

Summer 8-2017

The Power of Perseverance: A Qualitative Study of Factors That Impact Adult Student Persistence to Graduation

Philomena M. Gill

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THE POWER OF PERSEVERANCE: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF FACTORS
THAT IMPACT ADULT STUDENT PERSISTENCE TO GRADUATION

A Dissertation

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies and Research

in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

Philomena M. Gill

Indiana University of Pennsylvania

August 2017

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Indiana University of Pennsylvania
School of Graduate Studies and Research
Department of Professional Studies in Education

We hereby approve the dissertation of

Philomena M. Gill

Candidate for the degree of Doctor of Education

Valeri Helterbran, Ed.D.
Professor of Professional Studies in Education,
Advisor, Retired

Amber Racchini, D.Ed.
Assistant Professor of Developmental Studies

Mark Twiest, Ph.D.
Professor of Professional Studies in Education

ACCEPTED

Randy L. Martin, Ph.D.
Dean
School of Graduate Studies and Research

Title: The Power of Perseverance: A Qualitative Study of Factors that Impact Adult Student Persistence to Graduation

Author: Philomena M. Gill

Dissertation Chair: Dr. Valeri Helterbran

Dissertation Committee Members: Dr. Amber Racchini
Dr. Mark Twiest

This study used a qualitative interpretive approach to examine perceptions of adult students in their final semester prior to graduation by analyzing what they believe contributed to their persistence to degree completion. Participants were all pursuing undergraduate degrees, were 25 years-of-age or older, and were enrolled in one of three schools within the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education.

The research revealed that motivations of employment, family support, and maturity levels were the three main contributing factors that adult students believed were the most important to their persistence. In addition, participants of the study largely held no regrets that their journey to graduation did not have a traditional path. Participants also held low expectations on what they thought their university should do to support them, and they lacked a sense of institutional connectedness.

This study was significant because it added to scant research on the topic of adult student retention. It concentrated on areas that have been largely overlooked in most retention research, and provided insight into what factors contribute to the persistence of adult learners.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

With the decline of Pennsylvania high school graduates since 2011, student admissions in the state's colleges and universities have also decreased, especially at the Commonwealth's 14 state-owned universities. The Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education (PASSHE) is the compilation of 14 state-owned universities in the state of Pennsylvania. The universities in the System are Bloomsburg, California, Cheyney, Clarion, East Stroudsburg, Edinboro, Indiana, Kutztown, Lock Haven, Mansfield, Millersville, Shippensburg, Slippery Rock, and West Chester Universities of Pennsylvania. All schools are accredited by the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools (Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education, n.d.).

Collectively, PASSHE enrolls an undergraduate student body of approximately 90 percent Pennsylvania residents (Smeltz, 2012). Because these schools depend heavily on the population within the state, they are particularly vulnerable to population increases and decreases (Smeltz, 2012). In 2014, fall enrollment declined among the 14 schools for the fourth consecutive year, a total average decrease of 1.5 percent (or 8,900 students). At their peak in 2010, these schools collectively enrolled 119,500 students; however, their enrollment fell to 110,600 in September 2014 (Erdley, 2014).

The decline in high school graduates came as no surprise. In fact, colleges and universities estimated enrollment 18 years in advance by tracking birthrates in Pennsylvania. According to a report by the Western Interstate Commission on Higher Education, the United States hit peak enrollment of college graduates in 2011 after 20 years of growth. College enrollment, however, is predicted to decline through 2020 as

Pennsylvania anticipates a nine percent decline in high school graduates during this timeframe, dropping from 149,595 in 2011 to 135,767 in 2020 (Western Interstate Commission on Higher Education, 2012).

This reality has caused administrators in PASSHE not only to look at the potential for new recruiting sources, but also to implement strategies to retain the students who are currently enrolled. Retention of students in higher education is important on many levels. Students who graduate from college earn a higher income (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012) and have a lower school loan default rate (Nguyen, 2012). Retention of current students also has fiscal benefits to the school.

Adult students, a viable recruiting and retention source, is one option available to fill the gap that has been left by declining enrollment of traditional high school students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013). As a growing population, adult students are often neglected when considering issues of admissions and retention.

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) projects that between 2012-2023 adult student enrollment will rise eight percent higher than those students of traditional age (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013). Forecasted data such as these indicate that adult students soon will constitute more than half of all potential ‘customers’ for institutions of higher learning (Hadfield, 2003). While enrollment of adult students is increasing in the postsecondary arena faster than any other population of students, administrators in higher education continue to view this group as an anomaly (Fincher, 2010; Wyatt, 2011). This perception of adult students as a ‘secondary business’ is evident in a school’s recruiting and admissions practices, hours of operation, marketing materials, mission statements, policies and procedures, class schedules and academic and

extra-curricular programming (Sissel, Hansman, & Kasworm, 2001). It can also mean stigma of terminology (nontraditional, part time, commuter), lack of funding for adult programs or services, and resources that are targeted to the 8:00 a.m. – 4:30 p.m. students (Sissel, Hansman, & Kasworm, 2001). While some courses or programs may be offered in the evening or weekend, services and offices such as financial aid, billing, tutoring, career counseling, and advising, among others, continue to operate on a traditional weekday schedule (Hadfield, 2003). Because leaders in higher education fail to understand fully the needs of adult students, they continue to apply models made for traditionally-aged students; thus, adult students are required to adapt, leaving them at a disadvantage (Hadfield, 2003; Wyatt, 2011).

Considerations for adult students in higher education are vast and include distinct provisions for services and programs, as well as strategies for marketing and retention. For a university working with adult students whose ages may span 60 years, unique needs are to be expected, including cost and financial aid, child or elder care, feelings of uncertainty, juggling responsibilities, flexibility of learning options, time-to-graduation, and recognition of prior learning (Cabrera, Burkum, La Nasa, & Bibb, 2012; Hadfield, 2003).

Typically, adult students juggle multiple responsibilities. Work, spouse, children, aging parents, and community volunteer work comprise some of the many roles that adult students hold. Most adult students deem their role of student as secondary to the other roles they serve. Because of these multiple roles, no standard approach exists for a college or university to retain this differentiated group of students (Kasworm, 2008).

Flexibility is a desired option for the adult learner. Prospective adult students search colleges that have convenient class times (evenings, weekends, online), are close to their home or office (or are online), and that provide faculty who are sympathetic and accommodating to issues that may arise during the course of a semester (illness, death in the family, pregnancy) (Aslanian & Giles, 2009).

Adult student enrollment in higher education now stands almost equal to traditional student enrollment, with nontraditional enrollment at 40 percent and traditional enrollment at 60 percent (Jacobs & Hundley, 2010). While traditional colleges and universities are aware of the data surrounding the increase in the number of adult students in higher education, and therefore, the increase in potential income, they continue to provide programs and services that better accommodate traditional students (typically recent high school graduates but also anyone 24 years-of-age or younger) (Hadfield, 2003).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the perceptions of undergraduate adult students in the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education regarding what these students believe are the factors that contribute to their persistence to graduation.

Statement of the Problem

Although adult students aged 25 and older are the fastest-growing segment of the higher education population, no standard method of measuring adult student retention exists (Fincher, 2010; Wyatt, 2011). One reason may revolve around the definition of ‘retention’ used by the NCES and the fact that it is not necessarily relevant for adult students who may have several stop-outs (stopping enrollment for a period of time but

reenrolling at a later date) during the course of their education. NCES defines retention as students who return to school the following year to continue their studies (Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System, n.d.). Additionally, many colleges and universities do not track data specific to adult student retention or degree completion. A recent survey found that 43 percent of institutions do not know the retention rate of adult students on their campus, and 77 percent do not know their school's rate of degree completion for this same population (United Professional and Continuing Education Association and InsideTrack, 2012). Institutions that do not track this information, therefore, can do little to address the issue of adult student retention on their campuses.

A lack of knowledge about adult student retention on the part of institutions may be influenced by two issues. First, the reporting of retention and graduation rates for first-time, full-time students (those viewed as 'traditional') by institutions is a requirement for those receiving U.S. Department of Education (ED) Title IV funding. However, no reporting is required for other groups of students such as part-time and transfers (those also identified as nontraditional) (United Professional and Continuing Education Association and InsideTrack, 2012).

The NCES reports four, five, and six-year graduation rates for students seeking a bachelor's degree at four-year institutions. These statistics can be isolated by gender, institution type (public, nonprofit, and for-profit), race, and cohort entry year. However, the report cannot be segregated by age; therefore, a determination of graduation rates for adult students cannot be made. NCES reports the national four-year graduation rate as 39 percent, the five-year rate as 54.9 percent, and the six-year rate as 59.2 percent (Digest of Education Statistics, 2014a).

Similarly, NCES also reports retention rates for four-year and two-year institutions which can be separated by institution type, institution selectivity (based on percentage of accepted applications), enrollment status (full time or part time), and year accepted. The report is not, however, separated or identified by age. Again, a determination on retention rates for adult students cannot be made. However, since nearly half of adult student enrollment is part time (Aslanian & Giles, 2009; Erisman & Steele, 2015), a comparison of adult versus traditional student retention can emerge when examining enrollment status. The overall national retention rate for both traditional and nontraditional students combined is 71.8 percent for full-time students and 42.2 percent for part-time students (Digest of Education Statistics, 2014b).

The second issue that helps explain the lack of knowledge about adult student retention on the part of colleges and universities involves the definition of retention and how it applies to an adult learner. NCES measures retention by calculating first-time students who return to school one year following their initial enrollment (Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System, n.d.). At the same time, the Department of Education continues to define retention based on older norms that reflect students whose main focus is college. These students (termed ‘traditional students’) enter college immediately following high school, have a fixed course of completion, and no or part-time work responsibilities (Hadfield, 2003).

Significance of the Study

The topic of college student retention is one of the most studied issues in the field of higher education (Berger, Ramirez & Lyons, 2012). However, much of the 20 year old or older research focuses on traditional-aged students. Although it has been studied

extensively, and the causes of student dropout have been uniformly substantiated, statistics on retention rates have remained virtually unchanged. Thirty-three percent of first-time, full-time, baccalaureate degree-seeking students are not retained from year one to year two; 40 percent of students who enter college will never earn their degree; and less than half of all students earn their degree in five years (Habley, Bloom & Robbins, 2012).

Research on adult student retention comes mostly from studies done at community colleges (Guidos & Dorris, 2008). In addition, most research addressing student retention or attrition is quantitative in nature (Geisler, 2007). However, fewer than 50 percent of these studies provide reasons for student persistence, and quantitative research often has small sample sizes and poor survey response rates (Hoffman, 2000). Finally, most studies on student retention focus on why students leave, not why they remain (Tinto, 2012). For these reasons, this study uses qualitative data, focuses on why students stay, and takes place at four-year institutions.

In addition to the problem of these research gaps, the study of student retention remains significant on three levels: an institutional level, an individual level, and a national level. At an institutional level, the cost of unretained students has obvious implications such as the loss of tuition and fees. It also has ancillary ramifications in financial losses to dining, housing, bookstore, and athletic services, as well as other campus events. The lost revenue is not for just one semester, but for the total number of semesters it would have taken for that student to graduate (Seidman, 2012).

Similar to many other states that tie public funding to institutional performance measures such as retention rates, institutions within the Pennsylvania State System of

Higher Education (PASSHE) also receive allocations based on system accountability metrics (known as performance funding indicators). Institutions with poor retention rates score low on this indicator, which can decrease their portion of state allotment.

Accrediting bodies may also consider retention rates in their reviews and awards (Middle States Commission on Higher Education, 2015).

On an individual level, a person with some college education but with no degree, on average earns \$32,295 per year, standing at \$24,370 less per year than someone with a bachelor's degree (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). While this difference is significant on a yearly basis, the disparity over a lifetime is greater still.

On a national level, students who received financial aid but drop out of college are at a greater risk for defaulting on their loans. Drop-outs have a 16.8 percent rate of default, while graduates default at a rate of only 3.7 percent (Nguyen, 2012). Thirty-one percent of students in 2009 who did not complete a degree and who had attended a for-profit institution, had debt equaling 100 percent or more of their yearly income. Twenty-one percent of non-completers at non-profit institutions had the same problem (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013). A student's ability to repay their school loan debt depends largely on their employment situation, which in turn, depends on their college completion. Unemployment rates are higher for individuals who do not complete their college degree (six percent) when compared to those who do (3.5 percent) (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013; United States Department of Labor, 2014).

Pennsylvania ranks third in the nation of states with the highest student debt upon graduation. Students graduating from non-profit schools (public or private) in Pennsylvania leave school with an average debt of \$31,675. Two PASSHE universities

made the top 20 list of those with the highest debt in the nation for a public institution, with Indiana University of Pennsylvania ranking fourth, and Mansfield University of Pennsylvania ranking seventh. No PASSHE universities were listed in the top 20 colleges and universities for having students with low debt (The Institute for College Access & Success, 2013).

Research Questions

This study will be guided by the following two questions:

1. What do undergraduate students aged 25 and older consider to be the most important factors contributing to their degree completion?
2. How do undergraduate students aged 25 and older view the university's role in assisting them with degree completion?

Study Design

A qualitative interpretive approach was used to conduct this study of students in the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education (Yin, 2011). The use of an interpretive approach was chosen because it allowed for an analysis of individuals who shared similar experiences in their pursuit of higher education. This approach is also relevant for this study because of its focus on an individual's perceptions of an experience or event and their interpretation of it.

The nine students interviewed were all 25 years of age or older, were enrolled in an undergraduate degree program, and were in their final semester prior to graduation (termed 'pending graduates'). The sample population included students from three of the 14 State System schools. These three schools were chosen because they enroll the highest percentage of adult students in the System. One-to-one interviews were used as the

primary method of data collection. Demographic information was also collected prior to each interview.

Theoretical Framework

The Center for the Study of College Student Retention lists eight major models, concepts and theories of student retention that have been developed over the past 78 years: John McNeely's college student mortality (1937); John Summerskill's concept of personality attributes (1962); William Spady's model (1971); Kamens's studies comparing institutions of different sizes (1971, 1974); Vincent Tinto's model of student retention (1975, 1993); Alexander Astin's theory of involvement (1977, 1985); John Bean's model of work turnover to student attrition (1980, 1983); and John Bean and Barbara Metzner's conceptual model of nontraditional student attrition (1985) (Morrison & Silverman, 2012; Retention theories, n.d.).

While many studies focus on college student retention, of the eight main theories, concepts, and models developed, only one – John Bean and Barbara Metzner's Conceptual Model of Nontraditional Undergraduate Student Attrition – specifically addresses adult student retention (Bean & Metzner, 1985).

The theoretical frameworks used in this study includes two of the models listed above: Vincent Tinto's model of student retention (1975, 1993) and John Bean and Barbara Metzner's conceptual model of nontraditional student attrition (1985).

Vincent Tinto's model of student retention is the most cited of the retention theories, models, or concepts that exist today (Hagerdorn, 2012). Tinto uses Dukheim's theory of suicide as the theoretical framework for his study and he suggested three sets of characteristics that influence students' dropout from college – family background,

individual attributes, and pre-college schooling (Tinto, 1975). While Tinto's model is supported by the idea that social integration into college life is a contributing factor to student retention (Bean & Metzner, 1985), it also uses academic variables such as grades, intellectual development, faculty interaction, and goal commitment (Tinto, 1975).

Since the life circumstances of adult students preclude many from participation in clubs, organizations, activities, athletics, and other social events in college, Bean and Metzner (1985) created a model that used variables that were more germane to the adult student. These variables, referred to as environmental variables, include finances, hours of employment, outside encouragement, family responsibilities, and opportunity to transfer. Like other models, they also include academic variables (study habits, academic advising, absenteeism, major certainty, and course availability) and background and defining variables (age, enrollment status, residence, educational goals, high school performance, ethnicity, and gender).

