nontraditional students, they also recognized that life experiences enhanced student learning. One of the participants specifically acknowledged that they were more deeply able to apply course concepts due to more worldly knowledge; whereas younger traditional students do not have this luxury.

Still, the life experiences that adult learners contribute to the classroom are not of sole benefit to traditional students. For example, adult learners report difficulty with and fear of adjusting to current technology used within their academic endeavors (Allen-Drewry, 2017; Brazelton, 2016; NODA Newsletter, 2019). Through interactive classrooms and group work, traditional students can impart their technological proficiency onto nontraditional students, therefore creating a relationship of reciprocal learning.

Traditional students, currently "Generation Z," also tend to be a generation that is passionate about social justice issues and embrace diversity with open arms (Seemiller & Grace, 2016). Prior generations have not been as open to discussing topics such as LGBTQIA+ matters like sexual orientation and gender identity, among other concepts of social justice (2016). Generation Z's tolerance and passion for advocacy have the opportunity to inspire discussion among classmates through challenging the thought processes and assumptions among those from different generations.

Educational Mission

As institutions of higher education, faculty and staff work to foster an environment that engages students in higher learning through exposure to, and interaction with, individuals with different identities, beliefs, and interests than their own. Institutions must take an introspective look at their practices to uncover biases or barriers to adult student success (Chen, 2017). Although the contributions of the nontraditional student population have the opportunity to broaden other students' perspectives, they are currently a marginalized population due to the policies and practices including inconvenient class schedules, campus service hours of operation, few campus programming efforts focused on adult learners, among others (Englund, 2019). With additional support and acknowledgment of nontraditional students and more conducive integration efforts, all groups of students would be more likely to reap the intellectual benefits essential to higher education.

Whether an institution has online programs or solely on-campus courses, administrators must realize that the increasing presence of adult learners requires a shift in the one-dimensional model of educating students (Acrobatiq, 2017; Iloh, 2017). With additional considerations for

students of all ages and circumstances, the culture of higher education must shift to one that truly appreciates each student as an individual who uniquely contributes to the learning environment.

Conclusion

Nontraditional students are a diverse group of individuals who have differing needs. It has been demonstrated within the literature that this group faces several obstacles, including dispositional, situations, and institutional barriers. Whether the primary barrier is an internal struggle, an environmental issue, or a complexity imposed by the institution, each of these factors should be recognized and acted upon in a multifaceted way to improve the retention and persistence of this often-neglected student population. Typically, for students who do not persist, there is not one single factor that prompts dropout, but rather, the rationale is more complex and comprised of several components (Thompson-Ebanks, 2017).

From the start, institutions must make clear to all of their underrepresented groups, including nontraditional students, that each person is a contributing part of their campus and will be supported throughout their college career. When colleges and universities decide to enroll students of all backgrounds and identities, the institution makes a commitment to recognize, validate, care for, and educate all of its students. With this promise in mind, institutions must outwardly support all of their students in a holistic manner, regardless of a student's life circumstances.

Chapter 3

Methodology

Research Design

A qualitative research design is best suited for the present study to allow for an exploratory analysis of nontraditional student experiences. A phenomenological approach is typically used when a researcher seeks to learn about the lived experiences of a certain group of people who experienced the same phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In this case, a qualitative phenomenological study is utilized to understand and describe the shared experiences of nontraditional "adult learner" students who attend small higher education institutions in Northeast Pennsylvania in pursuit of their bachelor's or master's degree. A quantitative design may be adequate for future research, but a qualitative approach is best suited for the initial broad analysis.

This research is important to better understand the lived experiences and barriers to persistence that face the nontraditional student population. The findings of the study will be used to inform enhanced procedures and offerings at institutions of higher education that will support the retention of these students. Results of the qualitative study and a compilation of best practices for nontraditional persistence are included in the following sections and will be provided to each participating institution.

Positionality Statement

As a qualitative researcher, it is imperative to recognize one's own biases to ensure that these beliefs do not interfere with the study's results. The nontraditional student population has been of particular interest to me as a result of my former position as the Director of Student Activities and Leadership Development at a small, private school in Northeast Pennsylvania. In this position, my office was responsible for various student retention efforts, including

coordinating New Student Orientation, overseeing clubs and organizations, the Student Government Association, the programming board, among other areas. Through my close interactions with students, I grew to know some of the school's nontraditional students who were continually seeking to find their place on campus among the traditional student population. It was often difficult for these students to build genuine connections with the other traditional-aged students because of their life situations and family obligations, and at times, due to their own insecurities as well.

In one specific instance, one older woman frequently slept on a couch in one of the open lounge areas in the evenings as she took study breaks between assignments. She was grateful for any attention or conversation because she shared that she felt as though she was an outcast and that others did not understand how difficult it was to balance a job while going back to school with a family at home. In another instance, a different, much younger student joined the Orientation Leader team to get involved and make friends. She was unable to make friends previously because she had a three year old toddler at home to care for and was therefore unable find the time to become involved outside of the classroom. During the first evening of the overnight Orientation Leader training week, she broke down in sadness because she had previously never been away from her daughter overnight. Learning that she had a daughter was helpful for the staff, which allowed us to make accommodations for her and connect her with another student who was experiencing a similar situation.

These situations opened my eyes to student circumstances that I had never previously considered. Working in a predominantly traditionally-aged campus, the adult learner population was not intentionally accommodated. Although we hosted commuter-specific events, these did not serve the nontraditional student population in the way that they needed or deserved. There

were no special accommodations during New Student Orientation to connect these individuals or

make them feel more comfortable, there was no student organization specifically for adult

learners or student parents, and there were no efforts to consciously identify the nontraditional

students within the campus. It took these coincidental interactions with nontraditional students

for me to realize that there was a hidden student population that we were unintentionally

neglecting. I have since moved on from this role and was unable to leave behind lasting services

that are needed for this population. I feel an obligation to ensure that these students are

increasingly recognized and considered within the student body, particularly at small schools that

pride themselves on providing a welcoming and supportive environment for all of their students.

Additionally, with enhanced support services for this population, there is an increased likelihood

of improving the retention of this student population. By providing a more supportive

environment, both the students and the institutions will benefit in both the short and long term.

The Qualitative Paradigm

Participants and Site Locations

The students eligible to participate in this study included undergraduate and graduate

nontraditional students currently enrolled at a small institution in Northeast Pennsylvania who

completed a minimum of two semesters of full time study at their current institution. A purposive

sampling approach was selected for choosing participants for this phenomenological study

(Terrell, 2015). A specific type of purposive sampling, called criterion sampling, was specifically

selected for this present study and simply entails seeking out participants because they meet the

study's criteria (2015).

In phenomenological studies, it is recommended that the number of participants range

from 5-25 individuals (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Given this guidance, it was anticipated that a

minimum of 15 individuals would participate before reaching saturation. After interviewing a

minimum of 15 participants, if no novel information was provided upon the conclusion of

interviews, the researcher could be confident that saturation was reached.

To be considered as an approved institution, the initial participant recruitment letter was

approved by the respective Institutional Review Board/Exempt Review Committee, and the

participant recruitment letter (see Appendix A) was emailed to students through the institution's

listservs. The researcher was not privy to any individual student names or email accounts until

their submission of the electronic consent form.

Within the email invitation was a detailed description of those eligible for the study,

which includes a student who possesses one or more of the following characteristics indicative of

adulthood: age 25 years or older at matriculation, independent for financial aid purposes, one or

more dependents, a single caregiver, does not have a traditional high school diploma, delayed

postsecondary enrollment, and/or is employed full time. Nontraditional students, which may

include transfer students, were only eligible to participate if they were enrolled full time and

experienced a minimum of two semesters at their current institution.

If the individual perceived that they fit the criteria and agreed to participate in the study,

an informed consent form was electronically provided directly preceding the demographic

information collection (Appendix C). As a small incentive to participate, a $10 e-gift card to

Amazon.com was provided to each individual after interview completion.

Instrumentation

A qualitative study was necessary for this research due to the complexity of the

phenomena in question. First, the nontraditional student population is very diverse and

encompasses individuals of wide age ranges, life situations, and backgrounds. Individual student

experiences are likely to vary from person to person and would be too difficult to quantify using

pre-defined criteria or closed-ended questions, such as through quantitative methods. The ability

of the researcher to delve deeper into emerging themes provides a depth to the analysis that

would not be possible without the use of exploratory qualitative methods interviews. Ultimately,

the qualitative nature of the study allowed for broad themes to emerge from individual

experiences (Drummond & Murphy-Reyes, 2018)

Before the qualitative interview portion of the study, preliminary demographic

information was collected via a Qualtrics form included in the "call for participants" recruitment

email. Informed consent was required, but all other questions were optional. Demographic

questions included:

- Interest in serving as a participant in the present study

- Nontraditional student traits including gender, race/ethnicity, major/minor, birth year, number of semesters attended at current institution, number of dependents, student veteran status, first generation status, undergraduate institution, transfer student status

- Mode of preferred communication for interview

- Interview time preference

- Pseudonym

- Contact information

In qualitative research, the researcher serves as the tool for data collection and therefore

conducted semi-structured interviews to gather participants' feelings about their collegiate

experiences (Terrell, 2016). The researcher utilized guiding questions throughout the interview

to gain information about each student's overall experience as well as the challenges/barriers that

they faced during their time in college to this point. Patricia Cross' (1981) three barriers to adult

learning (dispositional, situational, and institutional barriers) were used to frame the research questions. A detailed list of interview questions is provided in Appendix C.

In phenomenological research, it is imperative that the researcher bracket out their own experiences with the phenomenon to prevent unintentional manipulation of the outcome of the study based on previous knowledge or views (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As discussed in the Positionality Statement, the researcher's former role as the Director of Student Activities and Leadership Development at a small private school in Northeast Pennsylvania indicates that there is sentiment developed toward this specific student population, making the topic somewhat personal and meaningful. As the sole researcher, I acknowledge that I perceive that the nontraditional student population, in broad terms, is shown a disservice due to the lack of outward support provided at most institutions throughout their undergraduate careers, in particular. Throughout the study and during data analysis, I was very aware that not all nontraditional students have this experience and was cautious not to intentionally or unintentionally skew the outcome of the study to align with my pre-existing beliefs.

In this type of qualitative research study, it is typical that each participant is asked two broad questions during the interview process. In this case, the two broad research questions included: (1) What is your overall experience in terms of being an adult learner/nontraditional student enrolled in a bachelor's or master's degree program? (2) As a nontraditional student, what challenges have occurred that have influenced your experience among the traditional student population (Creswell & Poth, 2018)? In phenomenological studies, additional open-ended questions may also be asked of participants, as well as utilization of other data that may become available, including observations, newspapers, articles, or other records (2018).

Additional open-ended questions were sporadically used by the researcher when further clarification was needed or vague information was provided by the participant.

Research Procedure

The researcher received an exempt review from the Exempt Review Committee (ERC) at Institution A and the Institutional Review Board at Institution B. The present study did not pose a risk greater than that of normal daily activities. Although the interviewer inquired about potentially sensitive information, such as personal obstacles that may hinder student persistence, the data collected was kept strictly confidential, with all identifiable information excluded.

After approval from the respective review boards, an introductory email was sent to all bachelor's and master's degree, full time students. This initial invitation was sent via the undergraduate and graduate listservs to seek out participants who fit the study criteria. At Institution A, two reminder emails were sent in the subsequent weeks to reach nontraditional students who may have not seen the initial call for participants.

The present study was open to any student who identified as a full time nontraditional student, based on the broad definition listed above. The body of the email contained the recruitment letter, explaining the purpose of the study and its corresponding expectations. If the student fit the eligibility criteria and decided to participate by submitting the form collecting personal demographics, then they were automatically prompted to provide their informed consent at the start of the online form.

Once recorded, the participant then entered their personal demographic information and preferred contact information, which took no longer than three minutes. This demographic information collection was utilized as a means of screening participants for their characteristics of nontraditional student status. This demographic information included self-disclosed gender,

race/ethnicity, major/minor, birth year, number of semesters attended at the current institution, number of dependents during enrollment, student veteran status, first generation, and transfer student status, and name of undergraduate institution. Participants were not prompted to reveal their high school class rank, SAT score, or similar characteristics because these items are not highly relevant to nontraditional students (Bergman, Gross, Berry, & Shuck, 2014). In some cases, a student may not have completed high school as well.

In the Qualtrics form, the participant also provided a pseudonym which was the name used throughout the entirety of the present study. At the end of the form, the participant was asked to provide their email address, for which to send the details of the interview and the $10 gift card incentive. The participant was notified that their email addresses would be stripped from their responses upon receipt of their consent and would only be used to send them a small "thank you" gift for taking part in the study.

The researcher reviewed the responses in the Qualtrics survey and reached out to each participant via their indicated preferred form of communication within 48 hours. The researcher thanked the individual for their interest in participating in the study and coordinated a method to pursue the interview. This was determined at the comfort of the participant and included a video conference call or an interview by phone at a time that was convenient for each person. A confirmation email with the interview date, time, and details was sent as well [Appendix E]. Collecting demographic information separately from the interview was a worthwhile tactic because it allowed for a more personalized approach when tailoring questions to each participant.

The data collection phase took the form of a semi-structured interview protocol that consisted of the eight sub-questions listed in Appendix C. Before all interviews, the researcher provided information about confidentiality and to make each participant aware of their required

informed consent. Each participant also identified a pseudonym for interview collection and

written report purposes. All interviews were audio-recorded via a digital voice recorder and

lasted between 15-60 minutes, depending on the length of the participant's responses. The

interviews were open-ended, and detailed field notes were taken during each semi-structured

interview. After the conclusion of the interview, participants were emailed a $10 e-gift card to

Amazon.com for their time.

After the interviews concluded, the records of the study were kept private. Information

used in any written or presented report was made unidentifiable. Only the main investigator and

the three advisors on this project's doctoral committee have access to the research records. While

it is understood that no computer transmission can be perfectly secure, reasonable efforts have

been made to protect any identifiable data and keep all transcribed information confidential.

Records will be kept secure and stored in an encrypted location for a minimum of three years.

The data will then be destroyed. The participants were made aware of the strict confidentiality

through the participant consent form.

Methods of Analysis

All interviews were audio-recorded and data analysis began by transcribing the data into

a digital spreadsheet to synthesize and code into themes based on commonalities with detailed

descriptions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The researcher personally transcribed all audio recordings.

During this initial data analysis portion, the researcher focused on the participants' interview

responses in a process known as "horizontalization" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 79). The

"significant statements" were then highlighted to provide a deeper understanding of how the

participants experience being an adult learner pursuing a degree among a traditional student

population.

Upon gaining a better understanding of the phenomenon from the horizontalization process, the researcher developed "clusters of meaning" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 79) and then compiled these statements into themes. The researcher composed "textural descriptions" (p. 79) which encompassed detailed descriptions of the participants' experiences. A "structural description" (p. 79) was also utilized to describe the setting which caused the participants to experience the phenomenon in the way that they did.

Finally, through the use of the textural and structural descriptions, a "composite description" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 79) was compiled to convey the overall essence of the phenomenon from the participants' common experiences. The researcher determined that additional interviews with the participants were not needed to provide additional context or clarification (2018), and no follow-up interviews were needed. At this point, the researcher shared the analysis with the participants to ensure a correct interpretation, made the necessary changes to the themes, and confirmed a final version with the individuals. The compiled data is represented in the paper's Chapters 4 and 5. To maintain the accuracy and integrity of the participants' experiences, all quotes utilized in the discussion section are original quotes directly transcribed from the participants' interviews.

Validity

The extent of a study's trustworthiness must be carefully considered in qualitative research given that the data analysis involves interpretation. First, the reliability of the present study was heightened through recording the entirety of each participant's interview using a clear voice recorder. This audio recording allowed for the interviews to be meticulously transcribed, including any imperfections in the participant's speech, moments of silence, or other vocal patterns that may possess meaning (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In terms of validity, four

components comprise a study's trustworthiness. These include credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006; Lincoln & Guba, 1985 as cited in Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Before completing the interviews, the dissertation team reviewed the interview prompts to ensure that the questions were clearly articulated and accurately represented the intent of the questions. After the interviews were conducted, the study's participants also had the opportunity to review the interpretation of the themes and conclusions of the data. Based on their feedback, minor changes to the initially proposed themes and sub-themes were altered slightly. By engaging the participants in the study's findings, they had the opportunity to play the essential role of ensuring that the data analysis aligned with their personal feelings and experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

An additional way to demonstrate trustworthiness is to provide transferability, which is an external validity measure showing that the findings can be generalized to other individuals or situations outside of the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This was conducted through writing with great detail that paints the picture of the participants' stories, rather than summarizing through the lens of the researcher.

Lastly, confirmability is used to demonstrate neutrality (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Utilizing the same researcher for all 22 interviews reduced the potential bias that may occur if multiple researchers interviewed or transcribed the data. Instead, the researcher interviewed and transcribed all of the interview data. Following that step, the individuals on the dissertation committee conducted an audit to closely monitor that the content of the participants' interviews was accurately interpreted and represented. Ultimately, the researcher must provide accurate

interpretations that are not clouded with any unintentional biases or preconceived notions. The researcher must, therefore, acknowledge any inherent biases, personal experiences, or values.

