6-2005

The Persistence of Adult Undergraduates on a Traditionally Oriented University Campus

Wendy Samuels

Western Michigan University

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/dissertations

Part of the Higher Education Commons

Recommended Citation


1056.

https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/dissertations/1056
THE PERSISTENCE OF ADULT UNDERGRADUATES ON A TRADITIONALLY ORIENTED UNIVERSITY CAMPUS

by

Wendy Samuels

A Dissertation
Submitted to the
Faculty of The Graduate College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the
Degree of Doctor of Philosophy
Department of Teaching, Learning and Leadership

Western Michigan University
Kalamazoo, Michigan
June 2005
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My heartfelt thanks to the participants in the study who shared their stories. I am in awe of them for their candor, their tenacity in life and I applaud the realization of their dream: achieving their bachelor’s degree.

A project of this magnitude is never accomplished alone. I had the privilege of being mentored by two remarkable women: Dr. Andrea Beach and Dr. Louann Bierlein Palmer. To the extent that it is possible to feel nurtured in a Ph.D. program, I did. You are great role models, and rigorous instructors. You pushed when I didn’t think I had anything left. Thank you to both of you, as well as Dr. Michael Parchammy editor, Mikki Garrels, who found the voice within my manuscript and patiently corrected every comma.

A very special thank you to my study group: Suzette Compton, Deb Thalner, Denise Dedman. This would not have been possible without you. We laughed, cried, screamed and survived statistics together. You are terrific!

To my daughter, Christine, a thank you for all your support, especially with the technological minutia. I enjoyed sharing “studenthood” with you.

Lastly, to my husband, my best friend and soul mate, Jim, who has always challenged me to get to the essence of what I’m trying to say. Thank you for the countless times you calmly watched me melt down, and for continually asking how you could help. You complete me.

Wendy Samuels
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS ......................................................................................................... ii

I. CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION ........................................................................................................... 1
THE PURPOSE OF THE STUDY AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS 4
RATIONALE FOR THE STUDY .............................................................................. 5
THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK ........................................................................... 8
DEFINITION OF TERMS, DELIMITATIONS, AND LIMITATIONS ..................... 9

II. CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE ......................................................................... 11

Theoretical Background ...................................................................................... 11
Systems Perspective ............................................................................................ 19
Models of Student Attrition and Persistence .................................................. 20
Persistence Factors ............................................................................................. 26
Meeting the Need of Adult Learners in Colleges and Universities ................. 32
LITERATURE REVIEW CONCLUSION ............................................................. 37

III. CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY ................................................................................................. 39
PLACEMENT AND ROLE OF THE RESEARCHER ........................................ 41
POPULATION AND SAMPLE ............................................................................ 44

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
Table of Contents – Continued

III. CHAPTER 3

DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURES ................................................. 47

INSTRUMENTATION ....................................................................... 48

DATA ANALYSIS AND VERIFICATION ......................................... 48

IV. CHAPTER 4

RESULTS .......................................................................................... 53

PARTICIPANTS ................................................................................. 54

Betty ............................................................................................. 55

Arthur ............................................................................................ 55

Vicky ............................................................................................. 55

Jose ............................................................................................... 55

Kathy ............................................................................................. 56

Eve ................................................................................................. 56

John ............................................................................................... 56

Patti ............................................................................................... 57

Jane ............................................................................................... 57

Vanita ............................................................................................ 57

Tom ............................................................................................... 57

Ray ............................................................................................... 58

Kelly ............................................................................................. 58

Nicky ............................................................................................. 58

Joan .............................................................................................. 59
IV. CHAPTER 4

EMERGENT THEMES ................................................................. 59

Theme 1: The Students Exhibited a Strong Personal Striving to Achieve Their Aspirations .............................................................. 59

Sub-theme 1: Enhancing marketability within the workplace .................................................. 66

Sub-theme 2: Coming to school as a role model and legacy for their children ....................... 66

Sub-theme 3: The lack of value and support from families of origin ........................................ 68

Sub-theme 4: Attendance at college often precipitated by a significant life event .................... 71

Sub-theme 5: Attaining their degree quickly was critical ........................................................ 73

Sub-theme 6: Participants exhibited a value and goal for lifelong learning ................................ 75

Theme 2: There were Significant Gender Differences in the Use of and Expectations for Faculty Support ........................................ 76

Theme 3: Good Advising and Program Flexibility were Critical to Attaining Their Bachelor's Degree .................................................. 82

Theme 4: Immediate Family Support and Sacrifice Were Important: For Single Parents with Young Children, this Support was Critical to Persistence .................................................. 91

Theme 5: Social Integration was not Important for Persistence and the Classroom was the Fulcrum of College Activity for Older Participants ................................................................. 96

Sub-theme 1: The classroom was the only connection to the campus for older participants in the study ........................................ 96

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
Table of Contents – Continued

IV. CHAPTER 4

Sub-theme 2: Negotiating the social divide became more difficult with age......................................................... 98

Sub-theme 3: Older students used and participated in the classroom environment much differently than their younger counterparts .................................................. 101

Theme 6: Institutional Support was not Perceived to be Crucial to Persistence; However, There were Identified Barriers Created by the Institution that Caused Stress ........................................ 103

SUMMARY .................................................................................................................. 106

V. CHAPTER 5

SUMMARY, PERSONAL REFLECTIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTICE AND RESEARCH AND CONCLUSION.... 108

SUMMARY .................................................................................................................. 109

Review of the Research Questions................................................................. 111

Research Question 1: What role does family support play in persistence? ......................................................... 111

Research Question 2: What role does faculty support play in persistence? ......................................................... 113

Research Question 3: What role does institutional policy and services play in persistence? ......................................................... 115

Research Question 4: What role does the classroom environment have in persistence? ......................................................... 117

Evidence of a Strong Personal Striving to Achieve Aspirations

PERSONAL REFLECTIONS ................................................................. 124

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH ..................................... 125

SUGGESTIONS FOR PRACTICE ................................................................. 127

vi

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
Table of Contents – Continued

V. CHAPTER 5

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CONCLUSION</td>
<td>129</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REFERENCES</td>
<td>132</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPENDICES</td>
<td>140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A. Donaldson and Graham’s Model of College Outcomes for Adult Students</td>
<td>140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. Colleges at Ferris State University Granting Four Year Baccalaureate Degrees</td>
<td>142</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. Interview Outline</td>
<td>144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D. Initial E-mail to Department Heads</td>
<td>147</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E. Initial E-mail to Potential Participants</td>
<td>150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F. Approval Letters From the Human Subjects Institutional Review Boards</td>
<td>153</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G. Demographics of Participants</td>
<td>157</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H. Thematic Distributions and Comparisons</td>
<td>159</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER 1

Introduction

The populations of college campuses are changing radically (Rhodes, 2001). Since the 1960s, institutions of higher education have experienced increased diversity in ethnicity, culture, and age of enrolled students. The model of students going right from high school to the college classrooms is no longer the norm. The largest increase in enrollment over the past 30 years has occurred among non-traditional students, particularly women (Brown, 2002). More and more older students are entering or re-entering college as life circumstances and careers change (Hagedorn, 1999).

This increase in adult learners is a result of several social, political, and economic factors. The women’s movement, affirmative action, the GI Bill, rapidly advancing technology, and the changing social and political climate have all influenced the number of adult learners (Astin, 1998). From 1970 to 1991, there was a 171.4% increase in the population of non-traditional students (Kasworm, 2002). These students now make up approximately 43% of the student population (Cubeta, Travers, & Sheckley, 2001; National Center for Education Statistics, 2004). Non-traditional students have been widely defined in the literature, but for the purposes of this study, non-traditional students are students over the age of twenty-five years.

Adult learners are significantly different from their younger counterparts (Hagedorn, 1999). Students over twenty-five often have jobs, families, community involvement, financial problems, and other external issues that compete with their academic involvement for their time, money, and energy. For these students, attending college means constantly juggling competing priorities. Non-traditional students are
almost always less involved on campus than are younger students, because they are more involved in the external community (Bean & Metzner, 1985). They are typically not as prepared for the role of student, and they therefore experience significantly more role conflict (Brown, 2002). They are twice as likely as their traditional counterparts to leave school after their first year (Brown, 2002). Adult students do, however, tend to have a higher college grade point average (GPA), and once they have completed some college courses and feel more confident, they tend to persist to graduation more often than do the traditional students (Kasworm, 1990).

Adult learners add insight and depth to academic programs and campus life. Yet, in spite of the fact that non-traditional students represent over 40% of the undergraduates nationwide, most residential college campuses are still primarily geared to the traditional age student (Martin & Scheckley, 1999; Schlossberg, Lynch & Chickering, 1989). Kasworm (2002) writes extensively about the successes of non-traditional students on more non-traditional campuses, where administrators have altered services and curriculum to specifically attract them. Universities, such as the University of Phoenix, have worked hard to attract the non-traditional student and are enjoying considerable success doing so (Rhodes, 2001). But what about the students who cannot travel to these adult-oriented colleges and universities? Because diversity enriches the learning environment, it certainly seems worth the effort for the traditional universities to adjust to this change in student population. Those in geographically-grounded colleges and universities must address the unique needs of the adult students in order to compete for this market.
Competing in the market means understanding the consumer. That is not an easy task. As Kasworm (1990) writes in her review of the literature on adult undergraduates:

There is clear evidence that the researchers have been struggling with three primary concerns [in attempting to understanding the population of adult learners]. How does one define the adult learner within the context of the undergraduate student role? What is the relationship of the adult learner to the traditional undergraduate student environment? What should be the relationship between the adult student and the undergraduate higher educational environment? (p. 346)

Factors that are significant regarding the persistence of traditional students are atypical for non-traditional students (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Kasworm, 2002), and researchers have recommended studying this population with more depth (Donaldson & Graham, 1999; Kasworm, 2002). This dissertation informs a larger audience of higher education professionals about the unique needs of this diverse population through emergent themes.

Non-traditional students learn differently (Donaldson & Graham, 1999; Knowles, 1968; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999), identify different personal support systems (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Donaldson & Graham, 1999; Kasworm, 2002, 2003), are motivated to attend college for different reasons (Brown, 2002), and are involved on the campus in different ways (Kasworm, 2003; Sandler, 2000) than are traditionally aged students. While some universities have specifically adapted to this population (Kasworm, 2002; Rhodes 2001), many have not, as their primary consumer remains the traditionally aged college student. Although a university may be still primarily geared to younger undergraduates, are there institutional or pedagogical changes that can be implemented to
attract and retain this population? This study explored the experiences of non-traditional students on a main university campus, to better understand how their academic and social experiences have affected their persistence to graduation.

The Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

We know a great deal about the persistence of traditionally-aged college students. We also know that the same factors that predict success for that population do not apply to the non-traditional adult learner (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Kasworm, 1990, 2002, 2003; Sandler, 2000). Research on non-traditional students reveals a highly diverse population that is not easily defined. Yet, it is imperative for each institution to understand its particular non-traditional student population and to develop “an institutional database to define both global and specific adult student profiles” (Kasworm, 2002, p. 20). The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe the social and academic experiences of non-traditional students on the main campus of a traditionally oriented residential university and how these experiences promote or impede their persistence to graduation. Therefore, the questions explored by this research were:

1) What role does family support play in persistence?
2) What role does faculty support play in persistence?
3) What role does institutional policy and services play in persistence?
4) What role does the classroom environment have in persistence?

This research will be particularly significant to administrators and faculty in universities where complete adaptation to the adult learner is impractical.
Rationale for the Study

The recruitment and retention of college students is a primary concern for any institution of higher learning. The financial strain attributed to attrition is enormous, not to mention the loss to the students (Kennedy & Sheckley, 1999). Since enrollment declines in the 1970s, American colleges and universities have invested heavily in attrition research and retention interventions. Most of the information gained about undergraduate retention and strategies employed by institutions has been directed to the traditional college student, aged 18-24. Studies on non-traditional students are comparatively scarce and often yield conflicting data (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Brown, 2002; Cubeta, Travers & Sheckley, 2001; Hagedorn, 1999; Harrington, 1993; Kasworm, 1990, 2003; Sandler, 2000; Scott, Burns & Cooney, 1998; Slotnick, Pelton, Fuller & Tabor, 1993). Because of such conflicting results, Kasworm (2002) recommends that this population be studied with more depth.

Factors significant to the persistence of traditional students, such as grade point average and social and academic integration are atypical for non-traditional students. Because non-traditional students are more likely to drop out early in their educational careers, it makes sense to understand the persistence factors that apply specifically to this population (Brown, 2002; Kasworm & Pike, 1994). The attrition research that exists on non-traditional students suggests that variables relating to persistence are partially related to institutional characteristics, which supports the suggestion by researchers that retention studies be institution-specific (Kahn, 2000; Kasworm, 2002; Tinto, 1993). Understanding factors important to the persistence of non-traditional students at a traditionally oriented university is critical to recommending institutional interventions.
Characteristics of the student population, the setting, and the type and mission of the institution all affect the persistence of non-traditional students in different ways.

The rationale for this study is also contained in the recommendations for further research in nationally published studies of non-traditional students. Most of the research conducted has been quantitative in nature. Only two qualitative studies were found during the literature search, a doctoral dissertation (Brinkerhoff, 2000) and a qualitative study by Kasworm (2003) characterizing the meaning of undergraduate education for adult undergraduates. Brinkerhoff found two significant themes with regard to adult undergraduate persistence: the commitment to the goal of graduating and the support of others. Kasworm’s study did not deal specifically with persistence; rather it delineated five knowledge voices by which adult undergraduates find meaning in their education. It did not yield emergent themes or a deeper understanding of the reasons for persistence for adult learners.

Researchers have recommended at least a mixed methods approach to studying this population to “help uncover which external factors are the most important influences in terms of drop out and how these factors may vary across age groups” (Cleveland-Innes, 1994, p. 443). Bean and Metzner (1985) designed a conceptual model of non-traditional undergraduate student attrition, recommending that further research be conducted that is based on theory and includes variables from the students’ external environment. In an extensive review of the literature of adult undergraduates over the past 30 years, Kennedy and Sheckley (1999) identified that interactions between students and the college environment most consistently explained the variance associated with factors of persistence. Sandler (2000) emphasized the importance of studying the
reciprocal relationships among the faculty, the students, and the institutions to identify what impact these relationships have upon the persistence of non-traditional students. In another extensive literature review on adult undergraduates, Kasworm (1990) recommends further research to “adequately capture the reality of a transactional relationship between adult students and the undergraduate institution” (p. 365). Kasworm further suggests research on non-traditional students incorporate lifespan and other theoretical frameworks of adult development. Students’ decisions “to persist or withdraw are complex and involve an ever shifting interplay among a wide set of variables” (Kennedy & Sheckley, 1999, p. 35). In the presentation of their Model of College Outcomes for Adults, Donaldson and Graham (1999) suggest “it may well be time for additional qualitative research to inquire into the dynamics suggested by our model in an effort to uncover details needed for a more thorough study of these dynamics…” (Donaldson & Graham, 1999, p. 37).

The factors built into this proposal have taken into account these researchers’ recommendations. Looking at adult learners from the ecological and systematic perspective of the persons within their environments, this study attempted to further explain what eventually leads adult undergraduates to persist to graduation. Using adult learning theory from a systems perspective, this study looked at students’ external environment and examined what role family support, faculty support, institutional policy and services and classroom environment have in adult undergraduate persistence. A previously conducted pilot study that informed and influenced the research questions for this study indicated that the support of faculty and family members is crucial to success (Samuels, 2004).
Theoretical Framework

The major theoretical underpinning of this study is adult learning theory. Pioneered by Malcomb Knowles (1968), adult learning theory provides a set of assumptions that assist us to understand how adults learn. These assumptions include the fact that adults are autonomous and self directed, they have accumulated a set of life experiences and knowledge, they are goal oriented, relevancy oriented and practical, and as all learners, adult learners need to be shown respect, particularly with regard to the rich knowledge and experience they bring to the learning experience. Adult development impacts how adults learn (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). Biological, psychological, socio-cultural, and cognitive changes that occur in adulthood are linked to learning. This study explored the experience of the non-traditional students as they relate to these assumptions about adult learning, and specifically how interaction with institutional services supports the unique needs of the adult learner.

This study was undertaken from a systems perspective. Systems theory states that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts and that when one part of the system is changed, the system will react to that change (Andrae, 1996; DuBois & Miley, 2002; O'Connor & McDermott, 1997; Senge, 1990). Or stated another way, a system is a whole that exists through the interaction of its parts. For example, this study examined the students’ external support systems, and how interaction amongst those systems promotes or impedes their success in college. What happens to the family system when the student decides to re-enter school? How does that particular system either reinforce that decision or act as a balancing feedback loop to achieve the status quo.
The conceptual framework for the study is based upon Donaldson and Graham’s (1999) Model of College Outcomes for Adults, (see Appendix A). This model is a synthesis of the research on adult learning and persistence studies (Astin 1993; Bean & Metzner, 1985; Hughes & Graham, 1990; Kasworm, 1997; Kasworm & Blowers, 1994; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999; Pascarella, 1982; Tinto, 1993). Hypothesizing that adult students utilize different skills and techniques in negotiating their undergraduate experience, Donaldson and Graham suggest utilizing this model as a guide for discussion and further research on adult learners. The open model considers the diverse nature of non-traditional students and the impact of environmental factors outside the college environment. The components in this model include: prior experiences and personal biographies, cognition, psycho-social and value orientation, life-world environment, and the connecting classroom (Donaldson & Graham, 1999). These components constituted the general categories that directed the interview process.

**Definition of Terms, Delimitations and Limitations**

A non-traditional student is defined as a student who is at least twenty-five years of age and is enrolled in a credited academic program.

An adult undergraduate is defined as a student who is at least twenty-five years of age and is enrolled in a credited academic program.

An American undergraduate education is defined as a credit-seeking learning experience in a community college or a four year university.

Persisters are defined as those students who are within two traditional semesters of graduation. These would include both full and part time students.
This study was limited to non-traditional students at Ferris State University's Big Rapids campus. The rationale for selecting this site is that the main campus is primarily geared to a more traditionally-aged student, and this presents possible barriers for the non-traditional student to negotiate. Ferris State University is highly representative of the geographically grounded university previously mentioned.

A major limitation of this study was the fact that there are approximately 174 majors at Ferris State University, and it is unmanageable to do a credible cross section of majors within the university. This is particularly true of the College of Technology, which has 16 bachelor degrees spanning Automotive Technology to Plastics Engineering to Construction Management. It is understood that each of the majors, particularly those technically oriented majors may have different attractions for entering the major as well as factors for persisting in the major.
CHAPTER 2
Review of the Literature

In this chapter, adult learning theory is presented as the major theoretical construct of this study, and the systems perspective is defined. The major models of student attrition and persistence are identified, as well as persistence, attrition, satisfaction and achievement factors for both traditionally aged and non-traditional students. Finally, an overview of the characteristics of adult learners completes the review. Throughout the review, results from a pilot study conducted prior to this larger research (Samuels, 2004) are highlighted.