In examining academic and environmental variables only, Bean and Metzner concluded that the combination of positive and negative support in each area affected retention. If environmental support was always positive, the adult student would be retained, even if academic support was negative. If environmental support was ever negative, even positive academic support could not prevent the student from dropping out (Bean and Metzner, 1985).

The following graphic organizer depicts the theoretical frameworks that will be applied when examining factors that lead to adult student retention. (Figure1).

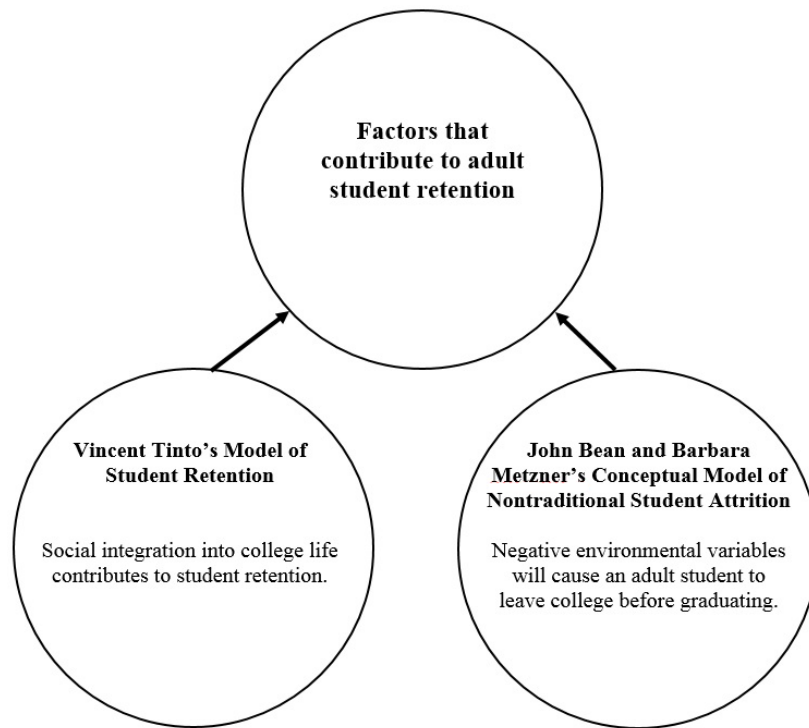


Figure 1. Author-created graphic organizer of theoretical framework.

Definition of Terms

The following terms will be used throughout the course of this study:

Adult student: The adult student definition varies and can include students who are 25 years-of-age or older, have delayed enrollment, are enrolled in classes part time, work full time, have a spouse or children, are a veteran of the military, or are financially independent. The majority of adult students are middle-class white females who attend school part time for reasons relating to their career. They typically enroll in degree programs that are in the health, education, or business fields (Aslanian & Giles, 2009). Their motivations for pursuing postsecondary undergraduate education include achieving personal enrichment (97 percent), increasing income (89 percent), proving they can do it (76 percent),

changing careers (75 percent), advancing within their current job (66 percent), and being a role model for their family (62 percent) (Harms, 2008).

For the purpose of this study, adult students will be defined using the PASSHE definition, which is a student in an undergraduate degree program who is 25 years-of-age or older. Adult students are also referred to as adult learners or nontraditional students.

PASSHE: PASSHE is an acronym for the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education which is the only public university system in Pennsylvania and includes 14 state-owned schools. These schools include Bloomsburg, California, Cheyney, Clarion, East Stroudsburg, Edinboro, Indiana, Kutztown, Lock Haven, Mansfield, Millersville, Shippensburg, Slippery Rock, and West Chester Universities of Pennsylvania.

Retention: Also sometimes referred to as persistence. NCES defines retained students as those who return to school the following year to continue their studies (Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System, n.d.). PASSHE measures and publishes retention rates for first-time, full-time baccalaureate degree-seeking freshman (adult learners are included in this data) after their first and second year of enrollment only. The opposite of retention is attrition.

Success: While success can mean different things to adult students, for the purpose of this study, success is defined as continuous and uninterrupted enrollment to the point of graduation.

Stop out: A stop out is when a student withdraws from the institution, but typically returns to the same or different school after a period of time.

Traditional student: For the purpose of this study, a traditional student is identified as an undergraduate student who is 24 years-of-age or younger.

Limitations

The implementation and success of this study was contingent on the cooperation of select universities within PASSHE and the PASSHE Research Office. The results of the study are only reflective of adult students within undergraduate degree programs, and the findings will not necessarily be representative of certificate or graduate degree-seeking students. Likewise, private schools, community colleges, and for-profit institutions may not be able to make inferences based on four-year public school conclusions. In addition, universities from only one system and one state are represented in the findings. Because a limited number of participants were used, findings are not generalizable.

Summary

The issues affecting adult students in higher education are unique and differ greatly from students enrolling directly from high school. Consequently, maintaining enrollment of the adult student population requires strategies that meet their needs. Although adult student enrollment has grown exponentially over the past 40 years, most colleges and universities still deliver a product designed for the traditional student.

The retention of adult students is not tracked nationally. Those who are tracked fit into the traditional mold of a full-time student, and the definition of retention, in and of itself, is one that disregards a nontraditional learner. The large amount of research that has been done on student retention in higher education has produced many theories, concepts, and models. Only one, however, specifically addresses the adult student.

The retention of students has significance, not only to the student, but to the institution and the nation: individuals retained to graduation earn a greater income, institutions maintain their viability, and loan default rates are lower for students who become alumni.

The purpose of this study was to examine the perception of adult students and what they believe were the contributing factors to their success in college. This approach looked at why these students stay, rather than why they leave, which provides colleges and universities with a better understanding of what they can do to retain them to graduation.

CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

The purpose of this study was to examine the perceptions of undergraduate adult students in the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education regarding what these students believe are the factors that contribute to their persistence to graduation. This study is grounded in two major theories related to student retention, and this chapter examines the body of literature surrounding retention and adult students in higher education.

Students, parents, faculty, staff, and legislators have an interest in whether a student persists in college through degree completion. For students, a degree can raise their standard of living; for faculty and staff, it can validate their hard work; for parents, it can mean money well spent; for legislators, it can be a measurable outcome; and for the economy as a whole, it can mean a more educated workforce and better positioning to compete globally (Astin & Oseguera, 2012).

This chapter initially focuses on historical research of student retention and how it evolved into a significant issue in higher education. In addition, this chapter addresses the definition and measurement of retention by the United States government. This chapter also briefly discusses the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education (PASSHE), since the students who are the focus of this study are enrolled in schools within the System. Consideration is also given to adult student trends and retention, as well as the controversy surrounding retention. The final examination centers on the theoretical framework that is the structure for this study.

This literature review was conducted using EBSCOhost and ProQuest Digital Dissertations as the two primary Internet database sources. Search terms included (in various combinations): academic, persistence, retention, attrition, adult student, adult learner, nontraditional student, higher education, post-secondary, and college or university. The Center for the Study of College Student Retention (www.cscsr.org) assisted in identifying themes and references, and the National Center for Education Statistics provided vital data. *The Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice* was also an invaluable resource as the only found journal dedicated solely to issues of student retention in higher education.

Historical Background

While institutions of higher education have existed in the United States for over 350 years, only during the last 50 years has the issue of retention become a topic of interest. In the early years, there were few students. Enrollment generally consisted of men being groomed for the ministry. In addition, degrees held little importance, and graduation was not a goal (Berger, Ramirez & Lyons, 2012). The United States Department of the Interior and the Office of Education commissioned the first study of student retention (which at that time was termed ‘student mortality’). John McNelly conducted the study and published his results in 1937 (McNeely, 1937).

Today, the topic of college retention is an area that is studied more than any other field related to higher education (Berger, Ramirez & Lyons, 2012). While anywhere from hundreds to thousands of articles surfaced when searching the Internet database sources (depending on the combination of search terms listed previously), much of the research is 20 years old or older. The issue of retention became saturated and much of the research

dwindled by the mid-1990s (Braxton, 2000), leaving sparse research on the subject in the past two decades.

Studies on adult student retention are even less plentiful. In 2007, authors Donaldson and Townsend examined the amount of articles that journals devoted to adult student issues in general. The authors reviewed all articles published during a 13-year span (from 1990-2003) from the following seven journals: *The Journal of College Student Development*, *The National Association of Student Personnel Administrators Journal*, *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, *The Community College Review*, *The Journal of Higher Education*, *Research in Higher Education*, and *The Review of Higher Education*. They found that of the 3,219 articles examined, only 41 (1.27 percent) were specifically devoted to issues surrounding adult students (Donaldson & Townsend, 2007).

In addition to scant research, there is also a lack of knowledge of adult student issues, such as retention and graduation rates, by administration within higher education. When the University Professional and Continuing Education Association Center for Research and Consulting (UPCEA) and InsideTrack (a consulting firm that works with colleges and universities to help students succeed) surveyed UPCEA member schools, the researchers found that a majority of the schools (77 percent) failed to track or to know the degree completion rates for adult students at their institution. Additionally, almost half were not aware of their school's retention rate for this same population (United Professional and Continuing Education Association and InsideTrack, 2012).

Retention research indicates that there are three areas most critical to retention efforts. The first area includes programs and services that aid a student in their transition

to college life, whether it be after high school or after a prolonged absence from school. The second area focuses on assisting students with the selection of a major or career path that best fits them. The third and final area involves the placement of students in courses for which they are adequately prepared, and provision of learning support for those who need it most (Habley, Bloom & Robbins, 2012).

Most recently, the Student Right-to-Know Act of 1990 dramatically impacted the focus of student retention by requiring schools receiving Title IV funding to release graduation rates for full-time students. Even though graduation and retention rates are separate and distinct, a student who is routinely retained from year to year is more likely to graduate within the normal time specified by the graduation rate (six years for a four-year institution) (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013a).

Definition and Measurement of Retention

Chapter one contained a brief definition of retention, but below is one with greater detail. As will be discussed later, this definition fails to depict the adult student. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) defines retention as:

A measure of the rate at which students persist in their educational program at an institution, expressed as a percentage. For four-year institutions, this is the percentage of first-time bachelors (or equivalent) degree-seeking undergraduates from the previous fall who are again enrolled in the current fall. For all other institutions this is the percentage of first-time degree or certificate-seeking students from the previous fall who either re-enrolled or successfully completed their program by the current fall. (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013b)

To calculate retention rate, the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), the data collecting division of NCES, uses the following mathematical formula:

$$\text{IPEDS RR} = \frac{\text{Number of students re-enrolled in the following fall}}{(\text{Number of students in the fall cohort} - \text{exclusions})} \times 100$$

(Hagedorn, 2012).

The term ‘retention’ was not used to describe college persistence until the 1970s when there was sudden interest on the subject and subsequent seminal works by those such as Tinto (1975) and Astin (1975). Prior to that, retention was seen as a problem for students, not for institutions, and terminology such as ‘dropout’ or ‘departure’ was used instead of retention (Habley, Bloom & Robbins, 2012).

Frequently, literature and research use and view the terms ‘persistence’ and ‘retention’ as the same phenomenon; however, NCES clearly differentiates these terms: retention is institution-focused, whereas persistence is student-focused. “In other words, institutions retain and students persist” (Hagedorn, 2012, p. 85).

With the vast and varied definitions and measurements of retention, the problem in considering adult student retention becomes further complicated. First, there are many examples in which students are not retained or graduated; however, they meet their personal goals. Students may be taking classes at one institution so that they can transfer them to another; the student has an eight-year goal of graduating, not a four- or six-year goal; or perhaps the student has no intention of graduating at all, and prefers to take classes for personal enrichment (Anderson, 2011; Bean, 1990; Habley, Bloom & Robbins, 2012). In those instances, a student is successful. According to the NCES measurement of retention and graduation, the school is not. A better measurement of

retention for situations such as this would be to compare a student's initial goal to the results (Bean, 1990; Habley, Bloom & Robbins, 2012).

The second problem with the definition of retention lies in the assumption by NCES that students are attending full time, with school being their primary focus and responsibility, and a bachelor's degree their goal (Hadfield, 2003). Despite evidence of the growing population of nontraditional students in higher education, no widely-accepted measurement of retention exists for adult students (Fincher, 2010).

The Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education

Since most studies of adult student retention focus on those from community colleges, this study aims to examine adult student retention at four-year public institutions.

The Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education (PASSHE) is the compilation of 14 state-owned universities in the state of Pennsylvania. The universities in the System include Bloomsburg, California, Cheyney, Clarion, East Stroudsburg, Edinboro, Indiana, Kutztown, Lock Haven, Mansfield, Millersville, Shippensburg, Slippery Rock, and West Chester Universities of Pennsylvania. All schools are accredited by the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools (Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education, n.d.).

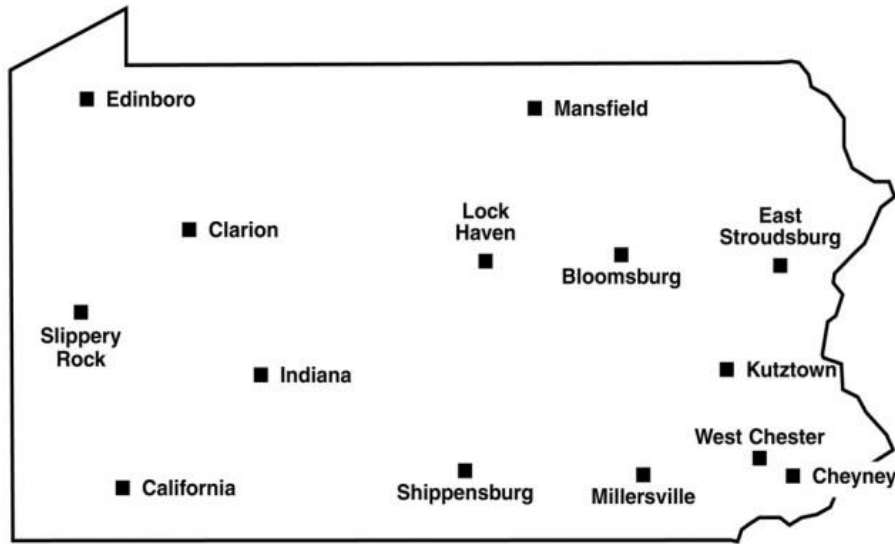


Figure 2. Map of PASSHE schools. (Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education, n.d.).

All of these universities commenced as normal schools with the purpose of educating future teachers. In 1911, the state purchased these 14 institutions and their names and focuses evolved during the next 70 years from state normal schools, state teachers colleges, state colleges, to finally, universities, when PASSHE was established on July 1, 1983 (Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education, n.d.).

The system, governed by 20 members of the Board of Governors, includes the State's governor and operationally is run by a chancellor. PASSHE's headquarters are in Harrisburg, the state's capital. Similarly, each university is governed by 11 members of their own council of trustees and is overseen by the university's president (Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education, n.d.).

PASSHE enrolls a total of 8,742 undergraduate adult students who account for 9.42 percent of their total undergraduate population. The System publishes retention rates for first-time, full-time baccalaureate degree seeking freshman; however, it does not

publish retention data separately for nontraditional students. The retention rate for undergraduate students stands at 76.9 percent after the first year and 66.9 percent after the second year. The graduation rate after four years is 50.1 percent, 55.6 percent after five years, and 56.5 percent after six years (Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education, 2011). The latest data on retention and graduation rates from NCES (2011) show that the national graduation rate after six years has reached 59 percent (National Center for Education Statistics, 2011).

Adult Student Trends, Perceptions, and Retention

In the past 30 years, the profile of an adult student has not changed significantly. Adult students are typically: Caucasian; female; married; middle class; have some college credits already; are in the business, health, or education fields; and going to school part time (Aslanian & Giles, 2009).