Additionally, Creswell & Poth (2018) explain that a phenomenological researcher must use the method of bracketing to reduce the bias of their own experiences with the phenomenon in question. As a student affairs professional who works with nontraditional students each day in my role, engaging in reflexivity throughout the study allows for the reader to understand my frame of reference and lends itself to greater transparency. By practicing this epoche technique and using detailed descriptions of the participants' lived experiences rather than an interpreted summary of them (Creswell & Poth, 2018), my personal experiences with nontraditional students did not interfere with my interpretations of the participants' lived experiences and any pre-existing assumptions did not color the interpretation of the results.

Ethical Considerations

All participants in this study were found through the student email listserv at each participating institution. At the time in which each individual fills out the demographic form to indicate their interest in the study, they were also be asked to choose a pseudonym which they were referred to during the remainder of the study. Additionally, all transcribed interview data will be destroyed after three years.

Ethical concerns have been identified, including the possibility for individuals to become more self-aware or self-reflective of their institution's support (or lack thereof) for nontraditional students, which may spark feelings of isolation, frustration, or anxiety. Additionally, speaking about obstacles to success or the challenges related to persisting to degree completion may be a sensitive topic for some individuals. The reasons for entering college and the obstacles encountered as an adult learner are often personal and may be emotional. Additionally, college

students typically invest substantial resources into attending college, including time, money, and other personal sacrifices. Speaking about one's lived experiences and actively sharing potentially intimate details with a researcher may bring up feelings of discomfort.

Chapter 4

Data Analysis

Participants

Participant Recruitment

In the present study, the participants included undergraduate and graduate nontraditional students currently enrolled at two small institutions in Northeast Pennsylvania. Many of the participants transferred from a different undergraduate institution and therefore represent ten different undergraduate institutions, the majority of which are also small institutions in northeastern Pennsylvania.

The population in question are nontraditional bachelor's and master's degree college students who completed a minimum of two semesters of full time study at their current institution. In phenomenological studies, it is recommended that the number of participants ranges from 5-25 individuals (Creswell & Poth, 2018), and so it was anticipated that a minimum of 15 students would serve as participants in the study. The researcher interviewed all interested and eligible participants, totaling 22 individuals.

Participant Demographics

The 22 participants were a fairly diverse group of individuals (e.g. see Table 1), including 18 females, three males, and one trans male. Half of the participants identified as first generation students, half transferred to their current institution, and half possess at least one dependent (child). Participants ranged in age from 20 to 67, with a median age of 42 years old. In terms of race/ethnicity, 16 identified as "White," three "Black or African American," one "Asian American," one "Hispanic or Latino" and one "White and Hispanic or Latino." Given the range

of individuals interviewed and no novel information provided upon the conclusion of 22

interviews, the researcher was confident that saturation was reached.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Gender identity	18 females, 3 males, and one trans man
Age at time of interview	20-67 years old, median age of 42
Race/ethnicity	16 White, 1 Asian American, 3 Black or African American, 1 Hispanic/Latino, 1 White-Hispanic/Latino
Full semesters completed at time of interview	4 two semesters, 3 three semesters, 6 four semesters, 1 five semesters, 4 six, 1 eight semesters, 3 "other"
Student veteran	0 students
First generation	11 students first generation, 10 not first generation, 1 uncertain
Transfer student	11 transfer students, 10 non-transfer students, 1 other
Student parents	11 students no dependents, 11 students one or more dependents

Themes and Subthemes

The purpose of this study was to understand the lived experiences of nontraditional

students at small institutions in Northeast Pennsylvania, including their barriers to persistence

and challenges toward the progression of their degree. These challenges were categorized and

investigated using Patricia Cross' three barriers to adult learning: dispositional, situational, and

institutional barriers. Participants were therefore prompted by the following semi-structured

questions during the qualitative interviews:

1. Describe your overall experience at [undergraduate institution] as an adult learner?

2. What challenges have occurred that have influenced your experiences as an adult learner among traditional students?

3. What is your primary motivation for pursuing a bachelor's degree?

4. How has the COVID-19 pandemic impacted your educational experience?

5. What are the positive and negative aspects of taking courses within an online learning environment, and does this help or hinder your ability to be successful?

6. What are the institution's strengths and weaknesses in serving/supporting the nontraditional student population?

7. How did you feel in terms of your abilities to be successful with the rigors of college coursework? *(dispositional barriers)*

8. [If applicable] Did you face any internal struggles or anxieties related to being older than most other students? *(dispositional barriers)*

9. How do your personal life circumstances outside of school influence your time at [institution]? *(situational barriers)*

10. Do you have a support system? If so, who? *(situational barriers)*

11. Does [current institution] have resources specifically geared toward serving adult learners, such as a specific office or department, nontraditional student lounge, or nontraditional student organization? *(institutional barriers)*

12. What could [institution] do that would make your feel more supported? *(institutional barriers)*

Two theories guided this research, including Knowles' theory of andragogy (Knowles et al., 1998) and Schlossberg's theory of marginality and mattering (Schlossberg, 1989). The primary framework, Knowles' theory of andragogy, provides a context for analyzing the maturity and personal characteristics of each nontraditional student during their time in college. Based on an individual's life circumstances, each student faces unique complexities in terms of their emotional maturity, self confidence, and level of resilience, which is reflective of their experience in college (1998). The historical context of each student is important to consider, as it has an impact on the student's sense of marginality and mattering during their time in college. These feelings of marginality and mattering can affect their likelihood of persisting to their degree (1989).

As discussed in Chapter 3, each participant chose a pseudonym for interview collection and written report purposes. Throughout the analysis, all participants' names are reflected as their chosen pseudonyms to protect their anonymity. A summary table is provided indicating the various themes and subthemes that resulted from the 22 interviews. The themes are in no particular order of importance.

Table 2

Themes and Subthemes

Challenging Life Circumstances Lead to College Start Later in Life
- Personal Circumstances Led Individuals Down the "Wrong Path"
- Financial Stressors Postponed College
- Pregnancy Impacting Trajectory
- Caretaker Status

Barriers Challenge Nontraditional Student Persistence During College
- Situational Barriers
  - Difficulty of Managing Multiple Life Roles
  - Daily Finances Require Maintaining Full-Time Work
  - Family Emergencies/Personal Circumstances
- Dispositional Barriers
  - Self Doubt
  - Faculty Views and Behaviors
  - Cultural/Societal Expectations
- Institutional Barriers
  - Maintaining Financial Aid
  - Availability of Course Offerings

Initial Academic Challenges Arise Related to Generational Differences
- Unfamiliarity with Current Technologies
- Speed of Learning and Retention
- Significant Self-Confidence Due to Life Experience

Focus on Age and Feelings of "Otherness"
- Individuals Unable to Develop a Sense of Belonging
- Individuals who Become Integrated among Traditional Students
- Institutional Setting Influences Level of Self-Consciousness

Shift to Remote Learning due to the COVID-19 Pandemic is Unfavorable for Most
- The Importance of In-Person Interactions

A Return to School Later in Life Furthers Commitment to Coursework
- Life Experience Leads to Maturity and Commitment
- Life Experience Leads to Frustration

Supportive Factors Influencing Student Persistence
- Support System as a Key Component to Success
  - Family and Friends Support
  - Employer Flexibility and Faculty Empathy
  - Importance of Advising
  - Strong Intrinsic Motivation Caveat

Impact of Internal and External Motivators
- Wholehearted Commitment to Persistence
    - Thirst for a Sense of Purpose and Greater Life Satisfaction
    - Duty to Set Good Example for Children
    - Ambition to Earn Degree for Self and Family

Challenging Life Circumstances Lead to College Start Later in Life

Within the literature, nontraditional students' life demands are well researched (Hittepole, 2018; Osam et al., 2017; Warden & Myers, 2017; Zerquera et al., 2018), but little is documented about these students' lives before pursuing higher education. In the present study, the participants shared their motivation for pursuing their bachelor's degree, which provided the reasoning behind their nontraditional "late start" to college. This historical information also provided context for better understanding each student's struggles or successes during their college experience.

Personal Circumstances Led Individuals Down the "Wrong Path"

One surprising theme that emerged included a significant number of participants who described a troubled home life or experienced a somewhat tragic scenario that pushed them away from attending college directly after high school. Several students described themselves as "partiers" in high school who were simply uninterested and too immature to make further education a priority. One participant recounted:

> "The reason I'm almost 40 and finishing school now is because I was a slacker. You know, there were a lot of times that I didn't go to high school, I was an addict. Like, I wasn't a *bad* kid; I wasn't mean or I didn't cause problems, but I… I basically hurt myself." (CS)

Others also shared that an addiction to drugs or alcohol led them down the wrong path. In the most extreme scenario, Frederick Douglas, now a master's degree student, shared that he did not graduate high school. As a self-proclaimed "gang-banger, prison inmate, and street kid," he

earned his GED during his second year in prison. Another participant, Dee, was a sophomore in

high school at the time he was expelled, after which it took ten more years to become sober and

truly reflect on the tumultuous time during his youth. Now, as a dedicated adult learner who

recently began his master's degree, he shared:

> "All of those formative years that, you know, your adolescence, early adulthood, where
> you're, you know, finding your place in the world, I was just consumed by drugs and
> alcohol. So when I got sober, it was like a rebirth, I guess."

Others shared similar sentiments about the hazy days of their "party years." Rose, now a

strong student, shared that her parents were drug addicts and without the guidance of parental

support, she "went off the deep end" after high school in an attempt to "get out of her own head,"

ultimately resulting in periods of sporadic college enrollment. As a nontraditional student

attempting to manage her finances while processing the mental distress from her childhood, it

took her multiple semesters to gain the inclination and determination to seek out a four-year

institution where she could earn her bachelor's degree. As she reflected on those difficult years,

she captured the sentiment of many other students who were raised with a difficult home life:

> "I mean, statistically, I shouldn't be in college. I should be a drug addict like them [my
> parents]. I mean, like, it's not, like, not impossible, you know, but [there were] a lot of
> things that happened with them so that kind of like, really derailed me from going to
> school that I totally stopped and I just worked, you know, and I just didn't really… I
> didn't know what I wanted to do." (Rose)

Financial Stressors Postponed College

Where some students had difficult home lives that damaged them psychologically,

others' home lives postponed their personal dreams of pursuing college after high school to put

their family's needs first. For example, two participants, Neko and Halley, spoke at length about

the need to take a year off between high school and college to work full-time to help alleviate

their family's financial burdens. These students, both from first generation minority

backgrounds, also expressed an internal pressure to excel in school to make their families proud

and do better for themselves than the homes within which they were raised.

Pregnancy Impacting Trajectory

Another personal situation that led the participants down a path other than higher

education was the arrival of a new child. For some mothers, the decision to have children meant

that they put their personal dreams on hold to raise a family. For some, like Sarah, this meant a

hiatus of many years:

> "My youngest is going to be graduating high school this year. The others are done with college or [are] in college, so it's just a great point for me to get back to what I started for myself."

For others, their pregnancy meant a shift in their personal goals. For Jess, a student who

revealed that her pregnancy was the result of a sexual assault, the birth of her child necessitated a

change in her career goals from ambitions of becoming a physician's assistant to majoring in

Hospital Administration. For another participant, her pregnancy sparked the need for stability.

Dorothy, who was working as a waitress at the time she became pregnant, shared her epiphany:

> "I was a single mother at that time. It was just like, okay, I need to do something else… I'm just going to apply to go to school. So, my daughter was born, and that January, I started [at the university]."

Caretaker Status

Although a new child inevitably causes a shift in one's priorities and obligations, an

individual's status as a caretaker more generally causes an impact as well. For example, another

participant, Enna, explained her responsibilities in caring for her parents who are both adult

children of alcoholics. She expanded on the generational trauma rooted in their mental illnesses,

causing them to act as alcoholics themselves. This is just one example of others who had to take

care of parents, adult children, or other individuals while balancing schoolwork. Another

participant, Big Momma, described her caregiving status while working to pay for school and support her family in a straightforward manner: "Hard, very hard."

While each of these students has a unique personal story, all have experienced challenging life circumstances that played a role in the trajectory of their college experience. Ultimately, it is important for faculty, staff, and administrators to consider the backgrounds of the students enrolled at their institution. As demonstrated by the present study, it is not surprising that many nontraditional students enter college academically underprepared due to a range of experiences that led them astray from college at a "traditional" time.

Ultimately though, Dee, Rose, and Frederick Douglas, like others in this study, do not take their college education for granted at this point in their lives.

> "But now, like, I *appreciate* it. But when I was younger - even if I did pay for [college] - I wouldn't have gotten anything from it. Probably wouldn't have retained anything because I just didn't care." (Dee)

Similar to Dee, many of these students recognize the investment in their future and overtly expressed gratitude for overcoming a challenging period and having the opportunities that they have in front of them today. Despite a rocky start for many, nontraditional students' maturity and a thirst for knowledge are further described in a following section.

Barriers Challenge Nontraditional Student Persistence During College

Situational Barriers

As Cross (1981) suggests, situational barriers, defined as impediments that arise in a person's life at a specific time, were salient obstacles that arose in the lives of the nontraditional students within this study. The three most prevalent situational barriers for nontraditional students included balancing life roles, financial stressors, and serving as a caregiver.

Difficulty of Managing Multiple Life Roles. The difficulties associated with successfully balancing academics with part-time or full-time employment, often while maintaining personal relationships, was undoubtedly the most common theme that emerged from the interviews. Interestingly, while each student spoke of different sacrifices that they made and demonstrated a strong commitment to their coursework, no students shared that their academics were their utmost priority. One student explained this bluntly, stating:

"Life happens. [It] just has to come first before school." (Halley)

On a related note, some students elaborated on the difficulties of managing their time among their different life roles, including required academic internships or practicals during the daytime hours, which affected the ability to secure childcare and infringed on the ability to work traditional working hours. These mandatory daytime activities make balancing time more difficult for parents/caregivers and put an additional financial strain on those who do not have a supplemental source of income.

Ultimately though, most mothers, regardless of their children's age, agreed that successfully maintaining their family life is the most challenging part of being a nontraditional student, as demonstrated by Sarah's quote:

"I think that most of the pressure is on fulfilling all my roles. My role as a mother, my role as a wife… my role as a student. Um, and you know, all those things come into play. It's not just the educational anxieties, I guess. Actually, those are probably the easiest. You know, I think when you're a nontraditional student, the other ones are what you beat yourself up about."

Others managed to find humor in the struggle to maintain a strong family life and complete their academic assignments. One father laughed as he recalled his first year in college:

"And I can remember when the little people [my children] were *really* little. And while I'm sitting down at my desk trying to do schoolwork, there's one climbing up my back, there's another one pulling in my lap, someone else's pulling down the glasses on my face... and it was just insane." (Frederick Douglas)

Even those who do not have families often balance a job during the hours that they are

not in class. Several participants shared that they find it difficult to complete group projects due

to their availability, which is far more limited than traditional students living in a residence hall

or without an outside job (Halley, Sarah, Mike, Rosey).

Additionally, due to the rigor of balancing multiple life roles, there is a low likelihood

that nontraditional students become involved with campus life. "H" shared her experience with

extracurricular involvement, stating:

> "But, you know, I have a family… like, I have other things going on where I couldn't be,
> you know, be there and be available to get involved with campus life. So it's like
> basically my experience with campus - just class."

H and others expressed disappointment, and sometimes frustration, at the inconvenient

involvement offerings available to students to supplement their classroom experience. Timing of

events and campus resources were both mentioned as examples of such issues:

> "All of the activities would happen at like 9 or 10 o'clock at night, which is like again, I
> work night shift or I don't live on campus or something like that. It's like... when am I
> supposed to meet people?" (MJ)

> "[The university] also gives you an astronomical amount of fees for services that I can't
> use - library, pool, study rooms… they're closed during the hour that, like, my classes are
> over." (Jane)

This inaccessibility is an unfortunate byproduct of balancing full time work and school,

but for others, this is both frustrating, disheartening, and can even be "isolating" (Halley).

Increasing awareness about nontraditional students' perceptions is important to consider. For

example, even the marketing of events can be a sensitive subject, as evidenced by Mike's

experiences:

> "It's an overwhelming amount of emails, but also, like, kind of a reminder that I'm not on
> campus and that I'm not involved in the campus life. That's not necessarily, that I
> wouldn't like to be. And also... I can't because I'm an adult learner. So it's kind of, like,
> frustrating sometimes to see those emails coming through."

Overall, campus services, resources, and involvement opportunities are facets of the

college student experience that nontraditional students desire to utilize. Ensuring that these

offerings are accessible is an important part of creating a positive student experience.

Suggestions for maximizing accessibility in this regard are provided in the following

"Recommendations and Implications" section.