It is important to begin by defining terminology frequently utilized in the persistence research. Early researchers (Astin, 1993; Bean & Metzner, 1985; Cleveland-Innes, 1994; Stolar, 1991; Tinto, 1993) were focused on “attrition”: why students left college. Later studies (Brown, 2002; Cubeta, Travers & Sheckley, 2001; Franklin, 1995; Hagedorn, 1999; Harrington, 1993; Kahn, 2002; Perry, Cabrera & Vogt, 1999; Sandler, 2000; Shields, 1994; Tinto, 1998) switched perspectives and focused on “persistence” factors: why students stayed in college. The “retention” of students is an institutional term often indicating efforts toward keeping students at a particular college or university. These three terms are purposefully used throughout the literature review.

Theoretical Background

Learning in adulthood is different than learning in childhood (Knowles, 1984). To understand adult undergraduates, one must fully understand how adults learn. This is well known by educators specializing in adult education (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). This in-depth review of adult learning theory provides the foundation to explore what
role institutional policies, services and the classroom environment have in persistence. How well institutions design curricula and services that are consistent with adult learning may well have an affect on whether an adult undergraduate persists to graduation.

The major theoretical underpinning of this study is adult learning theory. “Understanding learning in adulthood is like piecing together a puzzle; there are many parts that must be fitted together before the total picture emerges” (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999, p. 193). The individual learner, the context in which the learning takes place, and the learning process are all parts of this puzzle. “Indeed, adult learning is the ‘glue’ holding together a field [adult education] that is diverse in content, clientele, and delivery systems” (Merriam, 1993, p. 5).

Much of the early work in adult learning focused on intelligence, and whether intelligence declined with age (Merriam, 1993). Studies regarding adult intelligence in the early part of the century were a function of both flawed methodology and flawed conclusions about the loss of intelligence later in life (Merriam, 1993). Typically, such studies were conducted in an artificial setting, and timed educational tests were used to compare young learners with older learners. We know now that intelligence is not reduced through the aging process. In fact, a significant finding in the brain research of the 1990s indicates that the more the brain is used, the less likely cognitive function will be lost (Ratey, 2001). And, supplementing the “use it or lose it” concept, intelligence can actually increase with increased intellectual exercise.

Adult physical and psycho-social conditions certainly impact how adults learn (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). Some biological changes, such as loss of hearing and sight or disease, can seriously affect the learning process. From a psycho-social
perspective, life stages or events can have an impact not only on whether or not adults choose to participate, but on how they participate, in learning. Erikson's stages of development were influential in the development of adult learning theory (Erikson, 1963; Tweedell, 2000). Two of Erikson's adult stages of development, generativity vs. stagnation and integrity vs. despair, were particularly significant to understanding developmental crises faced by adult learners. Both of these stages occur later in life.

Generativity deals with the idea that man needs to be needed, and that there is a concern in establishing guidance for the next generation. Integrity implies a mature emotional integration of self that conveys a sense of order and spirituality. The role of self actualization at the top of Maslow's (1968) hierarchy of needs informed the field about the role of basic needs and safety prior to adults moving to more self actualizing behaviors, such as furthering educational goals (Knowles, 1984). Certainly the socio-cultural changes that occur in adulthood are linked to adult learning, particularly as cultural roles become redefined (Hughes & Graham, 1990; Sheehy, 1974).

Adult learning theory can trace its philosophical roots back to the experiential learning philosophy of John Dewey (Tweedell, 2000). Dewey's (1948) philosophy of newer education stressed the importance of experience in the learning process, the participation of the learner in the learning process, and the importance of perceiving learning as a lifelong process. "There is... no point in the philosophy of education which is sounder than its emphasis upon the importance of the participation of the learner in the formation of the purposes which direct his activities in the learning process" (Dewey, 1948, p. 77). The idea that education was related to the whole of life's experiences, and that the educational experience required active participation of the learner, was quite
radical for the time (Dewey, 1948; Tweedell, 2000). While the adult learning community has utilized these concepts as theoretical underpinnings of its pedagogy, it’s interesting, reading his work, to note a resurgence in these educational concepts in education in the recent movement toward learner-centered teaching (Weimer, 2002).

The concepts of self directed learning, andragogy, and perspective transformation, have been critical to the development of adult learning theory (Merriam, 1993). Two educational theorists were products of Dewey’s laboratory school for the Department of Education: Cyril Houle and Malcolm Knowles, and the ideas of both have framed the discussion around adult educational theory (Tweedell, 2000). Houle’s research, which was a qualitative study of individuals participating in various types of learning, resulted in a typology of the adult learner. Houle identified three subgroups of learners: adults who are goal oriented, adults who are activity oriented, and adults who are learning oriented (Houle, 1961). Goal oriented learners are out to accomplish some identifiable objective, such as a degree or certification. Activity oriented learners are those who participate in learning for another reason unrelated to knowledge acquisition: to socialize, to find a spouse, to escape an unpleasant home life. Learning oriented learners are those who seek knowledge for its own sake. Houle’s research was significant to the development of the concept of self directed learning, a concept that has helped define learning in adulthood (Houle, 1961; Merriam, 1993; Tweedell, 2000). It was also significant to the development of the idea that all persons had a desire to learn, a rather radical thought for its time (Griffith, 1987).

Heavily influenced by Houle, Knowles’ (1968) concept of andragogy versus pedagogy, ie., adult learning versus child learning, is widely accepted as a seminal work
in the field. Knowles was first introduced to the concept of andragogy by Yugoslavian adult educator, Dusan Savicevic. The concept of andragogy had been evolving in Europe for some time, and was further refined by Knowles (1984). Andragogy, the art and science of teaching adults, is contrasted with pedagogy, the art and science of teaching children (Knowles, 1984). In the former, the learning experience is driven by the learner; in the latter, the learning experience is driven by the teacher. Andragogy is based upon five assumptions of adult learning: maturity moves one to more self direction, experience is a rich resource for learning, learning readiness is closely related to the developmental tasks of the adult’s social role, adults are more problem centered than subject centered in their learning, and adults are motivated by internal rather than external factors (Knowles, 1968; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). The assumptions posited by Knowles have been the subject of much debate, a frequent criticism being that Knowles was more descriptive than analytical in presenting his ideas and that andragogy is perhaps “his own ideological exposition” (Jarvis, 1987, p. 184). In spite of widespread acceptance for the assumptions of andragogy, there has been little empirical research to test the validity of the assumptions, or to predict adult learning (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999; Merriam, 1993). Although first published as a learning theory (1968), Knowles later acknowledged the andragogical model was based on a set of assumptions, rather than on a theory (Knowles, 1984). Knowles also later recognized that “pedagogy-andragogy represents a continuum ranging from teacher-directed to student directed learning, and that both approaches are appropriate with children and adults, depending on the situation” (Merriam, 1993, p. 8). While Knowles’ concept of andragogy was perhaps not a comprehensive theory, “he has
provided a foundation upon which theory might eventually be erected" (Jarvis, 1987, p. 185).

The concept of perspective transformation is informed largely by the field of cognitive psychology. Two major themes in cognitive development are particularly informative: dialectical thinking and contextual thinking. Dialectical thinking “allows for the acceptance of alternative truths or ways of thinking about the many contradictions and paradoxes that we face in everyday life” (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999, p. 167). Adult students also think within the contextual frames of social, cultural, political, and economic forces. Mezirow’s (1990) theory of perspective transformation was significant in informing adult cognitive process. Attaching critical reflection and an awareness of why we attach meaning to reality is a hallmark of adult learning. “Uncritically assimilated meaning perspectives, which determine what, how, and why we learn, may be transformed through critical reflection. Reflection on one's own premises can lead to transformational learning [italics original] (Mezirow, 1990, p. 18). Transformational learning means reassessing one’s perspectives or correcting distorted assumptions.

Three perspectives widening the lens through which we define adult education include sociology, critical theory, and the feminist perspective (Merriam, 1993; Tweedle, 2000). The psychological perspective has been predominant in the past. More recently, however, we are beginning to develop a more holistic perspective of adults within the context of their culture and society. Significant information from this perspective reveals who has access to what learning opportunities (Merriam, 1993; Merriam & Cafferella, 1999). We know that higher education, for example, is still predominantly white and middle class (Merriam & Cafferella, 1999). The feminist perspective, with particular
attention to societal power structure, has also been directly relevant to issues of oppression and disenfranchisement. A major thrust of critical theory has been to take adult learning to a macro perspective with the goal for social change and to "uncover oppressive forces that hinder individuals from developing their full potential" (Merriam, 1993, p. 11). Thus transformational learning, as discussed above, eventually leads to emancipatory learning, which leads to social action (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). All three are systematically intertwined. As discussed above, we know that cognitive functioning does not necessarily decrease with age. We do know, however, from the work of cognitive scientists, that there are apparent losses in both short and long term memory as we age (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). We also know that older adults take a longer time to process complex information. These cognitive challenges need to be considered for the adult learner. Learning style inventories, such as Kolb's Learning Style Inventory, have proven effective in assisting the adult learner. Learning results from stimulation of the senses (Lieb, 1991). When adult students are informed about their learning styles, they are better prepared to negotiate through the learning process. "Despite the lack of uniform agreement about which elements constitute a learning style, it seems apparent that learning style inventories, unlike most cognitive style instruments, have proved useful in helping both learners and instructors alike become aware of their personal learning styles and their strengths and weaknesses as learners and teachers" (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999, p. 210).

Learning from experience is certainly something the adult learner brings to the table. Adults, as indicated in the above narrative, tend to connect what they are learning to previous experiences and possible future situations (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999).
Adult learners are also very pragmatic: they want to see that what they are learning has application to something practical. Two ways adult educators have brought the experiential world of adults into the learning process is through cognitive apprenticeships and anchored practice, and the primary goal of each is to develop specific skills and competencies in a particular field. Cognitive apprenticeships involve developing real world situations or tasks that are grounded in the learners needs, finding a model to facilitate the learning process for the learner, and then allowing the learner to practice the task. Field internships in social work, engineering, criminal justice, and public administration are examples of cognitive apprenticeships. Anchored instruction is providing an experience base in a classroom setting that simulates the real life setting, and allowing the learner to practice the skill. An example is the interviewing class I teach: students actually interview each other on videotape and receive feedback regarding their skills. The more students practice the skill, the more proficient they become.

In answering the question, “where are we headed?” with adult learning, Merriam (1993, p. 12) states that it is unlikely that we will ever have one single theory of adult learning. Rather, she suggests that the field is understandably headed “toward a multifaceted understanding of adult learning, reflecting the inherent richness and complexity of the phenomenon” (p. 12).

Adult learning theory has evolved over the years; however, several concepts seem to remain as hallmarks: the experiential nature of adult learners, the ability to critically think, and most significantly, the idea that all adults participate in learning, whether formal or informal. As written so long ago by Houle (1961):
While the desire and the ability to learn are not shared equally by everyone, both can be fostered by good teaching, by careful guidance, by building and enlarging sympathetic enclaves, and by providing a range of educational opportunities. These tasks are too great for partial and divided efforts. The inquiring minds of the past have produced most of the advances of civilization. Our hopes for the future must rest in large measure on our capacity to increase the number and the ability of those who continue all their lives to share in the benefits and the pleasures of intellectual inquiry. (p. 82)

**Systems Perspective**

The environments in which adult learners live and work as well as the people in their lives have an impact on their persistence. Understanding systems theory will provide a foundation for understanding what role faculty and family support have in the persistence of adult undergraduates.

Systems theory is actually a term originated in and borrowed from the biological sciences, specifically from ecology (DuBois & Miley, 2002; Slossberg, Lynch & Chickering, 1989). Ecology deals with the interaction of an organism and its environment. Although there is significant evidence that behavior is pre-determined through genetics, there is also evidence to suggest that when the environment is altered, so will the behavior alter (Schlossberg, et al., 1989). In one environment, an organism may flourish; in another, it may perish. The same is true of the non-traditional student on a college campus. The essence of the ecological perspective is that both the individual and the environment are seen as important. To understand the persistence of the adult learner, one must understand the interaction of the learner with his or her environment,
including family, community, work, and the learning institution (Astin, 1993; Bean & Metzner, 1985; Brown, 2002; Hagedorn, 1999; Harrington, 1993; Kasworm, 1999, 2002, 2003; Sandler, 2000). Schlossberg, et al. (1989) suggest we need to "see our institutions as environments that have the potential for facilitating or hindering adult learning" (p. 2).

Systems theory states that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, exists through the interaction of its parts, and that when one part of the system is changed, the system will react to that change (Andrae, 1996; DuBois & Miley, 2002; O'Connor & McDermott, 1997; Senge, 1990). The profession of social work is built upon systems theory (Andrae, 1996; DuBoise & Miley, 2002).

Models of Student Attrition and Persistence

Several theoretical models for student attrition and persistence have been developed over the years. The first theoretical model was developed in 1971 by Spady. He found that dropout decisions are a result of a longitudinal process, that background characteristics such as family background, academic potential, and socioeconomic status, are important. He also found that friendship and congruence with the institution were important factors in a student's decision to stay. The most important factor Spady found in preventing attrition was a heightened degree of social integration.

The second model, built on Spady, was Tinto's (1975) Student Integration Model, which borrows heavily on tribal society's rite of passage and the social theory of suicide. Tinto's model is perhaps the most empirically tested model, and has become accepted as the most useful for explaining the causes of student departure from higher education (Cabrera, Nora & Castaneda, 1994). Tinto (1975) found that, similar to those passing through the rites of passage in tribal societies, students needed to successfully
complete three phases: separation from home and parents, transition to living on their own, and incorporation into college life. When students are unable to do this, they commit social suicide by dropping out. Social and academic integration into the college environment are necessary conditions for persistence. Tinto (1993) found six variables crucial to persistence: academic integration, social integration, goal commitment, institutional commitment, intent to persist, and academic achievement.

A third model, created by Bean and Metzner (1985), relied extensively on past research and review of the literature, and they developed the first model of student attrition for the nontraditional student. The researchers theorized the need for a new nontraditional student model, as the other models relied heavily on social and institutional integration. “One defining characteristic of the nontraditional student was the lack of social integration into the institution; therefore, a different theory must be used to link the variables in this model” (Bean & Metzner, 1985, p. 489). They perceived student attrition as analogous to workplace turnover, and they stressed the importance of behavioral intentions and intent to stay, as significant predictors of persistence. Bean and Metzner developed a path model and found that attrition decisions were based on four sets of variables: poor academic performance, intent to leave, background (educational goals and high school performance), and environmental variables.

In a fourth model, Cabrera, Nora, and Castaneda (1993) merged Tinto’s student integration model and Bean’s student attrition model into an integrated model of student retention. Combining these two earlier theories led to a better understanding of student attrition for both traditional and non-traditional college students. Cabrera, Nora, and Castaneda suggested that the effect of environmental factors was far more complex than
first conceptualized by Tinto. Intent to persist and encouragement of friends and family had the largest total effect on persistence in their research. Environmental factors exerted significant influence in the socialization and academic experiences of the students, and their research suggested that environmental factors should always be considered in conceptual frameworks about student persistence.

Sandler’s (2000) research and subsequent path model is perhaps the most significant piece of research on non-traditional students since Bean and Metner’s 1985 study. This extensive quantitative analysis of 469 non-traditional students at a private urban university studied the independent variables of career decision making self efficacy, family encouragement, perceived stress, financial attitudes, academic integration, social integration, cumulative grade point average, institutional commitment, goal commitment, and intent to persist. Disputing the findings found by Tinto, Sandler found that institutional commitment and academic integration have a total negative affect on re-enrollment. Of the twelve variables in Sandler’s study, career decision making self efficacy had the largest total effect and the largest influence on all other variables. Sandler suggested that the “vocational futures of adult students in the workplace include the larger environment in which they participate in households and families” (p. 567). In other words, while career decision making self efficacy has the largest influence on the other variables, persistence is a result of a highly interactive process between the student and the environment. Sandler offered a highly interactive path model that “reflects a developmental exchange among adult students, the environment and the institution” (p. 571). Sandler’s study suggested that persistence is a result of a system of relationships, and that each of these relationships can affect other relationships. For example, a
student’s satisfaction with financial assistance will affect encouragement from the family to persist toward the goal of graduation. This path model “moves beyond the person-environment fit models of Tinto, Bean, and Cabrera to a path model that is more inclusive and dynamic” (Sandler, 2000, p. 571).

Lastly, Donaldson & Graham (1999) offered a Model of College Outcomes for Adult Students, drawn widely from the research regarding adult learning and persistence studies. “The model attempts to take into consideration the complex nature of adults’ lives and explain the key components affecting their undergraduate experiences” (p. 25). They suggested utilizing this model as a guide for discussion and further research on adult learners. The model considers the diverse nature of non-traditional students and the impact of environmental factors outside the college environment. Although presented in a linear format (see Appendix A), the authors stressed a great deal of interaction among the various components, consistent with systems theory. This study uses their model as its conceptual frame, and the following paragraphs discuss the specific domains of the model.

The model encompasses six components: (a) prior experience and personal biographies, (b) adults’ cognition, psycho-social and value orientation, (c) life-world environment inclusive of reinforcing agents and social settings, (d) connecting classroom, and (e) outcomes (Donaldson & Graham, 1999). The variation in the experiences for adult students is reflected in the multiple components of this model, composed of several different variables based on prior research.

The prior experience component highlights the adult learners’ rich personal experiences and biographies. It influences self efficacy, motivation, and responsibility,
and it impacts the adult students’ approach to their educational experience. It also establishes the stage by which they will make meaning of their collegiate experience.

The psycho-social and value orientation component takes into consideration the internal psychological characteristics and values the students bring to the educational experience: How they feel about their roles as students and the value they place on their education are two factors in this domain. Chartrand (1990), for example, found that a positive evaluation of oneself and a commitment to the role of student were positively related to each other. Issues such as fear of being too old and a lack of confidence in their academic abilities will impact this domain. There is evidence that adult undergraduates are very concerned with the quality of their education, have a greater desire to learn, and value the educational aspects of their collegiate experience much more than do traditionally aged students (Chartrand, 1990; Dill & Henley, 1998; Donaldson & Graham, 1999; Graham, 1998).

The concept of the connecting classroom suggests that adult students use the classroom as the fulcrum of the college experience and that classroom related learning and relationships with faculty are of significant importance for the adult learners. There is much evidence that adult learners value the development of community within the classroom (Kasworm, 2002, 2003; Donaldson & Graham, 1999). “Because adults generally spend less time on campus, they may be forced to find ways to use the classroom as the focal point for their learning experiences” (Donaldson & Graham, 1999, p. 30).

The complex cognitive schema of adult learners allows them to connect new information with previous experiences and to the real world, resulting in practical
application to theoretical learning (Justice & Dornan, 2001; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). This describes the adult cognition component of the model (Donaldson & Graham, 1999). "Once in college, they struggle to connect their present and emerging life-world knowledge structures to their academic knowledge structures. The extent to which they are able to make these connections influences the value of their college experiences" (p. 33).

Life-world knowledge structures are out-of-class settings in which adults participate and interact with others, such as family, job, and community (Kasworm, 2002, 2003; Donaldson & Graham, 1999). A big factor in the life-world environment is the influence of "reinforcing agents" that either support or impede the adult undergraduate's return to college. These reinforcing agents might be family, friends, co-workers, and community members.