Adult students pursue higher education for a multitude of reasons. According to Stamats (2008), a college marketing and consulting firm, undergraduate adults are motivated to earn a degree to gain personal enrichment (97 percent), to increase their income (89 percent), to prove they can do it (76 percent), to make a career change (75 percent), to advance within their current job (66 percent), or to be a role model for their family (62 percent) (Harms, 2008, p. 2). However, while adult students may list several reasons why they are motivated to earn their degree, typically a trigger event (such as a divorce or career change) initiates enrollment (Aslanian & Giles, 2009; Hunt, 2007).

In deciding where to attend, adult students highly prefer schools that have a liberal transfer credit policy; that have classes accommodating their home and work

schedules or that may have online components; that are located near their home or workplaces; and that are cost effective (Harms, 2008).

In terms of class offerings and delivery, 66 percent of undergraduate adult students favor the option of classes offered completely in an online format. While weekend classes may work better for adult students than a daytime weekday course, they prefer an evening weekday course so that their weekends remain free (Harms, 2008).

Adult students tend to devote more time on their school work than their traditional-aged counterparts. They also have higher motivation levels and possess other characteristics that exemplify a more mature cohort. Adult students have very specific expectations of what they will receive in return for the money they spend on their education. These expectations are due to their sensitivity to time and the fact that they must apply what they have learned directly to their current employment (Bergman, 2012; Hadfield, 2003).

According to the What Works in Student Retention Survey (WWISR), all but one of the 15 variables that are the highest contributors to student dropout involve student characteristics (ACT, 2010). Students most often cite health, personal, or financial problems for dropping out of school (Habley, Bloom & Robbins, 2012) (although students often blame financial problems even if that reason is not accurate) (Seidman, 2012). However, the opposite of these problems (good health, good personal situations, or good finances) does not lead to increased retention (Habley, Bloom & Robbins, 2012).

The National Center for Education Statistics uses three sets of criteria to characterize adult students – enrollment patterns, financial and family status, and high school graduation status. Enrollment patterns include factors such as 1) the period of time

after high school graduation before the student enrolls in college, and 2) attendance that is less than full time. Financial and family status takes into consideration matters such as marital status, children, and employment. Finally, high school graduation status acknowledges those who have a general education diploma (GED) or certificate of completion from high school (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.b).

According to Hadfield (2003), adult students are viewed as the ‘stepchildren’ in the student population for two main reasons. First, they are difficult to neatly define. Their age may be 25 or older, but it also may be individuals younger than 25 who possesses all of the responsibilities of a 40-year-old. They could work full time or part time, or they may be laid off. They could be married, single or divorced, and have children, grandchildren, or no children. They also attend school for a myriad of reasons (Hadfield, 2003).

The second reason adult students are viewed as ‘stepchildren’ is a lack of research on adult students, perhaps because of the many factors in play. Much of what is known is purely “anecdotal” (Hadfield, 2003, p. 18).

While retention in general has been widely studied, adult student retention, specifically, has not. Currently, no process or system of measurement exists for adult retention that has been uniformly agreed upon (Fincher, 2010). Retention continues to be measured nationally against a traditional-aged student model – one that is flawed – because even most traditional students today have adult-like responsibilities. Current measurements assume that school is a student’s first and most important focus and that the student’s goal is to graduate within four to six years (Hadfield, 2003).

The sparse research that does exist on adult student retention comes mostly from studies conducted at community colleges. Convenience and accessibility of traditional-aged students is a contributing factor (Guidos & Dorris, 2008); however, outcomes from this population should never be mistaken as identical to those of adult students (Fincher, 2010). Adult students often cite obligations of work and family as reasons for dropping out – factors that are not as common for traditional students (Guidos & Dorris, 2008). While national statistics do not track adult student retention rates separately, those who research adult student retention have found that adults are retained at a lower rate than their younger counterparts (Noel-Levitz, 2008; Wiggam, 2004). This is of particular concern since adult student enrollment is currently increasing at a higher rate than traditional enrollment (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.a).

What research does reveal is that certain characteristics of adult students do have an impact on retention. For example, commuters, students with children, and part-time students all have lower rates of degree completion (Astin & Oseguera, 2012; Cabrera et al, 2012; Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2005). Because part-time students are enrolled over a greater period of time, they have a higher chance for life circumstances interrupting their schooling (Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2005). On the other hand, students living on campus are more engaged in college life, a predictor for degree completion (Seidman, 2012).

Social integration into college life is the crux of Tinto's model of student retention (Tinto, 1975). However, for many adult students, campus engagement is either impossible or not a priority (or both). Commuters tend to come to campus only to take classes and to do nothing else (Seidman, 2012). Because of the busy lifestyles of these students, research shows that an institution is powerless to encourage connection and

involvement by the student in the life of the campus (Wyatt, 2011, p. 16). Therefore, if engagement is going to occur for adult students, it must occur within the classroom (Tinto, 2012; Wyatt, 2011).

Contributing Factors to Retention and Attrition

Contributing factors to student persistence and dropout have been the focus of many retention studies. These factors can include financial aid, student gender, marital status, high school GPA, on- or off-campus residence, part-time enrollment, and class standing (freshman, sophomore, junior, or senior), among others.

More often, women have higher retention rates than men (Astin & Oseguera, 2012). However, some women have higher retention rates as compared to other women. For example, nontraditional married women have higher retention rates than their divorced counterparts, yet married adult women have the same retention rates as women who have never been married (Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2005). One caveat is that married women with low support from their spouse may be at greater risk for attrition (Maroney, 2010).

Studies also show that part-time students have lower retention rates than full-time students. This may be because they are less involved in institutional life. At the same time, prolonged enrollment increases the chance that life circumstances will distract students from continuous study (divorce, illness, death in the family). Progression takes longer for students in remedial or lower-level classes who are trying to proceed to advanced coursework, or coursework within their chosen field (Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2005).

Alternative online education entices adult students with busy schedules; however, both online degree programs and singular online courses have lower retention rates (Park & Choi, 2009; Heyman, 2010). A study by Meister (2002) shows that 70 percent of adult students failed to complete their online program.

Financial aid also ranks as an important factor in retaining students, especially for those in the early stages of their academic career (Astin & Oseguera, 2012). The early dropouts reported the lack of finances as the prominent reason for leaving school. This hindrance is especially concerning for adult students because as many as one-third do not realize they are eligible to receive aid. In addition, adult students tend to apply to college at times when financial aid deadlines have already passed, as opposed to traditional-aged students who apply to college while attending high school and well in advance of financial aid deadlines (Guidos & Dorris, 2008).

How far along students are in their studies is a telling factor of whether or not they will be retained. Levitz, Noel, and Richter (1999) asserted that the first year of a student's academic career undoubtedly stands as the most critical for retention because attrition decreases by half for every following year of enrollment. For example, if attrition rates for a school stand at 20 percent during a class of students' first year, they stand at 10 percent the second year, 5 percent the third year, and 2.5 percent the fourth year. Since students drop out the first year at a higher rate than any other year, graduation rates are most affected by the first-year retention rates. In this example, four-year graduation rates for this particular cohort would be 62.5 percent (100 percent minus the sum of attrition rates for all four years). Cutting the first year's attrition rates by half has a

greater impact on graduation rates than if attrition rates were cut in half for any subsequent year (Levitz, Noel & Richter, 1999).

Controversy and Limitations

Much controversy and several limitations surround the most studied topic in higher education. In fact, an entire book, *Understanding and Reducing College Student Departure* by Braxton, Hirschy, and McClendon (2004), is dedicated to questioning Tinto's interactionalist theory. Much of the debate, however, focuses on which students are targeted for retention initiatives (such as at-risk or first-year students).

Administrators at colleges and universities are inclined to progress through two steps when tackling the problem of student attrition. The first step is to identify the population of students who are at the highest risk for dropping out. The second step is to devote a great deal of consideration, time, money, and energy into programs and services that aim to improve the retention rates of these students. However, according to Kalsbeek, focusing on "statistical outliers" does very little to change the retention rate of institutions. Instead, he suggested focusing on "broad institutional processes" so that retention initiatives have better results, and students who are at highest risk for dropping out will still benefit (Kalsbeek, 2013, p. 10, 11).

Today, most research on retention centers on a student's first year of college, the point in time when most dropouts occur. Tinto argued that, while the theories of student retention that have developed from this research are supported with evidence, overall, they are only general estimates of whether a student will stay or leave (Tinto, 2012).

In their present formulation, they can tell us only so much about the forces shaping student leaving. More importantly, theories of student leaving can tell us

only so much about the forces shaping student persistence. Leaving is not the mirror image of staying. Knowing why students leave does not tell us – at least not directly – what institutions can do to help students stay and succeed. In the real world of action, what matters are not our theories, but how they help us address pressing issues of retention and persistence...Unfortunately, current theories of student leaving are not well suited to that task. This is the case not only because they focus on leaving, but also because they utilize abstractions and variables that are not clearly within the immediate control of the institution to influence. (Tinto, 2012, p. 253-254)

Habley, Bloom, and Robbins (2012) also list three limitations in existing retention framework. Those limitations include institutions having responsibility for retention factors in which they have no control; the consideration of different types of institutions; and the comparison of institutions to each other (Habley, Bloom & Robbins, 2012). The reality is that students are human beings and life circumstances may come between them and their studies (Cortes, 2013; Habley, Bloom & Robbins, 2012).

Another controversy surrounding retention involves institutions that keep under-prepared students for the sake of higher retention rates. Selectivity factors in as the greatest predictor of retention and graduation (Astin & Oseguera, 2012; Berger, Ramirez & Lyons, 2012). ACT and SAT scores alone account for over 75% of the difference in graduation rates (Kalsbeek, 2013).

College readiness is an increasing problem on college campuses today. Approximately 1.7 million students enroll in remedial college courses each year at a cost of \$3 billion. Ethically, colleges and universities must consider shifting their focus from

“How can we keep them?” to “Should we even admit them?” Half of all students in community colleges must take remedial coursework, while one in five must do so at four-year institutions. For adult students at these four-year schools, the statistics are even worse: more than one in three must take remedial courses (Complete College America, 2012).

Continuing to keep students who are not academically prepared is ethically questionable on a matter of academic principal, but it also has economic implications. Over 600,000 individuals with student loans in 2010 defaulted two years later. Nearly half of those individuals had attended for-profit institutions (even though for-profit institutions only enroll 13 percent of all students) (The Institute for College Access & Success, 2013).

Students who graduate incur an average debt of \$31,675. Those who are not retained to graduation also incur debt, yet without a college degree, have fewer resources to pay back that debt and are more than four times as likely to default (Nguyen, 2012). Thirty-one percent of students who did not complete a degree in 2009, and who had attended a for-profit institution, had debt equivalent to 100 percent or more of their yearly income. Twenty-one percent of non-completers at non-profit institutions had the same problem (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013b).

A student’s ability to repay their school debt depends largely on their employment situation. The rate of employment for those who did not complete their college degree is lower when compared to those who completed their degree (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013b). Income levels for non-completers are also lower. An individual with some college education but no degree earns, on average, \$32,295 per

year, which is \$24,370 less per year than someone with a bachelor's degree (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012).

By enrolling students who never had the ability to graduate initially, or by continuing to keep students who have indicators of eventual attrition (such as a pattern of poor grades), colleges are viewed as culpable of steeping debt upon students. One such example is the Chicago State University that in 2011, began deviating from its policy to dismiss students who fell below a 1.8 GPA. Instead, they continued to enroll and to receive funding for and from students (even from 106 students whose GPA was 0.0.) in order to increase retention and enrollment numbers for accreditation purposes (Cohen, J. S., 2011; Redden, M., 2011).

In 2008, an unknown adjunct professor launched a movement that questioned the perception that everyone should go to college. Known only as Professor X, he wrote an essay titled "In the Basement of the Ivory Tower" that appeared in *The Atlantic*. This one essay drew more web visits than any other article in that publication in 2008 (Professor X, 2011). He subsequently wrote a book of the same title in which he expanded on the essay. He argues that admitting students who have no chance at progressing or graduating is morally questionable, and that America has a problem telling people they lack the abilities to do whatever they want. This country, he believes, is also cautious of encouraging individuals to pursue a vocational path. With mounting pressure to graduate students, Professor X fears professors will be expected to inflate grades. If academic institutions abandon integrity, degrees will be of little value (Professor X, 2012).

Because there are more college graduates today than there are jobs that require degrees, our society has produced an environment of underemployment. McNamee and

Miller (2009) refer to this as ‘credential inflation,’ which occurs when employers expect higher levels of credentialing for work that never required it in the past. This shift in perspective causes the view that a college degree is not so much helpful as a lack of one is hurtful.

Subsequently in 2011, Dale Stephens inspired another movement known as UnCollege. While this movement does not question a person’s ability to succeed in college, it does question the college’s ability to succeed for the person. Stephen’s stance is that lifelong, experiential learning has far greater value, and that colleges teach conformity rather than individuality and independent thought. He believes that, by holding a college degree in such high regard, society is producing academic inflation. This thought mirrors that of McNamee and Miller’s definition of credential inflation: “Academic inflation is the process of raising minimum job requirements so that there is an excess of people with lower degrees. As the market becomes completely degree-saturated you will soon need a Ph.D. to succeed as a janitor” (Stephens, 2011, p. 10).

In 2011, a report by the Harvard Graduate School of Education suggested that a four-year degree is not for everyone. The report states that only one-third of the 47 million jobs that are expected to be created by 2018 will require a four-year degree or higher. In addition, it suggests a need for more emphasis on career counseling for students early in their high school career, and engagement by employers to offer experiences such as internships (Harvard, 2011).

In 2013, television personality Mike Rowe began ‘Profoundly Disconnected,’ an initiative under the mikeroweWORKS Foundation that also challenges the idea that everyone should go to college. The Profoundly Disconnected slogan is “Work Smart

AND Hard” which is a take on the poster “Work Smart, not Hard” that was often posted in high school guidance offices during the 1970s. The old poster encouraged pursuit of college, while insinuating that by doing so, an individual would not have to work hard. The Foundation attempts to dispel the myth that there is something wrong with hard work, and encourages individuals to pursue skilled trades by offering scholarships (mikeroweWORKS Foundation, n.d.).

Since the 2012 Talent Shortage Survey by the ManpowerGroup reveals that the skilled trades are the hardest sector of the labor force to fill, the mikeroweWORKS Foundation may be a part of the solution for filling the gaps in skilled trades. Over half of those who are already employed in the skilled trades are 45 years of age or older. Since those who work in skilled trades jobs (which are more physically demanding) retire at a younger age, soon, there will be a shortage of individuals to fill this gap. With high schools focusing more on preparing students for college and less on a vocational path, this adds to the prospect of an employment gap (ManpowerGroup, 2012).

Theoretical Foundations

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine what adult students believed were the factors that contributed to their retention. Of the eight majors models, concepts, and theories of student retention that have been developed over the past 76 years, two of these eight were used to support this study – Vincent Tinto’s (1975) model of student retention and Bean and Metzner’s (1985) conceptual model of nontraditional student attrition.

Vincent Tinto's Model of Student Retention

Of these, Vincent Tinto's model of student retention is the most cited (Hagerdorn, 2012). Tinto's model uses Dukheim's theory of suicide for the theoretical framework, and he suggested that there are three sets of characteristics that influence students' dropout from college – family background, individual attributes, and pre-college schooling (Tinto, 1975).

Characteristics of family background include socioeconomic status and education of, and relationship to, the parents. Research cited by Tinto found that higher socioeconomic status and education of a student's parents, and better relationships between the parent and student, produced higher student persistence (Tinto, 1975).

Individual attributes include ability, impulsiveness, and gender – specifically the higher the academic ability and the lower the impulsiveness, the more likely a student would persist. Men were also found to be more likely to persist than women (although this is no longer the case) (Astin & Oseguera, 2012; Tinto, 1975).