Daily Finances Require Maintaining Full-Time Work. Another situational barrier

prevalent among the participants included the financial stressors associated with college tuition

and the need to carefully weigh their financial circumstances with their school obligations to be

successful and persist toward their degree. For example, one participant stated:

> "I just felt like, you know, um, doing both those things [having life responsibilities and
> pursuing a science degree] was really hard and I… I had to quit my job to just continue
> towards my degree." (Rosey)

Other students do not have the option of taking out loans or relying on a supplemental

source of income and are forced to take a break from their studies to pay their bills. While many

have the fortitude to return, others may never return to finish their degree. For example, one

student in the final year of her program shared:

> "So I'll probably have to take a semester off and just work work work and get the money
> until I can pay for it." (Big Momma)

Family Emergencies/Personal Circumstances. In other cases, more serious situational

barriers arise, including a personal medical or mental health emergency, or a family member

crisis, which may necessitate a voluntary leave of absence or program withdrawal. These

unexpected personal or family circumstances are not unique to nontraditional students, however,

as a comparatively "older" individual with additional responsibilities, these emergencies may

impact adult learners more significantly than a traditional student. For example, in one instance,

Jess, now 20 years old, faced an unintended pregnancy during her freshman year resulting from a

sexual assault. She raised unique concerns regarding her right to bring her infant to class and her

circumstances as a residential student living on campus at the time:

> "And then bringing a newborn baby to class when there is nobody to babysit, you know that's challenging, but… a lot of professors didn't, I guess, appreciate a newborn baby in class, even though she wasn't distracting, it was just kind of like… they were annoyed by it, I guess."

When considering the variety of situational barriers that impact each nontraditional

student in their own way, it is clear that the external factors, including one's life circumstances,

have a direct impact on each student's perspective and motivation for learning. In terms of a

nontraditional student's ability to learn and apply the course material, faculty and staff must

consider that the life circumstances of their students is a unique story and a rigid "one size fits

all" approach may not be in the best interest of their students.

Dispositional Barriers

Self Doubt. Where situational barriers are tangible challenges that may threaten a

student's progression through college, dispositional barriers are intangible impediments that are

only present in one's self-concept. In one conversation with a participant, Senior Sally explained

the significance of returning to school later in life:

> "I think the reason why it's so hard to go back to school is because you already have, like, your life figured out. So then when you go back, you think, okay, you just go to school, take notes, take tests, quizzes. But really, it's so much more than that."

Returning to school as a nontraditional student is a significant life decision that is often

accompanied by self-doubt. For some students in the present study, their lack of confidence was

related to a perceived gap in knowledge. For example, one participant, Sarah, explained that she

entered her university as a "sophomore" due to high school coursework that transferred as

college-level credits. She said:

"Last spring, I took Developmental Psychology and the teacher kept referring to General Psychology, which I took 25 years ago. So, there's gaps in my education which pose a challenge."

Another participant, Neko, shared similar concerns, saying that it felt like a game of constant "catch up," even though she only took one gap year between high school and college. For Mike, his bachelor's degree took a total of 12 years because he felt underprepared and lacked both confidence and the maturity to be self-reflective enough to make proactive changes.

For the older participants, the significant age gap between themselves and their younger classroom peers often triggered feelings of inadequacy and nervousness:

"I felt like their education was very fresh - coming from high school and mine was kind of dormant." (Sarah)

For some, the feelings of self-doubt subsided after a few semesters, while others never found their confidence. One participant recounted feeling so insecure in her abilities that she second-guessed the "A's" she received, having thoughts that the professor made a mistake during grading or did not read the content (Enna). Another explained having multiple "crises of faith" that she experienced during her first year, internally reiterating to herself: "If I can't get past this course, I don't belong here" (Rosey).

Many of the participants expressed difficulties staying up-to-date with their workload, spending adequate time to study, and finding the time to complete group work with other students. Ultimately though, the majority of the students in the present study exhibited the self-reflection and resilience that are required for a successful learning process (Knowles et al., 2005). One student shared that she was grateful for her time spent in her master's program because it allowed her to "learn about [herself] as a learner" and was even able to discover an undiagnosed learning disability (Janine). Another student rationalized:

 "I've honestly been through worse things throughout my life and that's what I like tell myself. Like, if school's the thing that takes me out, then was everything else for?" (Rose)

Faculty Views and Behaviors. In general, the students within the present study were found to genuinely care about their academic work. However, it is clear that given nontraditional students' multiple life roles and demands, school is not their utmost priority. Many commented that their professor's views differ in this regard, which could be frustrating given the discrepancy in ideals. More disheartening is their constant struggle trying to successfully balance obligations while some feel that their professors do not appear to recognize the hardships that they undergo daily. One student parent described her experience with professors who do not consider students who have different life circumstances:

"You know, the professors are kind of just like 'Oh everybody should be able to give up however much time for me no matter what the situation is.' And I'm like 'I can't do that.' They think that we should just be able to open up our schedule at any moment" (Jess).

Other students, like Heidi, shared Jess' perspective:

"And I know that they want school to be your priority, and it's really difficult to make school my priority."

The issue of professors' lack of understanding students' life roles was more pronounced for certain participants than others. Students' lives and corresponding obligations outside of the academic realm is an important concept for faculty to consider. In addition, some of the students in the study faced deeper issues related to faculty behavior that needs to be addressed.

Within the field of psychology, the term "microaggression" is used to describe instances of discrimination that are subtle but often occur in everyday life. These occurrences can be verbal or nonverbal, intentional or unintentional, but are targeted at a group of people that are different or marginalized in some fashion, often related to race or gender (Midgette & Mulvey, 2021). Although not racial incidents, some adult learners in the study experienced

microaggression-related incidents as a result of being older than the "typical" student in class. While this cannot be likened to the experience of minority groups experiencing microaggressions throughout their lives, these instances of belittling remarks affected participants negatively.

For example, "H," a 42 year old participant explained a story in which her professor conducted a hearing demonstration in a course and explained that hearing decreases as a person ages. The faculty member then asked the class to raise their hand to indicate if they could or could not hear the sounds played. As expected, H, visibility the oldest student in the class, was forced to state that she could not hear the bell sounds like the remainder of the younger students. It is clear that this exercise was intended to be an interactive educational one, but it had negative effects on her given that she was already sensitive about their age compared to the other students in the classroom. Instances such as this can be harmful to older students and can perpetuate pre-existing self-conscious thoughts and feelings.

Similarly, another student, Janine (age 46), recalled a time in which a professor remarked on her active participation in class, stating: "Well, I see that you're very academic." Janine, slightly self-conscious of her age, tried to take the comment as a compliment but was uncertain if the comment was meant in a derogatory tone. Other students in the study also commented that they actively refrain from answering questions in class to better fit in with the overall group. Sometimes this is not possible, as described by Enna's experience, who shared:

> "A lot of instructors kind of look to me indicating *'Does that make sense?'* like explaining it to the kids and like… I don't know!"

Others had the opposite feedback. For example, other students like Sarah and Rosey shared that they sometimes feel spoken down to by their faculty members even though they are middle-aged adults. Jess, a 20-year old student mother who became pregnant at 18 expressed much frustration at the majority of her faculty members during her undergraduate years. She

vehemently expressed her desire for a more understanding environment overall. She shared

many examples of professors who were not accommodating when she had doctor's appointments

or who would not provide flexibility when her daughter was born among balancing a full-time

job. She felt that perhaps some of the instructors did not condone having a child before marriage,

which was a difficult subject for her, given that her child was born as a result of a sexual assault:

> "I think just being more understanding as a whole, I guess, 'cause it's not… it was
> something out of my control. It's not like I had an accident [becoming pregnant]. You
> know what I mean, like… I was actually assaulted. I wouldn't call it my fault. Is it my
> fault? I mean, I chose to keep her. So I guess you could say that, but as a Catholic college
> I would expect them to understand that more than they do." (Jess)

The experiences of Jess and others demonstrate that each of these interactions with

faculty members represent different dispositional barriers. Regardless of the circumstance or

severity, each interaction is detrimental to a student's sense of belonging in some fashion.

Cultural/Societal Expectations. Typically, expectations of society are deemed

"situational barriers" because they are obstacles resulting from a specific life circumstance. In

the case of the present study, these external influencers are categorized as "dispositional barriers"

due to the demonstrated impact on the participants' self-concept and overall college experience.

In one instance, a participant shared that she does not feel like she fits in and feels as though she

"doesn't deserve to be there" at times (Neko). She attributed some of these feelings to her status

as an underrepresented minority student within a predominantly White institution. Her status as a

first generation student further compounds this issue in that her family is unable to understand

the expectations of college coursework and therefore cannot serve as the adequate support

system that she needs through difficult times.

Identifying as a nontraditional student is a marginalized identity at the institutions

represented in this study. Students who belong to an underrepresented minority group and are

also considered a nontraditional student/adult learner are placed at a further disadvantage

because both of their identities place them in a marginalized role. These feelings of insecurity

and self-doubt are indications that a student's sense of mattering is low and that they are more

likely to depart from the institution than others who feel a strong sense of belonging

(Schlossberg, 1989). Feelings of marginalization can arise for a multitude of reasons and must be

attended to, regardless of the root cause.

As discussed in Chapter 1, dispositional barriers can be remedied through strengthening

relationships with students, faculty, and staff at the institution as a way of reducing

marginalization. However, for some students, their "otherness" is the factor that prevents them

from forming deeper connections. For instance, another participant explained feeling much

anxiety and nervousness due to his minority status as a male within a female-dominated

institution and field of study:

> "I still struggle with asking for help from classmates because they're female and more
> times than not, they're attractive females, and attractive females that have boyfriends and
> husbands and children at home." (Frederick Douglas)

This student shared that he does not want to appear as though he is making romantic

gestures toward females in his classes. Given his identity as the only male in his classes, and an

older male compared to the majority of the women, he refrains from asking for help to ensure

that the wrong message does not mistakenly get conveyed. This fear further demonstrates the

emotional stressors that nontraditional students may experience as they progress through their

schooling, sometimes feeling as though they must navigate school alone given a certain identity -

race, ethnicity, gender, age, or socioeconomic background.

Within settings of higher education, it is the expectation that students speak in a "well-

spoken" tone that is ultimately reflective of their privilege and level of education. This way of

speaking is common and encouraged within many professional settings, but is not embraced by

populations who, historically, have not had the same opportunities and access to education. The

same participant, from a Black/African American background, spoke about his first experience

during his first year of college feeling extremely out of place:

> "At first, the terms and the language that the professors used and students used was not
> part of my repertoire - was not a language that I use at all. And I found myself saying a
> lot of times *I can't wait to get out of class so I can look up all of these words that these
> people just used.*" (Frederick Douglas)

He further elaborated, stating that the way that "educated individuals" speak is not the

way that he speaks with his friends and family. Frederick Douglas experiences a continuous

internal struggle because he does not want to become comfortable speaking in this "professional"

manner and then mistakenly speak to a client (troubled youth from predominantly Black/African

American backgrounds) in this manner, and then lose his client's trust because of his unrelatable

nature. This phenomenon is termed "code switching" in the field of linguistics and refers to a

way of speaking different varieties of the same language based on perceived appropriateness

depending on the setting (Daniels, 2018). In his example, Frederick Douglas has been socialized

to "code switch" in an academic setting, which is often an unspoken expectation related to the

ways that White individuals view "proper" or "professional" written and spoken language within

an academic setting. These societal nuances are not unique to nontraditional students but are

important aspects to consider in terms of how a student's racial/ethnic background, education,

and workplace may collide.

Institutional Barriers

Institutional barriers include practices or procedures that impede a student's ability to progress through their intended educational trajectory. Cross posits that these barriers prevent a student's participation in educational activities (1981), which may include developmental exercises inside or outside of the classroom.

Surprisingly, the majority of the barriers to nontraditional student persistence among those who participated in the present study were more closely related to the participants' personal circumstances than external impositions brought on by the institution itself. Of the students who participated in the present study, the majority were satisfied with their overall college experience, their choice of institution, and in particular, the personal feel of a small institution. Many shared that their choice to attend a small institution in Northeast Pennsylvania was a decision based on the availability of their intended major, the general convenience (i.e. location close to home, flexible schedule, etc.), and an approachable environment.

In alignment with an andragogical framework (Knowles et al., 1998), the nontraditional students in the present study expressed maturity in terms of their ability to recognize that their personal dissatisfaction with different aspects of their college/university are minor hurdles to overcome. In general, the students recognized that their respective institutions do their best to provide strong services to their students. Many acknowledged that small institutions have limited resources and were therefore understanding of issues, including more limited "infrastructural resources" and even faculty member's time, that may not occur at larger campuses with greater financial means. For example, one participant commented:

> "The weakness [of the university] lies in the same quality as the strength. It's a small institution. If opportunities, say for research, are abruptly constrained [during the COVID-19 pandemic], there's not very much the institution can do about that." (Gisele)

Maintaining Financial Aid. One central institutional barrier that emerged included the requirement for students to maintain full-time credit status to achieve "satisfactory academic progress," required by the Office of the U.S. Department of Education, to receive full federal financial aid. Although this is an issue outside of each institution's control (Federal Student Aid, 2021), this policy poses a threat to student persistence. Maintaining a typical full time course load of 12 academic credits, or enrolling in three to four classes a semester, requires significant time and dedication to excel. Among the nontraditional students in this study, approximately half entered into their degree program with feelings of significant academic under preparedness or anxiety related to the rigors of academic coursework. Some also continued to balance a part-time or full-time job in addition to various familial responsibilities required of them, making it nearly impossible to successfully complete their coursework in the intended timeframe. One participant, Halley, illustrated this concern:

> "I had to really reevaluate how much workload or course load I could take on because in the beginning I was taking, I think, like 16-17 credits and then I had to bump down to maybe 12 credits just to make sure that I'm still considered a full time student. But there was times where I felt overwhelmed with the amount of credits that they assigned me in my first year - 'cause we don't really get a choice in that first year, so I remember withdrawing from classes and I had to retake a few classes because I just wasn't prepared for the amount of coursework."

Others shared a similar experience of withdrawing from one or more courses to stay afloat, particularly during the initial stages of their college career.

> "So [entering college] was a big… it was just, like, hugely transitional. I would say that in 2018 I kind of had to take a "W" on some classes and sort of, like, scale back a little bit on my course load just to make it through like things like Anatomy and Physiology." (Rosey)

Having the resilience to push through failure is commendable, but it may not be feasible or perceived as reasonable depending on each individual's life circumstances. Withdrawing from a course can become both a financial strain and a psychological stressor and some students may

feel that it is not in their best interest to continue with their schooling. Rosey further mentioned

that she decided to remain in school and scale back her courses, but felt forced to quit her job:

> "My scholarship was requiring that I take 15 credits per semester and I couldn't hack that. I couldn't do that." (Rosey)

Ultimately, the requirement that all students remain at full time status to maintain their

financial aid is a barrier that is unequally detrimental to those with limited financial means or

those with more complex life circumstances.

Availability of Course Offerings. A second institutional barrier prevalent in the present

study was the availability of course offerings. As Dee shared:

> "While I was [at my undergraduate institution], one thing that was kind of a bummer is because this campus was so small that there was one option every semester, you know, for the classes. So it was pretty much like my schedule... there was no flexibility there. So all the flexibility had to come from my employer. Um, so it was tough..."

For students balancing work life, home life, and their academic life, the lack of flexibility

in course options is a challenge. For example, if a student must retake a course or does not plan

out their programmatic requirements well, their normal course of progression may be delayed by

a year, at minimum. Big Momma experienced this problem after financial aid issues impacted

her course registration and dishearteningly indicated:

> "It'll be next year before I can take these classes over [because they are only offered once each academic year.]"

At larger universities, it may be the case that a course can be retaken during the

consecutive semester, or perhaps during winter or summer break. To compensate for these

limitations, small institutions must be proactive in counseling students through these hardships

and offer alternatives at neighboring institutions during summer/winter semesters or beyond.

Initial Academic Challenges Related to Generational Differences

Unfamiliarity with Current Technologies

Difficulties with technology, including the navigation of Learning Management Systems (i.e. Moodle and Blackboard), presentation programs (i.e. Google Slides and PowerPoint), word processors (i.e. Microsoft Word and Google Docs), and citation styles (i.e. APA and MLA) were described as both challenging and frustrating for many adult learners in the study. CS, a 39 year old senior in college, shared:

> "I definitely don't type as fast as [the traditional students] because we didn't type in school. I have a hard time picking up some of the technology stuff. Moodle took me a little while to get used to, Google Docs is like 'wow,' I mean, I grew up with the Word - we didn't have internet or anything!"

Many adult learners expressed similar sentiments and described feeling overwhelmed given the unspoken expectation that all students have a foundational knowledge of these technologies.

Many participants with children shared that their teenage or college-aged children regularly help them with utilizing the various online platforms, particularly because there is a sense of shame or embarrassment in asking a peer or faculty member teaching the course about these basic questions. One 34 year old participant, Mike, even expressed resentment at his younger peers who so naturally utilize the current technologies, recalling his thoughts as an undergrad:

> "I was like *these damn kids and their Google Slides or whatever*."

On the other hand, 54 year old participant, Frederick Douglas, laughed at himself for his inability to turn on the scientific calculator he received in a statistics course, given that pocket calculators did not exist when he was in high school.

However, more than navigating the complexities of modern technology was the frustration and confusion associated with proper formatting and citing research papers. Participants ranging from 21 to 54 years of age discussed their struggle understanding the rules

and expectations of different citation styles, sharing that they were never taught these necessary

skills. One individual described APA writing as "the crutch of his life" (Frederick Douglas) and

another recounted that "MLA format in English class sounded foreign to me!" (Sarah). Even

those who once attended college, took a short break, and later returned to school had difficulties

with properly citing because of the version changes over the years.