Unlike the more traditional definition of college outcomes, this model "suggests that adults may really be seeking, and in many cases achieving, different levels of outcomes [compared with those sought by traditionally aged students] related to their college experiences and learning" (Donaldson & Graham, 1999, p.34). Some of the research suggests that adult undergraduates have a broader perspective about the value of their education than simply studying to achieve a grade (Donaldson & Graham, 1999; Kasworm, 1995, 1997; Samuels 2004). This model suggests measuring outcomes by multiple factors, and not just by what the learners experience on campus or by the traditional outcomes of grades and graduation (Donaldson & Graham, 1999).
Persistence Factors

Enrolling in college does not necessarily mean staying in college. In addition to studying the student models, several researchers have studied variables important for student persistence. The factors that influence traditionally aged students to persist to graduation are quite different from the factors that influence the adult undergraduate. This section will overview the persistence factors found generally in traditional students, then it will move to discussing the factors that seem essential for the adult population.

Several research studies on the persistence of traditionally aged students to graduation indicate that social integration on the college campus is a significant variable for persisters. (Astin, 1993; Pascarella, 1980; Spady, 1970; Tinto, 1993). In Tinto’s (1975) seminal work on student attrition, social integration was found to be a critical variable in student persistence. Pascarella (1982) emphasized the importance of informal student-faculty interaction in the persistence of students. His research indicated that informal contact with faculty heavily influences educational outcomes and persistence. Astin (1993) found that retention was increased by students living on campus and by student involvement with peers and faculty, and it was negatively affected by working. In assessing student satisfaction, Astin also found that student satisfaction was associated with opportunities to participate in extra curricular activities, opportunities for interaction with faculty members, and the overall college experience. Students were generally dissatisfied with those aspects of student support services: academic advising, career counseling, financial aid, and job placement services (Astin, 1993).

In previous research studies, whether or not the student “mattered” to the university was significant to persistence (Astin, 1993; Schlossberg, Lynch & Chickering,
This mattering often means that students feel they are heard, their needs are met, they feel important to the institution, and that student services are widely available and user friendly. If students feel supported through appropriate programs, the development of relationships, and appropriate advising and counseling, they are much more likely to complete their college education (Martin & Sheckley, 1999).

The factors that influence adult undergraduates to persist in their schooling are diverse and complex (Kasworm, 2002), and very different from the factors that influence traditional-age students. "Adult students find that their goals and motives for college attendance are tested, supported, and sometimes diminished by both the collegiate world and their other worlds" (p. 29). Kasworm delineates five areas of self and society that influence the adults' navigation through their collegiate experience: work responsibilities, family and significant other responsibilities, financial responsibilities, community responsibilities, student role responsibilities, and responsibilities to self. Often, the role of the student significantly conflicts with the adult undergraduates' other responsibilities.

It is in the area of social integration on campus that adult learners look most different from their younger colleagues. As adult students attempt to juggle the other four responsibilities, the ability to spend time on campus is at a premium. Contrary to the results of the research on traditional students, Kasworm (2003) found that adult undergraduates were focused on the classroom, as opposed to peer group or campus involvement, as the main stage for their collegiate experience. These students typically do not have time to socialize on campus, and socialization is less important to the older student (Kasworm & Pike, 1994). They have several external factors competing for their time and energy: jobs, family, and on-going commitments to their external community.
The role of student is only one of many roles they play. Bean and Metzner (1985) theorized that since other models of student attrition focused heavily on socialization and involvement factors, a new model for student attrition was required for non-traditional students that did not emphasize this variable. Donaldson and Graham (1999) suggested that non-traditional students engage in the classroom in a unique and different way that accommodates for their lack of time on campus and substitutes for the social integration found in more traditionally aged students:

To compensate for this lack of time to devote to campus and their peers, adults may draw on their previous personal experiences, their wisdom from years of experience, their friends and family, and their instructors to make meaning out of the new knowledge they have acquired. To do this, they use different skills and strategies that compensate for the lack of attention they can give to out-of-class activities. (p. 36)

Participation in campus activities is relatively rare for this student population (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Donaldson & Graham, 1999; Kasworm, 2002). The nontraditional students are much more closely connected to factors in their external community. “The chief difference between the attrition process of traditional and [that of] nontraditional students is that nontraditional students are more affected by the external environment than by the social integration variables affecting traditional student attrition” (p. 485).

Conversely, in Sandler’s (2000) recent study of nontraditional student persistence, social integration was significantly related to persistence for adult learners. This is the first time these findings have been reported for this population. In another
recent study on the persistence of women over 30, Hagedorn (1999), suggested that older female students benefited from social interaction with students and faculty. This study further suggested that adult students be encouraged to attend extra curricular activities and professional conferences, and to interact socially on campus. In my recent pilot study, students reported that the reason they do not participate in student organizations is that the organizational activities do not particularly interest them, and their families are not encouraged to participate in the social events (Samuels, 2004). One student indicated that she would not bring her children to social events on campus because the younger students did not watch their language around her children, and also that the social events often would involve drinking behavior (Samuels, 2004).

High school grade point average (GPA) and college entrance exams have long been predictors for success for the traditionally aged student (Spady, 1971; Tinto, 1993). These variables are less significant for the adult learner (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Kasworm & Pike, 1994; Kennedy & Scheckley, 1999). Although we are increasingly more aware of the differences between younger and older students, institutions tend to continue to utilize admission criteria based upon the younger population, and tend to expect these adult learners to perform similarly (Kasworm & Pike, 1994). These students have typically been out of school for a while, and yet we expect them to compete with high school seniors who have just finished twelve years of academic training. “If higher education is to serve the older adult learner effectively, colleges and universities must consider revising their admissions criteria to reflect the fact that pre-college characteristics, such as high school grades and scores on admissions tests, and other related background characteristics of high school preparation, may not be accurate
indicators of academic success that are unique to older students" (Kasworm & Pike, 1994, p. 707).

Crucial to the success of a nontraditional student is the environmental support that that student receives from family and faculty. "For nontraditional students, environmental support compensates for weak academic support, but academic support will not compensate for weak environmental support" (Bean & Metzner, 1985, p. 492). Several research studies point to the importance of family support toward the persistence to graduation (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Cabrera, & Castaneda, 1994; Sandler, 2000; Scott, Burns, & Cooney, 1998). Ironically, particularly for women, the factors that may motivate women to enroll in college, such as remediation of their life circumstances, may in fact make it difficult for them to complete their education. It may also mean significantly less support is available. "For instance, returning to study as means of dealing with an unsatisfactory marriage may meet with resistance and hostility from one's partner to the degree that completing study becomes impossible" (Scott, Burns, & Cooney, 1998, p. 237). In a study of support systems for female non-traditional students, Carney-Crompton and Tan (2002) found that there were significant differences in the quantity of emotional and instrumental support for non-traditional students and for traditionally aged students, with the younger students reporting greater supports. Their study also contradicts other research in that it found that the lack of support was unrelated to academic success in both traditionally aged and non-traditional students.

In some instances, the faculty can substitute for family support. "When the college environment is considered, the primary impact on adults often stems from involvement in relationships with faculty and in class related learning" (Graham, 1998, p.
There is much evidence that adult learners value the development of community within the classroom and the interaction with caring committed faculty (Donaldson & Graham, 1999; Kasworm, 2003; Graham, 1998). “For traditional age undergraduates, peer interaction had a substantially greater impact on satisfaction than did faculty student interaction. In contrast, faculty-student interaction was more strongly related to satisfaction than was peer interaction for older students” (Kasworm, 1994, p. 705). In a study on female adult learners, Scott, Burns, and Cooney (1998) found that “the graduates in this study who had experienced a lack of family support were likely to have identified university staff and fellow students as their main source of support” (p. 237). A perfect example of this comes from the pilot study work of Samuels (2004). In that work, “Dawn’s” re-entry to Ferris State University’s Social Work Program exacerbated a tense marital situation, which eventually led to a divorce. Because of traditional family values prohibiting divorce, Dawn’s family of origin also rejected her. To compensate, Dawn turned to the social work faculty for her support. She talked about the faculty becoming her role models, her mentors, and her surrogate family during the last two years of her schooling (Samuels, 2004). Faculty influence “spans across the educational domain – not only are they involved in knowledge delivery, but they also influence the student’s larger choice of whether or not to remain in school” (Lundquist, Spalding & Landrum, 2002). In Nora, Cabrera, Hagedorn, and Pascarella’s (1996) study on the differential impacts of academic and social experiences on college-related behavioral outcomes, the most significant positive effect on persistence for both traditionally aged and non-traditional women came from non-classroom mentoring. Particularly relevant for female students is the relationship they develop with faculty outside the classroom.
(Martin & Scheckley, 1999). As one non-traditional student (Ely, 1997) summarized in a presentation to the annual meeting of community colleges:

I see faculty and staff as extensions of student services and value their ability to answer my questions. As an adult student, I see these individuals as my support system and my counseling service. Taking a few moments with me to answer a question, head me in the right direction, or just listening to me vent about a bad day is worth its [sic] weight in gold. (p. 2)

Meeting the Need of Adult Learners in Colleges and Universities

The populations of college campuses are changing radically (Rhodes, 2001). Since the 1960s, institutions of higher education have experienced increased diversity in ethnicity, culture, and age of enrolled students. The model of students going right from high school to the college classrooms is no longer the norm. The largest increase in enrollment over the past 30 years has occurred among non-traditional students, particularly women (Brown, 2002).

The influence of non-traditional students on higher education is evident in many ways. Broadly speaking, universities wishing to attract these students have had to change the way they do business (Rhodes, 2001). What services are offered and how they are offered, academic pedagogy, what programs and classes are offered and when they’re offered, and the role of the faculty are all influenced by this population. In a review of the research on nontraditional students, Kasworm (1990) poses the question: “The majority of the past research assumed the relationship between the student and higher education must be one of accommodation or assimilation. But who should adapt?” (p. 365).
Non-traditional students “have placed an incredible burden, as well as opportunity at the doorstep of colleges and universities across the country as they hasten to develop lifelong learning experiences for the plethora of students who are arriving in ever increasing numbers” (Brown, 2002, p. 70). What challenges does this change in student population pose for institutions of higher learning? First, to meet the needs of these students, it is important to have a good understanding of how the adult learner is different from the traditional college student. “Professionals who provide services to adult learners would benefit from increasing their understanding of the specific needs of older learners (e.g., dealing with the multiple demands of children and aging parents while attending school and working)” (Martin & Sheckley, 1999, p. 303). Then, after understanding the characteristics of this population, the challenge is to alter often well entrenched institutional systems to better address their needs (Sandler, 2000). Why is this important? These students are less likely than their traditional counterparts to complete a degree program (Bean & Metzner, 1985). “Greater family responsibilities, lower socioeconomic status, and lower levels of parental education place older learners at a disadvantage for persisting in college and completing a degree” (Kasworm & Pike, 1994, p. 692-3).

It is evident that the universities which have been highly successful in capturing this student market have greatly adapted to the individual needs of the adult learners, rather than expecting them to assimilate into the more traditional college environment (Rhodes, 2001). Weekend and evening classes, on line course work, the use of adjunct faculty working in their field, experiential pedagogy, programs that have direct links to business and industry for applied research and practice, the presence of day care centers
on campus, and giving credit for life experiences are all examples of how higher education has been influenced by the adult learner (Kasworm, 2002; Rhodes, 2001).

The satisfaction the adult students have with their college experience influences whether or not that institution will develop a reputation of being “user friendly” to this population. In their 2002 National Adult Student Priorities Report, Noel-Levitz, Inc. summarized:

Successful institutions tend to share three basic attributes: they focus on the needs of their students, they continually improve the quality of the educational experience, and they use student satisfaction assessment results to shape their future directions. Making the decision to regularly assess student expectations and levels of satisfaction can provide institutions with the insurance policy they need to maintain their edge in the academic marketplace. Students whose needs are actively addressed by their institution are more likely to be successful in achieving their educational goals and more likely to persist – and ultimately become the institutions’ best ambassadors and future benefactors. (p. 86)

Colleges and universities are businesses. “Although colleges dislike thinking of their services within a business framework, this growing cadre of adults consists of demanding customers with very specific expectations for service. They want it their way!” (Kasworm, 2002, p. 48). Customer satisfaction ultimately determines whether a business stays viable (Senge, 1990). Competition for students in higher education is fierce. The degree to which colleges and universities identify and meet the needs of their students will ultimately determine whether they survive (Rhodes, 2001). To meet the needs of the students, systematic assessment of expectations and satisfaction with
academic and institutional services needs to be conducted. If universities continue to operate blindly, based upon what is convenient or based upon how they've always done business, or if they choose not to understand the priorities of this population, they will ultimately lose adult learners.

As previously indicated, the typical college student has changed in the past thirty years. In a review of an annual freshman survey of the Cooperative Institutional Research Program over a thirty year period, Astin (1998) identified several trends indicative of the social, political, and economic changes in the larger society. “None of these larger societal forces, however, stands out as clearly in the data as the women’s movement” (Astin, 1998, p. 115). The women’s movement has affected the educational plans and career aspirations of women as well as the attitudes of both genders toward the role of women in society (Astin, 1998). More women are attending college and graduate school, and more women are pursuing careers in medicine, law, and business as opposed to the more traditional female careers of teaching and nursing (Astin, 1998). For nontraditional students, divorce is the single most reported reason to return to school (Brown, 2002). “These predominately female students experience both institutional and personal barriers that make their ability to learn and to complete their education more difficult” (p. 68). These students typically have children, have a limited income, and have limited support systems. Although returning to school is a positive decision, any break in support threatens their persistence to graduation (Brown, 2002). Educators need to be aware of potential fragility in support systems.

The characteristics in the rapidly changing workforce are also being reflected by the typical college student. Traditional students are motivated to get a degree primarily
to prepare for a first career. Nontraditional students often return to school to enhance or change a current career, or to complete a degree begun earlier in life. This challenges academic pedagogy to address these changes by making the liberal arts and professional curriculum relevant to the workplace, by developing learning strategies that incorporate the external environment with the academic experience, and by developing linkages and co-curricular activities with the outside workplace (Sandler, 2000). “The actual behavior or re-enrollment or persistence of nontraditional learners may be increased by blending a traditional academic classroom delivery system with vocational enhancements that affect adult student lives directly” (Sandler, 2000, p. 570). Making the classroom environment relevant to real life may be a key persistence factor for non-traditional students.

One of the major issues facing adult learners is lack of confidence in their academic abilities. In fact, Samuels (2004) notes that one student interviewed stated she was nauseous right up to the point of graduation because she was so unsure of her academic abilities. This student graduated with a straight 4.0 GPA! All the students interviewed indicated that the fear factor in returning to college was very high (Samuels, 2004). Several studies indicate a very strong relationship between academic self efficacy and academic success (Cubeta, Travers, & Sheckley, 2001; Kennedy & Scheckley, 1999; Sandler, 2000). Adult learners returning to college are capable, but do exhibit some characteristics which may lead some to question their ability. “They generally do not like competitive class activities . . . and they have a lessened concern for speed in learning since they are more concerned about accuracy” (Slotnick, Pelton, Fuller, & Tabor, 1993). In addition to competing priorities, lack of self confidence in academic abilities is often a reason for attrition for adult undergraduates (Kasworm & Pike, 1994). Good academic
advising and faculty encouragement early in the students' academic career will enhance the possibility for persistence (Kasworm, 2002).

In spite of this perceived lack of academic self efficacy, adult learners expect academic rigor (Kasworm & Pike, 1994). In the 2002 Noel-Levitz report, Instructional Effectiveness was the highest rated priority for adult learners. Older students also tend to report higher levels of satisfaction with their academic experiences than their younger counterparts (Kasworm & Pike, 1994). A priority for adult students seems to be learning for knowledge, rather than memorizing for a test (Kasworm & Pike, 1994; Samuels, 2004). Consistent with adult learning theory, adult learners also prefer pragmatic and experiential methods of teaching. "Studies reported significantly higher preference for collegiate studies as a means to new knowledge and competence in skills, were less oriented to formal structured teaching-learning assignments, and preferred less formal student/faculty association roles" (Kasworm, 1990, p. 355). Overall, adult learners tend to have a "stronger sense of commitment to or focus on their educational experience" (Harrington, 1993, p. 22). Academic quality is expected. Challenging adult learners will enhance their satisfaction with their college experience, and increase the possibility of persistence to graduation.

Literature Review Conclusion

Through the theoretical foundation of adult learning theory and a systems perspective a lens through which this study can be viewed has been created. The experiential nature of adult learners, the ability to critically think and the idea that all adults participate in learning are significant concepts. It is also important to look at adult undergraduates in the context of their complete environment. Past models and studies of
student persistence are starting points in understanding why some adult undergraduates persist to graduation and some do not. Although research on this topic has resulted in conflicting conclusions, most of the studies do reflect that persistence factors for non-traditional students are different than those for the traditionally aged student.

With the social and technological changes that have taken place over the past thirty years, it is possible for many adult learners to now achieve their dream of obtaining a college education. With a little systematic effort, institutions of higher learning can make sure that dream is realized, and, in the process, will enhance their own campuses with the richness and diversity these students bring to the student body.

As Ely (1997) highlights in her final thoughts:

I am your 'at risk' student. I personally believe every student that walks through your doors is a potential 'at risk' student. The point is: I will be looking for your help, support and encouragement; I need your help support and encouragement.

Please be there for me and my dreams. (p. 5)

In summary, the adult undergraduate is significantly different than the traditionally aged undergraduate in many ways. Recruitment and retention of the non-traditional student cannot be ignored by institutions of higher learning. In spite of the various persistence models developed, there has been little in-depth analysis of the experience of non-traditional students on a traditionally oriented campus. What is it like to be on a traditionally focused college campus later in life, and how do these experiences promote or impede persistence to graduation? This study will seek to answer that question.
CHAPTER 3

Methodology

This phenomenological research study examined the social and academic experiences of non-traditional students on a traditionally oriented main campus. Specifically, this study explored the students' experiences with family support, faculty support, institutional policies and services and the classroom environment, and how these experiences promoted or impeded their persistence to graduation.

According to Creswell (2003), there are three considerations in matching a research design to a problem: the audience, the problem, and the personal experience of the researcher. Qualitative research involves studying a small number of subjects in depth to develop patterns and to understand meanings. Qualitative researchers tell a story (Creswell, 1998; Patton, 2002). Qualitative research is an “inquiry process of understanding based on distinct methodological traditions of inquiry that explore a social or human problem. The researcher builds a complex, holistic picture, analyzes words, reports detailed views of informants, and conducts the study in a natural setting” (Creswell, 1998, p. 15).

Let us first consider the audience. A primary audience for this study included administrators of higher education, particularly those in student affairs. Information provided in this dissertation informed a larger audience of higher education professionals about the unique needs of this diverse population through emergent themes, rather than through conflicting and narrowly focused persistence factors found in the quantitative literature. Researchers have suggested that retention studies be institution specific (Kahn, 2000; Tinto, 1993). Because the site for this study was Ferris State University, valuable
information regarding the non-traditional student population at FSU will be available to administrators of that specific institution.