Pre-college schooling includes performance in, and quality of, high school (ie. quality of personnel, building, and other resources). The higher the performance and quality, the more likely a student will persist (Tinto, 1975).

Tinto also found that academic and social integration influenced persistence – specifically that students who were more involved in the academic and social realms of college life were more likely to persist to graduation. A notable exception was that if students became too involved in the social aspects of college, those social aspects became detrimental to their academic progress and involuntary dropout (academic dismissal) could occur (Tinto, 1975).

Specifically, “interactive experiences” (Tinto, 1975, p. 115) with members of the college community impact a students’ feelings of dedication and loyalty to their school, which can have either a negative or positive impact. For individuals whose overall interactions and experiences are positive with members of the college community, their dedication to the school is increased. The opposite occurs with negative interactions (Tinto, 1987).

Tinto also cited separation, transition, and incorporation as three stages in which a student must transition in order to persist from the first year of college to the second. In separation, the student must cut ties with home including family and friends; in transition, they must make new relationships in college; in incorporation, the student becomes a part of college life. If these three do not occur, dropout is likely (Tinto, 1993).

Tinto’s longitudinal model serves to assist institutions with the retention of students until graduation. By identifying components that pinpoint areas internal to the school’s environment that can impede student progression, institutions can proactively take steps to improve a student’s collegiate experience (Tinto, 1987).

Bean and Metzner’s Conceptual Model of Nontraditional Student Attrition

Of all the models, concepts, and theories of student retention, only one specifically addresses adult student retention. John Bean and Barbara Metzner published a conceptual model of nontraditional undergraduate student attrition in 1985. Because of the work and home schedules that adult students must juggle in addition to school, they cannot typically integrate socially into college life. Therefore, theories and models that use social integration as a factor in retention, such as Tinto’s, do not adequately apply to adult students (Bean and Metzner, 1985).

The life circumstances of adult students led Bean and Metzner to create a model that included environmental variables. These variables include finances, hours of employment, outside encouragement, family responsibilities, and opportunity to transfer. Like other models, they also include academic variables (study habits, academic advising, absenteeism, major certainty, and course availability) and background and defining variables (age, enrollment status, residence, educational goals, high school performance, ethnicity, and gender) (Bean and Metzner, 1985, p. 491).

Bean and Metzner acknowledged that considerations of student departure were hard to conceptualize in a model, since departure did not necessarily mean failure on the part of the student or institution. A student may leave because they simply need to take a short break or because they are transferring to a different institution. Whatever the reason, environmental factors were found to have a greater impact on student retention and attrition than academic variables. Still, Bean and Metzner included academic variables in their model because past academic performance is a good predictor of future performance, regardless of how many years separate the adult student from high school (Bean and Metzner, 1985).

Examining only academic and environmental variables, Bean and Metzner concluded that the combination of positive and negative support in each area had an effect on retention. If environmental support was always positive, the adult student would be retained, even if academic support was negative. If environmental support was ever negative, even positive academic support could not prevent the student from dropping out (Bean and Metzner, 1985). Graphically, the combination of positive and negative support may look like Figure 3.

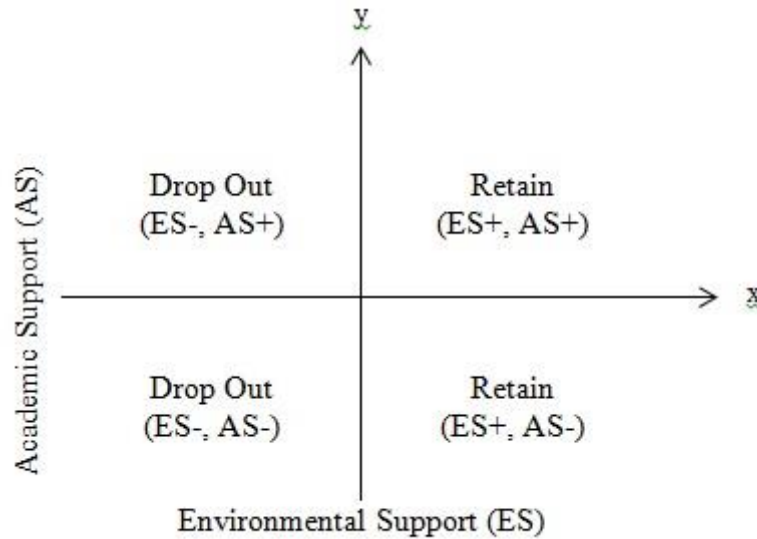


Figure 3. Author-created academic and environmental support chart.

Summary

While undergraduate student retention is the most studied phenomenon in higher education (Berger, Ramirez & Lyons, 2012), much of the research is 20 years old or older (Braxton, 2000). There are also few studies on retention of adult learners, however those that do exist are mostly limited to community colleges (Guidos & Dorris, 2008). Factors that lead to retention or attrition of adult students are not identical to those of traditional-aged students (Fincher, 2010), so further research is warranted. Because adult students are the fastest-growing population of students in higher education (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.a) and because adult students are retained at a lower rate than traditional-aged students (Noel-Levitz, 2008; Wiggam, 2004), additional studies will prove helpful in understanding their unique needs.

While adult student retention rates are not calculated separately by NCES, changes in how retention is measured and defined, and what constitutes student success, are needed. A new measurement of student goals-to-outcomes is a more appropriate

approach to quantifying student retention (Bean, 1990; Habley, Bloom & Robbins, 2012).

Finally, changing the perception of adult students as ‘other’ will go a long way in addressing some of the factors that contribute to attrition. A change of perception will cause a change in actions such as offices remaining open past typical hours, classes being offered in a nontraditional format, adults engaging in the classroom, and needs being met (childcare, priority scheduling of classes, and programs specifically for adult students) (Sissel, Hansman, & Kasworm, 2001).

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to examine the perceptions of undergraduate adult students in the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education regarding what these students believe are the factors that contribute to their persistence to graduation. While there has been a significant amount of research on student persistence in higher education, the research has not led to any significant changes in retention rates over the past several decades (Berger, Ramirez & Lyons, 2012; Habley, Bloom & Robbins, 2012). In addition, the majority of the research that does exist is now at least 20 years old, and research on adult students is scarce (Braxton, 2000; Donaldson & Townsend, 2007).

The retention and graduation of students in higher education is important to students, as it can mean greater income over the course of their lives (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). To the university, retention of students can mean a steady revenue stream (Seidman, 2012). To the nation as a whole, successful graduation of students from college provides a more educated workforce and lower loan defaults (Nguyen, 2012).

Most studies on student retention focus on traditional-aged students at community colleges. The studies are also primarily quantitative in nature and examine why students leave (Geisler, 2007; Guidos & Dorris, 2008; Tinto, 2012). This qualitative study examined reasons why adult students persist at four-year public institutions. The theoretical framework used in this study was Vincent Tinto's (1975) model of student retention and Bean and Metzner's (1985) conceptual model of nontraditional student attrition.

Data for this study were gathered from nine participants through both one-on-one interviews and a survey of demographic information. Member checking and document analysis were also used to triangulate the data to help insure validity of the results. To assist the researcher's understanding of the participants' background prior to the interview, a demographic survey was utilized. This survey captured information on gender, age, major, marital status, dependents, and enrollment patterns. The interviews were conducted with participants representing three different four-year public institutions of higher education in the State of Pennsylvania. All participants were 25 years-of-age or older and were in their final semester of undergraduate study prior to graduation.

Qualitative methodology was chosen for this study because it allowed for a more thorough examination of the experiences of individuals and the meaning that they derive from those experiences (Seidman, 2012). Semi-structured interviews were employed to allow for flexibility when unanticipated subject matter was introduced and further inquiry was needed (Saldaña, 2011).

Research Questions

This research-applied information was gathered through interviews with nine adult students from three Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education (PASSHE) schools and examined the factors that the students believed contributed to their persistence. The following research questions guided this study, which used an interpretive qualitative approach:

1. What do undergraduate students aged 25 and older consider to be the most important factors contributing to their degree completion?

2. How do undergraduate students aged 25 and older view the university's role in assisting them with degree completion?

Data Collection

This study examined the perceptions of undergraduate adult students and the factors they believe led to their personal and academic success in college. A qualitative interpretive approach was used to conduct this study. One-on-one semi-structured interviews allowed the participants to give an account of their individual experiences, and the researcher to gain an in-depth understanding of participants' stories (Creswell, 2007).

Narrative analysis was used to examine answers provided in both the interview, and to a demographic survey that was administered prior to the interview. The purpose of an interview is not simply to provide answers to questions, but to understand the experiences of an individual and the meaning those individuals attach to those experiences (Seidman, 2012).

Sites

The three sites chosen for this study came from the 14 public universities in the State of Pennsylvania. The universities were chosen because they enrolled the highest percentage of undergraduate adult students when examining total undergraduate enrollment (20 percent at Scholarton University, 18 percent at Readerville University, and 13 percent at Brightham University) (PASSHE, 2015). Although the three schools can claim this distinction, the percentage of adult students enrolled is significantly less than the national average of 40 percent (even when taking graduate enrollment into account) (Jacobs & Hundley, 2010). The 14 State universities in Pennsylvania enroll a

total of 8,742 undergraduate adult students who account for only 9.42 percent of the total undergraduate population (PASSHE, 2015).

Population

Purposive sampling was the method used to identify participants for this study (Creswell, 2012; Yin, 2011). This form of sampling was applicable to the study of both groups, individuals, and sites, and was useful for two main purposes: 1) selection of targets that aid in understanding the topic and 2) acquisition of a deeper knowledge on the topic (Creswell, 2012). In this deliberate form of selection, participants who provided abundant and pertinent information related to the topic were chosen. Administrators at each of the three universities who identified possible study participants were asked to select students who represented a diverse range of age, gender, and major to avoid bias and to help ensure a variety of viewpoints (Yin, 2011).

The sample population for this study was obtained from three PASSHE institutions named 'Brightham University,' 'Readerville University,' and 'Scholarton University' (pseudonyms). These institutions were selected because they represent four-year public institutions within Pennsylvania that enroll the largest percentage of undergraduate adult students when compared against total undergraduate enrollment (PASSHE, 2015). The participants were at least 25 years-of-age or older and were in their final semester prior to graduation. Nine participants were selected (three from each university) and all were enrolled in undergraduate degree programs. Administrators at each of the universities who identified students for participation were asked to recommend six candidates from their school in the event that some candidates declined participation in the study.

Following IRB approval at Indiana University of Pennsylvania, and IRB and site permission from the three targeted universities, nine participants were chosen.

Identification of study participants was made through consultation with the individuals at each institution charged with overseeing adult student operations. These administrators provided contact information for the potential participants, and the researcher contacted the students by phone or email to introduce the study and the process, and to ensure the students met the following criteria: 1) they were enrolled in an undergraduate degree program at the identified university, 2) they were at least 25 years of age, and 3) they were in their final semester before graduation.

Upon confirmation that all potential participants qualified for the study, each student was asked to participate and provided with all pertinent information via email regarding the research including purpose, risk, benefits, contact information of the researcher, interview protocol, and the voluntary informed consent letter and form. Candidates were given one week to inform the researcher of their decision to participate. The voluntary informed consent forms were also due to the researcher at the conclusion of the seven days via email. Individuals who had not responded by the end of one week's time were sent a reminder email.

Possible participants were assured that they could withdraw from the study at any time, including during the interview, by contacting the researcher in person, by electronic mail, by telephone, or by written note. These individuals were provided this assurance through both the voluntary informed consent process and at the time of the interview. Pseudonyms were used throughout this dissertation for both the college sites and the

study participants to safeguard confidentiality and will be used for additional scholarly pursuits related to this research.

Expert Review

An expert review was conducted prior to administering interviews. The expert review consisted of a panel of the individuals at each of the three universities who identified possible participants. These individuals were identified by visiting each school's website and reviewing the staff directory. Phone calls and emails were placed to these individuals, whose titles suggested they oversaw programs and services to adult students. If the person contacted was not the correct individual, they were able to provide information on who was. While the author of this study is the individual who directs programs and services to adult students at one of the institutions studied, the expert at this university was referred to another individual who supervises the division in which adult services are provided.

To help establish validity of the instrument, the identified experts were asked to evaluate the interview questions. Suggestions for changes were implemented prior to conducting interviews.

Participant Interviewing

In deciding what type of research to conduct, and therefore, what instrument to use, the researcher took into consideration three factors listed by Creswell (2012) including connecting the approach to the research problem, fitting the audience, and relating the approach to the researcher's own experiences and expertise.

An additional consideration was that most research addressing student retention or attrition is quantitative (Geisler, 2007). However, less than 50 percent of these studies

provide reasons for student persistence, and many times quantitative research has small sample sizes and poor response rates to surveys (Hoffman, 2000).

For these reasons, an interpretive approach was used and the primary form of data collection was through one-on-one semi-structured interviews as well as a demographic questionnaire completed by participants prior to the interview. The development of the interview instrument was unique to the study and attempted to inform the two research questions.

Once potential participants were identified, they received an email to invite them to participate in the study, the interview protocol to aid them in their decision, and the voluntary informed consent forms. Possible candidates were given one week to inform the researcher of their decision to participate. Individuals agreeing to take part in the research were contacted by email to schedule an interview at a time and via a method most convenient for them. Every effort was made to conduct interviews face-to-face in a mutually agreeable public location. In the event that the participant was not able to meet face-to-face, Skype or phone interviews were substituted. The instrument included a demographic information questionnaire (Appendix A), as well as questions that encouraged reflection on the students' experiences with barriers and success while pursuing their degree.

The design of the semi-structured interview was created to allow for flexibility throughout the interview. This structure provided the researcher with the opportunity to ask follow-up and probing questions when clarification or further information was needed (Creswell, 2012). The questions sought information regarding the perception of adult students and what they believed were contributing factors to their persistence to

graduation. The interview protocol was provided to participants prior to the interview to allow for contemplation and preparation of comprehensive responses.

Interview Protocol

An Interview Question-Research Question Matrix is provided in Appendix B to display the alignment of interview questions with the research questions. The interview questions consisted of the following:

1. Talk to me about what motivated you to pursue a degree.
2. Discuss any family support that you had while attending your University.
3. Tell me about a time when you felt the most connected to your University.
4. Tell me about a time where you felt like you did not fit into the college experience.
5. Was there ever a time where you stopped out of school? If so, what were the circumstances and how long was the period of time before you returned to school?
6. Where you ever involved in any co-curricular activities at your University? If so, what were they and what was your involvement with them?
7. Discuss some of the obstacles you faced while pursuing your degree.
8. In what ways did your University support you to ensure your success? In what ways could your University have better supported you?
9. What university offices, services, or programs were most helpful to you in your pursuit of higher education and in what way?
10. If you could change anything about your college experience, what would it be and why?

11. Is there anything else you would like to offer on the topic of your persistence to graduation?

Data Analysis

Creswell (2012) listed six steps for analyzing and interpreting qualitative data: preparing and organizing the data, exploring and coding the data, building descriptions and themes, representing and reporting findings, interpreting findings, and validating the accuracy of the findings.

After each interview, the recordings were transcribed and entered into NVivo, a software program designed to organize qualitative data. NVivo organizes content such as interviews, surveys, focus groups, literature reviews, audio, video, PDFs, emails, and web content, among others. The transcriptions for each interview were entered as individual sources. In addition, each individual interview question was combined from all interviews and entered as a single source. The audio recording from each interview was also uploaded as external data.

Emerging themes from each question were identified by the researcher after transcribing the interviews. These themes were grouped into nodes within NVivo. Although NVivo was used to help organize the data, connections of themes to the research questions were done by the researcher after studying the interview transcripts. After all nodes were created, a word frequency query was conducted to identify issues that the researcher may have overlooked.

Seidman (2013) suggested that, although it is appropriate to recognize themes as the researcher is conducting the interviews, the researcher must be careful not to impose

significance onto future interviews. For this reason, he suggests the bulk of the analyzing should be done after all interviews have been conducted.