Although most of the students have since adapted to the newer technologies and

requirements for academic writing, the technological struggles can be a true obstacle that

threaten a student's ability to be successful at the start of their college career. For example,

Rosey revealed:

> "I would say the first semester was pretty rough. I went from having a 4.0 to having, like,
> a 2.5 my very first semester. So just meeting expectations and technological differences
> between what I was used to and what I was going to have to do to make it in a bigger
> university [from my community college] was hard."

Integrating into life as a full time student is often a difficult feat for nontraditional

students, so personnel at institutions of higher education must provide classroom training on the

required technologies needed to be successful at their respective institutions.

Speed of Learning and Retention

Another emergent theme included participants' perceptions that they are slower to learn

their academic course material than their "traditional" counterparts. Interestingly, though, the

reasons for this varied widely. Some attributed this purely to their cognitive abilities, like CS:

> "And I think retaining some of the information is harder for me than it would be for [the
> traditional students."

Others acknowledged that they need to read and complete assignments at a slower pace,

presumably because of their age (however one student mentioned physical and cognitive

challenges as the cause). Sarah, a 47 year old mother of two, attributed her slower pace to her

diligent commitment to the material, stating:

> "I still oftentimes think that it takes me just a bit longer, but I'm not, I don't know that
> that's, you know, sort of [my] skill set, but maybe more maturity where I'm wanting to
> definitely absorb a lot. I'm older, my perspectives are different."

A final student mentioned that her personal availability was the reason why she

completed her work more slowly than the majority of her peers. She shared that her peers would

regularly complete work together at their dorm or apartment or stay late at the library, whereas

she had to go home, make dinner, and complete assignments on her own at a later date. Others

concurred with the sentiment that group work is particularly challenging given classmates'

opposing schedules.

Significant Self-Confidence Due to Life Experience

As noted, the majority of the adult learners in this study struggled with the various

technologies associated with their schooling. However, there was a select group of adult learners

within this study who starkly contrasted from the other participants in that they possessed

significant self-confidence in their academic abilities. These students did not express problems

with technology or proper citations, but rather, they embraced the technological advances since

they were last enrolled in school years prior and felt that these technologies contributed to the

high quality of their education. For example, one participant, Adult Learner, described that he

was able to converse with individuals from across the globe in his French speaking course, which

would never have been possible without the video conferencing tools that are so prevalent today.

Another participant, Gisele, shared that she was widowed on September 11, 2001. She

described the changes that so unexpectedly occurred in her life and possessed an evident

maturity and wisdom as a result of undergoing such an abrupt major life change:

"If you have a little more experience with life, both patting you on the back end beating you up, those things are… are smaller and.. and those.. those bumps become less," she explained.

Given the various obstacles that she has overcome in her life, she always felt "completely confident in [her] ability to handle the work."

Overall, maturity spawning from life experience was shown to benefit this group of students. Carla, a 50 year old woman now in a master's degree program, worked in the field of education for years without her degree before returning to school. She expressed such confidence in her abilities that she felt the need to constantly restrain herself from speaking in class. She acknowledged that she is a very vocal participant and therefore and feels the need to force herself to stop participating to provide her classmates with the chance to learn and make conclusions on their own.

Janine's experiences aligned with Carla's, who also expressed that her personal life and raising children have given her a broader perspective with more life experiences than the traditional students in their late teens or early twenties. Due to her worldly knowledge, she found herself feeling "a little bit self-conscious" and purposely stifling her comments so as to not draw attention to herself during class. In this case, these students were so confident in the academic material that they felt the need to step back to prevent overshadowing their peers.

As demonstrated, there are large discrepancies between nontraditional students' confidence levels. To combat this, faculty teaching small courses should take the time to better understand the needs of their students and either accommodate their weaknesses or capitalize on their strengths. Ensuring that their students feel comfortable participating in class will enhance their sense of belonging, maximize their learning, and increase the likelihood that they will persist.

Focus on Age and Feelings of "Otherness"

The students in this study ranged in age from 20 to 57 years old, with a median age of 42. The younger participants (ages 20, 21, and 22) did not express feelings of insecurity about their age, as they identified as a nontraditional student due to other factors, including parental status and time off between high school and college coupled with full-time work. All but one of the remaining 19 participants (ages 31 - 57) acknowledged a certain level of discomfort as a result of their age compared to the majority of their peers. However, despite some initial anxiety, many of these students found their place in the classroom and were able to successfully integrate within the university setting. Others were unable to acclimate and demonstrated a preoccupation with their age compared to their peers in the classroom.

Individuals Unable to Develop a Sense of Belonging

Several participants spoke of their difficulties relating to the younger students in their classes. The words "lonely," "self-conscious," "nervousness," "loser," and "left out" were all words that the participants uttered aloud to describe their undergraduate college experience. One student, Gisele, wisely summarized this common notion, saying:

> "We're a very social species and there's always a little bit of awkwardness being the one who is different… so when it's you, you know, of course, you always magnify your own differences."

Through the conversations with the participants, it was evident that some students' initial level of self-consciousness was overcome after forming connections on campus, while others' level of self-consciousness was too strong for them to feel ever comfortable within the university setting.

For example, "H," a 42 year old mother, recalled a time in which she took out her student ID card and a peer asked her what year she was born. After hearing "1978," the student replied:

"Oh wow, my mom was born like a year after you." Regardless of the fellow student's intent,

this comment was immediately perceived as hurtful and perpetuated the feelings of self-

consciousness that were already internalized. At the end of the interview, after recounting several

similar instances of feeling out of place, this student appeared to have a revelation and

exclaimed:

> "I don't know that it was [the institution] that made me feel unsupported, I guess, or if it
> was just me?!"

Her surprise conclusion demonstrates the internal struggles, or dispositional barriers, that

plague some students, yet are unrelated to the quality of the institution.

Similarly, other adult learners described feelings of awkwardness upon getting mistaken

for faculty, therefore emphasizing their "otherness." These participants recalled that they were

assumed to be faculty members in numerous settings including an in-person class prior to the

professor entering the room, outside of the classroom on campus, in the dining hall at the cash

register, among other instances. In one example, Enna recalled her first day of classes:

> "And so then I finally walked in and sat down in the ceramics class, and I'm just sitting
> there. All these traditional students are coming into the same place, and they're all
> looking at me going *'Oh, what are we learning?'* And I'm like *'I don't know, let's see
> when the instructor gets here.'* And then I'm like *'What? Ohh like, I'm like, no, no, no.
> I'm a studenttttt!'*"

In a similar instance, Gisele recalled a walk through campus:

> "At first, it was a little awkward, I find myself being mistaken for an instructor walking
> across campus so little groups of kids will suddenly go silent as I pass them."

Many others who struggled with their self-concept also reported feeling continuously nervous or altogether avoiding the initiation of any conversations with their peers in an attempt to connect or find common ground. However, as evidenced by the life demands of the younger students within the present study who are working full-time to support their families or have a child of their own, judgments about one's personal life often cannot be assessed at face value. Still, even the participants closer in age to traditional students made the immediate assumption that their experiences are significantly different than that of students who entered college directly after high school:

> "You know, there's, like, seniors that are 21 and here I am, like, 26 years old. And I feel like it's not that much older. But the amount of life that happens just in that time for everyone like from 20 to 27... that's when things really hit home and you really go through just, you know, real life stuff." (Rose)

These assumptions about other students' backgrounds arise due to personal insecurities, but still must be understood and considered by higher education professionals. These self-doubts prevent students from establishing a sense of belonging, which may be a significant factor driving students toward drop-out.

Individuals Who Become Integrated Among Traditional Students

Although many participants experienced difficulties assimilating into the campus culture, the students who were able to successfully integrate into the classroom described their college experience as a positive one. The small size of the institutions in the study appeared to positively impact the students' sense of belonging, as many happily referred to knowing each student in their classes by name, moving through each semester in a tight-knit cohort, and not feeling as though they are "just a number," as they assumed that they would experience at a larger campus.

Establishing relationships with faculty, staff and peers assisted the participants in feeling more comfortable on campus as well. Developing relationships was primarily done within the

classroom setting, although a few participants described also getting involved outside of the

classroom. One participant described her experience in extracurricular activities:

> "But I get along with all of the kids; I've joined a couple of clubs that I'm consistently a
> part of. I went on an alternative break trip and nobody made me feel out of place." (CS)

Unfortunately though, despite their positive attitude, CS and others still described aspects

of self-consciousness in their language. For example, she went on to state:

> "So, while I do feel like I belong, and I do feel like a part of the class because we have
> the same class for like, for almost everything, sometimes I feel like I'm the mom that's
> hanging around the teenagers. And that I'm, like, that mom that's like, in people's
> business, because I, you know, when people are all talking, I do add, you know, to the
> conversation, but I'm always afraid that they're gonna be like *'Oh my gosh, what? Like, I
> don't even know why she's... she's involved in this'* or something. But I try and be a part
> of a group. It was a little stressful at first, but now not as much." (CS)

Another student, Senior Sally, expressed similar thoughts, sharing:

> "I just feel like I'm comfortable [now] and even though, like at first, I definitely felt like a
> sort of loser in the room, but when it comes to [institution name], they don't hold
> anything against me. It's just like I fit right in with the actual students."

Gisele provided a similar experience, acknowledging that her hesitation with the younger

students contrasted with their perceptions:

> "In my own discipline and in my own classes kids less than half my age have been very
> willing to be friendly to come forward to me because I haven't generally done it to them -
> I felt like it might be intrusive. So overall, I found the community very welcoming."

Here, CS, Senior Sally, and Gisele claimed feelings of contentment and integration, but

their choice of words, such as "I'm always afraid," "don't hold anything against me," "*actual*

students," and "kids" still depict a sense of otherness. Ultimately though, these feelings that

began as ones of "otherness" may develop into an unanticipated advantage, depending on the

personality of the student. For example, Gisele, in particular, shared that although she

experienced initial feelings of discomfort about her outward differences compared to the

majority of her classmates, her recognizability necessitated engagement.

> "I find that because I am quite obvious in my classes, there's no hiding for me - it's not possible simply to keep my head down and stay quiet (even if I wanted to). High visibility brings high expectations, in a way."

Through this "forced" engagement as a standout on campus, she explained that she became known, and many times, by name, on campus, which allowed her to feel "less weird, less different, especially in the first semester or two." Gisele positively reflected on this in that she was easily well-known among the faculty and students, which automatically increased her connectedness on campus. Although not all students in a similar situation would view their recognizability in positive regard, her desire to have relationships with her faculty and peers is a natural inclination and one that contributes to student persistence.

Institutional Setting Influences Level of Self-Consciousness

Compared to the students who began their coursework at a four-year institution, the students who transferred from a community college did not have the same experience of "otherness" during their time of attendance.

> "At community college there were more people my age. But when I got to [institution name] it was like literally everyone I was in class with was in their early twenties [so I was far older]." (Dee)

Within the present study, the graduate students and those who took evening-only classes also did not express anxieties related to being the oldest student in their classes. One student, H, mentioned:

> "I don't feel like the old lady in class anymore. You know what I mean? 'Cause like, some of the students are, like, closer to my age or actually there is one who is older, but you know what I mean? So I feel like in that respect, I feel better and I feel more accepted than I did during my undergraduate."

Another student concurred with H, referring to a greater feeling of acceptance in graduate school, stating that the age gap during her master's program was a "non-point for the most part" (Rosey).

Shift to Remote Learning due to the COVID-19 Pandemic is Unfavorable for Most

The students who were eligible to participate in the present study were required to have spent a minimum of two full semesters at their current institution at the time of the interviews. Using this criterion, the student participants each had a minimum of one and a half semesters of experiencing their current institution under "normal" circumstances before the COVID-19 pandemic. While five of the participants were not impacted by the abrupt shift to an online learning environment due to the remote format or timing of their academic program, the remaining seventeen attended solely in-person classes at their respective campuses pre-pandemic.

The Importance of In-Person Interactions

When prompted about positive aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic on their education, the participants agreed that they enjoyed the convenience of online classes. Without a commute, additional time is added to their day, which allows them to spend more time on their responsibilities outside of school. For approximately one-fifth of the participants, they value this convenience over in-person interactions and highly prefer the online learning environment. The reasons behind the value of convenience varied, ranging from removing a long commute, allowing more flexibility to balance work and school obligations, reducing childcare needs, and lowering anxiety - particularly for those with sense of belonging issues. These students acknowledged that an online learning environment is different than that of an in-person experience, but they embraced the detachment from the college campus. Senior Sally summarized this group's thoughts, saying:

> "I'm older so it's not like I need that once in a lifetime college experience. Like, I've been there, done that. I'm happy to be in the comfort of my own home, going at my own pace. I just really enjoy it."

However, the other 80% of participants acknowledged that remote classes are certainly more convenient than in-person classes, but they felt that there is no replacement for face-to-face interactions. The fact that the majority of nontraditional students prefer in-person classes despite less convenience and more flexibility was a surprising finding. Many students commented that they intentionally chose an institution with an in-person program "for the experience of being in-class together" (Carla). Another participant, Sarah, even described the loss of an in-person experience as "devastating," particularly in terms of the "interaction in the classroom that [she] really came to appreciate as an adult learner." Those with cohesive cohorts agreed that remote class is "just not the same" but seemed to have an easier transition than others due to the pre-established camaraderie among cohort members built before the onset of the pandemic.

Academically, some shared that the remote environment makes it more difficult to mentally focus compared to an in-person setting, which is perceived by the students as more engaging. Having the ability to ask questions of the course instructors and actively contribute to class discussions was important to many of the participants. Senior Sally, although a large proponent of online classes, still spoke about the lack of professor-student interactions, stating:

> "I like to have a teacher right there to answer anything and everything that I have questions with."

Jane had a similar criticism in that:

> "In a traditional classroom class you have a teacher to interact with, and online, you're teaching yourself through guided lessons that they provide, but there's very, very, very little contact with your teacher online. I really don't like it."

Even one of the participants who highly preferred remote coursework expressed that online learning requires "quite a lot more cognitive focus and attention than in-person learning does" (Gisele). Having an interactive educational experience in which a student can actively work through problems and discuss real-world applications with others is a key component of

effective learning according to andragogical theory (Knowles et al., 1998). This suggests that asynchronous courses, although most convenient for students, are the approach least conducive for learning unless conveyed in a creative, interactive manner.

Others referred to the lack of peer-to-peer interaction as their primary concern, which particularly affected those who desired a more social experience. In a remote environment, spontaneous conversations among classmates do not occur naturally and there is less of an opportunity for informal communications, which often facilitates bonding. MJ struggled with making new connections, sharing:

> "It's hard because one of the good things about going in-person in undergrad is to meet people that you wouldn't normally, and you, like, communicate and become friends with people - and it's nearly impossible to become friends with people online like that."

In addition to less unplanned, friendly banter, CS mentioned that students tend to speak less during online classes, in general. She commented that she is a hands-on learner, so she tends to struggle academically due to fewer conversations amongst her peers and professors in the remote environment. Others also shared that it is more difficult for them to grasp the material without physically being in class, therefore causing more time spent separately teaching themselves the course materials. This was an evident stressor for many of the participants.

While some students described their online-only or socially distanced classes as "disappointing," others were more significantly affected, revealing feelings of both loneliness and/or depression. One student described falling behind in her classes due to the "mental toll" that the solitude had brought upon her, causing an overall lack of motivation (Neko). Another shared that it can be "difficult enough" for her to go to class during "normal" circumstances, so with her academic struggles related to online-only courses, her mental health has suffered (Halley). Through the interviews, it was clear that a remote learning environment, while more

convenient, can result in poorer mental and physical health for a small portion of the student

population.

A Return to School Later in Life Furthers Commitment to Coursework

Life Experience Leads to Maturity and Commitment

As with many adult learners, with the proper supports, the individuals in the present study

overcame the initial struggles of the transition to college and have emerged as strong students

who are dedicated to their field of study. As the participants reflected on their college

experience, their maturity was evident. For many, they reminisced about their younger years and

remarked about how far they have come. One participant, Adult Learner, summarized the

thoughts of many, stating that he previously didn't have the "time or the mindset" to be a strong

student and to get involved outside of the classroom, which contrasts to his current enrollment, in

which he can "enjoy the experience a little more." Carla, who took a 20 year gap between her

undergraduate degree and graduate school expressed similar feelings in that her interest and

commitment during her master's program is far deeper than when she went to school for her

bachelor's degree. Others, like Janine, did not have the perspective to compare between two

degrees but speculated that:

> "I think that I'm definitely more successful than I perhaps would have been in my
> twenties."

Based on the findings of the present study, the nontraditional participants returned to

school to further themselves and their future careers, but are doing so from a place of maturity.

Rather than desiring to earn a degree for the sole purpose of gaining a credential needed for

future employment, they are invested in the academic content and have a strong desire to learn.

Having the ability to apply course concepts to real-world situations is essential for deep learning

(Knowles et al., 1998) and this is appealing to nontraditional students who seek to do more than

just "the bare minimum" to pass their courses. For students like Enna, even though the academic

rigor is challenging, she is invested in her degree program and shared that:

> "There are times where it's just like I couldn't get enough that I could… I couldn't soak
> up enough information."