Second, let us consider the problem. A qualitative approach is appropriate for this study primarily because of the conflicting results in the quantitative studies on non-traditional students and the fact that there have been so few qualitative studies on this population. Factors that are significant to the persistence of traditional students are atypical for non-traditional students. Recommendations from previous researchers include studies to understand this population with more depth (Donaldson & Graham, 1999; Kasworm, 2002).

Finally, let us consider the personal experiences of the researcher. This type of research highlights the strengths of the researcher, which will be explored with depth in the following section.

The qualitative research strategy that best fits studying the non-traditional student experience is phenomenology. In phenomenological studies, the focus is attempting to understand a concept or phenomenon (Creswell, 2003; Patton, 2002). Patton (2002) suggests that the foundational question in phenomenology be: "What is the meaning, structure, and essence of the lived experience of this phenomenon for this person or group of people?" (p. 104). The history of phenomenological research begins with Edmund Husserl, who emphasized the essence of the experience, the intentionality of consciousness, specific methods of phenomenological data analysis and the use of *epoche* by the researcher (Creswell, 1998). These concepts will be explored later in this chapter. Phenomenology is a specific type of naturalistic inquiry, wherein the researcher studies the participants in their natural setting, utilizes him- or herself as well as other humans as
the data gathering instrument, and utilizes inductive data analysis to allow for emergent information (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). What all phenomenological research shares is a “focus on exploring how human beings make sense of experience and transform experience into consciousness, both individually and as shared meanings” (Patton, 2002, p. 104). Understanding the shared experiences of the non-traditional student and understanding the phenomenon of their persistence was the focus of this study. The story told is how a non-traditional student survives to graduation on a campus that is primarily geared toward the traditionally aged student, and what factors were significant to their persistence.

Placement and Role of the Researcher

Enhancing credibility in qualitative research involves employing rigorous fieldwork methods, the presentation of a credible researcher, and a fundamental belief in the value of qualitative inquiry (Patton, 2002). I attempted to enhance the credibility of this study by addressing these elements and I assume that the reader shares my belief in the value of qualitative research.

An inherent barrier to the credibility of qualitative findings is the suspicion that the researcher has shaped the results according to predispositions or biases (Patton, 2002). It is therefore imperative that the researcher is aware of any predispositions. The first step in phenomenological data analysis is for the researcher to participate in what is called \textit{epoche} (Creswell, 1998; Patton, 2002). \textit{Epoche} comes from the Greek and means \textit{to refrain or abstain from judgment}. In this step, the researcher clearly identifies prejudices, biases, viewpoints, and assumptions that may affect the story. The researcher
also begins with a full description of his or her own experience of the phenomena being studied. An honest dissemination through *epoche* will lend final credibility to the study.

The credibility of the researcher is a key factor in determining the credibility of a qualitative study. It is important to stress that I am a trained professional social worker. Part of that training is to be aware of bias and to be able to contain it, and set it aside. Self awareness and self control are paramount to our profession, and my professional training allows me the ability to explore, discover and assess data as objectively as humanly possible. Self awareness will be crucial throughout the implementation of the interviews to enhance the credibility of data collection and analysis.

A qualitative study highlights my strengths as a researcher, particularly that of data collection and assessment through interviews. Having spent thirty years as a professional social worker, I have extensive experience in interviewing, assessment, and analyzing data. Not only do I have the ability to conduct a completely open-ended interview for a holistic assessment, I have sharp clinical abilities to effectively recognize themes and patterns from human stories. Social workers are also trained to look at persons within their environments. Because of this trained professional perspective, approaching this study from a systems perspective was second nature to me.

My interest in studying non-traditional students is a result of observations and anecdotal stories heard as a faculty member of the social work program. I conducted an extensive literature review and am therefore entering this study with a certain amount of bias based on information received from student satisfaction focus groups, individual meetings with students, students who have left the program and findings in the literature. I have already identified patterns of difficulty for non-traditional students with regard to
class scheduling, expectations to participate in campus activities, and frustration with working with traditionally-aged students. These students also identified support of family and faculty as important which influenced the formulation of the sub-questions regarding family and faculty. Throughout the research, I continually explored alternative explanations of the participants' experiences as non-traditional students.

A nontraditional student myself, I am living the same experience as the participants, albeit in a much different setting than that of an undergraduate program. I re-entered college at age fifty after obtaining a masters degree in 1977. Now, as a doctoral student, I am experiencing many of the same difficulties as our students: balancing multiple roles, struggling to get back into academic thinking, fitting in, and navigating the system for registration and library holdings. As a participant in this process, I bring personal experience to the research table, and my experience will be reflected in the findings. However, while sharing some similarities, my experience is much different from that of an undergraduate non-traditional student on a traditionally oriented campus. I am participating in my second graduate degree with a cohort of non-traditional students whose needs are well addressed by the college. I also have extensive family support from my husband, with few familial responsibilities, as my children are all grown. I am extensively involved in my external community; however, I have made good choices about limiting these activities during my student tenure. Identifying my own similarities to, and differences from, this population enhances my self awareness and objectivity in approaching this study.
Population and Sample

The site selected for this study was the main campus of Ferris State University. The rationale for selecting this site is that the main campus is primarily geared to a more traditionally-aged student. This presents possible barriers for the non-traditional student to negotiate, and I would like to understand some of those difficulties so as to potentially recommend policy or practice changes to administrators of higher education. Ferris State University is highly representative of a geographically-grounded university as described below.

Ferris State University is located in Big Rapids, Michigan, an area typically described as “rural” in nature. The population of Big Rapids is approximately 12,600 people without students. Ferris adds approximately 11,000 students to the city’s population during the school year. It is the only four-year university in a 60 mile radius. Ferris is unique in both its history and educational mission, which stems from its history. Founded in 1884 on the concept of providing students with marketable skills, the university maintains a mission that all majors have a job “attached” to the major. Recently, Ferris has broadened this mission in practice to include some liberal arts majors; however, the focus of the university remains highly pragmatic. As such, Ferris is a teaching university as opposed to a research university. Another unique feature of Ferris State is its admission policy. Until a couple of years ago, Ferris was fairly flexible in its admission criteria. The institution’s educational philosophy has been that some students mature late in life, and therefore it has admitted students who might not have done well in high school, and given them an opportunity in their first two years at Ferris to obtain a GPA of at least 2.0. This admission policy historically posed challenges for
Ferris, including a high attrition rate, and students who were under-prepared for the rigors of academic life. In 2002, Ferris implemented a minimum 16 ACT, or high school GPA of 2.0 for admission. The new admission policy is slowly being implemented, the goal being not to adversely affect enrollment in programs. These criteria could feasibly negatively impact returning non-traditional students who did not do well in college the first time.

Although the Ferris State University’s extended campuses are geared toward working adults, the main campus is predominantly geared to the needs of traditional undergraduates. Ferris State University has put considerable effort into retaining “First Time in Any College” (FTIAC) students. The 2001 retention rate for FTIAC students at Ferris State University was 59% for the first year. The university developed tutoring and other remedial programs and required a first year seminar of all incoming students (FSUS 100). These efforts seem to be paying off, as retention rates for this population have increased for the past three years. However, little to no effort has been put into retaining returning older students and older transfer students. In fact, FSU Institutional Research has no data on the persistence of non-traditional students, in spite of the fact that 23% of the current students at Ferris are 25 years or older, and there are 1339 non-traditional students on the main campus (FSU Institutional Research, 2004). Clearly, FSU would not be among the institutions Kasworm (2002) profiles as exemplars at understanding and serving adult students.

The sampling procedure was purposeful and based upon criterion sampling. “The idea behind qualitative research is to purposefully select participants or sites…that will best help the researcher understand the problem and the research question” (Creswell,
Students from each department within all five colleges were identified by the department heads, or by other personnel within the department to whom the department head referred. These students were non-traditional students within two traditional semesters of graduation with their bachelor’s degree. A listing of FSU’s colleges and departments with bachelor’s degrees is found in Appendix B. From the initial potential sample, I chose 15 students from the pool, and was able to achieve a diverse sample in age, gender, type of profession, and racial affiliation. Although I anticipated few problems gaining access to the students it was very difficult to get names from the department. Emails were not returned, so I often had to follow up with phone contacts. The department heads had little knowledge about the students, so I was often referred to the program coordinators. The administrators will be offered a copy of the completed study once the students have graduated or given their permission to have the copy disseminated.

Because I am a faculty member at FSU, I was participating in backyard research (Creswell, 2003). Research in one’s workplace is a form of backyard research. I ensured that none of the students I interviewed were in subsequent classes that I teach, or in organizations with which I am affiliated on campus. Strategies for validating the accuracy of the findings will be discussed later.

I obtained permission to conduct this study from the human subjects review boards of both Western Michigan University and Ferris State University. Research ethics were carefully observed, and participants were assured of their ability to voluntarily withdraw from the study at any time, informed of the purpose of the study and the data collection procedures, assured of confidentiality, and informed of any risks associated
with participation in the study. The participants were given a letter outlining these factors and were asked to sign written consent to participate in the study.

The only ethical issue I identified is a problem with administrators of the program knowing which students are being interviewed and then reading the study. Although the students' names were not identified in the study, identification is still possible because of purposeful sampling. This would tend to have a chilling effect on anything negative a student might want to say. I addressed this by not giving the administrators the final copy of the study until after the students have graduated, and I informed the participants of this protection. In reality, there was little involvement by administrators in selecting the participants. The department heads referred me to program coordinators who had more information about the students in their program. There was also a potential risk from what I call small town America syndrome: that I may know the family members. The participants were to be excluded from the sample if that were to happen, however this was not a factor in this study.

Data Collection Procedures

Individual interviews were utilized as the primary method for collecting data. Creswell (2003) suggests that the disadvantages of an interview include the fact that the researcher's presence may bias the responses, and that people are not always articulate. Again, my training as a professional social worker was useful. My skill in developing relationships easily led to openness and vulnerability in the interviews.

Interviews were conducted at each student's convenience; therefore, there was no disruption to any class or administrative function. The interviews took place at FLITE, the FSU Library, to ensure a neutral environment. Interviews were audio taped for
transcription. I also took extensive notes during the interview, and typed an interview summary immediately following the interview. Interviews were approximately two hours in length. There was no need for second interviews, only a couple of follow up emails for clarification and to achieve the member checks. I spent whatever time I needed with the participants to get a sense of their lived experience; some interviews lasted more than two hours and I heard many life stories.

Instrumentation

A general open ended interview approach was utilized to assure covering the research questions (Patton, 2002). The general interview guide outlines a set of issues, delineated from the research questions, to be explored with each respondent, with much flexibility to allow emergent information. "A qualitative design needs to remain sufficiently open and flexible to permit exploration of whatever the phenomenon under study offers for inquiry. Qualitative designs continue to be emergent even after data collection begins" (Patton, 2002, p. 255). The four general areas of family support, faculty support, institutional services and policies, and use of the classroom, were explored through open-ended interviews to encourage an unconstrained description of the student’s college experience.

Data Analysis and Verification

Analyzing the data in a qualitative study is an inductive process (Creswell, 1998; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 2002). "Qualitative analysis transforms data into findings. No formula exists for that transformation" (Patton, 2002, p. 432). Unlike quantitative analysis there are no prescribed formulas for analysis. However, good practice enhances the credibility of qualitative research. Qualitative inquiry produces
massive amounts of data. An important focus of qualitative analysis is to reduce the data by developing codes or categories to discover common meanings, sift through trivia, and find significant patterns (Creswell, 1998; McMillan & Schumacher, 2001; Patton, 2002). The first step in the data analysis was for the researcher to get a sense of the whole. This involved listening to the interviews twice, transcribing the interviews and reading through the transcriptions to become immersed in the data. It is also important to note that storage and backing up the data was crucial. Care was taken to store the transcripts and tapes in a confidential, locked file cabinet, and any electronic data was backed up on alternative drives.

Key to qualitative data analysis is the task of phenomenological data reduction (Creswell, 1998; Patton, 2002). In this process, the researcher “brackets” out the outside world and views the data in its pure form. An approach to reducing the data is the development of initial codes or categories based upon the data presented. This is called horizontalization of the data (Creswell, 1998). Researchers often logistically put notes or codes in the margins of the transcribed data. The researcher then begins the process of describing and classifying the data in an effort to describe the meaning of the experience for the participants, called a textural description of the data. Utilizing his or her own experience, the researcher then puts an imaginative variation on the textural descriptions and further groups the divergent perspectives into structural descriptions: which is “how” the participants are experiencing this phenomenon. The researcher then combines all the above to disseminate the “essence” of the experience, or a composite description. In coding the data, researchers need to be concerned with judging the data by two criteria: external homogeneity, the degree to which the data do not belong together; and internal
homogeneity, the degree to which the data belong together in a certain category. Creswell (1998) presents a data analysis spiral, in which the researcher moves in analytical circles rather than in a linear approach: constantly reading, re-reading, coding, combining meanings and finally describing the phenomenological account based upon the participant’s experiences. This is the process by which I analyzed the data.

While quantitative analyses are subject to statistical procedures to determine statistical significance of the data, qualitative analyses rely on verification procedures to assure credibility and goodness of the data (Arminio & Hultgren, 2002; Creswell, 1998; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 2002). Qualitative researchers are concerned whether they have interpreted the data as accurately as possible. Arminio & Hultgren (2002) suggest that the term “rigor” is an empirical term and should be replaced by the term “goodness” in qualitative research. “Meeting the criteria of goodness requires meaning making of a phenomenon for the purpose of practical action” (p. 450). They suggest five elements that would measure goodness in a qualitative study: That the study be based on a specific theoretical foundation, such as phenomenology; that the methodology outline a specific plan of action; that data collection techniques are clearly identified; that the researcher reflects and defines his or her voice and experience with regard to the study; that the interpretation process results in some new insight; and that the research provides clear recommendations for professional practice. This study incorporated all five of these elements to assure goodness of the study. They also suggest that measures of “reliability and validity” be replaced by the idea of “trustworthiness” in qualitative research. Trustworthiness is providing evidence that the work is credible and representative of the population studied. “The basic issue in relation to trustworthiness is simple: How can an
inquirer persuade his or her audience...that the findings of an inquiry are worth paying attention to, worth taking account of” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 290).

Creswell (1998) and McMillan and Schumacher (2001) outline several verification procedures to enhance trustworthiness: prolonged engagement in the field, triangulation, peer review or debriefing, negative case analysis, clarifying researcher bias, member checks, a thick rich narrative description, and external audits. Creswell suggests qualitative researchers engage in at least two procedures in a given study. To provide trustworthiness of the data in this study, I employed three verification procedures: member checks, peer review, and thick rich descriptions. Member checks involve the participant’s review of the material to ensure accuracy. I shared the results of the study with the participants in the study to ensure that their meaning has been accurately captured. A rich thick description in the narrative also allowed the readers to make their own decisions with regard to the meaning of the research. I told the participant’s stories with some detail to allow emergent assumptions from the reader. To accomplish the peer review, another social worker in the same Ph.D. program read all the transcript summaries, asked tough questions, and further determined whether the meaning was accurately captured.

In summary, qualitative research methodology and data analysis is different from, but not less rigorous than, quantitative analysis. The choice to use qualitative research should be based upon considerations of the audience, the problem and the personal experience of the researcher (Creswell, 2003). Clearly identifying the role of the researcher as part of the study enhances credibility of the study, and it is important for the researcher to be keenly aware of biases and predispositions at the start of the research.
(Arminio & Hultgren, 2002; Creswell, 1998; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 2002). The researcher should also have the expertise to accomplish this type of research. Sampling procedures are purposeful to assist the researcher in understanding the research question, and should be carefully selected to achieve a wide variety of diversity. Data analysis should be inductive and allow for emergent themes, and verification procedures should enhance the credibility, trustworthiness and goodness of the data. This study was designed with these concepts to ensure a rigorous qualitative study of non-traditional students at a traditionally focused university.
CHAPTER 4

Results

This chapter contains the description of the research participants, an analysis of the interviews and the research findings gathered from 15 interviews with non-traditional students. Six emergent themes were found as a result of the interviews. The interpretations of these themes were a result of inductive data analysis and data reduction. This involves immersion in the specifics of the data and coding procedures that take into account external homogeneity, the degree to which the data do not belong together, and internal homogeneity, the degree to which the data do belong together (Creswell, 1998).

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe the social and academic experiences of successful non-traditional students pursuing a bachelor's degree on the main campus of a traditionally oriented residential university and how these experiences promote or impede their persistence to graduation. The methodology used was open ended individual interviews based on an interview outline. The interviews were approximately two hours long, with some follow up emails for clarification. Participants in the study were all students within two traditional semesters of graduation, and the sampling procedures were purposeful, yielding a fairly diverse pool of participants. Trustworthiness of the data was accomplished through thick, rich descriptions, member checks and peer review (Creswell, 1998; McMillan & Schumacher, 2001).

The open ended interviews allowed in-depth inquiry and follow-up for clarification and detail. In many cases, the participants told their life stories, which enabled a placement of their university experiences in the context of their personal
characteristics and biographies. Many had remarkable stories to tell, highlighting their tenacity and personal motivation to achieve the goal of getting their bachelor’s degree.

Participants

Twenty-one names were received from department heads and others to whom they referred me, and all were contacted. Fifteen students responded favorably to the initial email. The participant pool was highly reflective of the on-campus student population within the university at which this study was conducted. There was only one African American participant, and one Hispanic participant; however, this is consistent with the limited diversity of that on-campus population, with African Americans representing 7% of the student population and Hispanics representing 1% of the student population (Day, Salomonson, & Worth, 2004). The demographics are shown in Appendix G. The participant pool included ten women and five men. The College of Business is underrepresented in the participant pool because I was unable to get participants from that college despite repeated attempts. The College of Business has 19% of the student population and the participant pool included only one student, representing 7% of the participants. The other colleges were represented somewhat consistently with their enrollment. Most of the participants had children, and five participants were single parents, including one single father with custody of his two young children. A brief summary of all the participants follows. The names were changed and the specific majors of the students are not identified to protect their confidentiality.
Betty

Betty is a divorced 32-year-old Caucasian female in the College of Allied Health Sciences. She is a single mother of a two year old, living with her parents while she finishes her degree. She works part time and attends school full time. Betty indicates that she has been going to school on and off for the past 15 years. She commutes one hour to campus.

Arthur

Arthur is a 28-year-old Caucasian male in the College of Education and Human Services. He is recently divorced and currently has custody of his children, ages five and two. He works part time and attends school full time. Arthur recently began attending school after working as a laborer for several years out of high school. He and his children live on campus.

Vicky

Vicky is a married 52-year-old Caucasian female in the College of Arts and Sciences. She has taken college courses for the past 15 years, initially just for the pleasure of taking courses, and only recently identified her desire to attain her bachelor’s degree. Vicky’s husband is a faculty member at the university, and one of the employee benefits offered is up to 8 credits of free coursework per semester for employees and their families. Vicky works part time and is the mother of a 12 year old and four adult children, as well as a grandparent.

Jose

Jose is a married 32-year-old Hispanic/American Indian male in the College of Technology. He is also the father of seven children, ranging in age from two to 17, with
another baby on the way. Four of these children are adopted. Jose was laid off from his job three and half years ago, and he has been attending college full time. This is his first time in college. Jose commutes one hour to campus.