Once all data were coded and themes and connections were made, findings were reported and interpreted. The final step answers questions about consistency and inconsistency with the literature, connections between experiences of those interviewed, and how the findings answered the research questions.

Reliability and Validity

Qualitative research is best used in situations when issues need deeper exploration. Individuals with their own stories, common experiences, or shared culture make good candidates for this type of research (Creswell 2012). The hallmarks of qualitative research include flexibility in research, challenging common beliefs, fieldwork, and “non-numeric data” (Yin, 2011, p. 10). As with any research, reliability and validity are important to establish trust in the results.

A valid study uses proper collection methods and data interpretation. This ensures an accurate conclusion, one that would produce the same results if the study was conducted again using the same methods and criteria (Yin, 2011). A researcher must be mindful of his or her personal background and role in the research that can shape the interpretation of the findings (Creswell, 2012).

One method to increase the validity of this study was to utilize an expert review. The expert review engaged a panel of experts in the process by consulting with them regarding the interview questions. Individuals who work in higher education and with adult students or in the field of retention provided feedback on each of the questions. These individuals also recommended possible participants.

A second method to increase the validity of this study was to use member checking. With this method, a sample of participants were asked to review the findings from their specific interview and report on the accuracy of those findings. Participants were asked to comment on three areas: 1) that the description was complete and correct, 2) that identified themes were accurate, and 3) that interpretation was reasonable (Creswell, 2012).

The third and final method to increase the validity of this study was to use triangulation. Triangulation is the extracting of information from multiple sources to increase the accuracy by corroborating information (Creswell 2012). Triangulation is best when the sources used are in different forms (i.e. observation, interviews, documents, or similar artifacts.) (Yin, 2011). Triangulation used in this study included interviews, member checking, and documents related to each university site. The documents were gathered from each of the universities for analysis. Documents included university catalogs, view books, recruiting materials, and various brochures.

The three methods employed to increase validity allowed the researcher to make adjustments to the interview protocol, ensure that the interview questions addressed the research questions, and identify researcher bias (Seidman, 2012).

Summary

An interpretive approach was used in this study to examine perceptions of adult students in their final semester prior to graduation. Through the use of one-on-one semi-structured interviews and a demographic survey, participants were able to provide an in-depth account of experiences throughout their college career. Participants were identified

by representatives at three public four-year universities in the State of Pennsylvania through purposive sampling.

Nine undergraduate adult students aged 25 and older who were in their final semester prior to graduation took part in interviews. Data collected through interviews were used to analyze what adult students believe were factors leading to success and ultimate graduation from college.

In addition to data collected from interviews and a demographic survey, participants were also asked to member check transcripts and analysis of their individual interviews. Triangulation of data was completed through the use of document analysis (university catalogs, recruiting flyers, view books, or similar artifacts).

This research may enable institutions of higher education to evaluate and assess the adult student retention programs on their campuses. For institutions with no programs in place, this research may assist with informing the creation of such programs. It will also benefit the participant by assisting them to identify areas of personal success and barriers they have overcome.

CHAPTER 4

DATA AND ANALYSIS

Chapter four includes the results of the nine interviews conducted with adult students aged 25 or older, enrolled in undergraduate degree programs, and in their final semester prior to graduation at three universities within the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education (PASSHE). These institutions were chosen because they enroll the highest percentage of adult students among the 14 schools within PASSHE. The purpose of this study was to examine the perceptions of undergraduate adult students in the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education regarding what these students believe are the factors that contribute to their persistence to graduation.

Initially, chapter four contains the demographic information of the participants in this study: major, gender, age, employment status, enrollment status, marital status, and parental status. This part also addresses the manner in which the interviews were conducted.

The second part of the chapter comprises a review of artifacts such as university catalogs, view books, recruiting materials, and various brochures. This portion also contains an examination of the university websites. This method of review was utilized to increase the validity of the study.

The third section of chapter four reports themes that emerged among the nine interviews. A review of the transcripts from the interviews revealed themes of family support, no regrets, lack of institutional connectedness, stop outs, employment as a driving force, and low expectations for university support.

Demographic Analysis

Three adult students from each of three PASSHE schools participated in this study for a total of nine participants. Six of the participants were female and three were male. Age span was widely distributed, with ages covering the 25-30 range to the 51-55 range.

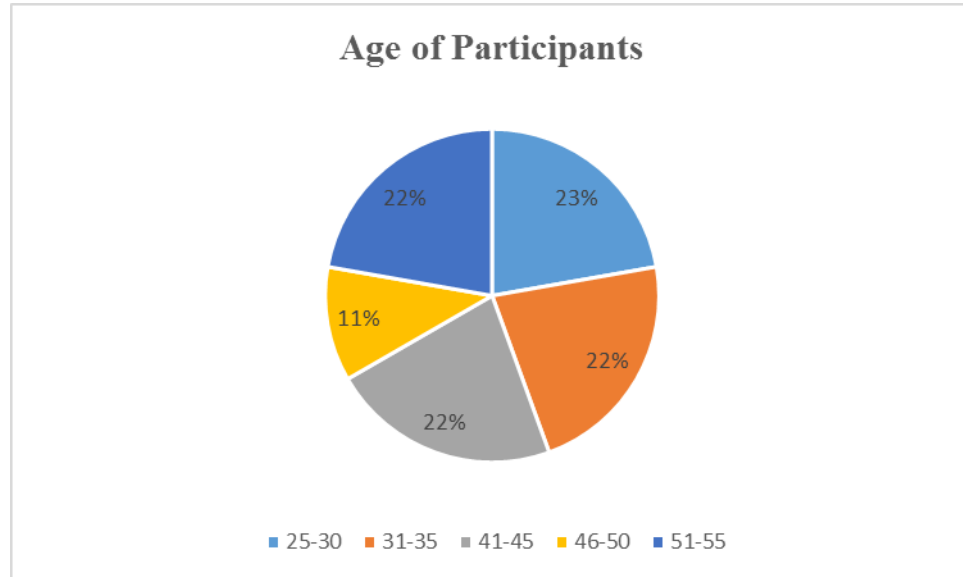


Figure 4. Age of participants.

Of the nine students studied, six individuals were employed and three were not. Of the individuals who were employed, two worked part time and four worked full time. Enrollment in college was also varied with six individuals indicating that their enrollment from all of their colleges (both current and past) was a mixture of full and part time. Two were enrolled primarily part time, and only one individual was enrolled primarily full time during their tenure as a college student. Just over half of the participants were online-only students, with five being web-based and the remaining four being primarily face-to-face.

All nine participants were married, with four indicating they had no children and five indicating they did have children. Of the five individuals who did have children, all five had children under the age of 18 living in the home. Two individuals also had at least one adult child in addition to children under 18.

All nine participants indicated that they had stopped out of college at some point. A stop out is when a student withdraws from the institution, but typically returns to the same or different school after a period of time. Eight of the participants had stopped out from a previous school, and later reenrolled at another institution. One individual stopped out at the school from which he will graduate. Of the eight participants who had stopped out from a previous school, six had attended two previous institutions before enrolling in their current university. Two had attended one institution before their current university.

All individuals were enrolled in an undergraduate degree, and the majority (eight) were in a bachelor's degree. Majors ranged widely. Only one was enrolled in an associate's degree program. The majors included geography (one), library science (two), nursing (two), human services (one), industrial engineering and administration (one), communication disorders (one), and technology leadership (one).

Interviews took place via three formats: face-to-face, telephone, and Skype. The three face-to-face interviews took place in participants' university library. Since many of the students were online students who lived as far away as California, telephone and Skype platforms were used for the remaining participants. All interviews were audio-recorded.

Participants were eager to share their story of persistence, stating that they hoped their story would encourage other adult students. The interviews were completed within

one hour and pseudonyms are used for each of the participants. They are as follows: Jeremy, Ethan, Gloria, Stacy, Theresa, Laura, Chloe, Amber, and Lance. Four of the five participants, Ethan, Chloe, Lance, and Amber, were all face-to-face students who commuted to campus in order to attend classes in person. Jeremy, Gloria, Stacy, Theresa, and Laura were earning their degree entirely in an online format.

Review of Artifacts

Artifacts were reviewed from each of the three schools in which participants were enrolled. Included in the artifacts were recruiting materials, flyers, brochures, undergraduate catalogs, and university websites. The artifacts were evaluated based on the inclusion of information relevant to adult learners, as well as pictorial representation of adult students in the printed materials or on the school's website.

Examination of artifacts revealed varying levels of adult student representation at the three universities from which the nine participants were enrolled. Like the participants in this study, pseudonyms are used for the universities. They are Brightham, Readerville, and Scholarton Universities. The students in this study from Brightham University were Ethan, Chloe, and Lance. The students from Readerville University were Theresa, Gloria, and Laura. The students from Scholarton University were Stacy, Amber, and Jeremy.

Artifacts from Brightham University show a strong depiction of adult students and programs. The Brightham website is easy to navigate, particularly with the keyword search function. With ease, visitors to the site can find information for adult students. Brightham boasts both a departmental office and a university-wide committee specifically devoted to the success of their adult learners. They not only offer credits to

adult learners for prior learning in the form of life experience and credit-by-exam, but also extend the advantage of early scheduling to adults.

Other items on Brightham's adult student website include information concerning university-sponsored adult student scholarships, childcare, commuting, and programs for dislocated workers and veterans. In addition, the website indicates that Brightham recognizes that many adult students were students at a previous college or university, and therefore offers a liberal transfer credit policy.

A comprehensive document that can be found online, Brightham University's undergraduate catalog contains academic-specific information relevant to adult learners, such as the assessment of prior learning and evaluation of transfer credits that are older than ten years. Information about Brightham's adult programs and services are also available within the catalog.

Brightham University has two main recruiting brochures. The first is larger and more in-depth, containing information such as an overview of the campus grounds, facilities, faculty, degree programs, housing options, student organizations, financial aid, tuition and fees, and a campus map. The smaller brochure lists degree programs, financial aid, and housing options.

The information in the brochures, as well as the pictures of students throughout, has a bent toward the traditional-student population. Brightham does, however, have brochures specifically targeting other populations of students including adults, veterans, transfers, minorities, and students with disabilities.

In contrast, Readerville University has a less robust website for adult learners and does not have an office dedicated to this population of students. Readerville does have an

extended learning office, which serves online students (some of which are adults). The only material dedicated to adult students exists as a page about credit for prior learning with information about advanced placement, the College-Level Examination Program (CLEP), credit-by-exam, credit for professional experience, and military credit.

In Readerville University's online undergraduate catalog, the only information regarding adult students shares a section with details about the institution's branch campus. This section simply states that the branch campus serves many populations of students – including adults – and also contains details about advanced standing, such as CLEP and life experience credits.

Readerville presents three main recruiting brochures. The first brochure highlights the success of 26 of its graduates. The second, a student-life piece, showcases the residence halls, the student union, student organizations, athletics, and arts and culture. The third and largest piece details Readerville's degree programs, on-campus living, athletics, clubs and organizations, financial aid, and various university facts. None of the three pieces includes adult student representation and none specifically targets prospective adult students.

Similarly, Scholarton University does not dedicate an office solely to adult learners, but includes services for adult students within their continuing education office. This office manages non-credit classes and non-degree (certificate) programs. Under the auspices of two other offices, information is presented about life experience credits and CLEP testing.

Scholarton does have a webpage dedicated to prospective transfer students that allows individuals to upload an unofficial copy of their transcript from a previous

institution. Since many schools require a completed application prior to providing a transfer evaluation, this service may entice prospective adult students who attended other schools and who may wonder how many of their previous (and sometimes dated) credits will transfer. This also gives the prospective student an idea of time-to-degree without first paying an application fee.

Scholarton's online undergraduate catalog makes no mention of prior learning assessment options such as life experience credits or CLEP exams. The only mention of adult learners falls under a section that contains information about the school's off-campus site where a small selection of courses are offered. A general, multidisciplinary studies degree is also advertised in the catalog as a good option for nontraditional students because of the flexibility it affords.

Scholarton has two main recruiting pieces. The first is a larger and more comprehensive document that contains information about housing, majors, student life, athletics, and university facts. The students depicted in the view book all appear to be of traditional age. The second brochure is a smaller piece that gives a general overview of campus life. It too only contains pictures of traditional-aged students.

Emergent Themes

There were seven themes that emerged from the nine interviews. Their relationship to the research and protocol questions (both of which are listed in chapter three) can be found in the chart below, and a closer examination of this association is found in the final section of this chapter.

Table 1
Theme Relationships to Research and Protocol Questions

Theme	Research Question	Protocol Question
Family Support	1	2
No Regrets	1 and 2	10
Lack of Institutional Connectedness	2	6
Stop Outs	1	5
Driving Force: Employment	1	1
Low Expectations for University Support	2	8 and 9

Family Support

Observations during the review of interview transcriptions showed that family support played an important part in the persistence puzzle for female participants only. Female participants unanimously agreed that family support was critical during their pursuit of a college degree. While female participants mentioned several individuals who had supported them (both inside and outside of the household), every female participant specifically mentioned the support of her husband. Some spoke of how they were able to quit their jobs to finish their schooling, and how the support of their husband was crucial in making that decision.

Male participants, however, spoke of not needing support. Jeremy, for example, explained how he made schooling function around his family.

I would say from a family support standpoint, I've gone and done this outside of my parenting duties. I'm married, and I have two little girls. I pretty much only work on classwork after 8:30, 9:00 every night, and I'll stay up until 11:00 or midnight or however long I want to work. I think from a support standpoint, I haven't really asked a whole lot from them, because that was our wind down time anyway at the end of the day.

Lance, who said he needed support when he went to college the first time, indicated that it “wasn’t really necessary now.”

In the discussion of family support, female participants used words such as “tremendous,” “extremely,” “dynamite,” “wonderful,” and “awesome.” Support for them came from individuals inside and outside the household, including in-laws and employers. Ultimately, Chloe spoke of all such individuals.

My family support has been tremendous. My husband has been the most patient man. My kids have actually done OK with it too. There are times when they get frustrated with me in doing homework, but between my husband and my mother-in-law, they are right there to take the kids and get them out of my hair so I can do homework. And even my employer is dynamite. Everybody’s been behind me 100 percent on this and helping me get through it, so it’s been awesome.

Gloria also experienced ample support and used the opportunity of school to teach her children the importance of education.

Actually, my whole family was supportive, even my own children. They are 11 and 13, and it also showed them that you’re never too old to get educated and to learn. My 13-year-old is real proud of me. He’s like ‘mom I’m really proud of you – you did this and you’re so old.’ And my husband was great the whole time.

Likewise, Stacy and Amber talked about how supportive their husbands were in the decision to cease working in order to obtain their college degree. For Stacy, quitting her job occurred in her final semester. She had worked full time when she first began the program, and later she switched to part time.

My husband, God love him, he lets me not have to work right now so I can concentrate fully on this last semester of school and getting my degree because, when I was going for my associate's, he knew I couldn't work at all. He was a big help in doing things that would help me out like household stuff. He was the one busting butt, earning money to pay bills...So, my husband said 'go ahead and stop working. It's only going to be for a few months. That way you can devote your time to it.'

Amber expressed a similar sentiment.

I had so much family support. My cousin and my mom babysit my daughter. They pick her up from preschool or whatever, and my husband allowed me – well he didn't allow me – he made it possible for me to not have to work while I'm doing this, so, I couldn't imagine trying to do this, work, and have a kid.

Laura and Theresa rounded out the consensus among female participants that family support, and specifically support from their spouses, was essential for completing their degrees. Theresa shared, "My family has been extremely supportive during this time. My husband has been very supportive and given me the time I need to work on my classes and talking out anything I need to. I have a really nice support system through both my husband and my immediate family." Meanwhile, Laura spoke exclusively of her husband's support.