Enna's intrinsic thirst for knowledge is a demonstration of her developmental maturity

and is an indication that she exhibits the qualities needed to successfully move through the

learning process (Knowles et al., 1998). Unlike Enna, Dee needed to begin his college education

to realize the impact that it would make on his life. He recalled:

> "And then it was like this - everything shifted, you know, once I started taking classes at
> the college. It was almost like I had found what I was missing. And that was the pursuit
> of knowledge... like the pursuit of just learning new things and adapting to that
> environment."

This desire for deep learning and appreciation of knowledge was a common theme

among the participants. Rose had the same experience, stating:

> "I feel more fulfilled, like, I'm not just doing it. I know what I want to do now, and like, I
> just feel good about being there - it makes me happy."

Furthermore, several participants, including Enna, Jess, Dorothy, and Sarah, shared that

despite an initial learning curve, they are excelling in their courses. The participants attributed

their academic success to truly caring about the course material, having a firm goal/purpose in

mind, and by developing an emotional maturity that they may not have possessed at a younger

age.

Additionally, after making a conscious decision to pursue a bachelor's degree later in life,

other family-related factors may impact one's personal commitment to do well. For example,

Sarah shared:

> "I feel like I put a lot of pressure on myself. Being a nontraditional student, this is, you
> know a big… I don't know how to say it…. It's a big gamble, you know, taking away my

job, financially. Yeah, so I put a lot of that pressure on myself to really really excel and I have to set an example for the little humans, my children."

Whether a commitment to academic success results from perceived external pressures or personal internal motivation, the nontraditional students in this study felt that their life perspective is different than that of traditional undergraduates.

"When I graduated from my undergrad, I thought I knew way more than I knew" (Carla).

One of the youngest participants, Halley, even demonstrated a maturity that appeared wise beyond her years. She described the importance of understanding one's priorities and learning how to successfully manage time. While she does not have extensive life experience due to her age (22), her full-time employment to meet the financial needs of her family provided a unique perspective, proving that a person's age does not always correlate to their level of life experience or emotional maturity.

Life Experience Leads to Frustration

Although life experience and maturity have benefits, at times, these qualities also led to frustration when the adult learners compared themselves to their traditional counterparts. Interestingly, annoyance with younger classmates was common, but the reasons for this irritation varied. One school of thought included the perception that younger students do the "bare minimum to get through" (Sarah) and care more about "snapping selfies" (CS) than having a strong work ethic or desire to master course material. For adult learners, this may entail progressing more slowly to take ample time with the material or it may entail asking more questions and/or contributing examples in class discussions more frequently than the traditional students. One student, Janine, who has 20 years of experience in her field shared that she has an example for everything discussed in class, which contrasts with the younger students who sometimes have difficulty comprehending the concepts. She clarified: "[The traditional students]

are not bad or wrong, they just don't know" but noted that it can be frustrating to have such a wide gap in both knowledge and experience levels.

The gap in maturity and life experience was frustrating for others as well, going so far as to cause resentment toward peers. Both Mike and Jane commented that the way that school was the only true obligation in most traditional students' lives created strange dynamics, particularly during group projects, discussion groups, and when they considered the financial impact that returning to school had on them, paying out of pocket. Upon further reflection, Mike offered that his ongoing annoyance with younger students' mentalities, priorities, and even their technological proficiency may have been a result of his insecurities.

Ultimately, the perspective that adult learners possess frustration at younger students in their classes should not be overshadowed by their respect for the learning process and desire to learn. Although an age discrepancy may be a sensitive subject for some nontraditional students, all students, regardless of background or age group, have knowledge to offer one another. The goal of an academic environment is focused on reciprocal learning and wisdom gained through life experience is a valuable lesson for all.

Supportive Factors Influencing Student Persistence

Support System as a Key Component to Success

The reasons for nontraditional student persistence or departure are complex. A range of environmental factors, including work, childcare, and other personal responsibilities often make it more difficult for students to persist, however, there is one force that appeared to positively affect nontraditional students consistently - the presence of a support system. The types of support systems vary and may range from a family member (such as a parent or a significant other) to a flexible employer or empathetic faculty member. While some students are fortunate

enough to have numerous support systems to help pave the way to success, even one single support made a significant difference in the lives of these nontraditional students in the present study.

Family and Friends Support. The most frequent source of support arose from family members. Upon being asked the question "Do you have a support system, and if so, who?" many of the participants visibly lit up with gratitude and expressed that they would likely not be in the place that they are today, in terms of their academic trajectories, without this familial support.

> "I think I probably would have [dropped out of school] had my husband and my in-laws not been so encouraging" commented CS.

> Dorothy agreed, sharing:

> "I would not have been able to do it without [my mom, my aunt, my sisters] - I mean I guess I would have - people have, but it definitely made it a lot easier and more of a choice that I could easily do it." (Dorothy)

> Many others recounted their loved ones' support, using words like "Yeah definitely"

(Mike), "biggest cheerleaders" (Frederick Douglas), "biggest fan and number one supporter" (Senior Sally) to demonstrate the depth of their loved ones' support which has helped them along the way. For those with children, their family's support was crucial as well. Big Momma light-heartedly joked:

> "Oh my gosh, this is a Black family you're talking about, lady. We got Sunday dinners with the grandma and mom, the older sisters, my kids, you know, their kids!"

> Additionally, because of the family's presence, a babysitter was always available and

family bonds provided strength to overcome difficult times. Jess, a nontraditional student with a now-toddler shared:

> "Yes, my mom was super helpful she… she definitely, I would not have been able to do it without her. Because I didn't... I couldn't afford to pay for childcare on top of everything else."

Each family's ability to assist with watching the children was a significant weight off of these student parents' shoulders and is not a guarantee among the nontraditional student population. Without a family's assistance, the childcare needs and financial burden of paying for daycare may be too burdensome for a student to handle and could lead to drop-out.

A few of the participants also mentioned their spouses, stating that "[My husband's] been able to make this happen for me" both for financial and child-care reasons. Rosey and Sarah openly shared that returning to school as an adult learner came with the understanding that they are unable to contribute to the household income. Being in the position to not worry about financial contributions is a large source of support contributing to persistence, but is certainly not a luxury that not all nontraditional students share, particularly among those running single households.

Employer Flexibility and Faculty Empathy. While family support was the most common response, many students noted that friends, co-workers, or peers (cohort-mates) helped them to progress through their schooling. This was the case most often when the friend was also a college student or otherwise understood the rigorous demands of college coursework from personal experience. Employers were also revealed to be a critical factor for students working to support themselves and their families. Students with employers who provided the flexibility to change shifts based on the students' class schedule or allow for other forms of scheduling accommodations were able to successfully balance school and work obligations, albeit with little sleep.

> "I've been at two different jobs and both of the employers have bent over backward to make sure that my schedule was flexible so I could continue. Yeah, that support that I've had that I had from my employers was big too." (Dee)

Employers who do not demonstrate this flexibility force students to make the difficult

decision to choose between employment and higher education, which is not a simple choice and

may necessitate dropout.

Finally, students' faculty members were mentioned as a large source of support. Neko, a

nontraditional student who took a gap year to work full time to support her family shared:

"There were a couple of professors and I spoke to them about my situation, and they have also pushed me constantly, to the point where it seems like they're not even doing their professional job - rather, they're being, like, a life mentor. And I'm really grateful for that." (Neko)

Another student, Dee, explained that he worked third-shift five days each week while

taking evening classes. He shared the story:

"So, you know, if it got to a point where it looked like I was falling asleep, and I wasn't gonna make it through their lecture, um, you know, I would literally just go find my professor and be like, *'This is the deal... I'm exhausted... I'm going to fall asleep. So, maybe just give me the notes.'* And she would do that for me. She'd say *'This is what we're discussing. If you have any questions, you know, come to my office hours or something.'* And you know, I'd go home and go to sleep."

Dee was extremely grateful for the empathy that his faculty demonstrated in this regard,

as it allowed him to continue in the program and perform his best given his challenging life

circumstances. A final student, Jess, further stated how much it meant to her that her athletic

coach allowed her child to attend team practices, even offering to hold the baby.

Through these findings, it is clear that having a support system is a critical factor in

nontraditional student persistence because these supports served as a significant source of

strength for the students. It is not guaranteed that all students have the support they need from

their home environment, but they may be able to find the support that they need within the

collegiate setting. One student bravely shared that due to a poor family environment, she had

never been "guided" before entering college. When she got to school, she made connections with

the faculty, established a new romantic relationship, and it was the first time that she finally got

the "push" that she needed. She recounted:

> "I just needed that *one* person to help me see that I had it in me." (Rose)

Similarly, Enna had a difficult home life growing up and did not have a built-in support

system like most of the others. However, through getting involved inside and outside of her

institution and by actively reaching out to others, she was able to establish the supports that she

needs to progress toward her goals.

Importance of Advising. The participants in the study were vocal about their need for

reliable, consistent academic advising to ensure that they are enrolled in the correct courses for

their degree plan and are continuing on a smooth, planned trajectory toward graduation. One

student, Sarah, described this, saying that "sometimes you require a little bit of extra help on

things being an older student," and so, having a designated staff or faculty member to turn to

across multiple years, can be comforting for nontraditional students. H felt similarly, sharing:

> "Like, I'm graduating college, I'm 42 years old - maybe I'm too old [to pursue graduate
> school]? But they were very encouraging that, like, age isn't really… it shouldn't limit
> you if you have the desire and you have the ability you should, you know, move forward.
> So, I like the fact that [my two academic advisors] were very supportive." (H)

Good communication and advising are something that nontraditional students both value

and expect. Unlike H, both Janine and Jane expressed frustration with their constantly changing

advisors over the years:

> "Unfortunately, and again, I don't think that this is indicative of [institution], but my
> department has had, like, several changes in heads. But still, like that, just like, who's my
> advisor?! That would be my biggest complaint, though, that I never really seem to know
> who my advisor is ever since it was the first lady left." (Janine)

> "So they switched [my advisor] in the computer, yet didn't tell me they switched me. But
> when I finally met with her, then they switched me back, but I didn't even want to be
> switched back. They didn't even ask me." (Jane)

As evidenced by Janine and Jane, a student's advisor is perceived as a valuable resource and should be more heavily emphasized by the administration at the institution. The influence of a strong advisor was discussed by Mike, who had the opposite experience at his undergraduate institution and describes a best practice for small institutions to follow to better support their nontraditional student population, in particular. This best practice includes a nontraditional student advisor, which is a separate resource from the faculty advisors at the institution. He recalled:

> "I remember, like, my first, my first phone call with [my advisor] was so, like, *'Okay, like this lady gets it and knows that, like, college can't be my entire life right now because I have to pay my bills and work a 40 hour work week and also, like, is willing to work with me on that and get me a degree like within a year or two*."

Additionally, aside from this woman's grasp of a nontraditional student's competing life roles and corresponding challenges, her office hours were held on nights, weekends, and in an optional virtual setting to accommodate her advisees' schedules, which is a demonstrated best practice in the literature (Sutton, 2020). Mike emphasized her open availability and her ability to understand how an adult learner's needs differ from a traditional undergraduate. For example, he shared a story about the assistance that she provided him for his resume since it looked different than the other students in his "Introduction to College" course given his ten prior years of work experience. She also worked with him to find courses that occurred during the evenings. When this was not possible, she "had a conversation beforehand about what that might look like so I was prepared going into it." Mike was extremely complimentary of this nontraditional student advisor, who he described as passionate about her work and committed to getting adults a degree.

Strong Intrinsic Motivation Caveat. It is important to note that while the vast majority of the participants leaned on their respective support system(s) for strength, there were instances

in which individuals possessing a high level of intrinsic motivation did not place heavy emphasis

on their support system. These individuals, regardless of the external challenges they

encountered, were steadfast in their determination to earn their degree and articulated that they

do not require a support system to persist. For example, Gisele, a woman who took an early

retirement and found herself "bored" before starting school explained:

> "I feel like at this point in my life like I'm not necessarily looking for support outside of myself. Like, I know that I want this program and I know that I want it to happen, so other than like an occasional, like, you know, peer support or whatever, um, I'm not looking for [this university] to support me."

A further explanation of the varying levels of intrinsic motivation is included in the

following section.

Impact of Internal and External Motivators

Ultimately, within the present study, two groups of students emerged. One group of

nontraditional students were wholeheartedly committed to persisting through their degree,

despite any obstacles that arise. The other group confided that they consider dropping out of

college regularly. For both groups, their support systems were helpful, but for the latter, a strong

support system was found to be an essential motivator for persistence.

Among the students who demonstrated a wholehearted commitment to their studies were

those who possessed an evident intrinsic motivation to remain steadfast to their commitments

and see these commitments to fruition. This group was comprised of individuals demonstrating

the mindset that:

> "I felt like I had committed and I was like... *no way can I give up*." (Rosey)

These students explained that they made an internal commitment to themselves and

therefore have made the decision to earn their degree without the option of turning back. These

students were also able to use self-reflection to rationalize that "there's no reason I can't do this" (Rosey).

The other group of students, while still dedicated to their studies, appeared to be more malleable and dependent upon outside influences in their lives. These students rely heavily on their family, friends, significant others, and/or peers to support them during difficult times. While this is a worthwhile coping mechanism, it indicates that without an external source of support, dropping out of school may be a sensible option for them if experiencing significant challenges, including social anxieties (Enna), academic struggles (Frederick Douglas, CS, Halley), among other familial challenges (Jess).

The findings that a strong support system is a key to a nontraditional student's success is a central takeaway from this study. Various participants explained that they were either unsuccessful during their first attempt at college or "couldn't do it" without the support of their loved ones. The students in the present study are all on the path toward degree completion, but the nontraditional students who did not persist are not represented in this study. It may be the case that one factor in their drop-out was a lack of support. Institutions of higher education must be intentional about establishing the proper supports early on for their students, regardless of their age or background. As Rose wisely stated:

> "If I just had like, *one* person, one person, that was there for me. Because you can't underestimate guidance. I feel like guidance is really key. It's not impossible to be the rose that grew from the concrete."

Wholehearted Commitment to Persistence

A support system is not the only positive contributor to student success. Those who exhibited a strong internal locus of control shared other reasons for their desire to earn their degree and accomplish their personal/professional goals. In some cases, these included the desire

to help others through a meaningful career (Jess, CS, and Dee), to succeed for personal reasons, and/or to earn a degree to make their families proud.

Thirst for a Sense of Purpose and Greater Life Satisfaction. As mentioned, a large factor for pursuing higher education was for personal reasons. As Gisele explained, she returned to school to "have something engaging to do" and to "have the paperwork to match the self-concept." Like Adult Learner, Gisele retired and found herself wanting to find a productive hobby that would contribute to personal growth. For younger participants like Rose, Senior Sally, and H, they had the opposite experience and found themselves in unfulfilling jobs that they did not want to remain in for the rest of their lives. These women found themselves seeking careers that aligned with their life goals, which had been put on the back burner or left unrealized for various reasons. These "lows" in their lives were used as motivational factors to pursue their true passions.

> "My motivation and my drive is really what's keeping me going because I know what it's like to not have any of that; to be a successful person. I'm on my way to having all of it." (Senior Sally)

Duty to Set Good Example for Children. For the mothers in the study, many aspired to set a good example for their children, no matter their age. For both Sarah and CS, this meant putting pressure on themselves to be role models for their children. Frederick Douglas was also affected by parenthood and sought to overcome his series of "mediocre, minimum wage going-nowhere jobs" upon starting a family.

Ambition to Earn Degree for Self and Family. While parenthood is a strong influence on mothers and fathers, the importance of making one's family proud was evident among the first generation students, in particular. Halley, a 22-year old student who took a year off to support her family financially recounted that her father never finished high school, so simply

having the opportunity to attend college was special for her. Neko, who moved to the northeast

to begin college and be closer to her boyfriend, explained that her parents were "actually really

proud" of her pursuit of her degree. Similarly, Rose began at a community college at 25 years

old partially because she thought "her grandma would like that."

Having family approval and aspiring to go further in life was certainly a motivational

factor for these nontraditional students, however, these individuals simultaneously exhibited an

internal force that propelled them forward, despite the inevitable challenges. Dee captured this

intrinsic drive when he stated:

> "So, [dropping out], that's never occurred to me, that's not an option. You know, my
> education and the path that I have chosen to get my education. I'm like... I decided
> something and I make a plan and I stick to it."

Dee's initial lack of self-confidence but wholehearted desire to do better for himself and

his family was indicative of many nontraditional students within this study.

Conclusion

The 22 participants from this study divulged their lived experiences as nontraditional

students attending a small, private university in Northeast Pennsylvania. While each experienced

their own unique challenges, each persisted to this point as a result of their support system(s) and

intrinsic drive to complete their degree. The emergent themes related to their experiences and

suggestions for improvement are crucial to understanding their perspective and for implementing

positive change leading to increased persistence in the future.

The timing of this study also allowed for a true glimpse into the impact of the COVID-19

pandemic on nontraditional students. Each participant completed a minimum of two semesters

before serving as a study participant, which allowed for a direct comparison between their

"normal" college experience and the "remote" experience forced upon them due to the pandemic.

The implications of the pandemic as well as realistic suggestions for change are described in the following section.