Kathy

Kathy is a 52-year-old Caucasian female, divorced mother of two adult children and one child, 12 years old. She is a student in the College of Education and Human Services. Kathy had extensive experience in college over the past several years, having received a clerical certificate, an electronics certificate, a dental assistance certificate and an associates’ degree by the time she was 40 years old. She works full time and attends school full time.

Eve

Eve is a 47-year-old Caucasian female in the College of Arts and Sciences. She was in the Navy for 12 years and became interested in coming back to college when she was visiting campuses with her daughter who was preparing to attend college. Eve is divorced and the mother of a 21 year old. Although she initially worked full time and attended school part time, she is attending full time this academic year so she can finally complete her degree. Eve commutes two hours one way to campus.

John

John is a 34-year-old Caucasian male in the College of Technology. He was motivated to attend school for the first time after suffering a disabling injury as a construction worker. He is married and the father of four children ranging in age from five to 17. John attends college full time, and commutes one hour to campus.
Patti

Patti is a 40-year-old Caucasian female in the College of Arts and Sciences. She is also a staff member at the university and started taking courses toward her bachelor’s degree, two courses at a time, under the university’s employee benefit plan. This was the only way Patti could afford to attend college. She is married and is the mother of three children, ages 15, 17 and 19. Patti works full time, attends school part time and commutes an hour to campus.

Jane

Jane is a 27-year-old Caucasian female in the College of Arts and Sciences and has attended school regularly since high school graduation. She is recently married and has no children. She has worked and attended school in a variety of combinations of full and part time, depending on her financial needs. It has taken Jane ten years to attain her degree.

Vanita

Vanita is a 31-year-old African-American female in the College of Education and Human Services. She is recently married and has a two-year-old daughter. Vanita attended college right after high school graduation but stopped out for awhile to be in the work force. She considers this bachelor’s degree her fourth career. She has worked part time and gone to school part time, but is currently in school on a full time basis so she can complete her degree. Vanita lives on campus.

Tom

Tom is a 28-year-old Caucasian male in the College of Allied Health Services. He is married with no children, and is currently working part time and attending school
full time. Tom attended college right out of high school and has his associate's degree, but he failed out of school due to a drinking problem. After being arrested for drunk driving, Tom got sober and is now proudly anticipating graduating this May. He commutes an hour to campus.

*Ray*

Ray is a 28-year-old Caucasian male in the College of Business. He is currently attending school full time and working part time. He is single with no children. Ray attended college directly out of high school, but stopped out when he had no direction. He came to the university for a unique degree offered.

*Kelly*

Kelly is a 25-year-old Caucasian female in the College of Education and Human Services. She is a single mother of a four year old daughter. Kelly has worked part time and gone to school full and part time directly out of high school, stopping out for one semester to get some direction and another semester to have her baby. It has taken her seven years to attain her bachelor's degree, which she anticipates getting in May. Kelly and her daughter live close to campus.

*Nicky*

Nicky is a 32-year-old Caucasian female in the College of Allied Health Services. She is divorced and the mother of an eight year old. Nicky has attended school intermittently since high school, only recently focusing on a degreed program. She attends school full time, and lives on campus.
Joan

Joan is a 35-year-old Caucasian female in the College of Education. She is married and has three children, ages 13, 11, and five. She is attending college for the first time and is working part time while she goes to school full time. Joan commutes 70 miles one way to campus.

Emergent Themes

The initial round of data analysis revealed 28 emergent themes from the open ended interviews. After two further rounds of data reduction, six strong themes from the participants were identified, with some sub-themes. The major themes from the data include: (a) the participants exhibited a strong personal striving to achieve their aspirations; (b) there were significant gender differences in the use of and expectations for faculty support; (c) good advising and flexibility of the program were critical to attaining their bachelor's degree; (d) family support and sacrifice made the road easier to navigate, but for single parents with young children, this support was critical to persistence; (e) social integration was not important for persistence and the classroom was the fulcrum of college activity for the older participants and (f) institutional support was not perceived to be crucial to persistence; however, there were identified barriers created by the institution that caused stress. These themes are presented below.

Theme 1: The Students Exhibited a Strong Personal Striving to Achieve Their Aspirations

Virtually all the participants described themselves as strongly internally motivated to achieve their degree. This internal motivation and goal orientation is referred to in the psychological literature as “personal striving” (Kasser & Sheldon, 2001). Personal striving is a unifying construct that “unites what may be phenotypically different goals
and actions around a common quality or theme. Thus, a striving does not refer to a particular goal but rather to an abstracted quality that can be achieved in a variety of ways” (Emmons, 1986, p. 1059). Many of the participants related their survival of incredibly challenging life circumstances. Most notable was their intense internal motivation to first persevere and succeed through these life circumstances, and then to transfer that motivation toward the goal of achieving their bachelor’s degrees. Their personal resilience gave them the ability to persist in spite of life’s barriers. Some of the participants in the study were truly phoenixes rising from the ashes.

Tom’s life story was particularly poignant. His father died when he was four years old, and he was raised by an abusive, uneducated alcoholic step-father. Tom’s motivation to attend college was in part due to the fact that he never wanted to be like his step-father, and he knew that education was possibly the way out. He actually left home at age 16 and went to live with his grandparents. Tom came to the university after graduating high school, attained his associate’s degree and was always on the dean’s list. He had planned on staying for his bachelor’s degree, but he began drinking and his plans were derailed. “I kinda lost sight of my final end goal and I became an alcoholic...for some reason I took comfort with that.” Tom states that he felt some of the courses he had to take were “bullshit,” and he just stopped going to class and began drinking continuously. “I drank every day and I drank a lot,” he admits. He subsequently flunked out of school.

Tom was eventually arrested for drunk driving, and while in jail he did some extensive soul searching. He stated he began thinking about how his father would have been disappointed in him. “I came to terms and peace with myself...[going to jail] was
the best thing that ever happened to me.” Tom got a restricted driver’s license, went back to work, and eventually reapplied to the university. Coming back was difficult; he stated he had a lot to prove to himself and his professors. “My priorities were wrong...now I know what they are. I feel I’ve matured...I demonstrated I was smart once...I needed to do it again.” When asked how he was able to make these changes in his life, his response was that he just made his mind up to be somebody; that he was determined to never be the loser his step-father was.

Patti is another example of resilience in spite of life’s barriers. Patti’s first marriage was extremely oppressive. Her first husband was extremely controlling and emotionally abusive. She attempted to take classes here and there, but it always seemed to interfere with her marriage and she would quit. In spite of the fact that she spent several years in this oppressive relationship, Patti somehow had the personal striving to go for her degree following her divorce.

Jane grew up in a progressively dysfunctional home due to alcoholism. Toward the latter part of her high school years, her parents barely paid attention to her. This lack of support and attention did not stop Jane from achieving her goals. She worked in high school to get money for her senior pictures and graduation regalia. Since college was a goal, she worked and saved enough to begin attending community college. She completed two years at the community college and then enrolled at the university. The day she was moving into the residence hall, she found out that financial aid was not going to give her what she needed to stay in school, so she left, worked a couple of years, and saved enough money to come back. It has taken her ten long years to get her bachelor’s degree, and she is proudly graduating in May. Jane relates that her personal
characteristics of “staying focused...being independent...and believing in herself” were the things that helped her persist to graduation.

Eve describes herself as the scapegoat of her family of origin. In spite of the fact that she spent ten years in the military and was successful in the workplace, she constantly got the message that she was a nothing going nowhere. “I got so much crap...so much so I believed it...the message I got from my family about me was that I made it all up. That everything that I was, was invented. There wasn’t me, there was just a story,” she says.

In spite of hearing these ego-destroying messages, Eve decided to enroll in college in her 40’s. She admits that part of her initial motivation to attend college was to prove to her family that she was going somewhere. As her self efficacy and self awareness improved, Eve began reframing her goal achievement to be for herself. “I remember telling my sister a couple months ago, I’m done being this family’s scapegoat...I’m done being beat up on.” Eve also described an instance of age discrimination by one of the faculty:

She said, ‘Let me see, you are how old...and it’s been a year since you had any math. I think you’re not going to make it and it is too late to get your money back.’ She got me so damn fired up, I ended up on the dean’s list that semester...you know what, bitch...watch me.

Eve describes herself as a “risk taker” and a “self motivator” and passionately states, “I’m a fighter.” She definitely has a strong personal striving to succeed.

When asked how she got through college in spite of the fact she was a single parent with absolutely no family support for her goal, Kathy indicates that her support
came primarily from within. “I’m determined... I started out with a positive mindset and you just roll with that.” Kathy describes coming from a physically and emotionally abusive marriage. There were triple locks on the doors. She was not even allowed to go to the mailbox on her own. Yet somewhere within, Kathy was able to remove herself from this relationship as well as set and achieve other goals in life. Kathy has worked full time and attended school full time, all while raising three children. She will be receiving her bachelor’s degree in May.

Vicky attributes her persistence to the fact that she is a “self motivator.” Raised in extreme poverty, Vicky showed early signs of persistence and survival. “My mother was very proud, and she always said ‘I’d rather starve than go on assistance,’ and a lot of times we did.” Her family was so poor that she and her sister shared a mattress without any cover. The springs were constantly popping through, and one time her younger sister’s back was cut by a spring. At twelve years old, Vicky got a job and saved money to buy a used mattress for her sister. Vicky describes that reading and learning was “an escape from poverty.” Eventually, a teacher took interest in her and introduced her to a convent where she was able to “get all the food I wanted.” Vicky credits her early passion for learning as part of the reason for her persistence.

Joan has persisted to graduation while working part time, raising three children, and commuting 70 miles one way to campus. Her husband, while supportive, is often gone for extended periods due to work, so she is effectively a single parent. “I don’t back down... I’m strong willed... stubborn... very goal oriented,” she indicates as being crucial to her success.
Betty flunked out of college the first time she attended. She decided she was not cut out for higher education. “I felt I wasn’t going to have a career or anything, so I might as well be a wife and mom,” she says. After a divorce, she moved home with her parents and enrolled at the university. Betty states that believing in herself was a key to her success.

A lot of it is believing in myself. I have been taught to think for myself...to always look for the future. I can look back but don’t dwell on yesterday...I don’t want to be a slave to my job. I want to work to live, not live to work.

Kelly is a middle child and describes herself as the “classic middle child.” She related that she was always in someone’s shadow, was never the favorite child, always second best. Kelly is the first of her siblings to be graduating from college. When asked how she felt about that distinction, Kelly first talked about being a role model for her older sister who has just enrolled in college, but then smiled slyly and stated “but sometimes I just like to rub their faces in it.” Kelly attributes the fact that she is “strong willed...self confident...independent” to her success in the quest for her degree. She reflects that self confidence and “knowing I’m capable of achieving goals” were crucial to her success.

John persisted to graduation in spite of the fact that, due to a severe construction accident and subsequent disability, he has endured several surgeries and is still in chronic pain. For three years, John attempted to get back to his construction job. He fell into a deep depression. When it became evident that returning to his former work was a physical impossibility, he decided to enroll in school and use his brain in the same field. John always scheduled his surgeries during the semester breaks and indicates that being
in constant pain was the most challenging part of finishing his degree. "I had a goal for myself and I was determined to reach it, no matter what."

For these strong personal strivers, their degree means that they are worth something, that they matter. There is an element of self respect that seems to come with the degree. "I will gain pride, respect, dignity, dedication, self accomplishment," stated Tom. "It means the light at the end of the tunnel is not about to run me over." For Patti, it was important that she do well in school, and she said, "I have somewhere inside something to prove to other people in my life...I don't know if it really even matters...I can do this. I could have done it a long time ago and not struggled so hard." John stated that being in school and attaining his degree have been critical in getting his self esteem back. Getting his degree means "I can be functional again...I can go back to doing something I love...I have something to offer." For Eve, "getting a college degree means a lot to me...I didn't plan on getting this...this is for me." Kelly states, "I did it!" when asked what her degree means to her. Although Betty will not have increased pay opportunities where she works, she indicated that getting the degree was important for her self esteem. "I have a capstone after all these years of hard work...I have something to show for this."

There were several sub-themes reflected in this broad theme of personal striving: (a) enhancing marketability within the workplace, (b) coming to school as a role model and legacy for their children, (c) the lack of value and support from families of origin for their higher education endeavors, (d) attendance in college often precipitated by a significant life event (e) attaining their degree quickly was critical and (f) participants indicated a value and goal for lifelong learning.
Sub-theme 1: Enhancing marketability within the workplace. All of the students reflected that getting a college degree means that more doors will be opened and their marketability and opportunities for advancement will improve. Vanita talked about her belief that having a bachelor’s degree puts one at a different level of employment. “Even jobs that I know I can do, and I’m qualified for...they won’t look at you without a bachelor’s degree.” Jose, who had been laid off prior to coming to college, felt that having his bachelor’s degree would provide stability in the workplace. He talked about the fact that the job market had changed: His father was able to get a good paying job in an auto plant despite the fact that he had never graduated from high school. He doesn’t feel that happens any more, and strongly feels that the combination of work experience and degree will make him more marketable in the future. Arthur came from a blue collar family and, after spending three years in the workforce, decided he was at a dead end. “I figure with my college degree I’ll be able to do what I want...I’ll be able to pick my job, not just have it picked for me.”

Sub-theme 2: Coming to school as a role model and legacy for their children. A strong theme in the study had to do with the fact that every participant in the study who had children, and even some who did not, mentioned they had been motivated to attend or return to school as a legacy and role model for their children. They wanted to be someone for their children. A total of 12 participants mentioned this as a primary motivator for their college attendance.

Kelly stated, “If I don’t have a foundation and good job for myself, I can’t give anything to [her daughter].”
Kathy indicated that one of the strongest reasons for going back to school was to be an example for her 12 year old daughter. “That’s the other reason I’m doing that [going to school] ….to show her…she’s got other people that she sees that are not very good role models.”

Eve feels that attaining her degree this May was a motivator for her 21 year old daughter’s decision to return to school this fall. Her daughter had started her undergraduate degree but had left school.

Betty made the decision to come back to school to get her degree when she was pregnant with her son. She wanted to give him opportunities she did not have. She talked about the fact that he is her motivation; he keeps her focused on attaining the goal. “He’s the best thing I have ever done or will ever do…he deserves the best.”

For Vanita, giving her daughter more in life was important. “The main reason I did come back to school was because of my daughter… because I could get a better career and be more marketable so I could spoil her rotten.”

Tom talked about “changing the family tree.” He notes: Change in the family tree means that both my wife and I are going to be educated now…it was my experience before that my mother and father were stopped at the high school level, and I am taking the next step and I am going to show to our children that the increase in education is beneficial…if you look at my grandmother and how she lived her life, and look at my wife and I and you see that the living styles are different, financial class is going to be different, so that’s what it means by changing the family tree. And from education you can also
produce the president of the United States or something like that...you can’t really get that without an education.

Arthur first stated, “I want my daughter to be proud of what her daddy does.” Then he talked about the importance of “breaking the cycle” of blue collar workers in his family.

My grandfather was first born here, and he did labor jobs just like my dad did, and I don’t blame them, after all, I’m here...but I want to break the cycle. I don’t want to struggle from paycheck to paycheck.

John is the father of four children, ranging in age from five to 17 years old. He sees his attendance at school as an excellent role model and example for his children and hopes that his example will encourage them to further their education. “I get to show them if I can go back and get a degree, let’s see what you can do. Don’t limit yourself...don’t sell yourself short. Put your nose to the grindstone and go.”

For Patti, her children were the major reason she began thinking about having a career as opposed to a minimum paying job. She started contemplating this when her first son was born.

We were living in a little two bedroom apartment...We were barely making it, and I was like, I want more for my kids...this is not cutting it... Anything I saw in the workplace, I saw you needed a degree...I don’t want this for my sons.

Patti indicated that another one of the reasons she has worked so hard to persist is to be an example for her children to encourage them to go further in school.

Sub-theme 3: The lack of value and support from families of origin. Although the participants overwhelmingly wanted a legacy for their children, there was a surprising
lack of value and support for higher education from the students' families of origin. Within this study, family of origin is defined as the families from which the participants originated: their mothers, fathers and siblings. I found this to be a remarkable disclosure, having anticipated the opposite. Of the 15 participants, 11 students were going to be the first college graduates in their family of origin. Only two of these 11 students reported receiving support from their family of origin regarding their college attendance. Only three participants had parents with college degrees: One student's parents both had post graduate degrees; and two students each had one parent with a post graduate degree. The rest of the students' parents had only high school degrees or did not graduate from high school. In ten of the participant cases, higher education was either discouraged or not perceived to be important.

In spite of the fact that Eve’s mother had her master’s degree and was an educator, attaining a college degree was never mentioned as Eve grew up, and her mother has mentioned Eve’s college attendance only once since Eve has come to school.

My mother has her master’s degree... but it was weird... we were never encouraged to go to college... we were never asked do you want to go to college, nothing. I don’t know where that came from... they looked at all of us [siblings] like we weren’t going anywhere... it just didn’t even come up.

When asked about family members’ support, Kathy stated,

Certainly not my father. When I told him I was going back to school he said, ‘You could go down there to McDonalds and get a job.’... after I was on the dean’s list a couple of times, he finally got to the point where he almost gave me credit for what I was doing, but not quite... talk about a rough row to hoe... He always told
me I was never going to amount to anything…but I’m going to show him….When I graduated with my associate’s degree, they didn’t even acknowledge it….so I put on my cap and gown and I drove up to their house….about a week later I got a card from my mother with $20 in it [Kathy was 40 at the time]….I’ve gotten more accolades from people who aren’t even related to me.

Joan’s parents were both high school dropouts and worked blue collar jobs throughout life. There was never any encouragement for Joan to further her education from either family or high school personnel. The only message she received from her family of origin was that she should be a good wife and mother. “Why would you want to go to school?” was the comment from her mother when she returned to school in her 40’s. She will be the first college graduate in her family. When her mother was recently laid off, Joan suggested that she return to school and her mother “poo poo’d the idea,” stating she was too old. Joan stated higher education was just out of the range of possibility for her parents.

Whereas Kathy indicated her father was more discouraging than supportive, Jane described a family of origin that was “extremely dysfunctional.” She had to work to pay for all high school graduation items and has had to put herself through college. It has taken her ten years of working and going to school to achieve her bachelor’s degree this May. She says her family is highly critical of how long it has taken her to get her degree.

Arthur indicated that few people from his home town have a college education. “Most people where I’m from just get a job and work. [Their attitude is] why would you need college?”
Sub-theme 4: Attendance at college often precipitated by a significant life event.

Another sub-theme was the fact that all the participants reflected that their decision to come to college was triggered by a major life event or by dissatisfaction with their current employment situation. Because their life goals were disrupted, they redirected their personal striving energy to be someone into the goal of attending college. Several of the participants talked about hitting the glass ceiling and needing a degree to further advance in the workforce. Nine of the participants had significant events that precipitated their decision to come to school, including divorce, severe injury, job layoffs, or being fired. For all of these students, many of whom had stopped out of the workforce to come to college, getting their degree quickly was crucial.

As previously indicated, John’s major life event was a serious construction accident resulting in a permanent physical disability. John initially spent about three years in surgeries and physical therapy to try to get back into the construction business. He finally decided if he could not do the physical labor any more, he would do the mental labor and stay in the same field.