My husband has been hugely supportive. When I decided I was going to go back in the 90s, he was like 'oh absolutely,' because his thought was always that you can't get anywhere without a degree. He's worked as a laborer his entire life, so he's never gone to college or anything, and he doesn't feel as though he wants to.

But, he has been my champion from the beginning, through my break, and then coming back. He actually suggested that I come back in 2014 to finish instead of letting those credits linger. So, it was really him that made me decide to come back to school. He's been wonderful.

Thus, the interviews clearly revealed that female participants experienced strong family support both inside and outside the home. This included immediate members of the household, as well as extended family and employers. All female participants were married, and all explicitly pointed to support from their husbands as being significant to their college persistence.

Contrary to the female participants, family support played a less apparent role for the male participants. In fact, two of the male participants clearly stated that they did not ask for or need family support.

No Regrets

Asked if the participants would change anything about their college experience, participants widely reported no regrets with their journey to degree completion. While many individuals wished they had returned to school sooner, they also acknowledged the benefits of pursuing a degree later in life.

All of this was true for Laura, including the acknowledgement that the careers and majors of today may not have been available had she attended and graduated from college immediately after high school.

I do wish I would have gone right after high school, but then I didn't know what I was going to do with my life even then. That was back in...I graduated in 1981, so, that was a long time ago. A lot of the things that are of interest now, like

forensic science and other things I'm hugely interested in, were not really prominent then. I always had an interest in psychology, but there just weren't as many options with what I was interested in at the time. Yeah, I do wish I would have gone to college right after high school, most definitely. I would have been done by now. Maybe I would have been a millionaire, who knows. I don't think about that anymore. You can't change the past.

While Laura acknowledged that she did not know about future careers when she attended college the first time, Theresa acknowledged that she did not know about the institution she is currently attending when she enrolled in school the first time. It was a current work colleague at the same institution who informed Theresa about the school and the possibility to attend online and from a distance.

Even though I've had a rocky college experience, I actually would not change anything because I wouldn't be here today if I did. Back, when I was younger, I had never heard of my institution because I live in San Diego. Ultimately, I wouldn't change anything.

As Jeremy saw it, applying classroom learning to the workplace was another benefit to delayed schooling.

I think that for me personally, I wish I would have gone back sooner. But, I wish that and immediately say to myself 'well, I'm happy that I didn't go back sooner,' just because, like I said, I feel like I'm learning so much more, applying so much more than I would have if I would have taken it without workplace experience at all. So, I don't know, I think that honestly, everyone has their own path with this kind of stuff. I don't think I'd really change a whole lot. Maybe I would have

gone back a year earlier, but that's it. I just think it was timing to be honest, so I don't have any real regrets or anything that I would change.

According to some of the participants, the benefits of delayed school had a positive impact on the children of adult students. Amber, for example, believed that her daughter will appreciate her own schooling after observing her mom pursue a degree.

I would have gone sooner. It just would have been nice to have already had all this done and not be trying to do it after I already have a kid and everything. But at the same time, having a kid was part of the motivation for going for this. Just to be done now would be nice, but I've also made friends that I wouldn't have made otherwise. Plus, I think it's nice that my daughter gets to see the hard work that it takes to go through with this and everything, and she will appreciate it whenever she goes to school.

Chloe believed that going back to school at this stage in her life prompted an appreciation for learning that would not have occurred if she had finished school when she began the first time. Having work and life experience also helped her with applications to her coursework. When asked if she would change anything about her college experience, Chloe said:

I don't know that I would, other than I wish that I would have gone back sooner. But I don't think I would. I do appreciate it more (now) and I definitely take it more serious. I think having a lot of life experience behind me has helped me to better understand some of the things the professors are saying.

Lastly, Ethan echoed what the majority of other participants felt about having no regrets. Asked if he would change anything, he said:

I wouldn't. Even though it was hard and I had obstacles, I still overcame them.

Gold isn't gold when it comes out of the ground. You have to take it through the fire first. If you haven't been through the fire, you can't shine. Pressure makes diamonds. Depends on what you're made of. I plan on being a diamond once I'm put under this pressure. So, I wouldn't change anything.

Lack of Institutional Connectedness

Participants of this study generally lacked a sense of connectedness with their institution. While this may be seen as an issue of concern for traditional-aged students [since social integration into college life is closely correlated with retention (Tinto, 1975)] the adult students in this study did not view a lack of institutional connectedness negatively.

Only two participants participated in co-curricular, university-related activities. The remaining seven individuals did not participate; however, a few of the participants mentioned that they participated in volunteer opportunities outside of the university. For online students in particular, involvement in campus life can be difficult, if not impossible. Both of the individuals who indicated involvement with university activities were face-to-face students who fell within the younger age ranges of 25-30 and 31-35.

Gloria confirmed she had no participation in co-curricular activities and stated "I think that no matter how I would have done it, whether it was online or in person, I would have felt like I didn't fit in to the college experience, because most of the students were quite a bit younger than I."

Laura also mentioned her age in relation to lack of participation.

I didn't feel that I fit in much, but that doesn't really concern me in my age. You know, I have a family, and I'm much more focused on just getting the work done without actually feeling like I'm part of a college. That's probably something that the younger ones feel. I thought about joining a national group associated with my major, but I just don't have the time at the moment with working, taking classes, making dinner, and all that kind of stuff. I felt like I would have spread myself just a little too thin. It is something I may look into after I graduate.

Continuing the thread of age in association with university involvement, Ethan likened schooling to a job.

I really never felt like I fit in to the college experience. Everything I was doing, I felt like I was doing on my own. I might be in a class with 150 people, but in my mind, it's just me and the professor. Maybe it's because of my age too. I never really felt like I could go chill out at the University Center [Student Union] and play ping pong. It's all business. Other than going to class and just the routine of it all, it's more like this is my job. It's not like the college experience. Maybe when I was young the experience was going to work, studying, and having fun with other people, maybe playing intramural basketball. I've always considered this as my job or my second job. It was always a business-like attitude.

Chloe supported what Tinto (1975) found. Students who become too involved in the social aspects of college suffer academic damage. Her grades suffered when she attended college directly following high school, but she was determined not to make that mistake again.

As an adult student, I don't participate in any campus events, and I'm not in any of the societies. Maybe if I was a younger student I would. I take a mixture of classes on main campus, the branch campus, and online. There was never a time when I felt like I was part of the college experience – not that I've been made to feel uncomfortable though. I just don't necessarily feel that connection. I can tell you the first time I went to college, I was in a sorority and was involved in campus activities. This time, that's not my focus. The first time my focus was to have a good time, which is why I didn't finish. This time, it's time to study, and that's that.

Any connectedness that was mentioned by a few of the participants did not involve the kind of social integration that is demonstrated by traditional-aged students. Jeremy felt connected when he spoke on the phone to his university's Financial Aid Office, and Stacy stated that her best connection was participating in discussion boards for her online classes. Theresa felt that receiving emails from her university was a small way in which she could feel connected, since she had never physically visited the campus. In the end, conventional campus connections were absent.

Stop Outs

Eight of the nine participants had attended a different (or in some cases, the same) institution previous to their current school, but had stopped out prior to earning a degree. A stop out is when a student withdraws from the institution, but typically returns to the same or different school after a period of time.

Three individuals had attended one school prior to the one in which they are currently enrolled, and five participants attended two previous institutions. The gap

between the year they first ever enrolled in college and their current enrollment ranged from nine to 28 years. The average was 18 years.

Reasons for stopping out varied widely and included family issues, the desire to earn quick money, poor grades, unwanted pressure from parents to attend college, and lack of commitment or preparation for college.

For Gloria, the desire to earn money more quickly prompted her to stop out and work, rather than finish her degree.

I hurried up to get a job the quickest way you can to make good money. I didn't go back for over 20 years because I just never had that motivation to do so. I always thought, well, I'm never going to make more money, so why bother? Then as you mature and grow up, so to speak, it's more of a thing of self-gratification. You know, it's like I want to get my degree because it's important to me – not because I'm going to make more money. So, that period of time I was out, it was lack of motivation to go back.

For Ethan, college was a struggle that he was not expecting and that he found different from his high school experience. He did not know how to study or to handle newfound freedoms. Because of his first college experience, he tries to instill good study habits with his own children.

The first time I went to college, I was on academic probation. This was back when I was 19. I think what happened was that I didn't have good study habits. When I was in high school, I could read a book for five minutes, take a test, and get a B. The actual putting in the work wasn't necessary for me because I didn't need to put in that much...I figured out you can't do that anymore, and that is

what I tell my kids is the major difference. I make them sit down at the table and just study for an hour, even if it's just to get in the habit, because if you don't get into the habit of doing it, once you get to school, you're going to fail. Someone's going to ask you 'Hey, do you want to go to New York today?' 'Hey, I'm going to Ohio for the weekend, want to come?' When they are given the option of going or studying, they don't choose studying. And that's what ended up happening. I had so many opportunities and new experiences.

For Lance, family issues forced a pause in schooling. Although he was not married and did not have children, he did have a younger brother with serious mental health considerations. Because his parents were not able to deal with these issues, Lance felt compelled to take control of the situation.

I left college the first time in 2009...My brother had autism and severe mental retardation, which was part of the reason I chose my major. His case was very severe...My parents, being religious and from the Middle East, never really understood it. It was not something that was very common to them or in our family. So, they didn't know how to handle it...I spent most of my time with my brother, and I could really relate to him. So, I kind of took him under my wing and became his guardian and tried to help him out. He used to suffer from seizures every day for a year and a half, so school didn't really become a priority for me at that time when I was younger...So, I wanted to fix that situation. I got him into a very good private group home that was built for him. The staff caters to him, and I found a neurologist who reduced his seizures down to once every few months. Once all of that happened, I felt like I could go back to school.

Theresa felt pressure from her parents to go to college, but her dream was to be a writer, and college did not seem necessary.

I didn't really want to go to college to pursue a degree because I wanted to be a writer. You know, you're a writer, what degree do you need to write books? And so, I was 18 when I first started college, right out of high school, because it was what my parents wanted me to do, and I actually quit school without telling them. That did not go over very well, but my parents were trying to be as helpful and supportive as they could. We ended up making an agreement that I could go part time and I would just get an associate's degree.

Theresa now realizes that her interest in writing can take on many forms, and after graduating with a library science degree, she plans to pursue a master's degree in the same field.

Driving Force: Employment

Seven of the nine participants listed employment as their main motivation for returning to finish their degree. These seven individuals fell into two categories – those who need the degree for advancement within their field, and those who need it for a career change. Ethan, Jeremy, Lance, Chloe, and Stacy all need a degree to advance in their current field, while Laura and Theresa need a degree to change careers.

A layoff was the triggering factor for Ethan to go back to school. He decided to use the opportunity to earn a bachelor's degree so that he could advance within his field of work.

I was a supervisor at the company where I worked and at some point, I realized that I'd have to go back to school. When I got laid off from the company, I saw an

opportunity to go back immediately. My thought was always that if I worked somewhere for 20 years, I wanted to be the man at the top. I never wanted to stay at the bottom. I felt like this was another level for me to take the next step – because I was the supervisor, and I needed to be the supervisor’s supervisor. The plan was always to go, but I wanted to put my oldest daughter through college first, and then maybe take a couple of classes part time. Being laid off accelerated my plan to go back.

Because of the connections that she has, Chloe felt like she might be able to advance within her career without a degree if she stayed in her local geographic area. However, she would like to relocate to a warmer climate. Without a degree, she felt as if she would be overlooked.

I work in health care, and in order to stay in healthcare and to keep doing what I’ve done, I need a degree. It’s more of when I leave my local area. I won’t have the connections anymore when I leave town. I’m not going to have the people that know my background. A lot of federal funding is dictating as far as positions and structures and experience, and the federal funding is dictating a college degree. I work for hospice right now. I’m a community educator and community liaison. I want to move to Florida.

After a 16-year stop out, Stacy earned an associate’s degree in 2010. With the demands in the healthcare field for more education, she felt the pressure to go back – even though overall, her income would not increase significantly.

They are telling us RNs with an associate’s degree that we have to go back and get our bachelor’s. That’s not the only reason. That just helped motivate me

because if you want to get into a specialty field or anything, they are only accepting bachelor's degree nurses. I did get my associate's degree in 2010 and worked for around five years as an RN. I had a lot of good experience because my background is in the Medical Surgical Unit working on a hospital floor, and that's the best place for a nurse to get experience right out of nursing school.

As mentioned previously, Laura and Theresa did not need a degree to move up the corporate ladder, but desired to change their careers. Both returned to pursue a bachelor's degree in library science. Theresa stated:

I started working for the county library system in the county where I live. I was a library technician, which is basically just doing day-to-day tasks and helping out with whatever needs to be done. And then, the two librarians who worked at the branch quickly realized I was really good with kids, and I really loved what I was doing. They started saying 'Theresa, why don't you become a librarian, you should become a librarian.' And I kept saying 'I'm a writer, I want to pursue writing.' I'm a self-published novelist and my eighth book will be coming out soon. Our branch manager said a really good platform for a young adult writer would be to be a youth services librarian. I was like 'you're so right.' So she was the one who actually motivated me to go back to school and get my degree so I could become a librarian. You need a master's in science to be a librarian. You first need to finish your bachelor's, which I will be finishing this semester, and then I'm taking a semester off and starting my masters in the summer.

Laura not only plans to change careers, but also hoped to move south with her husband. She wants to ensure that she has the credentials she needs to become a librarian.

Previously, she had amassed 70 credits at other institutions she had attended, but never earned a degree. Her interest was always in psychology until she began working part time in a school library.

My husband and I plan on moving down to Florida. We have a couple of houses down there, so we plan on moving down there, and I'd like to get a full-time job in a public library or an academic situation like what I'm in now, but full time. I love my part-time job so much, and that's what made me decide to change my concentration, because I really loved what I was doing and the interaction with the students.

Low Expectations for University Support

Generally, the participants in this study had low expectations of what their university should do to assist them (although each of the nine participants expressed their positive views concerning how the university did support them). Much of the support discussed seemed small in nature. Participants also had a sense of self-sufficiency, which may have factored into their low expectations.

Jeremy felt that his university's portal system adequately and efficiently assisted him in completing necessary tasks. He also felt the school excelled in communication to students.

I would say that being online as a remote student, that you can't ask for the world when it comes to support. There's a certain amount of independence that you have to have when you're working remotely as a student with the campus. So, basically what they did that I thought was helpful was that my school's communication was very good as far as letting you know deadlines for things – like deadlines for

doing your FAFSA, deadlines for class signups, things like that. Their student portal that you log into to pay your bill and see your grades and things like that, I mean, visually it's not the most beautiful thing, but it's very effective and you can get everything you need right in there. It tells you the dates you can sign up for classes and all that kind of stuff, so I think that communication part was really important for me, you know, and I have an advisor and he's checked in periodically, but I don't engage too much with him other than to make sure that I'm meeting all of my requirements to be able to graduate, but I'm pretty self-sufficient otherwise. So, I felt them being able to provide that online portal was, for me, that was all I needed, and I felt it gave me all the support I needed. And in ways they could have better supported me, I don't really think there was a whole lot more they could have done for me personally, but like I said, I'm pretty self-sufficient, so I don't expect a whole lot with that.

Theresa, another online student, also favorably rated her college's communication with her. Furthermore, she was pleased with the Desire to Learn (D2L) online platform that she used to conduct her online classes.

The email system has been really helpful. I felt that during the strike they kept us very well informed. I had, because I'm an online student, my teachers – I had two teachers that went on strike and two teachers who didn't, and all four of them kept us informed on what was going to happen and even if they didn't know exactly what was going to happen, they still did their best to try to keep us informed of what was going on with our classes. For me personally, I wouldn't say there was anything my school could have done to better support me. I think they do a really

good job of keeping me informed and updated, and I feel good about that. I would say, being an online student, I really like the D2L, the online database for classes. I think it is set up in a very organized and efficient way. Before I started, they had us go through an orientation kind of thing on the D2L database that showed us how to access and work everything on the interface, and I thought that was very helpful.