Chapter 5

Summary and Discussion

Introduction

Hearing the stories of the 22 participants in this study was an eye-opening experience. Reading about nontraditional student persistence in the literature prepared me with foundational knowledge regarding the challenges that nontraditional students often face while pursuing their degree, but scholarly papers lack the true emotion of the students who experience this phenomenon first hand every day. The participants shared many anticipated challenges, including difficulties balancing life demands, financial stressors, and instances of self-doubt. However, one aspect that I did not foresee was the participants' vulnerability in sharing very personal hardships, many that occurred before enrolling in college, which shaped them into the people that they are today.

These backstories added a human element that is missing from the literature and further solidified that the nontraditional student population deserves to be better recognized on college campuses. This population contains a wisdom, only gained through life experience, that many of their traditional peers may not yet possess. These pieces of knowledge should be welcomed in the academic environment and utilized to foster conversations and convey lessons of resilience and commitment.

Discussion

In general, the results of the present study are closely aligned with the expectations outlined in the literature. Patricia Cross's three barriers to adult learning, including dispositional, situational, and institutional barriers (1981) were an accurate reflection of the challenges facing nontraditional students enrolled in college today. Nontraditional students' life demands, sometimes termed "interrole conflicts" are well-documented in the literature, and include

balancing family responsibilities, a full or part-time job, financial obligations, personal health or

health of a family member, among other duties (Hittepole, 2018; Osam et al., 2017; Warden &

Myers, 2017). These same demands, typically considered situational barriers, were the most

prevalent issues for the students in the study. However, due to the psychological toll that these

situational barriers take on adult learners, some dispositional barriers come to light as well and

expose themselves by causing feelings of insecurity among the traditional students in the

classroom.

One aspect lacking in the literature that emerged in the study were the experiences of

nontraditional students prior to enrolling at their current institution. The information gained

about the students' life paths before college in the present study was helpful to contextualize the

underlying reason behind why many students felt academically underprepared or perceived

themselves as outsiders. Faculty and staff are often unaware of these difficult past events that

directly impact their students' performance because there is not a natural forum for students to

divulge this information. Faculty and advisors, particularly at small institutions like the ones in

this study, can develop supportive relationships with their students due to the small class sizes.

Assigning mentors early in a student's college career, requiring regular meetings, and

encouraging one-on-one conversations are tactics for developing trusting relationships that allow

student mentees to feel comfortable divulging personal information that may impact their

academic performance. Ensuring that faculty and staff are well-trained to provide referrals to

campus support services and similar resources is essential when creating a proactive support

system for students of all backgrounds and experiences.

Interestingly though, the difficult life events these students may have experienced prior

to college, including abuse of drugs or alcohol, family issues, pregnancy, and other personal

scenarios were often the reasons why the participants entered college "late" and may have felt stigmatized, but simultaneously served as the factors that catalyzed their maturity and gratitude for the opportunity to attend college. Nontraditional students' resiliency and ability to cope with feelings of "otherness" as a result of their life experience was supported in a quantitative study of nontraditional nursing students as well (Englund, 2019).

Similarly, in a qualitative study conducted on males who intentionally delayed their postsecondary enrollment to join a missionary before enrolling in college, the participants reflected on their choice to purposely delay college for 2-3 years and noted that they would not have been as mature or selfless without their missionary experience; both qualities which allowed them to be successful during college (Jepson & Tobolowsky, 2020). Taking these pre-collegiate experiences into account can be enlightening and should be considered, especially at small institutions that are equipped to provide more individualized attention to their students during advising sessions, office hours, classroom discussions, or other formal/informal interactions.

The scholarly literature generally focuses on nontraditional students' experiences once they arrive at college, but as suggested in Knowles' theory of andragogy, the core learning principles are not standalone concepts. To fully understand an adult learner's learning process, one must consider the external influences that directly impact each student's motivation for learning and overall worldview. For example, the literature reveals that faculty have been found to have concerns about adult learners' preparedness and academic performance in their classes (Zerquera et al. 2018). Unless the faculty are specifically trained on nontraditional student issues or take a special interest in each student's personal life, they may not understand or consider that a student's life demands outside of the classroom may impact their performance in the

classroom. A deeper understanding of their students' life roles may help to increase the depth of student learning.

Similarly, Jones (2019) conducted a study on nontraditional students on the verge of academic dismissal due to poor grades. Jones' findings suggest that some students are unable to progress to degree completion because they do not possess appropriate awareness of themselves as learners. This notion aligns with Knowles' theory in that a successful adult learner is someone who possesses appropriate self-regulation and can therefore use these skills to manage themselves inside and outside of the classroom (Knowles et al., 1998).

For students who do not yet possess this maturity, personnel at higher education institutions have the responsibility to foster these characteristics as much as possible, as these are important skills required to succeed both in college and beyond. Gaining appropriate self-awareness and maturity are skills built over time, often developed through challenge and support. To grow, students must face challenges that may seem overwhelming but are possible to overcome with perseverance and proper encouragement. Sanford's theory of challenge and support outlines this notion and provides guidance for collegiate personnel who interact with college students who are still undergoing developmental growth. To develop, students must be challenged out of their comfort zone, while simultaneously being provided support and encouragement to overcome obstacles in their way (Sanford, 1968). Support from faculty and staff may be provided through mentorship, which may be developed naturally, or can intentionally be built through an advisor-advisee relationship or meaningful campus involvement. Suggestions for emphasizing mentorship are described further in the Recommendations and Implications section.

Remote Classes

According to the literature, most studies have shown that nontraditional students typically prefer online or hybrid classes due to their flexibility (Cruez, 2017; Hunter-Johnson, 2017; Singh, 2019). However, the findings in the present study somewhat contrasted with that of the literature. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, approximately three-quarters of the 22 participants were impacted by a required abrupt shift to remote classes, and of those, 80% shared that they would forgo the convenience of online learning to be face-to-face in the classroom. This was a surprising finding given that these students have several non-academic obligations and rely on strong time management skills to perform well in their classes.

It would appear, as was suggested in the literature, that the convenience of online classes would outweigh the personal feel of in-person courses, but this was not the case for most participants. The reason for the discrepancy may be because, in the past, individuals who pursued online courses intentionally chose the option to learn remotely. During the pandemic, students were forced into an online learning environment despite their conscious efforts to enroll in an in-person curriculum.

Academically, some shared that the remote environment makes it more difficult to mentally focus compared to an in-person setting, which was perceived by the students as more engaging. Having the ability to ask questions of the course instructors and actively contribute to class discussions was of great importance to many of the participants, which was demonstrated in the literature as well (Bergman, Gross, Berry, & Shuck, 2014; Cruez, 2017). Ultimately, the desire to return to in-person courses was related to the importance that the participants placed on the knowledge gained from their coursework. Having the opportunity to experience their courses

in-person (pre-pandemic) and in a remote format (during the pandemic), the participants were able to identify and reflect on the value-added from their in-classroom experiences.

In the present study and within the literature, adult learners sometimes perceive that traditional students can be lazy, lack maturity, or do the bare minimum in their courses (Ellis, 2019; Wyatt, 2011). Adult learners often display frustration with this perception because they generally truly value the knowledge gained from their coursework and desire to actively engage with the material. The participants in the present study perceived that remote courses provide less opportunity to actively interact with classmates and professors, which therefore reduced the camaraderie and both structured and unstructured learning. This finding aligns with the existing literature which portrays adult learners as excellent students who care about their studies and excel academically (Brinthaupt & Eady, 2014; Denning et al., 2018). Assigning group projects, utilizing virtual breakout rooms, instituting polls and live feedback forms, among other activities during remote courses can function to increase student engagement, although the level of interaction that in-person courses offer is often what nontraditional students desire and is difficult to replicate.

Although the findings in the present study contradict with much of the literature suggesting that nontraditional students typically prefer online/hybrid degree programs, a study conducted by Ellis (2019) analyzing student success/persistence in one individual course (as opposed to a complete degree program) supports the current study's findings. Ellis (2019) investigated a group of traditional and nontraditional students (categorized by age) who completed an online course for academic credit and were provided with a variety of optional activities to enhance their learning. At the end of the course, it was found that far less of the

traditional students completed the optional activities than anticipated, whereas far more of the nontraditional students completed the optional activities.

Not only were Ellis' participants (2019) more likely to successfully persist through the required activities, but they were more successful in optional ones as well. This study is significant because it provides evidence that nontraditional students are generally strong students and possess the aptitude to excel in individual courses, yet, as a whole, this population produces lower persistence rates than their traditional counterparts. This finding suggests that non-academic factors are the largest barriers to persistence for the nontraditional student population and that close attention needs to be paid to ensure that students have individualized support.

Individualized support begins with identifying the target population early on, which is difficult with the nontraditional student population, given that there are varying characteristics that may cause a student to identify as "nontraditional," including possession of a child or spouse, serving as a single caregiver, and/or being employed full time (Acrobatiq, 2017; Chen, 2017; Denning et al., 2018; Nadworny & Depenbrock, 2018; U.S. Dept. of Education, 2017; Thompson-Ebanks, 2017). A voluntary demographic information collection form distributed upon matriculation or via an advisor would be a helpful way for all students to self-disclose personal identifiers to their comfort level. This form could then serve as a shared piece of information among faculty and staff working directly with each student.

Ultimately, in the present study, it was found that if given the option, in general, the participants preferred in-person courses but tended to desire asynchronous classes if required to take an online-only course. The asynchronous nature of remote coursework truly allows for flexibility based upon other life obligations, however, the lack of interaction between classmates and with the professor posed challenges for many. To combat this, a "camera on" environment

may increase interactions during an online course and allows an instructor to see body language

cues which can assist with ensuring comprehension of the material. However, teaching pedagogy

recommendations have emerged since the COVID-19 pandemic suggesting that video camera

requirements may affect different student demographics unequally, and most frequently, may be

detrimental to underrepresented minorities (Castelli & Sarvary, 2021).

The differences within each student's home environment may cause discomfort by being

forced to show their home setting on camera to classmates who come from a variety of economic

backgrounds. Concerns about personal appearance, family members or friends in the

background, poor internet connectivity, and maintaining social norms were also reasons in which

students did not want to turn on their cameras during remote courses (Castelli & Sarvary, 2021).

Similar concerns were provided by one of the current study's participants as well. Given these

inequities, it is recommended that instructors do not require cameras to be turned on during class

time.

Under this guidance, asynchronous classes may be more equitable and valuable for

students from all backgrounds with a variety of life roles, although tactics for increasing

connectivity between students and instructors can still be integrated into a remote learning

environment, even without video cameras. These tactics may include active polling during class,

utilization of the platform's chat feature, shared working documents, small group breakout room

activities, discussion boards within the Learning Management System, and simple

encouragement by the instructor to use the camera feature if comfortable (2021).

Ultimately, the timing of the present study was ideal in that each of the participants

experienced a minimum of two semesters in their current degree program at the time of the

interview. This meant that all participants experienced a minimum of one semester in their

intended "normal" state before the onset of the pandemic, which altered the entire 2020-2021 academic year. The findings related to teaching pedagogy, interactive virtual environments, and academic struggles resulting from a solely remote environment can be applied to improve remote programs and online instruction moving forward.

Exposure to Campus Technologies

Within the literature, adult learners are known to report difficulty with and fear of adjusting to current technologies (Allen-Drewry, 2017; Brazelton, 2016; Ellis, 2019; NODA Newsletter, 2019). For example, in a qualitative study on nontraditional students at four online universities, the 15 drop-outs in the study commented that utilizing the technology (including software for courses), navigating through the various platforms, and accessing online resources was a "significant issue" for them (Kroeninger, 2018, p. 78). The experiences of many adult learners in the present study strongly aligned with this notion. Interestingly though, even the study's younger participants who only took one gap year, and are therefore very close in age to "traditional" college students, spoke of their uncertainties with the technological platforms used at their home institution, including the Learning Management Systems, proper use of citation styles, and more. Considering this finding, perhaps discomfort utilizing new technologies at the college level is more widespread than just nontraditional students who experienced a significant gap in time between their high school and postsecondary education. Becoming acclimated to several new technologies simultaneously, such as at New Student Orientation, can be overwhelming for students and coaching students through the learning process is critical (Bomforth, 2021).

Faculty, staff, and administrators at colleges and universities must be more intentional about providing additional training to their incoming first year, transfer, and graduate students

centered around the technologies required to be academically successful at their institution. The online platforms at each higher education institution typically differ, so students entering from high school, a different college/university, a workplace, or gap years could benefit from additional exposure and explanation upon arrival. Additionally, the various citation styles vary based on discipline and frequently update versions, so expectations surrounding proper use of citation styles could be useful to college students of all ages and backgrounds.

Focus on Age and Feelings of "Otherness"

In both the literature (Bohl et al., 2017; Chen, 2017; Markle, 2015; Sogunro, 2015) and in the present study, there were a significant number of adult learners who felt a degree of self-consciousness about their age when compared to the traditional students in the classroom. Some students experienced this to a minor degree, while others were preoccupied with feelings of "otherness" and became stifled by this, ultimately leading to an inability to successfully integrate into the campus environment. The feeling of "otherness" is a concept reflected in Schlossberg's theory of marginality and mattering (Schlossberg, 1989), which urges that students who do not feel integrated into the campus community are less likely to be successful, and are ultimately less inclined to persist to their degree.

While the feelings of "otherness" were most commonly associated with age discrepancies, it appears that single parents, particularly mothers, often experience feelings of isolation as well (Landford, 2019). In the present study, Jess reported frustration at the lack of sympathy and accommodations for breastfeeding mothers within her campus. Cotton, Nash, and Kneale (2017) also suggested that single mothers have difficulties finding and forming bonds with other student parents. The student parent population is a difficult one to visually identify, so this may be a reason that student parents feel alone. Creating a student organization specifically

comprised of student parents as well as providing on-campus daycare/babysitting services are tactics that would increase visibility for student parents and foster natural connections between student parents. Additionally, ensuring that campus event offerings include family-friendly options would be attractive offerings for student parents while simultaneously perpetuating interactions between students in similar life situations.

Motivational Factors

An external factor that influences student learning that appears in the literature is the impact that children have on student parents. For example, for the mothers in the present study, the reason why they were so motivated to succeed was to set a good example for their children, no matter their age. In the present study, for both Sarah and CS, this meant putting pressure on themselves to be role models for their children. Frederick Douglas was also affected by parenthood and sought to overcome his series of "mediocre, minimum wage going-nowhere jobs" upon starting a family by earning a college degree. The dreams to set a good example for one's family are illustrated in the literature as well, especially among mothers (Bailey, 2017; Cruez, 2017; Lovell, 2014; Markle, 2015).

In addition to setting a good example for one's family, several of the participants shared that the support received from their home environment urged them to complete their degree (Bergman, Gross, Berry & Shuck, 2014; Hunter-Johnson, 2017; Zerquera et al., 2018). Others described that the motivation to persist to their degree was the result of a force within themselves and therefore described that they did not consider dropping out of school to be an option.

These feelings of strong intrinsic motivation align with the literature stating that individuals with a strong internal locus of control are more likely to persist toward their degree because they take responsibility for their actions and have the mindset that they are in control of

their own destiny (Quiggins et al., 2016). In a qualitative study focused on risk factors versus protective factors for nontraditional student retention, researchers found that high levels of intrinsic motivation coupled with at least one strong relationship providing support often serve as a protective factor in lessening the likelihood of dropout. This was the case even among those with troubled family lives during childhood, those suffering from or exposed to loved ones with addiction, and other similar circumstances that may initially appear to be too difficult to overcome during the college experience (Cotton, Nash, and Kneale, 2017).

Those with strong intrinsic motivation are most likely to persist to degree completion, but a variety of life circumstances may still cause pauses in enrollment. In a qualitative study of college dropouts, Thompson-Ebanks (2017) found that the participants (former college students) all expressed a strong desire to complete their degree for intrinsic reasons, but the external challenges that they faced were too strong. Administrators at higher education institutions need to take an active role in ensuring that these students return to complete their degrees. For some students, without a force prompting an easy return to the university, they may never complete their degree program. The literature indicates that many nontraditional students have sporadic enrollment periods (Busher et al., 2014), which a few of the participants, including Rose, Mike, and Big Momma experienced on and off for years.

Each of these students experienced irregular enrollment for different reasons and managed to progress through their program to this point. However, it is important to consider that the participants who opted into this study may not reflect the experiences of all nontraditional students who experience stop-out. The individuals who depart from their institution and never return are not represented in the present study and are the students who should be of large concern for personnel at colleges and universities. For example, in a

longitudinal study conducted over six years, researchers used data from the National Center for

Education Statistics (NCES) to investigate first-year undergraduate nontraditional student

persistence at two and four year institutions nationally (Kamer and Ishitani, 2019). It was found

that 114 of the 248 students dropped out prior to completion of their fourth academic year.

Further, students from low income backgrounds were nearly three times more likely to dropout

of their four year institutions compared to those from high income families.

For small schools in northeast Pennsylvania, the knowledge gleaned from the historic

data of nontraditional student retention found in the literature as well as the participants'

experiences in the present study can be utilized to implement meaningful, realistic changes to

maximize the likelihood of improved retention among this student population. Simple methods

to improve the nontraditional student experience are described in the following section.

Recommendations and Implications

Although the 22 nontraditional students in the present study currently attend one of the

two universities in Northeast Pennsylvania, these individuals represent a total of ten different

higher education institutions at various points in their academic careers. This study focuses on

their current experiences as nontraditional students at small institutions in Northeast

Pennsylvania, but at times, participants reflected on their experiences at their former institutions

as well. The diversity of student experiences provided insights into the inner workings of similar

schools across the country and yielded suggestions for enhancing the nontraditional student

experience moving forward. The following recommendations are intended to serve as ten

attainable action steps for small institutions to implement to better serve their nontraditional

student body, and ultimately, to increase the retention of this population.