Kelly’s parents were divorced when she was a junior in high school, and this was traumatic to her. She went from a relatively secure financial environment to an environment in which the entire family had to pinch pennies because Kelly’s mother only had a high school diploma. Her mother eventually returned to school to achieve her degree.

She taught me [through watching her struggle] that it’s necessary to have a degree to go further in life…watching her struggle in her 40s with not having a degree and having to go back to school was truly my motivation [to attend and stay in
college]. I don’t want to be 45 and be going back to school. I want to be 45 and thinking about retiring...I knew this is what I had to do for myself.

Patti’s first husband had an accident resulting in a serious head injury. He was severely disabled, lost his job, and, because of his injury, became violent. She chose to leave the marriage. “Suddenly I went from being comfortable at home, doing whatever I wanted to do, income was moderate...to gotta get a job, support my boys, support my family, and I had no education.” Patti initially entered the workforce as a receptionist and quickly realized that she had already hit the glass ceiling. She decided to come to school to attain her degree.

Just to make ends meet is really a struggle...we have nothing...I would like to get somewhere to a point where it’s not all about working and enjoy some of life...Having that education is something that will probably put me there.

The triggering event for Vicky was her husband’s heart surgery. She wondered what she would do if something happened to him, and felt she needed to get a degree “just in case.”

Arthur was working full time as a mechanic, hated it, and saw no future in what he was doing. “I don’t want to break my back every day doing something I don’t like.” He also saw the older people he worked with as being extremely unhappy. “The older people that I worked with were always grumpy and always complaining...they were always telling me I should go to school so I wouldn’t end up like them.” When he was fired from his job, he realized he didn’t want to “put up with the blue collar stuff” any more, so he took advantage of the time off to come to college full time. Vanita and Jose
were both laid off from their jobs during the economic downturn of 2002. Like Arthur, they took advantage of the “time off” to come to college full time.

Eve described an interesting triggering event. She was getting her daughter ready to attend college and was visiting campuses. Sitting in a classroom for orientation, she thought “I could do this.” She tried to talk herself out of it, but the idea just grew, and every barrier was removed. She finally enrolled in courses she wanted to take for fun. After spending some time taking courses without a particular goal, Eve found out her father was dying of cancer. She really took a look at her life at that point and made a decision to enroll in a degree granting program. She will be graduating this May.

The first time Betty went to college, she got the quickest associates degree she could get so that she could quickly get into the workforce. She hated her field and hated her work. Following her divorce and the birth of her son, she admitted, “I don’t want to do this any more.” She discussed returning to school with her parents, who convinced her to come home to live with them and return to school full time. She will be graduating with her bachelor’s degree in May.

Ray worked three years as a tennis professional in a variety of capacities. He quickly hit what he called the glass ceiling. He wanted to work in management and marketing but determined he would need to have his degree.

Sub-theme 5: Attaining their degree quickly was critical. As indicated previously, because several of the participants were stopping out of the workforce to attend school full time, it was critical they attain their degree quickly.

John finished four years of college in three years, going summers and taking up to 20 credits per semester. His family sacrificed greatly to send him to college. They sold
their dream house and most of their recreational “toys” and are living on a significantly reduced income. The importance of getting done as fast as he could was accentuated by his family depending on him to do so: “Someone else’s life is hinging on mine. They can’t move on until I move on.”

Arthur also felt he needed to get his degree as fast as possible to support his two children. “Yeah, that’s important. I want a job, I want a career...I look at my past and feel like I’ve wasted so much time, I just want to get out of here.” It was so important for him to get out as soon as possible that he sacrificed grades. He carried 19-21 credits through most of his academic career. “I wasn’t a bad student, but I didn’t get a 4.0.” Arthur indicated his “trick” was to show his academic advisor a normal load, get the advising hold lifted, and then add courses.

Although Vicky did not indicate that it was crucial to get her degree in record time, she did switch majors when she realized she could get her bachelor’s degree in less time than she could in the degree granting program in which she was enrolled.

Ray described his return to college as a “necessary evil” and can’t wait to return to the workforce. He stated, “I just need to get my degree and get out of here.” This is Ray’s second time in college, and he indicated that he has not enjoyed the journey this time around. He stated he loves the workforce, and can’t wait to get back.

Betty had already completed all of her general education requirements, having previously attained an associate’s degree. The fact that she needed only a few additional credits beyond what she’d already achieved was a crucial factor in her decision to return for her bachelor’s degree.
Vanita had a very specific goal with regard to getting her degree quickly: “I have a goal for my daughter to be able to write on her walls by the time she’s five years old, which means I’ll have to have a house of my own.” Vanita was laid off from her job in Atlanta and returned to Michigan to obtain her degree. She states that “everyone is waiting to go back south,” which is another motivation to getting through her program quickly.

Tom is working part time and attending school full time so that he can finish his degree quickly. “Going part time was not an option...I started slowly but then quickly went full time...I haven’t looked back since.”

Sub-theme 6: Participants exhibited a value and goal for lifelong learning.
Another emergent sub theme in the broad category of personal striving to achieve aspirations is that all of the participants referred to a value and goal for lifelong learning. “I’ve got this thing about learning that I just can’t stop” (Kathy). Eight of the participants in this study were planning on furthering their education in graduate school. It seemed that for many, achieving their associate’s degree gave them confidence to go on for their bachelor’s degrees, and now that they have achieved their bachelor’s degrees they have confidence to go on for a graduate education. Tom stated he needed another goal or “otherwise I’ll die.”

In one remarkable case, simply participating in the interview put graduate school on the radar. Kelly talked about the fact that had she not been so far into her major before having a child, she would have switched to education and become a teacher. I commented that she might consider attaining a master’s degree in education if that was her goal. Her comment during the interview was, “I’m so sick of school and sick of
being poor, I just need to get out.” A day later she called to thank me, indicating that my comment had made her think about everything from a long term perspective, and that she was investigating going on for her master’s degree.

Vicky is continuing a passion for learning that was her escape from poverty as a child.

[Learning was] for me an escape from poverty... each of us went and did our own thing... there was a teacher that I had... in the 6th grade who took an interest in me... she gave me a list of books. I think one summer I read 30-40 books... my mom would just go nuts... she’d say ‘get your nose out of those books and go outside’... I love to read... I’ll always be going to school because I love it.

Theme 2: There were Significant Gender Differences in the Use of and Expectations for Faculty Support

All of the females in the study shared personal information with their advisors and professors. In doing so, the students expected understanding regarding their personal circumstances as they navigated through school. With only one minor exception, the men in the study tended to utilize faculty support for academic reasons only. In most of the cases, the students felt supported by the faculty at the university. Many of the women in the study also sought female to female relationships from faculty for support.

Vanita has made extensive use of faculty outside the classroom both for clarification and to make sure that faculty are aware of her personal circumstances:

I was always in my teacher’s office... I know they say, ‘Oh here she comes again,’ but I don’t care... that’s what they’re here for... I learned not to be intimidated... I communicate with my teachers on a regular basis... we’re just regular people, on that personal aspect of it... so they know I’m trying and I might need a little extra
help, because the students I’m in class with... they’ve recently taken math, they know some of this stuff already, and I’m lost... I communicate with them on a regular basis, not just about academic stuff but also about personal stuff so they know where I’m coming from and so they can better help me... sometimes it feels like I’m begging, [to have exceptions for absences because of her daughter] and I don’t want special treatment, but hey, this is real.

Jane stated that the faculty support she received in school was extremely important to her persistence. She described a personal situation in which a fellow student was stalking her and, as a result, she was afraid to come to school. One faculty member helped her immensely through this time by being approachable, understanding, and helpful. She indicated that a female doctor at the Birkham Center was also very helpful. Jane indicated without this help she might not have returned to school.

Betty said, with respect to the faculty being more supportive of non-traditional students than of traditional students,

We have a lot more responsibility. We don’t just have to get up and go to class. We are responsible for our children, our house, our work... I have a very small faculty in our program and I feel they are more accommodating to me because of this.

She indicated that she felt communication with the faculty was crucial through her academic career, and that she would often let them know if something was going on in her personal life that was impeding her academic work. Betty felt that the small size of her particular program led to good nurturing and support from the faculty.
Patti stated that one particular faculty member in her program showed immediate personal interest in her, and that made a huge difference in her decision to stay in school early in her academic career.

She showed immediately a personal interest in not just being in her classroom but also me as a person and what was going on in my life. On two occasions, she...noticed I wasn’t doing well...pulled me aside and sat right down and started talking to me and asking me questions and...just her showing and noticing and showing a personal interest in me as a student, wow, meant a lot to me.

As a result, she felt she “belonged.” When talking about the extensive faculty support she has gotten at the university, Patti stated, “It’s like I have this handful of cheerleaders that are encouraging me along the way, and that keeps me going.”

Joan stated that it was very important to her that faculty understood she had family responsibilities, and she freely shared when those responsibilities were interfering with her academic schedule. She did expect some flexibility from faculty, and stated that most of the faculty understood her unique circumstances, but some did not.

Most of my professors were really great, very accepting. [They might say,] ‘Your son’s sick, you can make up the exam next week when you come back’...very supportive. There were a couple that expected you to be there no matter what...that was really hard...to email them and tell them I couldn’t be here because my kids are out of school...and some were like, ‘Your grade is going to suffer if you’re not here.’ Well, you know...getting my bachelor’s degree is important to me, but my family is most important... I am not a traditional student,
I have responsibilities...I don’t just have school...I understand where they’re coming from...they need to know where I’m coming from.

Joan also related a story about significant faculty support at the community college when she initially entered school. Her ultimate goal is to become a postal inspector: A rigorous undertaking! When she related her dream to her community college advisor, he didn’t judge her, but rather accepted her dream as fact and guided her where she needed to go. She stated this initial acceptance was very important to her:

When I first went in there...I told him I wanted to be a postal inspector...not one time did he look at me funny, or look at me like I was an idiot for even wanting to. It helped me out so much knowing that I was accepted...like my dream was going to really happen...I wasn’t going to be an outcast.

Nicky indicated that faculty support for her “single mom status” was very important to her, and for the most part she received that support, particularly in her program. “They got me into classes and into my apartment three days before I started classes...I would have been lost...they know I’m a single mom and give me a break.” She stated that female instructors were generally more understanding.

Kelly had very little help from faculty, and in fact indicated there were many times where faculty was an impediment to her success. She would always let faculty know at the beginning of a semester that she was a single mother of a pre-school child, not to use this as an excuse, but to let them know she had other responsibilities.

Faculty seem to perceive I use my child as an excuse and that I’m skipping class if something is going on with her...[they] wouldn’t let me bring her to classes – in fact I got yelled at once for bringing her to the computer lab for some group
work... that I should have gotten a babysitter... teachers have sent me home rather than allowing her to be in class.

The women in the study also expressed a need for faculty to perceive them as adults as opposed to younger students. Kelly stated she became quite frustrated with some of the rhetoric she constantly heard in class, even though her professors knew she was a parent: “‘When you become parents...when you get out in the real world...when you become adults’...hello, we are adults.” She stated that she often felt faculty perceived her as an incompetent child.

Patti felt a lack of faculty support when a professor apparently could not handle the age diversity of the classroom.

What turned me off about that professor; it seemed that in his lecture style he was unable to embrace the diversity of his audience. His lectures...and all of his examples, the things that he was saying were geared toward the person that had just graduated from high school...talking about their relationships with their mom.... and for me to relate to that and identify with that, I had to think way back.

In contrast, the men in the study tended to use faculty support for academic purposes only. The men tended to perceive the sharing of personal information as excuse making.

Only one of the men described faculty support as critical to his success. John described tremendous faculty support, stating, “The faculty changed me...I’m a better person now because of them.” He talks about their constant accessibility:
That's one thing that's helped me more than anything getting the degree and everything is the support of the faculty...I use them, too. I call them at home and they don't mind...if you need help they're there to give you that help...I never expected it to be that way...that's the single most reason for my success is the support of the faculty.

The help he described was purely academic. In spite of the fact that John described his biggest challenge in going to college was dealing with the physical exhaustion and pain due to his disability, he never once talked with his professors about this. He did not want any special compensation for his physical challenges. “I haven’t really brought it up. I don’t want the stigma...it’s not something I bring up to people. I want to be treated like anybody else...I want to accomplish it on my merits...so it’s not something I talk about,” he said.

The other men in the study were lukewarm on the importance of faculty support, and none felt the support was critical.

In spite of the fact that Arthur was a single father of two pre-school children, he placed little importance on faculty support. “They’ve been helpful, but I’ve never been one to sit down and tell them all my problems or anything...there are a lot of faculty that I feel that I could go and talk to, but I’ve never talked with them about any personal stuff...in fact, I don’t think any faculty even know I have children,” he stated.

Jose stated there were no faculty members who were particularly influential, and that he never shared personal information about his family with faculty. Jose is the father of seven children with another due in May.
Although Tom had shared some minor personal information with faculty, he did not want “being married to be an excuse.” He stated he has learned to “stop complaining... if I’m having a problem it’s because of me and not because of anyone else.” He used faculty primarily when he was struggling and needed additional academic help. What was most important for Tom was that faculty did not bring up his past failures. He credits his academic advisor as helping him get back into school, and he stated, “I want to show him I can do this.”

Theme 3: Good Advising and Program Flexibility were Critical to Attaining Their Bachelor’s Degree

Several of the students described their initial contact with advisors as critical to their decision to attend and stay in college. Many of the participants were transfer students from community colleges, and seamless advising from that level to the university level was also crucial. Some of the students persisted in spite of very bad advising, lack of program flexibility, and poor faculty support. Five of the participants had received incorrect advising and were taking a large number of credits in their last semester so they could graduate on time. It is important to note that the students interviewed for this study were students who had persisted to graduation, some in spite of poor advising. This theme was so prevalent that it begs the question about the students who received poor advising and did not continue with their studies as a result.

Kathy stated that in the three years she was in the program, she saw an advisor only once.

Only one time did this advisor sit down and say, OK, you need to take this class and this class [for the next semester]. I needed someone to sit down and tell me you need to take these classes this term, these classes next term... they gave me...
this packet... and even though I had my little packet, I’m thinking I’m just doing hunky dory... but I didn’t get the right information. That’s why I’m taking 19 credits this last term so I can graduate on time... you’re thinking you should be able to figure this out, but you can’t.

Jose transferred from a community college, and he indicated that he did not get accurate advising his first semester.

My first summer here I wasn’t sure what to expect. Then, after I started my classes, they said that they offered some accelerated courses, but by then I was pretty much situated and I couldn’t change anything. Maybe they should have advisors outside [the college] that deal with only non-traditional students, and saying this is what we offer... if you work it right, you can get all that done in one summer. Had I known that, I could have been done [with his general education classes] that first summer.

Jose stated that some of the general education credits from his community college did not transfer to the university. He stated he and his community college advisor were going by the articulation sheets. “I felt that it should have been my job to make sure that the transfer credits from [my community college] would transfer... but they should probably make sure that the articulation sheets are up to date.”

The issue of problems with community college articulation was felt deeply by Jane who related that, in spite of the fact she had attended two years at a community college, only nine credits transferred to the university! She stated her advisor did not seem to be able to advocate for her in this area.
John was initially advised by the university’s University College and described a very negative experience. This University College is the college designated for students who have not yet declared a major. He stated that the advisor kept questioning whether he should take a full load of rigorous courses.

They were a little negative, you know, are you going to be able to do this, are you going to be able to do that. I didn’t need any more negativity in my life. I was trying to get myself hyped up, and I really didn’t need anyone to give me anything negative, like you really can’t do this thing, and at first that happened, and I didn’t appreciate it,” he said. He was frustrated and said, “You’re telling me I won’t be able to do it, when I’ve already decided to do it. I don’t want anybody telling me I can’t when I’m doing everything I possibly can to accomplish it.

Vicky indicated that her husband, who is a faculty member at the university, put together her academic program so she could get her degree quickly.

I almost felt like I had to start all over again, [going for a degree] which I thought was ridiculous. If he hadn’t been able to do that, I would have just said ‘screw it’ I’m going to take classes that I enjoy [and not go for my bachelor’s degree]…

[For] some of the majors I would have had to take so many other classes.

Eve described a particularly bad incident of advising which resulted in her taking 21 credits this semester to graduate in May. When she met with her advisor and talked about the fact that she hadn’t taken some required courses based on his advice, this faculty member actually stated to her that “it really didn’t matter because my degree was worthless anyway…so what was the point?” This student’s degree is one of the liberal arts degrees.
Many of the students in the study who had success in completing their programs in a timely fashion had simply taken charge of their own advising. Patti was one of these students. She stated she followed the curriculum check list and did her own research regarding courses. Vanita was another student who handled her own advising. “I was my own advisor. I made sure that the classes I was taking [at the community college] were going to transfer... I spoke with people on campus as I was going along.”

Jose described that he was really more in control than his faculty advisors wanted. “I probably stepped on a few toes doing it, but the way I looked at it, I was paying for my education and I wanted to get the most out of it.” He stated that he did his own research and designed his own curriculum.

When I was talking with them, sometimes they didn’t know what to do with me. I was telling me what courses I wanted, and how I wanted to steer my education, and I think they got frustrated with that. It was understandable. I don’t think they’re used to dealing with non-trad students. They have students usually coming in that don’t know anything, and they have this four year plan laid out.

As stated previously, one of Arthur’s tactics was to schedule his own classes without his advisor’s knowledge.

I’m glad I did, because there were those people that took the classes their advisors told them to and they had to go extra semesters. One of my secrets is that I’d go to [his advisor] and I told him which classes I’m going to take, which would be about a normal credit load. He’d lift the advising hold and then I’d add other classes on top of that.

All of the students felt that programs should be individually flexible, and should
recognize both previous coursework from other institutions and life experience. Some of the students experienced a significant amount of program flexibility, while others did not. The importance of program flexibility was highlighted by the types of courses these adult students were required to take. Because of their life experiences, as well as the need to attain their degree as quickly as possible, courses that had obvious practical application to their major were most appreciated. Particularly for the older students, some of the general education requirements of the university were seen as irrelevant.

The lack of program flexibility is illustrated well in Kelly’s story. Kelly had been working at an area adventure learning center for three years, conducting experiential learning activities for school groups, residential facilities, summer camps, and corporations. Her previous knowledge was not recognized by her program, even when she was certified in certain areas, such as ropes course facilitation and backpacking.

It wasn’t even an option…Every time I asked, they said ‘sorry about your luck’…specifically the ropes course they would not let me test out of…and I’d been running ropes courses for three years [at work] before I took that course, on my own without supervision… corporate groups I was running…backpacking was another class they wouldn’t let me waive…they wouldn’t let me waive it even though before I had led… backpack trips [in my previous job]…recreation for special populations…I worked with at-risk kids and handicapped kids on ropes courses, backpacking trips, and swimming and all this stuff…wouldn’t let me waive that one…every time I approached [my advisor] to see if I could waive or test out of courses, she said no.
Kelly also experienced a lack of flexibility in her program with her responsibility as a single parent. "I had a 3.5 before I had [her child]...now I'm lucky to have a 2.5 and that sucks." In reflection, she stated she would not have picked this major as a mother because of all the extra requirements and the lack of flexibility of the faculty.