Availability of professors and a smooth online experience were important for Gloria. She also mentioned D2L, the platform used for her online classes.

The professors were always available it seemed like 24-7. Even if you emailed them when you were working late at night, they seemed like they were always quick to get back to you – even on weekends. They were very flexible with the online and their availability. The IT department was really, really great. I don't think I had any issues the entire time with my computer, the software, accessing the different applications like D2L, and email. Everything was a really good experience. I don't think I ever had any trouble. The online learning process was absolutely fantastic for me. I have no complaints at all. I think it was wonderful.

Stacy's idea of school support was simple. She liked that she could attend part time and that the classes progressively built upon each other.

I felt this school was supportive because they gave me the option to pick part-time schooling. For the most part, I only had two classes at any one time. Even though the demands online are a bit more. There's also a full-time option, which, there would have been no way for me to do that. I'm so glad they gave me an option of either full time or part time. And what I love about my school is that they map out

the classes that build on each other, so previous classes build into the classes I'm taking now. Also, having access to the professors for the online hours and email. It's just nice that they give us other contact means. I love how the professors all have great interaction with us, giving us opportunities to ask questions and get help for things.

Amber, a face-to-face student with a more traditional approach to her idea of support, believed that the guidance of faculty, advisors, and mentors was most helpful to her.

Pretty much all of the professors in my major are really helpful. You get to know them all because they teach multiple classes, and they start to know your name and you can go ask anyone of them for advice for anything academically, really. And my advisor was really helpful in, like, planning out my schedule and seeing what classes I had taken before and what criteria they meet so that I wouldn't have to take more classes. And also, my school has a program called peer mentoring. My peer mentor helped me figure out what kind of courses I needed and figuring out what courses were harder than others and what teachers were like, so it was really nice actually. My peer mentor was a little bit younger than me, but she wasn't the typical college-aged student. I think she was 25. Anyone going in can request one – even regular students going in. They just try to match you with a peer who is similar as much as possible.

Laura felt her faculty advisor was very helpful, although difficult to get in contact with sometimes. Access to online journal databases through the library was also a tool that Laura (an online student) found to be helpful in completing course assignments.

My advisor has been extremely supportive. She's been really good with giving me options and kind of directing me as to what might be better courses to take, what I have to take to make sure that I reach the goal of graduating, and things like that. So, although it's been difficult in getting in contact with her, I felt like I understood, that she's got a lot of others that she's advising, so I just stay patient with her. But she's been hugely supportive and really wonderful and not rushing me off the phone or rushing me off Skype or anything like that. I also liked how the university gave you access to library databases for free. I didn't have to pay for anything I used, like EBSCOhost and others. The databases were a huge help to me when I was doing certain assignments. I'm sure there were other services offered by the university that would have benefited me. I just haven't taken advantage of them. I feel like I haven't really needed it.

Lance praised his university for investing deeply in him throughout what he described as the "family crisis" with his autistic brother. He believed the university gave him several chances, even when his grades suffered.

Honestly, with my family crises and going back and forth with work, changing majors, not having a stellar GPA at times, and an entire semester when I did terrible just simply because I didn't show up. The school gave me second chances and third chances and forth chances. So, just knowing that people go through different difficulties in life, and even if they hear the same stories constantly over and over again, instead of becoming cynical, they kind of opened up their arms and really understood. I think that's what helped me to succeed.

Additional Emergent Topic

Every participant experienced obstacles to their degree completion; yet, they were each able to overcome. Although not a true theme, because the obstacles varied, the fact that all participants experienced roadblocks to completion is worthy to note.

Obstacles

All nine participants identified obstacles to earning their degree, however, the similarity ended there. Obstacles were unique to the individual, and sometimes, to their institution or major. For example, a few participants mentioned finding classes that fit their schedule as an obstacle, but this difficulty was specific to the school or major. Other obstacles included finances, working, family, commuting, burnout, and time management.

When Laura originally began school, she attended part time so that she could pay the tuition without the use of financial aid. However, the long enrollment took its toll on her and she stopped out. The long commute also wore on her. In her current enrollment, she worries about repaying student loans.

It was mainly just burnout I think, was the main obstacle from when I started the degree in the 90s. I was working full time and then having to drive the hour away, even though it was only one class a week, it was still a lot to do, and I lost a lot of sleep. You drive an hour, the classes start at 7:00 pm and then they end at 10:00 pm, and then I'm back at 11:00 pm, and then there was the work to do. The fact that I kept that up for ten years, I thought that was pretty good. But then I found myself getting just less and less interested in what I should do next, so that's when I felt like I needed to have a break. But then life itself throws you in different

directions. Then the next obstacle was to decide can I do this again? But really it was just the burnout, and am I really going to be able to do this? And this time, I took out a student loan so that I could get done, so the next stop is going to be paying it back.

For Jeremy, class scheduling hindered his degree completion. He spoke at length about a specific situation at his institution that made it difficult for him to gain access to classes he needed for degree progression.

At times, I had a little bit of a challenge with scheduling. I shouldn't say scheduling, but planning out my schedule with the classes that were offered depending if they were offered in fall semester or spring semester; if I had to take something in summer; prerequisites sometimes (like I wouldn't be able to get into). One example that really sticks out in my mind – I had to take one of the economics classes. With me not being a junior or senior status at my university, I was stuck in the sophomore scheduling. So, what was kind of tough being online was there was only a couple of classes for that economics class available online and so they would fill up very quickly. So, it got to a point where I literally couldn't take any more of my 300-level classes...until I took those economics classes. So, I ended up taking it in a shortened summer session and it was absolutely miserable. It really, really beat me up pretty hard. I was basically eating dinner and by 7:30 I was working and I worked on it through the weekends and it was completely miserable. So, my only real challenge or only real obstacle was just trying to get through scheduling of classes so that I could have my prerequisites ready to be able to move on and take the rest of my 300 level.

Theresa spoke of several obstacles including work, death of a friend, and the faculty strike that occurred in the PASSHE system during the fall 2016 semester.

One of my obstacles is that I work full time. I work for the county library system, which is nice that I take a lot of library science classes, and I could talk about a lot of things that we do in our system or vice versa where I start thinking about a lot of things that we can do in our system based on what I'm learning in class. So that's been really nice. I would say obstacles – life, a lot of life stuff that happens, whether it's relationships or whatever. I actually had a friend die this summer while I was taking summer classes and things that life throws at you. And I think the strike was a little scary for a day, and it lasted three days, so I was feeling much better when it was over, but just all those kinds of things that make you go – 'oh what's going on here?'

Chloe's main difficulty with degree progression was finding classes to fit around her work schedule. The classes for her major were typically available when she needed them, but the general education classes were not. Online classes were ideal, but her major was not one that could be earned completely online.

Other than balancing study time and family time, I'd say that's probably the only one, although sometimes, I can't say that. As an adult student, one of the obstacles is the class times and finding enough classes that I can take around my full-time job. I need either evening or early morning. Not all of the classes I needed were online, which is a fine format for me. I think I've taken nine or ten online classes already. I don't mind the online. After I graduate this semester with my associate's degree, I plan to continue straight through for the bachelor's. Right

now, I'm kind of sweating it if I'm going to be able to graduate in December of next year (with the bachelor's degree) because if I'm not going to be able to get the science class, I'm not going to be able to graduate. Classes for my major are great because they do a ton of sociology classes at night and online, so it's a great major for that. It's the gen. eds. that are causing the problem.

Ethan discussed several obstacles including working, not working, lack of sleep, and time management. Although working may seem like a common obstacle for adult students, Ethan gave an interesting perspective on the obstacle of lack of work. When asked what some of the obstacles were to pursuing his degree, Ethan said:

Being laid off. Because then you make half the money you made. Just paying bills and keeping everybody afloat. My kids understand, but also don't understand. At one point, I got called back to work, so working and going to school at the same time, that was interesting. Sleep was an obstacle. And time management was a true obstacle, because I'm still dad and still have to give my kids time. I want them to know this is the whole reason I'm doing this. It's for them.

Gloria, while giving a very brief look into challenges she experienced, acknowledged several including family, work, finances, and fatigue.

Having a family and working full time. Those were huge obstacles. And finances – having to pay for the tuition myself and student loans, and not being able to get sleep. Fatigue. Tremendous fatigue. I worked full time the entire time I was going to school.

Amber also offered a succinct view of a few of the difficulties she had encountered. Commuting time and family obligations were at the forefront.

It's kind of hard commuting because I have to go 45 minutes to an hour depending on traffic, and there is always construction on the road and stuff, and also just being a parent in general. In February, my daughter got pneumonia and was in the hospital for a couple of nights, so that makes it difficult. I have priorities that go above what school is. Sometimes that can be difficult.

Lance's one obstacle was the cost of tuition. Prolonged enrollment meant an exhaustion of his financial aid. Asked about his greatest obstacle, he said:

Financial – I mean, I think anyone can relate to that. Prices continue to go up. Since I've been here for a long time, nearly ten years, I saw the tuition prices rise before my eyes. It's not insignificant amounts either. It went from \$4,000 to \$4,700. I know it used to be a lot less than what it is now. Now I pay \$10,000 in tuition a year, and I think I was paying \$8,000 a few years ago, which is a big amount, whether you are middle class or low income, that's a huge amount of money. At one point, I went to the financial aid office and told them I don't have any more aid and I need to graduate with one more class, and they offered me a hardship grant of \$1,500. It was almost on the spot, and that showed me that the school is really committed to helping their students graduate, even if they've been here for a very long time.

Internet access being crucial for students who are pursuing their degree in an online format, Stacy mentioned both this and work as obstacles.

There was one period of time when I first started, I was working full time and I guess work is always a big obstacle. It's a necessity, and especially with young ones or families, I don't see how they do it. It takes a lot. I was working full time

when I started this program, and at one time, I switched to PRN [as needed]. I had three classes this semester. This just seemed like the heaviest load. I know it doesn't seem like a lot, but for me, I learn more slowly and I take my time. So, work itself is an obstacle. With anything else, you can incorporate school into it, including vacations. My husband and I are going on a hunting trip next week and there is no Wi-Fi out there, so I had to go buy a jet pack hotspot. Wi-Fi access is necessary no matter where you are at with online classes.

Summary

This chapter presented the findings from interviews conducted with nine adult students aged 25 or older, enrolled in undergraduate degree programs, and in their final semester prior to graduation at three universities within PASSHE. A demographic analysis that included participants' age, gender, major, employment status, enrollment status, and marital status was also represented in the data.

The demographic analysis revealed that age of participants was distributed widely. Gender representation favored females, with only three of the nine participants of the male gender. Employment status spread the full range with three participants unemployed, two employed part time, and four employed full time. Enrollment over the entire span of participants' time in higher education (both past and present) spanned from full time, part time, and a mixture of full and part time. All participants were married, and five of the nine participants had children. There was no consistency with majors.

A review of artifacts that included university websites, undergraduate catalogs, and recruiting materials offered further insight into how adult students were represented in the material. Brigham University appeared to have the most comprehensive website,

office, services, and printed materials for the adult student population among the three universities. Ironically, it was also the school with the least number of undergraduate online programs. Three of the four study participants who were attending face-to-face classes were from Brightham.

There were seven themes identified from the interviews: family support, no regrets, lack of institutional connectedness, stop outs, employment as a driving motivational force, and low expectations for university support. Family support was found to be important to college persistence by the female participants only. Husbands played a key role in this support through encouragement, financial support, and helping with household chores. Participants also held no regrets in their journey to degree completion. All acknowledged that while they may have wished to finish sooner, there were also unanticipated benefits of pursuing a degree later in life. Seven of the nine participants lacked any kind of institutional connectedness in the form of extra-curricular activities. Eight of the nine participants had stopped out of college earlier in their life, and for the majority of participants (seven out of nine), employment was the driving motivational force that brought them back to college. Finally, there were surprisingly low expectations from participants on what they felt their university could have done to support them better.

Discussion of the results of this study and their relationship to the theoretical foundations of Vincent Tinto (1975) and Bean and Metzner (1985) occurs in the final chapter. Also included in chapter five is an examination of the research questions in relationship to the themes that emerged from the interviews, implications for policy and practice, importance of the study, and recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to examine the perceptions of undergraduate adult students in the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education regarding what these students believe are the factors that contribute to their persistence to graduation.

In chapter five, this study's theoretical framework was analyzed against the findings from the nine interviews. The two research questions that guided this study against the emergent themes from the interviews are also discussed. Implications for policy and practice and recommendations for future research complete this chapter.

Nine undergraduate adult students from three different Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education (PASSHE) schools were interviewed for this study. All nine students were in their final semester of coursework prior to degree completion. A narrative analysis was used to examine answers provided to 11 interview questions. Participants were contacted through email, and interviews were conducted face-to-face, through Skype, and via the telephone. All interviews were audiotaped and transcribed. Member checking and triangulation were used to increase the reliability and validity of the results.

Vincent Tinto's (1975; 1993) Model of Student Retention relies heavily on social integration as the main factor for determining retention of students. He found that students who were more involved in the social life of campus were more likely to persist. Additionally, positive "interactive experiences" (Tinto, 1975, p. 115) with individuals within the campus community increased their dedication and loyalty, which in turn increased their likelihood of completion.

Bean and Metzner's (1985) Conceptual Model of Nontraditional Student Attrition is the only retention theory that addresses the persistence of adult students. This model places an emphasis on environmental variables such as family responsibilities, finances, and work. Like other models, it also includes academic and demographic variables. However, environmental variables were found to have a greater influence on student retention than any other variable. Bean and Metzner (1985) discovered that as long as environmental support was high, even if academic support was not, students were more likely to persist. If environmental support was ever low – even with high academic support, drop out was likely.

The two research questions that guided this study were:

1. What do undergraduate students aged 25 and older consider to be the most important factors contributing to their degree completion?
2. How do undergraduate students aged 25 and older view the university's role in assisting them with degree completion?

Application to Theoretical Framework

Vincent Tinto's (1975; 1993) Model of Student Retention was the first theoretical framework applied to this study. Integration into the life of the campus is an important factor in determining student persistence, according to Tinto. He found that establishing relationships with other students, participating in campus organizations, and identifying with subcultures within the college, predicted retention. It is important to note that the percentage of adult students enrolled in higher education was less in 1975 compared to today. While social integration may continue to be important for traditional-aged students, it was not for the students in this study.

Only two of the participants in this study – Lance and Amber – participated in co-curricular activities, and the activities they participated in were clubs that were directly related to their major. Lance and Amber were also face-to-face students. Lance did not have children. He was also in the youngest age group. All other students indicated that they did not participate in co-curricular activities due to competing interest of school, work, and home obligations.

The online students in this study were not able to engage in on-campus activities, since they live at a distance from the physical campus, but nearly all students in the study stated that they could not participate in co-curricular activities (even if they were on campus) because they were too busy. Tinto (2012) later acknowledged that if student engagement was going to occur for adult students, it would occur in the classroom.

For participants in this study, engagement did occur in the classroom (even if the classroom was a virtual setting). Online students felt that they had a connection to their professors simply through email or D2L. They also felt that they were able to connect with their classmates via discussion boards. Face-to-face students also connected to faculty and students within the classroom – especially in classes in their major, since many of the students and faculty were the same.

Any extra activities that participants did mention were ones not affiliated with their university. Some were involved with their children's school and activities, with their church, or with other community organizations. Adding involvement in school-related activities may have overburdened the adult students and proven detrimental to their progress toward degree completion.