Table 3

Recommendations for Improving the Nontraditional Student Experience

1. Develop diversity/inclusivity training among faculty, staff, and administration

2. Ensure that involvement opportunities and support services are accessible and convenient

3. Increase representation of the nontraditional student population

4. Assess availability of evening/weekend classes

5. Prioritize reliable, consistent advising

6. Implement mentorship programs

7. Provide accommodations for pregnant/nursing mothers

8. Train students on campus resources and technologies

9. Utilize campus-wide early alert systems

10. Conduct active outreach post-withdrawal

Recommendations and Best Practices

Develop diversity/inclusivity training among faculty, staff, and administration

The occurrence of microaggressions necessitates mandatory diversity training for the

faculty, staff, and administrators within settings of higher education. Although these comments

are unintentional, remarks about a student's age in any form create sense of belonging issues and

perpetuate self-consciousness among adult learners. Instructors must consider the impact that

their interactions have on each student and should avoid singling out any particular student,

regardless of their age, race/ethnicity, background, sexual orientation, gender identity, or any

other personal characteristics.

Ultimately, there is a need for faculty to be more conscious of their audience and be

aware that there may be a variety of life circumstances reflected in their classrooms (Jones, 2019;

Thompson-Ebanks, 2017). This includes awareness of students like Frederick Douglas, a first

generation student with a GED earned in prison, who shared that he "knew nothing about college

at all" or students like Big Momma who stated that she did not want her instructors "to get upset"

if she asked too many questions. The notion that students recognize that they need help but are

unwilling to ask for it out of fear of being disruptive was identified in the Cotton, Nash, and

Kneale (2017) study as well. First generation students typically have no prior knowledge of

college expectations when they begin their degree and could benefit from faculty who more

outwardly consider the challenges of students from different backgrounds in their classes.

A component of this diversity training should also focus on student parents and pregnant

mothers as well. In this study, Jess shared difficulties she faced with faculty when she requested

flexibility while pregnant due to a sexual assault. Regardless of an instructor's moral stance in

these circumstances, diversity training should be implemented to further educate faculty and staff

about the diverse student population at their institution and the multifaceted considerations that

this diversity demands.

Ensure that involvement opportunities and support services are accessible and convenient

Approximately half of the nontraditional student participants in the present study

expressed an interest in getting involved outside of the classroom. Unfortunately, this desire

often did not translate to extracurricular involvement due to the inaccessibility of offerings.

Given nontraditional students' diverse life circumstances, there is no simple way to

accommodate all students' schedules, but there are some approaches that may demonstrate more

consideration and awareness of this underrepresented campus population.

The most prevalent issue described by the participants in the study was the timing of

events and student organization meetings. Many nontraditional students work during the

traditional workday, which causes them to miss club meetings and activities that take place

during afternoon hours. These students do not have prior affiliation with the groups and therefore

do not have the leverage to speak up and make requests to move pre-determined meeting

days/times.

The inconsistent availability among these students makes finding a solution challenging.

As one small creative remedy, Jane offered the suggestion:

> "[Nontraditional students] are not on campus [often], I'm on my computer at my home.
> But you know, *(sarcastically)* you have to be at campus at five o'clock for an ice cream
> social! Well, I can't be at campus at five o'clock for an ice cream social. But if you
> handed me a voucher for ice cream at the cafeteria, like '*The first five to text back, you'll
> get a voucher,*' maybe that is something I would do."

Jane's suggestion of implementing more passive programming, which does not involve a

pre-specified time commitment, is one potential solution to this problem.

Increase representation of the nontraditional student population

 In addition to more passive programming, some participants shared the desire to have a

student organization focused on the nontraditional student population and/or student parent

population to increase visible awareness of these groups. Enna also expressed interest in an adult

learner-specific group and took the initiative to create a university chapter of Alpha Sigma

Lambda, a national honor society for adult learners, at her new institution. Colleges and

universities need to increase recognition of nontraditional student presence and student parents

on campus. Without outward visibility of these groups, it can leave students with the perception

that they are alone when that is not the case.

The addition of a targeted student organization for nontraditional students and/or student

parents would be a simple tactic for increasing representation. Creating a nontraditional student

organization would not only increase the representation of this population (for both current and

prospective nontraditional students) but would allow for nontraditional students, many of whom are transfer students and may have a more difficult time easily making friends, to have a natural place to turn for support or friendship. Further, the importance of supportive friends not only fosters a sense of belonging, but close friends in the collegiate setting is an important retention factor for students as well (Priode, Dail, & Swanson, 2020).

In addition to assisting with social connectedness, the nontraditional student groups of varying compositions could network with other student organizations of interest. For example, given the struggles related to accessible, affordable childcare, the school's Education Club may collaborate with a "Student Parent Club" to provide a little-to-no-cost babysitting service during class times for enrolled student parents.

If institutions could proactively coordinate affordable childcare for their students in need, this may alleviate a large burden that may otherwise have the potential to lead to dropout (Sallee & Cox, 2019). This notion was supported in a study of ten nontraditional college students with depression who dropped out of school before completing their degree. Of the nine participants with children, six shared that reliable childcare was a "huge stressor" for them (Thompson-Ebanks, 2017, p. 487). Participants in a phenomenological study of student-parents also shared that dependable childcare was a determining factor in their ability to remain enrolled. They agreed that the availability of childcare on-campus would ease their burden (Bailey, 2017).

Assess availability of evening/weekend classes

The student participants who took advantage of their campus's evening or weekend courses were pleased with the accessibility of the courses, particularly since the offering allowed them to successfully balance full time work. Dorothy and Mike, both students who continued on to pursue their master's degrees, shared their experiences in two unique programs that could be

developed at other institutions as well. Mike described an accelerated program at his former

institution dedicated to adult learners in that each course was seven weeks long and offered on

evenings and weekends only:

> "So you're still getting a reasonable number of courses, but they were all happening, one
> at a time, because everybody was also working and had families."

Dorothy also shared that the students in her graduate program are comprised of

nontraditional students, given that the majority balance work, a family, and their master's

program:

> "Many of them have already been working - they're parents and the program's designed
> to make it easier for them by having classes on Saturdays [only] - and, you know, some
> of the students are able to do internships in their field and hours in their workplace if they
> can find tasks that are different than what they already normally do."

Prioritize reliable, consistent advising

Many students in the present study were vocal about the importance of a reliable,

knowledgeable, and responsive academic advisor and this was evident in several studies on

nontraditional student persistence as well (Bergman, Gross, Berry, & Shuck, 2014; Creuz, 2017;

Jepson & Tobolowsky, 2020; Jones, 2017; Priode, Dail, & Swanson, 2020). In some cases, the

students were complimentary of their advisors as a helpful resource, sharing that it enhanced

their college experience and was important to their academic success, while others shared

frustration at the lack of dependable advising.

Institutions must prioritize high-quality academic advising for their students because

advisors play a key role in each student's progression from one semester to the next. A reliable

advisor also serves as a consistent presence who would be likely to recognize early warning

signs of an issue since their relationship with the student spans multiple years. In fact, strong

faculty advising and associated helpfulness, particularly for nontraditional students working over

20 hours per week, was determined to be one of the most significant supportive factors (in

addition to financial aid and transportation to off-campus rotations) in a study of nursing students

(Priode, Dail, & Swanson, 2020).

Even in Europe, the importance of a consistent advising team is emphasized (Cotton,

Nash, and Kneale, 2017), which higher education institutions should prioritize in the United

States as well. The focus at these institutions centers on additional monitoring and support in the

form of specialist teams that are comprised of multiple staff members or even peer advisors,

which has been found to be somewhat effective for retention efforts, especially when coupled

with financial support. The impact of financial support was demonstrated in Kamer and Ishitani's

(2019) study, revealing that dropout rates were reduced from 63% to 28% for each $1,000

increase in Pell and loan totals. Chen, Ziskin & Torres (2020) highlighted the importance of

financial aid for student retention, particularly during the first year, as well. Ultimately though,

the findings of Cotton, Nash, and Kneale's (2017) research aligned with the present study in that

the presence of an active, supportive advisor appeared to be a strong protective factor in

preventing dropout for their students.

Finally, instituting an advising model that includes one point person as the nontraditional

student/adult learner advisor is a recommendation for small institutions like the ones represented

in this study. An advisor who understands the intricacies of nontraditional students' life

demands, is eager to provide a personalized approach, and who has flexible working hours to

accommodate their students' schedules is a best practice.

Implement mentorship programs

In addition to knowledgeable, consistent advisors, establishing faculty-student

mentorship programs may be advantageous (Chen, Ziskin, & Torres, 2020). Through the

relationships established in mentoring programs, there is increased communication and social

connectedness that occurs between the mentor pairs, which has been shown to encourage

conversations about issues and ideas that promote academic success and increased connectedness

(Judd, 2017). Peer mentorship programs based on major may be advantageous for nontraditional

students as well. The ability to turn to peers within the same cohort for academic support was

critical for the students in the present study and was an important resource for students who

overcame academic dismissal in Jones (2019) study as well.

Taking this a step further, active mentorship may be particularly important for those who

do not have a strong familial support system. In the present study and in several others within the

literature, nontraditional students emphasize the impact that their family members had on them

while pursuing their degree. These family members proved to be crucial support systems and

drivers toward persistence (Bailey, 2017; Bergman, Gross, Berry, & Shuck, 2014). For the

students whose family members are an important part of their lives, ensuring that their families

are welcomed to campus events and are made to feel included in the institution may promote

retention. For those who do not have a support system, a mentor may help these students feel

comfortable and supported, which may combat threats to persistence.

Provide accommodations for pregnant/nursing mothers

Only one of the participants in the present study actively discussed the struggles of both

being pregnant and then having a young child while balancing school. Based on her personal

experiences, Jess shared many ways in which she felt that the institution should be more

inclusive to women in similar situations, beginning with recognizing their presence at the

institution. Simple ideas included adding a nursing room in several centralized locations to

breastfeed between classes without needing to walk throughout much of the campus. In addition

to breastfeeding, she shared "Even pumping - I've gotta pump every three hours and I have three-hour labs."

This notion was supported in a year-long case study of student parents at two community colleges who expressed struggles with lacking clean, convenient areas on campus to pump breast milk (Lanford, 2019). Mothers with school-aged children also sought places on campus in which they could bring their child(ren) while studying, such as the library or study spaces. Institutions that have child bans must reconsider these restrictions and be intentional about welcoming children onto their campuses.

As previously discussed, childcare options offered by the institution would greatly assist student parents. The need for affordable care is essential, as the majority of single mothers are classified as low income individuals (Sallee & Cox, 2019). Not only is the cost of childcare a large consideration, but often, campus daycares require several years on a waiting list, which limits the accessibility for student parents who need reliable childcare to remain in school (2019).

Finally, similar to grocery stores, adding designated parking spaces or allowing for special parking passes could be a simple change that would reduce the burden on expectant mothers walking between classes.

Train students on campus resources and technologies

Given the number of students who struggled with their institution's Learning Management System, other campus technologies, and understanding citation styles, there is a clear need for targeted training on these platforms. The type of training could be formatted in various ways, including a mandatory orientation program directly preceding the fall/spring semester, an asynchronous training program, a 1-on-1 session with an advisor, or guest speaker

educational training within individual classes, among other ideas. During these training sessions, the availability of academic tutors should be emphasized, as individual tutoring sessions can accommodate nontraditional students' complex schedules.

Ensuring that students are equipped with knowledge of and access to student support resources on campus is vital, particularly given the number of nontraditional students who report feeling academically underprepared when they begin college, both in the present study and in the literature (Bohl et al., 2017; MacDonald, 2018). In a study conducted on intentional postsecondary "delayers" between high school and college, the participants reported that attending their local community college served as an effective introduction to their college careers (Jepson & Tobolowsky, 2020). By attending a local two year institution before a four year school, students can typically take courses at a lesser expense, gain credit toward their degree program, and develop the basic time management and study skills that will be required of them at a four year institution. However, within the same study, the students reported that they did not receive a significant orientation to support services at their community college. In a separate study, nontraditional student mothers spoke highly of a required course during their first semester which covered topics including time management, notetaking strategies, study skills, how to write papers, among other introductory topics (Bailey, 2017). Ensuring that nontraditional students receive this information is crucial, particularly because the risk of nontraditional student attrition is more likely during the first year (Chen, Ziskin, & Torres, 2020).

A proper orientation program targeted specifically for nontraditional students and their unique needs is crucial at all institutions, regardless of two or four year status (Jepson & Tobolowsky, 2020). Without a proper introduction within community college, those who transfer to a four year college may still be perceived as "behind" and perhaps less likely to ask for help

since they are accustomed to working through barriers on their own. This challenge was also

addressed in a study of nontraditional students possessing a disability (Thompson-Ebanks, 2017).

With additional factors such as a mental or physical disability at play, these characteristics may

further compound the issues that nontraditional students commonly face, including fear of stigma

or hesitancy to reach out about necessary ADA accommodations which can result in a higher

dropout rate (Jones, 2019). Resources to assist with issues of time management is also a best

practice outlined in the literature to assist with adult learner academic success (Sutton, 2020).

Utilize campus-wide early alert systems

The implementation or utilization of early alert warning systems is a tactic recommended

for campuses to identify students who are at risk of unsuccessfully completing a specific course

or multiple courses (Jones, 2020). "Starfish Retention Solutions" and similar software allow for

faculty and staff to raise "flags" on students when they do not perform well on assessments, turn

in late assignments, or if they display behavioral concerns. The platform also serves as a place

for campus personnel to keep notes on student appointments as a means of effective record-

keeping visible by key faculty and staff members who are closely related to each student. Upon

multiple "flags" raised on a particular student, a campus designee will be notified immediately

and prompted to check in on the student. This proactive, campus-wide approach requires

university buy-in and monetary resources to purchase but is demonstrated to be an effective

practice at identifying students at-risk of poor academic performance or drop-out at the first signs

of an issue. This proactive support from the institution catches students early on and has been

found to be an influential factor in students' decisions to persist (Bailey, 2017).

Conduct active outreach post-withdrawal

While the goal to retain students is at the heart of every institution's purpose, there are cases in which some students do not persist and may find it necessary to drop out of school prior to the completion of their degree. For nontraditional students in particular, "stopout," or sporadic period of on-and-off enrollment, may occur and proactive approaches should be taken to provide a smooth transition back into the university should the student desire to complete their degree.

In a qualitative study on nontraditional student dropouts, nine of the ten participants shared that they did not receive contact from their institution after their withdrawal. Deciding to withdraw from the institution is difficult for students and can take an emotional toll, and the lack of communication from the various rural universities represented in the study created additional feelings of resentment and gave the students the impression that they were not valued. In the study, the participants remarked that the researcher was the only one to have reached out to them in the participant recruitment letter in the months or years after departing (Thompson-Ebanks, 2017).

In a qualitative study conducted on students on the verge of academic dismissal at a small institution, the students who persisted and improved their academic performance spoke of this as well. One student within the study reiterated that his program director reached out to him multiple times with messages of encouragement and offers to assist in any way. This student shared that it "meant the world to [him]" (Jones, 2019, p. 2014) which demonstrates the impact that positive outreach can have on students who are struggling to complete their degree. Kroeninger (2018) further suggests that the implementation of a formal exit interview process is a best practice for understanding the true needs of each institution's population of students.

Limitations

Before conducting the study, it was anticipated that the different methods of communication during the interviews could produce varying results. Participants were provided with the option of a phone interview or video conference interview based on their preference and comfort level. Twelve students chose a video conference platform (Zoom or Google Meet) and ten preferred a phone call. There did not appear to be a difference in the depth of the conversations on the different platforms, but there may have been varying comfort levels based on whether or not faces/facial expressions were shown on the screen or if the interview was conducted via audio-only. In some cases, the facial expressions may have encouraged the sharing of more vulnerable responses, but in others, a phone call allowing for greater anonymity may have allowed the participants to feel more comfortable. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the choice of a video call or a phone call were the only options provided given that in-person interviews were not an option as a health and safety precaution. In future studies, a face-to-face interview may be advantageous to ensure consistency and maximize the participant-interviewer rapport.

As anticipated, the inability to select students for the study based on demographics reduces the generalizability of the findings. With this sampling method, the diversity of the population is dependent on the individuals who are willing to participate. Given the racial/ethnic demographics of the student body at the two primary institutions in the study, the composition of the nontraditional student participants is surprisingly representative of both institutions' populations. However, it is important to note that these institutions are predominantly White institutions, and so targeting underrepresented minorities in future studies could be beneficial. Additionally, while the racial/ethnic composition is fairly reflective of the student population, the

statistics regarding gender identity, age, veteran status, and first generation status were not accessible. It may be the case that the study is therefore not representative of the student populations at small institutions in Northeast Pennsylvania.