Because recreation is so hands on...in every class you are required at the very minimum 10 hours of community service...going to the schools...going here, trying this...doing that. That was a big reason my grades really dropped because I failed to be able to do 40 hours of the extra stuff.

Kelly also related that although a class, such as canoeing, might be scheduled for two hours per week, it was nothing to have it last six hours due to taking a trip. Often, they would get only a week’s notice, and she couldn’t take the trip because of a lack of child care, and her grade would suffer.

Tom indicated that his program also did not recognize his life experience. He had worked in the health care field as a medical technician for six years. He now has to take some basic health classes, including hand washing and gown dressing that he’s been doing for years. He indicated that his advisor did not seem to know how to get him waived from these courses. "It could have saved me both time and money, but by doing these classes it’s going to help my GPA, so I guess it’s not all lost."

Jose had worked as a journeyman electrician before coming to school for his degree, and some of this previous experience was recognized by his program. He was able to test out of many classes because of his journeyman’s license, reducing significantly the amount of time he was in school. "They’ve been pretty flexible with me...so much so that they want to get me out of here before other students realize it."
Nicky also experienced a significant amount of support for her previous coursework at the community college and described her college as working with her to “fit” certain courses as substitutes. Nicky had initially planned to obtain her associate’s degree in business in addition to her bachelor’s degree in Allied Health, but when that college would not accept several community college courses, she dropped that plan.

I was going to go for an associate’s in computers... they would not accept my Access class from the community college... had lots of computer courses they did not accept... business was just really strict and rigid... they made you feel like everything you’ve done in the past was a waste of time... so I just forgot about getting an associate’s through them.

Patti stated her program was extremely flexible with regard to waiving some of the program requirements when she’d had life experiences or other courses that were somewhat related to the requirement. Joan related that initially several of the courses she took at the community college did not transfer as program requirements; however, her advisor advocated in making several substitutions as appropriate. She indicated this was very important to her.

A few of the students felt some of the general education requirements should have been waived due to maturity and life experience. John was particularly critical about having to take an introductory political science course, in which, he said, the professor talked about his own political ideas prior to the 2004 elections.

There are some classes that I don’t think non-traditional students should have to take. I mean, I’m out there living my life... I vote... I know how the political system works... why did I need to waste time and money listening to one person’s
political beliefs...I'm old enough to make those decisions myself... a lot of professors are one sided about what they're presenting and the kids haven't formed their own opinions... they should present both sides.

John was not at all adverse to taking general education courses; it was just that he wanted to take courses that would address his "weakness" and relate more to his major, rather than have someone else tell him what to take.

Jose felt he had a significant amount of cultural experience as a Hispanic and American Indian and, as an adoptive parent of four Hispanic children, he shouldn't have been required to take a particular cultural competence course.

I'm sitting in class trying to apply what I'm learning to what I have learned? I am constantly asking myself how does this apply to my field so I don't get bored... Some of the courses they require us to take are out there in left field... why do I need to take that [gave as an example a cultural enrichment course]... why can't I take what I need to take and be done... I mean granted some of those classes were very interesting, but if I could have just stuck with the classes in my major I would have been better off in terms of time and money.

Although most of the students in the study did not need to attend orientation or the freshman seminar (FSUS) because they were transfer students, the five students who did attend felt they were totally irrelevant to an older population.

I don't think it's [orientation] necessary for older people... we're not going to live on campus... we all thought it was a waste of our time... you're talking to 18 year olds and 40 year olds... they had a plan and were not real sensitive to the fact that
there were older people in the audience... Maybe if there was a separate one for older students. (John)

Betty was quite upset at having to attend orientation. She had previously attained her associate's degree and was supposedly required to attend orientation upon her return to Ferris. She took the day off work, commuted an hour to get to campus, was nine months pregnant at the time, and then was told when she got there she didn’t need to be there.

Only two of the students were required to take a freshman seminar (FSUS), and only one at Ferris. Jose stated that he got nothing out of the seminar and that it didn’t apply to older students. Eve had a rather unique way of handling the situation: “We had to write these diaries about our sexual life and experiences...I’d be writing things like ‘I love it’...I mean the guy was my peer, and he said he couldn’t even read it...I said, well, you asked!”

If students were working while attending school, the flexibility and encouragement of the employer were critical to their success. Many have been able to flexibly schedule their work around their school obligations.

Patti is a university employee and stated her job is very flexible, but she is careful not to take advantage of that; she attempts to schedule classes in the evening and over lunch hour. Kathy also indicated that her employer has been flexible and extremely encouraging, even though she knows she will be losing her as an employee once she gets her degree. Tom had to change employers to get the flexibility he sought to return to school. Although he had worked four years for a Grand Rapids hospital, they were unwilling to work out a flexible schedule with him. “I was dedicated to those guys for
four years... when I was there I gave 110%... I thought it was fair to ask them to meet me on the road somewhere.” He switched hospitals and is currently working only on the weekends so he can attend school full time.

For three of the participants, it was their employment situation that actually provided direction and encouragement for a return to school. Joan had worked for the post office for six years and decided she'd like to become a postal inspector. When she verbalized this dream to the postmaster, she also stated she really couldn't do it because of the stringent requirements. “He disagreed with me and told me to go to school... he saw potential in me I didn’t even see in myself,” she said. The hospital at which Betty works encouraged her to continue on for her bachelor’s degree once she had gotten her associate’s degree. Although she had planned to eventually return, it was their encouragement that was a decisive factor. “I think they’re grooming me for management.” She stated that work hours are extremely flexible, and there is also a tuition reimbursement program for a two year commitment following graduation. In Kelly’s case, her work experience provided her career direction. She had attended college following high school but was unsure of a direction. She took a year off to work at an area adventure learning center. Kelly loved the work so much she decided that her career would be in therapeutic recreation.

**Theme 4: Immediate Family Support and Sacrifice Were Important: For Single Parents with Young Children, this Support was Critical to Persistence**

Most of the students in the study talked about significant support from their immediate family for their school attendance. This is different than what had been found in reference to their family of origin. Only two single students expressed they did not have significant family support. All of the married participants had significant emotional,
financial, and physical support from their spouses. The women in this group tended to see their husbands’ support as critically important in achieving their goal; the men perceived their wives’ support as helpful but not crucial. Four of the women in the study met and married their current husbands after they had already started college, so their studies came as part of the package.

One of the most poignant stories about family support came from Patti, who is married for the second time to a dairy farmer. She described his support and encouragement as a key element in her decision to come to college. His statement to her when she decided to come to college, “I will help you,” has become a mantra for their relationship. “I have on many occasions had to repeat that to him, remember you said ‘I will help you’… when things get kind of hairy, I’ll remind him of that… and he says ‘yeah, you’re right.’” Her husband actually took the first college course with her and continues to follow along with her as she progresses through school.

He will actually sit down and read my chapters and then quiz me on it. It’s pretty amazing help. And what really bums me out is that I’ll go back and test him on it, and he does better than I do… He’s gone through every single class in great detail with me… he’s like a rock… he’s there to encourage me and push me… he also does all my laundry!

Patti also talked about going to the barn and discussing things with him or practicing speeches. Patti stated that the whole family has been supportive in a variety of ways: the boys “can make hamburger helper,” everybody puts up with the fact that the house is not as clean, the boys do their own laundry, and they are all just generally supportive of the fact that she cannot do all that she did before coming to school. “We’ve all sacrificed.”
Vanita also describes extensive support from her husband.

Oh goodness gracious, he supports me so much...sometimes he even does homework for me...sometimes I feel frustrated and overwhelmed and I shut down...he keeps me from shutting down...really he’s going to school right along with me...I teach him what I’m learning and that makes me feel very good that I can do that.

Vanita stated that his support has been crucial to her persistence. “I can’t see myself [going to college] as a single parent...trying to be the best parent I can be...if I was by myself there would be a sacrifice. By him being there, it’s taken a lot of weight off.”

Vanita related that her husband cut down on hours at work so they can negotiate schedules without having to do childcare. “It’s all about my school,” she said. He is her primary cheerleader: a few times she’s felt defeated and indicated she wanted to quit school. His response: “You’re not a quitter.”

Joan indicated that initially her husband was very supportive – “you want this, go for it” – but as the realities of picking up the slack hit, the family had a hard adjustment. “It was hard on our marriage, because he had a hard time accepting how hard it was going to be on him...it took a good three or four months before he got it.” Her oldest son has also had a hard time with the extra responsibilities at home. Joan stated that while family support was important, she did not feel it was critical to her success.

Jose lives with his seven children and wife on a small farm. When he was laid off, it was actually his wife who encouraged him to come to college. He stated that the entire family has pitched in and done more around the house and farm. They have survived on unemployment, financial aid, and his wife’s income as a part time respiratory
therapist. He indicated there have been no problems in the family as a result of his college attendance.

John described a significant amount of family sacrifice for his college attendance. He had been earning a very good living as a construction worker; they were building their dream house, and had many recreational "toys." To support his college endeavor, they significantly downsized: the family sold their house and all of their toys so they could live off the proceeds. They also had to move and the children had to change schools. This was particularly hard on the adolescent children. He indicated that his wife's "pep talks" were very important to him, and that family communication has been crucial.

For single parents with young children, family support was absolutely crucial. All of them expressed that they would not have been able to succeed in achieving their degree without this support.

Kelly, the single mother of a four year old, describes her family support as "incredible." She was fortunate to have several family members in the immediate area. Kelly indicated that she couldn't have gotten her degree without the extensive family support primarily in the area of child care, but she was also aided financially.

It's the only thing that kept me going. I would have had to quit and get a job financially from time to time. I wouldn't have been able to get to half of my classes, because when your kid gets sick, who watches the baby? The aunt that doesn't work, the mom that can take a day off, the dad who can pick her up from school.

Kelly stated that her family supported both the academic and the social aspects of her being in college. "They've never said 'no' to me...If I want to go out like any 25 year
old kid...they've said live a college life...go do what you need to do.” She indicated that their support was sometimes the only thing that kept her going. “Family pressure was one of the big things that kept me in school...I wanted to quit 100 times...if I quit I know my parents would ride me real hard...I didn’t want to deal with it.”

After a divorce and pregnancy, Betty has moved home to live with her parents while she is attending college. They have helped her emotionally, financially, and physically in the care of her son. Her father stays at home full time and her mother works part time. They are both actively involved in raising her son.

We are a village...they raise him almost more than I do, they are there so much...I couldn’t have done this without them...if it were not for my folks I would still be living in Midland on welfare or very unhappy in my whatever job.

Betty also stated that her brothers are also very supportive of her, and one brother has purchased all the diapers for her son since birth. “Both of them have been very encouraging in seeing the ‘can do’ part of me I cannot see myself,” she said.

Nicky’s family has provided significant financial and emotional support for her and her daughter. After several years of floundering without any goals and completing one semester in a community college, Nicky expressed a desire to attend college. Her parents supported her by saying “if you’re going to go to college, go full time...we’ll support you.” Nicky realizes she would not have been able to get her degree as a single parent without this support.

Arthur is a single father raising two pre-school children. His parents’ support through free day care has been critical to his ability to attend school full time. Arthur
indicated that his ex-wife has also been a significant support not only through the provision of child care but also through significant moral and emotional support.

One interesting finding in the study was the fact that four of the married women were strongly encouraged to attend and stay in school by their husbands in spite of the fact that their husbands were not college educated.

**Theme 5: Social Integration was not Important for Persistence and the Classroom was the Fulcrum of College Activity for Older Participants**

Most of the participants in the study were not at all involved in campus life. There was simply not enough time for work, family and school to participate in extracurricular activities. There were three emergent sub-themes within this category: (a) the classroom was the only connection to campus for older participants in the study; (b) negotiating the social divide became more difficult with age and (c) older students used and participated in the classroom environment much differently than their younger counterparts.

**Sub-theme 1: The classroom was the only connection to the campus for older participants in the study.** Not surprisingly, the younger the student, the more likely they were to participate in campus life outside the classroom. For most of the students over 32, the classroom was their only connection to the university and the fulcrum of activity. The only activities in which the older students were involved were their professional associations. None of the students over the age of 32 was involved in campus life.

The only participation in campus life for John was joining his professional student organization, even though this placed a greater burden on an already packed schedule. He did so because he thought it was an important step in being more marketable and would make him more competitive. He indicated that this had already proven a good
decision, as companies were asking for this in recent interviews. John stated that they wanted to make sure he would be able to work with younger employees, and being in an organization with younger students would be indicative of this competency.

Many of the older students were both working and going to school and literally had no time for other activities. Kathy has worked full time and gone to school full time for three years. "I have absolutely no social life at all...it's kinda making me question if there's something wrong with me. But then, where would I fit it in? It's all booked up. If I do have a few minutes...I do nothing," Kathy said.

When asked about being involved on campus, Betty said, "Oh no, I don't have time...I'd like to be involved, [in her professional organization] but it meets at a time that I cannot make during the day." Betty also indicated she has no social life outside of work and school: "It's been so long since I dated, I don't even know what that looks like."

For Jose, having a family life makes it hard to join any of the organizations. "I'm pretty much of the mind set of doing what I need to do here and then getting home." He also stated that he'd feel out of place. "I had heard that someone [a non-traditional student] had tried to join a fraternity and he was told he was too old." Although Vanita lives on campus, she is not involved in any campus activities: "As far as Ferris itself, I don't do a lot...I feel separate from the school."

A couple of the older students were involved in their local community, but not on campus. Vicky was extensively involved in volunteer work in the public schools and in her church. "I just feel I have a value to give back what God has given you...your time and talents are to be shared." Joan is a member of her local Fire Department and stated that she loves helping people but has not been involved in any campus activities.
As a contrast, the younger students in the study were involved socially on campus. Kelly, age 25, has been extensively involved in campus life. “I loved being in college...I did a lot of the extra stuff.” She has been active in the theater, having been in several productions, and also in her professional organization. She has participated in several entertainment and cultural events on campus.

Although Arthur, age 28, has not been involved in student organizations, he is very active in intramural sports. He expressed that he has really enjoyed the breadth and diversity of college life: “I’m soaking up the experience...I love meeting new people...watching people.” Arthur described himself as “laid back...I like just hanging out and making new friends.” He stated that he liked interacting with the younger students.

There were two younger students who were an exception with regard to being involved in campus activities. Both of these students were 28 years old, and both had life experiences that I believe had made them more mature than the other three students in this age bracket. This was Ray’s second time in college. He indicated that when he initially attended college right out of high school he loved college life and was extensively involved in campus activities. “I came back this time for the degree...not the college experience.” Tom works part time and attends school full time: “I didn’t really get tied up into the social stuff.”

Sub-theme 2: Negotiating the social divide became more difficult with age. It is also not surprising that it was much more difficult for older students to negotiate the social divide between young students and themselves. Students under 30 were more likely to have gone to college right out of high school and continued through or returned
after stopping out for a short while, and there was less adjustment to academic life for this population. In fact, the older students over 30 often expressed fear and a lack of confidence to begin or return to college. These students tended to ease themselves back into academics after an academic hiatus, often first attending a community college before coming to the four year university.

Although Vanita had previously attended the university and obtained an associate’s degree, she had been out of school for several years before coming back. She talked about feeling separate and inferior to the younger students.

I feel really disconnected from my peers...I’m coming at the last minute, which they’ve been here for years and they’ve gotten to know each other...I feel less of a person because I’m going back to school at an older age...I feel like I didn’t do something right...I don’t think I did anything wrong, but I feel other people are looking at me like I didn’t do it right...I hear snickering, and that makes me feel bad sometimes...it’s something I have to brush off my shoulder. They think that you don’t know anything.

Patti talked about being very nervous in her first college course. Prior to taking that course, she taken several proficiency exams for courses which “gave me a little boost that there’s something in there and I might be halfway intelligent.” Her first course was an evening course, and not a bad experience. “I would get really nervous and I’m glad that [her husband] was with me and being a night class, it seemed like a little adventure, and here we were in the euphoric stage of our relationship.”

Patti’s second course, a day business course, was a disaster.
It was full of real traditional students. I don’t think there was another non-
traditional in there. I felt very out of place, very awkward. And unfortunately the
professor was having some personal problems that she admitted to the class, and
told us that we needed to learn these things ourselves… I recognized one of the
students in the class and I said I need some help, can you help me, and he just
blew me off… I struggled and struggled… I didn’t feel like I had support in the
classroom, from the professor… from anyone.
Vicky stated her initial return to college in her 40s was an intimidating
experience.
It’s hard work going to school at this age… just getting the brain working. Let’s
face it, it was 25 years between going to high school and coming back to school. I
did not remember math, I did not remember all the rules for English… I learned
real early to give the teachers what they want, not what you think they
want… even if I didn’t agree with them… I felt really, really out of place. All these
young kids… I had very little confidence. I mean, I knew I was smart… but it had
been so long.
John talked about the fact that he was the only non-traditional student in his
program when he began and he did not really know what to expect.
I was nervous and scared… coming to school with a bunch of kids… am I going to
be shoved in a corner because I don’t want to socialize with you? That was a big
worry and concern. I had to push myself into that first room.
Eve described herself as “easing” into college: “I took oil painting… I was
scared… I had no idea what I wanted to do, so I took classes I knew I would like… don’t
take math, don’t take science.” Once she completed a semester, her self efficacy increased; she even took the risk of enrolling in a study abroad experience in Mexico for the following year!

Sub-theme 3: Older students used and participated in the classroom environment much differently than their younger counterparts. The use of and participation in the classroom was distinctively different for the older students than for the younger students. Older students tended to be leaders in their classroom and groups, more verbal in class and more serious about the classroom time being task and learning oriented. Interestingly, all of the participants in the study, with the exception of Kelly, separated themselves through the use of the term “kids” when referring to traditionally aged students.

I find it rather annoying that kids come in and talk about how the night before they’ve gotten drunk, and they’re rather loud and obnoxious, not that the kids are mean or anything... it’s just that I’m outside that social circle... at the end of the day I go home... I usually tell them to be quiet if they’re interrupting the class... take it outside, I’m here to learn (Jose).

John talked about the fact that he always sits in class in the front, does not socialize during class, and is very forward and verbal with questions when he does not understand a concept. “Class is class... I came to class to learn... I took that very seriously.”

Arthur described getting very frustrated when “the young kids” would spend time arguing with the teacher in the classroom; he felt this was a waste of the teacher’s time and his time. Ray also felt there was wasted time in the classroom: “There’s far too much
hand holding in class...we spend an hour going through the syllabus...or for 45 minutes
the kids will be talking about what kind of questions are going to be on the test.” He
stated that he often felt the material covered in the class was “dumbed down to the lowest
common denominator.”

Several of the older students talked about being the most verbal in class, and they
were frustrated that the instructors did not do more to encourage participation of
traditionally aged students. Vicky describes herself as a leader in the classroom and
attributes this to her dual role as Student Learning Assistant teacher as well as student.
Student Learning Assistants are employed on campus to teach sections of high fail rate
courses. She feels frustrated with her perception that the professors tend to single out
non-traditional students to answer questions or provide discussion. Eve stated that she
talks a lot in class because of her age and experience, and that she had to “rein myself in
because nobody was talking...I could understand that the instructor enjoyed it but I had
to say, whoa...nobody else will say anything if I keep talking.” Kathy also mentioned
the need to “tone myself down” in class discussions so that other students would
participate.