Bean and Metzner's (1985) Conceptual Model of Nontraditional Student Attrition added external factors as an element that influenced student retention. While their model included many of the same elements of other retention theories, they also included variables such as finances, hours of employment, outside encouragement, family responsibilities, and opportunity to transfer. With the exception of opportunity to transfer, since the research examined why students stayed, and not reasons they could leave, all elements were addressed in this study.

Only four of the nine participants worked full time. Two worked part time and three did not work at all. Since higher hours of employment negatively impact retention (Bean & Metzner, 1985), the fact that a slight majority of students worked part time or not at all is seen as a positive.

All six female participants enjoyed a level of encouragement by family, spouses, and employers. While male participants may have also received outside encouragement, they did not acknowledge any support, and in fact, denied needing it.

Four of the nine participants did not have children, which is often associated with additional family responsibilities. However, children was not the only qualifier. Lance, who did not have children, did have responsibilities involving his brother with mental health considerations. He dropped out of school during the height of this responsibility, and only returned when that responsibility had lessened. Of the female participants who had children, a relief from household responsibilities by their husbands was mentioned on several occasions.

Finances in the form of tuition cost and the ability to sustain the household were discussed by some participants in the study; however, the issue of finances was not a

theme that emerged. This detail may indicate that participants in the study were not negatively impacted by finances, which in turn, did not affect persistence. Again, this is consistent with Bean and Metzner's (1985) findings.

Research Questions

Research Question One: What do undergraduate students aged 25 and older consider to be the most important factors contributing to their degree completion?

There were three main factors that students believed were the most important for degree completion – family support, maturity levels (including previous college and life experiences), and employment.

Although family support was listed by participants as one of the most important factors for persistence, this is only applicable to the female participants in this study. All six of the female participants spoke of family support both in and outside of the home, and all specifically mentioned their husbands. The three male participants, however, expressed that they did not need support.

This finding was unexpected and suggested that women's traditional gender roles are still prevalent within the family structure. Participants credited their husbands with assisting with household chores, caring for the children, and for some female participants, agreeing they quit work or work part time in order to finish their degree.

If traditional roles are still prevalent, the fact that the male participants did not feel the need for spousal support makes sense. Although they work outside of the home, the additional duties of childcare and household responsibilities are significantly less. Assistance from their wives is not needed for tasks that are not their primary obligation.

This finding exposes the fact that, although adult students tend to have greater responsibilities than traditional-aged students, persistence is partially dependent on the ability of an adult student to lessen their responsibility (for females), or to not increase their home responsibility (for males).

Discussion of maturity levels occurred with many of the participants in this study. Not being ready for college directly following high school dominated this topic. This was the leading reason that stop outs occurred. Pressure from parents, poor grades, and a lack of focus was the demise of retention for participants. Returning to school later in life meant that participants held a greater appreciation for learning and were able to apply real-world experience to their coursework.

For some, the desire to begin earning quick money was more alluring than a temporary effort for a long-term gain. Ironically, the very thing that caused some participants to leave college, was the same thing that brought them back – employment.

Employment was the final important factor that contributed to student persistence. Students fell into two categories with employment – those who needed a degree to advance within their field, and those who needed a degree to move to a different field. This confirms what Harms (2008) found when examining motivational factors for adults to pursue higher education. Listing reasons for pursuing a degree, adult students (in part) listed increasing income (89 percent), changing careers (75 percent), and advancing within their current job (66 percent) as reasons for completing a college degree. Irrespective of traditional gender roles, there was no difference between male and female participants with this motivational factor.

Research Question Two: How do undergraduate students aged 25 and older view the university's role in assisting them with degree completion?

Some of the obstacles that participants faced were ones in which the universities can address, but others are beyond the institution's control. Areas where universities can assist adult students with degree completion include: the assurance of a variety of class options to fit around the life of a student who works or has children; the provision of financial aid packages specific to an adult; the offer of flexible options to eliminate or reduce commute time (such as online classes); the communication to adult students on a regular basis; and the inclusion of as many services as possible through the university's website. Areas where the universities have little or no control over ensuring success are the student's employment, family responsibilities, the students' ability to manage their time, and student burnout.

Five of the nine participants were online students. Of the remaining four students that attended face-to-face, three were from the same university (Brigham), which only offers one undergraduate degree program online. Readerville University offers 16 undergraduate degrees online, and Scholarton offers 12 online undergraduate degree programs. The only participants who mentioned commuting or trying to find classes that fit around their work schedules as an obstacle to degree completion, were those attending classes in a face-to-face format. Universities may be able to better attract and keep adult students by offering classes in an online format or at alternative times (weekends and evenings) and durations (eight week semesters instead of 15 weeks).

Provision of financial aid to adult students offers an additional avenue that universities can spur students on to degree completion. For example, in addition to the

hundreds of scholarships that Brightham University provides, 15 scholarships are specifically set aside for adult learners. Providing information to students about financial aid options is also important, since adult learners have the same access to federal and state student loans and grants.

The importance of communicating information to adult students was a persistence factor mentioned several times throughout the interviews. This seemed especially significant to online students who regarded email and the Desire2Learn (D2L) platform as the main sources of connection to the university.

At a time when colleges and universities are utilizing a variety of social media platforms to communicate with and to students, participants in this study relied heavily on email. It is important for institutions to utilize student email in a way that communicates important information without overwhelming students with excessive and non-relevant matters. Limiting individuals or offices at the institution who have the ability to mass email all students may be one way to achieve this.

All three universities have an online portal in which students are able to access a variety of services through a single sign on. Services include D2L, email, class registration, transcripts and grades, financial aid, bill pay, online journal databases, degree audits, parking permits, technology assistance, and much more. Several participants listed these online services as being important to their persistence.

The availability of these services in one, easily accessed location was equally important for both online and face-to-face students. For online students who did not have access to physical offices on campus, the online format ensured that they were able to utilize services with the same capability as face-to-face students. For participants

attending face-to-face classes, the online accessibility of the portal meant that they did not have to leave work during the day (when university offices were open) to address academic matters.

In summary, family support, maturity levels, and employment were all factors that adult students considered the most important to contributing to their persistence. These factors were ones in which the universities have no influence. However, there were some factors that students felt the universities could regulate, including cost and financial aid, flexible learning options, communication to students, and providing services online.

Implications for Policy and Practice

Examination of the obstacles that adult students encountered, as well as the areas where they felt the university assisted them along their journey, gives a clear picture of what institutions can and cannot do to effect changes to policies and practices.

The obstacles that adult students encountered, which were found as a result of this research, and that universities can address are financial aid, commute time, and flexible class options. Areas that universities cannot control include student burnout, family responsibilities, and work schedules.

In addition, colleges must clearly communicate information on financial aid and provide additional aid to adult students in the form of scholarships. Institutions can provide Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) assistance via workshops, video tutorials, and one-on-one guidance. Advancement offices can also raise funds and allocate current funds for adult student scholarships.

Generally, adult students seemed to have low expectations of what the university should do to assist them. The option to pick part-time schooling, receiving

communication through email, and having information provided on the school's portal were some of the items mentioned as those that were helpful. Knowing this, institutions should focus on improving these options for adult students.

While a university has no control over how far away a student resides from campus, they can offer more flexible options to cut back or eliminate commute time. Offering a variety of classes on the weekend would eliminate the need to drive to campus several times throughout the week. Placing classes or entire degrees online would also help diminish this obstacle.

The same recommendations to eliminate commute time would also assist with the obstacle of finding classes to fit around work schedules. Offering weekend, evening, and online classes would allow students to fit school around their home and work life.

Reflecting on the ways that participants felt their university was most helpful can inform institutions on what can be done to ensure the success of their adult students, reveal to them missed opportunities for adult student recruitment, and help with their bottom line in the form of tuition, fees, books, on-campus housing, meal plans, and other ancillary revenue sources.

Communication by the university was a key persistence factor mentioned by participants in this study. There is an effort within higher education to move away from communicating to students via email and Facebook, and to use social media platforms more relevant to millennials, such as Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat (Jorgensen, 2014; Kolowich, 2011). This may not be the best way to communicate with adult students, however.

From this study, email communication appears to be the most effective way to relay information to adult students. Five of the nine participants were online students, but there did not appear to be a difference in communication preference between the online and face-to-face students. Institutions should carefully consider how they are communicating information to adult students, and limit all-student email access by staff and faculty, so that students are not overwhelmed with emails that do not apply to them.

Institutions should provide, or continue to provide, access to services through a single sign-on portal. The ability to have information in one location is a convenience that participants of this study felt was one more way their university helped ensure their success.

Since all participants in this study were motivated by employment to finish their degree, colleges and universities should work closely with employers who have a tuition reimbursement program or require a degree for advancement. In addition to being a recruitment tool, the requirement of employers to complete a degree serves as strong encouragement for individuals to persist to graduation.

Finally, schools should provide adult students with access to faculty advisors who are knowledgeable and sympathetic to the needs of adult students. These advisors should also be available to the student in alternative formats (phone, email, Skype) and at alternative times (evenings and weekends).

Importance of This Study

Although retention is a topic that was once heavily studied in higher education, this study added to and updated the limited literature that is relevant to the persistence of adult learners. Because many adult students can be found at community colleges, much

of the research that does exist on adult student retention comes from these schools (Guidos & Dorris, 2008). Yet, traditional four-year institutions should already be preparing for a student profile that will change significantly from what it once was. Adult learners will soon comprise half of all enrollment in postsecondary institutions (Jacobs & Hundley, 2010). For these reasons, the research for this study was conducted at traditional four-year institutions.

Research on student retention also primarily focuses on why students leave school. However, this research does not provide colleges and universities with data that would assist them in retaining students since “leaving is not the mirror image of staying” (Tinto, 2012, p. 253). This study examined the perceptions of adult students and what they felt were the reasons for their persistence. The three main factors found were motivations of employment, family support, and maturity levels. These environmental factors are ones in which institutions have little control. However, these factors can play an important role in the admissions decisions for adult students at colleges and universities. Schools may consider selection criteria that includes motivation for enrollment, an established family support system, and an understanding of the importance of a degree.

Finally, colleges and universities that make a commitment to continued enrollment of their adult student population will, by default, also improve their bottom line. A continuing flow of tuition and fee dollars is an obvious advantage, but auxiliary revenue sources such as dining, housing, bookstore, and athletics (among others) is also affected. Additionally, public institutions may also receive performance funding by their State, which may include retention and graduation outcomes.

Recommendations for Future Research

Adult student enrollment in higher education is growing faster than any other population of students (Fincher, 2010). With adult student enrollment projected to grow eight percent higher than traditional-aged students between 2012 and 2023 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013), adult students will soon become the majority in postsecondary institutions (Hadfield, 2003).

As explained in chapter one, research on adult student retention is primarily from community colleges, is quantitative in nature, and focuses on student attrition rather than persistence (Geisler, 2007; Guidos & Dorris, 2008; Tinto, 2012). For these reasons, this study used qualitative data, focused on student persistence, and occurred at four-year institutions. With the projection of adult student growth, and the lack of qualitative, four-year student persistence studies, additional research is needed using these three measures.

Additionally, as a result of this research, there are four specific areas that are recommended for further study as it relates to adult students and retention: gender roles, age, motive, and comparison of format delivery.

When examining the issue of family support, it became evident that female participants placed great emphasis on family support, especially support from their spouse. This manifested in several forms including financial support, taking care of the children, and doing household chores. Male participants expressed that they did not need support.

Some female participants were able to decrease their work hours to part time or quit their job so that they could focus on their studies. The participants credited their spouse for making that possible. Others discussed how their spouses took care of the

children or helped clean the house so that they could have time to do homework or study. The assumption is that these were tasks normally performed by the female participant.

Since all female participants in this study specifically mentioned the significance of support by their spouse in relation to their persistence to graduation, further research is recommended. An examination of unmarried adult student females in higher education and the importance they place on family support may bring to light differences in traditional gender roles, especially if the unmarried adult student females do not have children.

Additionally, further research should be conducted on the persistence of married women with unsupportive spouses. Without the aid and relief of obligations that may hinder progress to degree, institutions may see lower retention rates from such students. This environmental variable may be difficult for schools to overcome.

Since all students in this study had persisted to graduation, there did not appear to be a difference in persistence rates based on age. However, this is another area where further research may be helpful. Included or separate from this additional research may be an examination of whether having no children, or children that are no longer in the home (over 18 years old) impacted persistence.

Employment proved to be a motivational factor that spurred persistence for all participants in this study. Research on adult students who have no motivation for degree completion that is tied to employment may expose differences in retention rates. Without this external influence, adult students may not experience the negative effects of drop out that are present for those who need a degree to be promoted, increase their income, or change careers.

The topic of online students is the final area recommended for further research. It is not clear from this study if there was a difference in the delivery format (online versus face-to-face) and how it related to adult student persistence. The majority of the face-to-face students (three out of four) were all from the same university (which only offered one undergraduate degree in an online format). Commuting and finding classes to fit around their work schedules were two obstacles for these students. A quantitative comparison of adult student retention rates between online and face-to-face formats may offer additional insight. If statistically significant differences in rates appear between the two groups, a qualitative examination into reasons for the difference is merited.

Conclusion

Motivations of employment, family support, and maturity levels were the three main factors that contributed to persistence in this study. The majority of the participants were motivated by employment and the need for a degree to advance within their current field, or to change careers. All female participants valued family support throughout their college journey, and no participant listed any regrets that they were pursuing a degree later in life.

Seven of the nine participants were primarily motivated by employment to finish their degree. However, many also cited a desire to be a role model for their children or to accomplish what they had started many years ago. For the seven participants who needed a degree to advance in their career or change careers, there was not a sense that the degree was being forced upon them. Participants viewed the degree as a necessary step in the process, and embraced it.

Family and spousal support of female adult students was very important to their persistence. Husbands provided financial support and assisted with child rearing and household chores. Children, employers, in-laws, and extended family were among others listed as part of the female participants' support system.

All participants believed they were more mature now than when they first attempted college. While many stated that they wished they had gone back to school sooner, they also acknowledged that they had a greater appreciation of their education now. Several participants identified positive attitudes and life experience as important reasons for their success in college.

As a result of this study, colleges and universities should examine the services and flexibility they provide to adult students. They should also review their recruiting material to ensure that adult students are represented. Faculty and staff should receive training on how to best serve the adult learners at their institution.

This study was significant because it added to scant research on the topic of adult student retention. It concentrated on areas that have been largely overlooked in most retention research, and provided insight into what factors contribute to the persistence of adult learners.

This research revealed the significance of family support and the importance of employment as factors that propel adult students to degree completion. Best ways to communicate with adult students, obstacles that impede degree progression, and low expectations of university support all added to the body of adult student retention literature.

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Appendix A

Demographic Questions

1. Gender

- ☐ Male
- ☐ Female

2. Age

- ☐ 25-30
- ☐ 31-35
- ☐ 36-40
- ☐ 41-45
- ☐ 46-50
- ☐ 51-55
- ☐ 56-60
- ☐ 61-65
- ☐ 65+

3. Major

4. Are you currently employed?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

5. If yes, do you work full time or part time?

- ☐ Full time
- ☐ Part time

6. Are you married?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

7. Do you have children?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

8. If yes, how many and what are their ages?

9. Did you attend other colleges or universities prior to your current school?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

10. If yes, how many and where did you attend?

11. In what year did you first enroll in a college or university?

12. Has your enrollment in college (both at your current and previous schools) been primarily part time, full time or a mix of part and full time?

- ☐ Part time
- ☐ Full time
- ☐ A mix of part time and full time

13. What was your primary reason for entering college?

Appendix B

Interview Questions and Matrix

Research Questions	Interview Questions
1. What do undergraduate students aged 25 and older consider to be the most important factors contributing to their degree completion?	1, 2, 5, 7, 10
2. How do undergraduate students aged 25 and older view the university's role in assisting them with degree completion?	3, 4, 6, 8, 9, 10