Furthermore, the present study collected data through self-reports, which utilized the assumption that the participants were truthful in their responses. Perhaps cross-referencing the experiences of the participants with individuals with whom they interact would help to further contextualize their responses. These individuals could include those who interacted with the participant most frequently during their collegiate journey, including their faculty advisors, professors, colleagues, or family members (Jones, 2019). In the same regard, phenomenological studies attempt to eliminate the bias of the researcher by addressing the personal experiences of the researcher through the bracketing process, but this does not eliminate all unintentional biases.

Finally, some of the student participants have more characteristics that are indicative of nontraditional status than others. For example, to be eligible for the study, a student needed to identify with a minimum of one of the following: 25 years or older when they started college, independent for financial aid purposes, have one or more children, work full time while going to school, took time off between high school and college, and/or have a GED (rather than a high school diploma). Additionally, some participants spent more time as a student than others, therefore providing more experiences from which to reflect upon. However, after interviewing the students, it was perceived that regardless of the amount of time spent at the institution or the number of characteristics qualifying each student as "nontraditional," the students shared similar experiences and were able to articulate their experiences as nontraditional students at their small institutions. Only one student actively discussed being pregnant while attending school and the

struggles associated with being a full time student, so this was one demographic that could have been better represented.

A student's ability to self-select into the study also poses a limitation because it means that the student participants are currently enrolled in their institution and are actively progressing toward their degree. The students who opted in therefore read their emails, were not too overwhelmed at the time of the study to participate, and were engaged enough with the campus to determine that participating was worth their time. It is important to note that although most of the participants were satisfied with their experience at their home institution, some chose to participate to have their voice heard in an attempt to contribute to a positive change. For example, Jess shared:

> "I just... I was actually like really grateful when I got this email. It's like *finally* somebody wants to hear from us."

The nontraditional student population is one of diverse backgrounds, life circumstances, and ages. Some nontraditional students do not physically look different than their traditional peers while others are more outwardly recognizable. Although both groups may have similar life situations at home, they likely do not interact or recognize their commonalities. For example, students and faculty may assume that Jess (mentioned above) is a traditional student who entered into college directly from high school. However, most are probably not aware that she gave birth during her first year in college and is now the single mother of a toddler. Other students may relate to this situation if they were aware of her circumstances, but there is not an organized forum for these students to connect. Without the intentional, regular representation of nontraditional students within each college campus, these students may feel that their situation is uncommon or abnormal. With increased recognition of this underrepresented population, the

students may have the ability to develop relationships with those of similar circumstances and develop a greater sense of belonging at their institution.

Future Research

The 22 participants in the present study provided well-rounded perspectives about their experiences as nontraditional students at small institutions in Northeast Pennsylvania. While these individuals represented everything from first generation students, retirees, parents, caregivers, on-campus and off-campus residents, transfer students, students with different gender identities, and individuals from varying racial/ethnic backgrounds, the most important population was missing from the study. That key population includes nontraditional students who were once enrolled in college but ultimately did not persist. Gaining insight into the situational, dispositional, and institutional barriers that contributed to these individuals' decisions to forgo their degree would be a critical population to study, but a very difficult one to access. Further, beyond an understanding of the challenges that led to a student's dropout, also identifying the initial warning signs and corresponding student behaviors/characteristics would allow institutions to be more proactive in terms of their nontraditional student retention (Cruez, 2017). Identifying each instance of institutional outreach would also be an interesting component to add to the study. Having a large sample size with the ability to compare between initial support, regular longitudinal support, and no support would be insightful data to analyze (Jones, 2019).

Gaining access to the population of students who dropped out in the midst of their degree could be an area of future research that would shed light on the *true* reasons for dropout. The current study was effective in determining the challenges to persistence, but it does not truly represent the reasons for dropout among nontraditional students. If access to this population was feasible, or if this research was conducted through a longitudinal study over a four to six year

period, this information could be utilized to identify institutional changes that may support

retention efforts. Additionally, the insights uncovered could provide the opportunity for targeted,

specialized outreach to participants who reveal that they may be inclined to complete their

degree with some additional support. Part-time students should also be considered in future

studies, as Chen, Ziskin, & Torres (2020) identified that part-time students are 14% more likely to

drop out than their full-time counterparts.

Another area of future research includes a similar qualitative study utilizing institutions

of different types, such as midsize or large institutions. Differences between private and public

institutions could be investigated as well. As discussed in Chapter 4, in the present study, many

participants shared that they appreciated the small-school atmosphere and intentionally chose an

institution in which they would have the ability to develop relationships with their professors and

peers through small class sizes. Faculty echoed this sentiment in the Cruez (2017) study as well.

For those who intentionally choose a larger institution with presumably more resources, these

students may have had a different experience with different expectations and varying needs.

Finally, other segments of the population, such as student parents (both mothers and

fathers) or those possessing two underrepresented identities (i.e. racial/ethnic minority +

nontraditional student) could be further investigated. For example, in a quantitative study

conducted on undergraduate nursing students, the nontraditional participants who were a part of

a racial/ethnic minority group expressed higher "marginality scores" in the study when compared

to those who did not identify as a racial/ethnic minority (Englund, 2019). Students of color have

been found to have higher dropout rates than White female students as well (Chen, Ziskin, &

Torres, 2020). Students with multiple marginalized identities likely have additional struggles and

needs that should be identified and supported within the higher education setting.

Conclusion

There is no single remedy to ensure that nontraditional students will be successful in their academic pursuits and progress to graduation, but there are several factors that may increase this likelihood. Cotton et al. (2017) noted that there is not one particular risk factor resulting in dropout, but rather, a compilation of challenges that may become too much for the student. On the other hand, however, the same logic is applied in terms of protective factors that support a student through progression in their program (Jones, 2019). If the personnel at higher education institutions are able to provide multiple streams of support, these cumulative factors may provide the necessary assistance to avoid attrition of their students. Through targeted outreach and an increased focus on the nontraditional student population, these strategies may change the trajectory of students within this population and serve as a protective measure for similar students in the future.

Appendix A

Participant Recruitment Letter

Subject Line: $10 Gift Card: Seeking Nontraditional Students/Adult Learners for Study

Hello students,

My name is Kimberly Coleman and I am a doctoral student at Marywood University. I am conducting a research study with the purpose of examining the experiences of nontraditional students/adult learners at small colleges and universities in Northeast Pennsylvania.

To qualify for this study, you must meet **any one or more** of the following criteria:
- Age 25 years or older at the start of college
- Independent for financial aid purposes
- Has one or more children
- Is a single caregiver
- Has a GED (rather than a high school diploma)
- Took time off between high school and college
- Work full time while going to school

If you identify as a nontraditional student, then you are invited to participate. The study will be conducted via phone or video call (options include Zoom, Facetime, or Google Meet) based on your preference. The interview will take no longer than one hour. This study is being conducted for an educational purpose and will provide results and best practices to provide better support for nontraditional students in the future.

Benefits may include the opportunity to inform colleges and universities with additional knowledge and practices that should be implemented to better serve the nontraditional student population.

This study is completely confidential and your participation is voluntary. For your participation, following the interview, you will receive a $10 Amazon gift card as a small sentiment for your time and assistance. The study is limited, so please respond as soon as possible if you are interested in participating. **If you are eligible and willing to participate in this study, please [click here.](#)** Upon indicating your interest, you will be provided with an informed consent form, which you must read and agree to. You will then be directed to enter your demographic information. Within 24 hours of submission, the researcher will reach out to you (via your preferred method of communication) to set up an interview.

Marywood University's Exempt Review Committee has approved this study. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me by phone or via email at the contact information below. I look forward to working with you!

Sincerely,
Kimberly Coleman

Appendix B

Informed Consent Form

A Qualitative Study of Nontraditional Student Experiences and Barriers to Persistence

Principal Investigator (PI): Kimberly Coleman – doctoral student at Marywood University
Principal Investigator Contact Information: (607) 372-2115, kcoleman@m.marywood.edu

Invitation for a Research Study
You are invited to take part in a research study about nontraditional student barriers, experiences, and perceptions of the campus climate. If you are a nontraditional student or "adult learner," who has been enrolled at your current institution as an undergraduate for at least two semesters, then you are eligible for this study. If you fit the criteria and wish to participate, then please read the instructions thoroughly and do not hesitate to reach out with any questions that may arise before agreeing to take part in this study.

Purpose - About the Study
The purpose of this study is to examine the experiences of nontraditional students/adult learners at small colleges and universities in Northeast Pennsylvania. Through a deeper understanding of the experiences and obstacles faced, it is the hope that colleges and universities can implement practices that fit adult learners' needs to better serve this student population in the future.

Procedures - What You Will Do
If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to complete a brief questionnaire to indicate demographic information about yourself. This is a one-time data collection and will take no more than three minutes of your time. Upon completing the brief demographic questionnaire, the researcher will set up a time to speak with you on the phone or through video call (such as Zoom, Facetime, etc.) to interview you about your experiences as a nontraditional student at your current institution. The interview will last no longer than one hour and will be recorded via digital audio recorder so that the investigator can transcribe the interview. You will have the opportunity to ask follow-up questions via email after the interview has been conducted as well as during the interview as applicable. There is also the possibility that the researcher may request a follow-up interview to clarify responses if needed.

Risks and Benefits
The risk of participating in the study is no greater than the risks experienced in daily life or normal activities.

The benefits of participating include the opportunity to inform colleges and universities with more knowledge regarding the lived experiences and needs of the adult learner population. Through compiling a model of best practices for colleges and universities, the results may also be used to implement better supports for current and future adult learners who face similar obstacles as you may have gone through.

Payment or other Rewards

You will receive a $10 Amazon gift card for your participation in this research study. If you are not selected to participate in this study based on your demographic information matching too closely with other participants, then the researcher will notify you and email you a $5.00 Dunkin Donuts gift card for your time.

Confidentiality

The records of this study will be kept private. Information used in any written or presented report will not make it possible to identify you. Only the main investigator and the three faculty members on this project's doctoral committee will have access to the research records. Records will be kept in a locked file for three years and the data will then be destroyed through electronic permanent deletion of the files.

Taking Part is Voluntary

Participation is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relationship with the investigator. It will not affect your relationship with Marywood University. You may withdraw at any time. There will be no penalty. To withdraw, please contact the investigator by using the contact information listed above. Your information will then be permanently deleted.

Contacts and Questions

If you have questions about this study at any time, contact the principal investigator. Her contact information appears at the top of the first page.

If you have questions related to the rights of research participants or research-related injuries (where applicable), please contact the Exempt Review Committee/Institutional Review Board at (570) 961-4782 or irbhelp@marywood.edu.

You may save or print a copy of this form to keep for your records.

Statement of Consent

I have read the above information and consent to participate in this study.

_____ *Click here to provide authorization of consent*

Appendix C

Semi-Structured Interview Questions

The semi-structured interview questions will include:

- Describe your overall experience at [undergraduate institution] as an adult learner?

- What challenges have occurred that have influenced your experiences as an adult learner among traditional students?

- What is your primary motivation for pursuing a bachelor's degree?

- How has the COVID-19 pandemic impacted your educational experience?

- What are the positive and negative aspects of taking courses within an online learning environment, and does this help or hinder your ability to be successful?

- What are the institution's strengths and weaknesses in serving/supporting the nontraditional student population?

- How did you feel in terms of your own abilities to be successful with the rigors of college coursework? *(dispositional barriers)*

- [If applicable] Did you face any internal struggles or anxieties related to being older than most other students? *(dispositional barriers)*

- How do your personal life circumstances outside of school influence your time at [institution]? *(situational barriers)*

- Do you have a support system? If so, who? *(situational barriers)*

- Does [current institution] have resources specifically geared toward serving adult learners, such as a specific office or department, nontraditional student lounge or nontraditional student organization? *(institutional barriers)*

- What could [institution] do that would make your feel more supported? *(institutional barriers)*

- Is there anything else you would like to tell me?

Appendix D

Demographic Information Collection

Thank you for your interest in this research study on nontraditional student experiences at small private colleges and universities in Northeast Pennsylvania.

To participate, you must be a nontraditional student who has been enrolled at your current institution for a minimum of two full semesters. This optional demographic information collection will take no more than three minutes of your time and is being gathered prior to the interview (which is expected to take no longer than one hour).

This study is completely confidential and your participation is voluntary. Following the interview, you will receive a $10 Amazon gift card as a small sentiment for your time and assistance.

Do not hesitate to reach out the researcher, Kimberly Coleman, a doctoral student at Marywood University, anytime at kcoleman@m.marywood.edu. Thank you!

Demographic Information

Which of the following characteristics describes you?
Check all that apply to indicate the trait(s) that make you a nontraditional student.

- 25 years or older when you started college
- Independent for financial aid purposes
- Has one or more children
- Is a single caregiver
- Has a GED (rather than a high school diploma)
- Took time off between high school and college
- Work full time while going to school

What is your current major (and minor is applicable)?
(Include Bachelor of Science - BS or Bachelor of Arts - BA if known)

What is your birth year?

With what gender do you identify?

What is your race/ethnicity?
Check all that apply.

- White
- American Indian or Alaska Native
- Hispanic or Latino
- Asian American

- Black or African American
- Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
- Two or More
- No Response/Unknown
- Other: _____

How many full semesters have you attended your current institution?
This does NOT include the current semester.

- One semester (not eligible for this study)
- Two semesters
- Three semesters
- Four semesters
- Five semesters
- Six semesters
- Seven semesters
- Eight semesters
- Other: _____

How many dependents (children) do you currently have?

- None
- One
- Two
- Three or more

Are you a student veteran?

- Yes
- No
- Other: _____

Are you a first generation student?
"First generation" is defined as the first in your family to attend college.

- Yes
- No
- Other: _____

What college or university do you currently attend?

Did you transfer to your current college/university?

- Yes
- No
- Other: _____

Interview Information
Please provide your contact information and preference for mode of communication. The researcher, Kimberly Coleman, will reach out to you within 24 hours!

Please provide the mode of communication you prefer for the interview?
The researcher will send a confirmation email with the appropriate follow-up information.

- Phone call
- Zoom conference
- Facetime
- Google Meet
- Other: _____

What time of day would you prefer to complete the interview?
Choose all that apply.

- Weekday morning
- Weekday afternoon
- Weekday evening
- Weekend morning
- Weekend afternoon
- Weekend evening
- Varies, please contact me to schedule the interview.

Please choose a pseudonym that will be used throughout the interview and during analysis.
A pseudonym is a fake name or alias to be used instead of your real name in order to preserve your participant confidentiality.

Provide an email address that the researcher may use to confirm the interview with you.
Note: Your indicated email address will be stripped from your responses upon receipt of this form and will only be used to send an incentive for taking part in the study.

Thank you!

Please do not hesitate to reach out to Kimberly Coleman, Marywood University doctoral student, at kcoleman@m.marywood.edu with any questions or comments about this study.

Appendix E

Participant Interview Confirmation

Dear [Pseudonym],

Thank you so much for completing the demographic information form in order to participate in the research study on nontraditional student experiences at small private colleges and universities in Northeast Pennsylvania. I would love to set up an interview with you at your convenience. Based on the information that you provided, it seems that a [weekday/weekend/morning/afternoon/evening] would be the best time to coordinate the interview, which is expected to take no longer than one hour.

Would [proposed date] through [preferred method of communication] work well for you? Please let me know and I will send you a [link/phone number] for the meeting.

I look forward to working with you!

Best,
Kimberly Coleman
kcoleman@m.marywood.edu
(607) 372-2115

Appendix F

Marywood University Exempt Review Committee (ERC) Approval Letter

EXEMPT REVIEW COMMITTEE
Immaculata Hall, 2300 Adams Avenue, Scranton, PA 18509

DATE: November 13, 2020

TO: Kimberly Coleman, B.S., M.S., Ph.D (in progress)

FROM: Marywood University Exempt Review Committee

STUDY TITLE: [1636803-4] Undergraduate Nontraditional Students' Lived Experiences and
Obstacles to Persistence: A Phenomenological Investigation

MU ERC #: 2020-E037
SUBMISSION TYPE: Revision #2

ACTION: APPROVED

APPROVAL DATE: November 13, 2020
REPORT DUE DATE: August 4, 2021
EXEMPT CATEGORY: 2ii

Thank you for your submission of a Revision Request for this research study. Marywood
University's Exempt Review Committee has APPROVED your request to include recruitment at
the University of Scranton. The project meets the criteria defined by federal regulations for an
Exemption and involves minimal risk to participants. All research must be conducted in
accordance with this approved submission.

**No new documents require the ERC's approval stamp as part of this revision. Past stamped
documents may still be found in IRBNet (Reviews on left tab, then on the main screen
under Board Documents and next to #2).**

Please also note that:
- **A CLOSURE REPORT FORM is due upon completion. If not closed by August 4,
  2021, a CHECK-IN REPORT FORM will be required by that date instead.**
- Any REVISION to the protocol must be submitted to and approved by the ERC prior to
  initiation.
- All DEVIATIONS from the described protocol, UNANTICIPATED PROBLEMS or
  SERIOUS ADVERSE EVENTS must be reported immediately to this office.
- All NON-COMPLIANCE issues or COMPLAINTS regarding this study must be
  reported to this office.

The appropriate forms for any of the reports mentioned above may be found on the ERC's website or in the Forms Library at IRBNet.

If you have any questions, please contact the ERC at 570-348-6211, x. 2418 or irbhelp@marywood.edu. Include your study title and MU ERC number in all correspondence with this office.

Thank you and good luck with your research!

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