Group work was a particular frustration. Most of the older participants talked
about initially taking the leadership role in groups and being depended upon to do most
of the work. Some also talked about letting go of the leadership role with more
experience in school. Betty explained, “I have a little bit of difficulty with the group
dynamics...we have a lot of book smart kids...I get very frustrated with the kids...they
are very know it all...I have the practical knowledge, and I think sometimes they resent
that...I try not to take over, but I am a natural leader due to my maturity and experience”.

And Eve said,

I used to get real frustrated with it [group work]. Oh, she’s the older one, she’s the responsible one, she’ll do the work...so I used to take charge right away...now I just sit back and let them to do it...what I’ve learned is that when I step back they step forward.

Ray talked about group work as “driving me nuts...it’s difficult to be tactful to group members who are not detail oriented...it impedes the quality of my work.” He stated that he would often take the leadership role in groups but has more recently refused that role.

*Theme 6: Institutional Support was not Perceived to be Crucial to Persistence; However, there were Identified Barriers Created by the Institution that Caused Stress.*

Most of the students in the study considered this university to be a supportive environment, and all had specific recommendations and suggestions regarding institutional policy changes that would make things easier for non-traditional students. With one exception, there were no strong patterns to these recommendations. The exception was parking. This issue was mentioned by all but one of the participants, both commuters and students living on campus. For one student living on campus, parking prevented an aging father from visiting. The researcher asked the one participant who did not mention this as a problem, and his comment was “everyone just needs to learn how to walk” (Tom).

Several of the students mentioned they would like longer class periods fewer times a week. Many found the 50 minute time slots for many of the courses to be
disruptive. All of the commuting students would have preferred longer classes fewer times per week. Jose put it succinctly:

It was an adjustment having 50 minute classes here as opposed to the community college where classes are 1½ hours...by the time you get adjusted to learning what they’re telling you, it’s time to go. That’s one of the biggest drawbacks I’ve found. You start learning something and it’s time to go, so you’re basically cut off by the time you grasp it, then you pretty much have to go on your own to work it out, then you’re left wondering ‘am I doing it correctly?’

The students in the study generally were able to finance their college education through a variety of methods, albeit all of the students mentioned the college debt they were acquiring. All of the students, with the exception of the two university employees, were attending school with a combination of work, student loans, and financial assistance. Several of the students were transfer students from a community college and mentioned that previous attendance at the community college was very helpful, both financially and in acclimating to the academic environment.

Although not an overwhelming pattern, many students mentioned they would have preferred more courses online. Jose mentioned specific reasons for this:

Some of us nontraditional students have talked, and some of the courses we’ve been sitting through have been, you know, power point. We felt we could do that over the internet. Other than lab, there wasn’t much we couldn’t do over the internet. We’ve mentioned this to our instructors...Why don’t they make it optional to attend lectures online? I looked before about coming to Ferris, to see what classes I could take while I was working. Coming to classes during the day
just doesn’t cut it if you have to work and make a living. If you could do some of these classes online, I think [the university] would have a bigger enrollment of non-traditional people that would want to continue their education…that was one of the drawbacks when I was considering coming back to school. All the courses were offered during the day and I was working during the day.

Most were pleased with the fact that they were able to register for classes online, but this was not without issue. John stated, “They need to work on registration.” He indicated that every semester he’d had to go to the office and have the support person register him for courses because online registration would not recognize current registration in a prerequisite course. He stated this was very frustrating and a common experience for students in his program. Another student (Kathy) stated that the switch to online registration was difficult for her due to her lack of computer literacy. She would have liked some training on how to do online registration.

The availability of affordable day care was an issue for many of the single students, particularly day care after regular business hours. “They really should have some kind of child care program. We’re not talking about Tot’s Place, because most of the people can’t afford it…there’s just not enough child care available in this town,” stated Vicky.

For one student, the institution’s lack of flexibility with regard to its withdrawal policy significantly affected her grade point average. Kelly had her child one semester following her return to the university. She took the summer off, but then attempted to take a full load in the fall. Her infant would not accept a bottle and was also extensively ill the first two months of the semester, and Kelly was not able to attend classes regularly.
By the time she realized she would not be able to pass some of her courses, it was past the regular withdrawal date. Although she had extensive documentation from her physician, the college would not accept a late medical withdraw. As a result, Kelly ended up the semester with three F's and one A. She indicated this as a major stressor, and she almost withdrew from college. "I didn't fight for myself...Looking back, I should have fought for that medical withdrawal."

Although not an institutional policy, several students mentioned professors' classroom policies of taking attendance as both annoying and difficult. "I'm paying money for this course...I will be there unless I absolutely cannot be there. When I'm not there, it's because there's a reason" (Betty). Kelly indicated another problem was the fact that many instructors demanded a doctor's excuse to receive an excused absence when her daughter was sick.

[I've] had to bring in a doctor's excuse every time she's been sick and I haven't been able to be in class - this requires I go sit in the doctor's office for two hours for them to say, 'Yes, she's sick' and then I can get excused from class. Lot's of times I just can't afford to do that, so my grades suffer."

Summary

For successful adult undergraduates, the evidence of a strong personal striving to achieve their aspirations was the strongest characteristic found in this study. In spite of significant barriers, the participants were strongly motivated to achieve their degrees, and were successful in that endeavor. For all the participants, faculty support was important. There were gender differences in how faculty support was sought: Female participants in the study tended to share personal circumstances with faculty and expected an
understanding of those circumstances, while male participants tended to use faculty for academic support only. Program flexibility, particularly with regard to substitutions that recognized competence and previous coursework was significant to persistence for these participants, although it did not occur for everyone. Immediate family support, especially for single parents with young children was determined to be critical to success. Social integration on campus was not determined to be important for persistence, as the classroom was the only campus connection for most of the older participants in the study. Institutional support, such as student services, bookstore and library hours, while appreciated, was not considered by these participants to be significant to their persistence. Please refer to Table 1, Appendix H for a summary of key themes by participant.
CHAPTER 5

Summary, Personal Reflections, Recommendations for Practice and Research and Conclusion

This study utilized Donaldson and Graham's (1999) Model of College Outcomes (Appendix A) as a guide in developing the research and the following discussion relies heavily on this model as a focus for discussion. With the goal of describing key elements that affect learning and persistence among adult undergraduates, this model stresses a great deal of interaction between five domains of (a) prior experience, (b) adult cognition, (c) psycho-social orientation and value orientation, (d) life world environment, and (e) the connecting classroom. Prior experience and personal biographies influence adult cognition, psychosocial and value orientation and life world environment. Additionally, the model depicts psychosocial and value orientation and life world environment interacting with the domain of the connecting classroom to lead to the possible outcome of persistence in achieving a degree.

Also guiding this research was a model developed by Bean and Metzner (1985), a study by Sandler (2000), and the research of Carol Kasworm (1990, 1997, 2002, 2003). Whether this study was similar or dissimilar to the results of these studies is discussed within the context of the research questions. Tables comparing the themes identified in this study with the work of Donaldson and Graham, Sandler, and Bean and Metzner are found in Appendix H.

A summary of the research is presented, related to the current literature and the research questions. As a qualitative researcher, I also included personal reflections on the research process. Recommendations for practice and further research are also presented.
Summary

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the social and academic experiences of successful non-traditional students on a traditionally oriented college campus. A review of the literature indicates that while non-traditional students are different in many areas than traditionally aged students, they are a highly diverse group within themselves. While this was certainly true, there were very strong themes that emerged as a result of this research. The one theme that resonated for all the participants was the evidence of a strong personal striving to achieve their aspirations. While the other themes did not have 100% participant consistency, they were represented enough to depict a strong pattern. These other emergent themes included: (a) there were significant gender differences in the use and expectations for faculty support; (b) good advising and flexibility of the program were critical to attaining their bachelor’s degree; (c) family support and sacrifice were important and for single parents with young children, this support was critical to persistence; (d) social integration was not important for persistence and the classroom was the fulcrum of college activity for the older participants and (e) institutional support was not perceived to be crucial to persistence; however, there were identified barriers created by the institution that caused stress.

Comparing these results to the Donaldson and Graham model (1999), one can easily see the six interactive components of their model represented in the data. Prior experience and personal biographies certainly influenced the adult cognition, the psychosocial and value orientation components. Participants in the study came primarily from families of origin who did not honor higher education. This had an influence on their value to become a role model for their children and embrace the value of life long
learning. Their prior experiences often included a significant life event or involved challenges which resulted in the strong personal striving characteristic. This, in turn influenced both their decision to enroll and stay in school. Life world environment and adult cognition also influenced their psycho-social and value orientation. They perceived they would be more marketable with a degree which also influenced their persistence. Supports in the life-world environments led to a positive outcome. The fact that many had significant family support and faculty support and were able to attain their degrees quickly was critical to their persistence. For the older students, returning to school was a stressor due to the social divide, but once they interacted successfully with the classroom, this stress was reduced. Donaldson and Graham (1999) assert that non-traditional students utilize the classroom as their connection to the university, and this was definitely supported in this study. This study found that participants lacked social involvement on campus and actually became leaders in their classroom environment. In the presentation of their model, Donaldson and Graham suggest qualitative research to “uncover the details needed for a more thorough study of these dynamics” (p. 37). This study contributes that detail.

Non-traditional students often return to school to enhance or change a current career, unlike traditional students who are preparing for their first careers (Sandler, 2000). All of the students reflected that getting a college degree means more doors will be opened and that the possibility for marketability and advancement will improve. For example, Arthur worked as an auto mechanic and is now preparing to get his Ph.D. Joan works at a post office and came back to school to ultimately become a postal inspector. All wanted to improve their lives, advance their careers and succeed.
Review of the Research Questions

Research Question 1: What role does family support play in persistence? It is important, first of all, to distinguish between family support and support from one’s family of origin. Most of the participants in the study received excellent support from their current families. However, most of the families of origin did not have a value system that encouraged furthering one’s education and consequently did not support the students’ attendance at college, as was discussed above. Only three of the participants had parents with college degrees. In ten of the participant cases, higher education was either discouraged or not perceived to be important.

Immediate family support was very important for most of the participants in the study. Several of the families had made significant sacrifices to support the student’s attendance at college. Family support took many forms: from a husband who read every chapter of every book with his wife, to a family who sold their home to live on the proceeds, to taking up the slack at home and with children. Some of the male participants indicated this support was important, but not crucial to their success. Most of the men described their wives as their primary cheerleaders. Most of them were substantially involved in taking care of the house and children, as well as working to support reduced family income. In one example (John), the family had sold their dream house and all their recreational “toys” to live off the proceeds, and they relocated so that John could come to school full time. The women in the study all tended to see their husband’s support as critically important to their persistence. In one remarkable example of support, Patti’s husband attended her first class with her, and then subsequently read all her texts and quizzed her on the material.
The importance of environmental supports, particularly family support, is well supported in the literature (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Cabrera & Castaneda, 1994; Sandler, 2000; Scott, Burns & Cooney, 1998). In Donaldson and Graham’s 1999 Model of College Outcomes, the presence of “reinforcing agents” within the life world environment domain, either supports or impedes persistence in college. Cabrera, Nora and Castaneda (1993) found that the encouragement of friends and family was one of two variables most important to persistence. In Bean and Metzner’s model of non-traditional student attrition (1985), they found that for non-traditional students “environmental support compensates for weak academic support, but academic support will not compensate for weak environmental support” (p. 492). We need to keep in mind that for these students, although returning to school is a positive decision, they are under significant stress. Brown (2002), for example, found although returning to school after a divorce was a positive for the women in the study, because their support systems were so weakened, any threat in their support system threatened their persistence.

For single parents with young children, family support was critical to the student’s persistence. Every student in this category indicated they probably would not have been able to achieve their goal without extensive support from their extended families. This support took the form of financial aid, housing, child care and general encouragement. In one situation, a single mom and her son were living with her parents and they were the primary caregivers to her son while she worked part time and went to school full time. In another, 25 year old Kelly’s extended family allowed her the financial and childcare support not only to attend school, but also to be involved in social and extra-curricular activities at the university.
One interesting finding in the study highlights one of Astin's (1998) identified societal forces in higher education over the past 30 years, the women's movement, which he identifies as having the greatest impact on higher education. There were four women in the study who were being encouraged to achieve their bachelor's degree by husbands who did not have a college education. This is a remarkable finding, and it seems to be indicative of the changing role of women in society.

Research Question 2: What role does faculty support play in persistence?

Although faculty support was important to almost all of the participants, there were significant gender differences in what kind of support was sought from faculty members. Men tended to perceive the need for and utilize faculty support in terms of only academic support, including the availability of the faculty outside the classroom and encouragement. Women tended to need and expect faculty support more on a personal level. In fact, the women in the study both sought and expected understanding from faculty regarding personal issues, particularly with regard to family responsibilities. When support was given, it was recognized and appreciated. When it was not, it was often perceived as an impediment to success. This is consistent with Kasworm's (2002) findings that academic advising and faculty encouragement will enhance the possibility for persistence. Kasworm's study, however, did not assess specifically the kind of faculty support sought by students. Only four of the studies in the literature review were gender specific, studying women (Hagedorn, 1999; Harrington, 1993; Mercer, 1993; Scott, Burns & Cooney, 1998) and only one of these (Hagedorn, 1999) investigated faculty support. Hagedorn's study on factors related to the retention of female undergraduate students over 30 suggested that older students benefited from interactions...
with faculty, but did not go into depth about the type of interactions with faculty. Therefore, this finding of differential faculty support expectations between genders is a significant addition to the body of knowledge regarding this population.

Patti enjoyed extensive faculty support, describing a time early in her academic career when a faculty member noticed she was upset and took time outside of class to find out what was wrong. She calls faculty her own personal cheerleaders. Kelly, on the other hand, perceived faculty thought she was using motherhood as an excuse. When asked about faculty support, her retort was “what support... I did it in spite of them.” Kasworm (2002) found that good academic advising and faculty encouragement early in the student’s academic career will enhance the possibility for persistence.

Previous research studies found that whether the student “mattered” to the university was significant to persistence (Astin, 1993; Schlossberg, Lynch & Chickering, 1989). Mattering meant, in part, that students felt they were heard and that they felt important. This was certainly true for the women in the study; the institution being represented by the faculty. Kasworm (1994) found that faculty-student interaction was more strongly related to satisfaction than was peer interaction. While none of the students had substituted faculty as a source of support to compensate for a lack of family support as described in other studies (Samuels, 2004; Scott, Burns & Cooney, 1998), there is evidence that there was a significant value placed upon the development of relationships with faculty within the classroom (Donaldson & Graham, 1999; Kasworm, 2003; Graham, 1998). Similar to Martin and Scheckley’s (1999) study, female students sought and developed relationships with faculty outside the learning environment.
Research Question 3: What role does institutional policy and services play in persistence? The biggest finding with regard to institutional policy and services was the need for program flexibility for previous coursework, as well as recognition of life experience. Policy regarding this was highly inconsistent throughout the institution: some students benefited from highly flexible programs, while others were required to take coursework previously taken or without regard for individual competency. For example, Tom had worked six years as a medical technician and yet was required to take a 100 level course he described as “hand washing and gown dressing.” Kelly was required to take a ropes facilitation course although she had been certified as a ropes course facilitator at another facility. Sandler (2000) discusses the need to alter well entrenched institutional systems to better address the needs of non-traditional students. Because these students have greater responsibilities they are at a disadvantage for persisting in college (Kasworm & Pike, 1994).

The importance of good advising is highly related to flexibility. Because flexibility begins initially with the ability of the advisor and the program to make course substitutions where appropriate and to advocate for the students when necessary, good advising was also seen as critical. Several of the students transferred from community colleges, and seamless advising from the community college level was important. Most of the advising issues were related to a lack of advocacy for previous coursework or life experience.

Several of the students described their initial contacts with advisors as extremely important in providing them with both good information and encouragement for their lack of confidence. Initial contacts ranged from excellent, as in Eve’s situation, when a
faculty member spent two hours with her prior to her applying at the university; to poor
for John, whose initial advisor basically gave him the impression he shouldn’t try to take
a full load as an older student because he might not be successful.

Because several of the participants had “stopped out” of the workforce to attend
school full time, attaining their degree quickly was critical. Many of the students did not
depend upon their advisors to negotiate their academic career; rather they took charge of
their own advising. In one creative situation, a participant would meet with his advisor,
get a regular load of courses and have his advisor lift the advising hold, then without his
advisor’s knowledge, would register for more courses.

Many of the students were dissatisfied with the 50 minute, three times a week
course structure for many of the courses, particularly the general education courses.
There were six commuters in the participant pool, and several mentioned often having to
come to campus for one class. Several mentioned they would prefer longer class periods,
fewer times per week.

For the most part, students did not see institutional services as an important factor
in persistence. Most were satisfied with the services at the university, particularly the
availability of on line services, and some highly praised the institution as being very
supportive. The lack of parking and childcare were mentioned as stressors, but not
something that was a significant barrier to success. However, the single students in the
participant pool all had extensive family support for child care. What about the student
for whom this is not true?

Kasworm (2000) and Rhodes (2001) write about meeting the needs of non-
traditional students through, for example, weekend and evening classes and more on-line
offerings. There was no clear pattern regarding students’ needs and wants in this area. Many of the students were attending school full time, so weekend and evening courses were not an issue. There was also no clear pattern regarding on-line offerings, in fact many of the students talked about their satisfaction with being in the classroom. This is an area for further study. Several of the students did talk about the inconvenience of 50 minute class periods three times a week, given the fact that they commuted a long distance to campus. They would have preferred a course meeting for one three hour period, rather than 50 minutes three times per week.

*Research Question 4: What role does the classroom environment have in persistence?* The findings from this study support the notion that in the area of social integration on campus adult learners look very different from younger students (Kasworm, 2003). With the exception of joining their professional student organizations, adult students over the age of 32 in this study did not participate socially in campus life. With one exception, going to school and working were their only activities outside family responsibilities. There was simply too much competition for their time and energy. In the exception, the student was taking only one or two classes at a time, so was able to participate extensively in her community, consistent with her personal values. Most of the early research on traditionally aged students found that social integration into the college environment is a necessary condition for persistence (Astin, 1993; Pascarella, 1980; Spady, 1970; Tinto, 1993). Bean and Metzner’s (1985) later model on non-traditional student attrition was based upon the theory that previous college retention models (Spady, 1971; Tinto, 1975) relied too heavily on social integration. Their study determined that behavioral intentions and intent to stay were significant predictors of
persistence. This study found that personal striving to achieve aspirations creates a goal of intent to stay, supporting this variable in the Bean and Metzner model. The lack of social integration found in this study contradicts Sandler’s (2000) more recent study of non-traditional student persistence, which found that social integration was significant for persistence.

Donaldson and Graham (1999) depict the domain of the “connecting classroom” suggesting that adult students use the classroom as the fulcrum of the college experience. Kasworm (2003) also found that the classroom was the main stage for adult learners’ undergraduate experience. For students over the age of 32, the classroom was definitely the fulcrum of their college experience. The participants in the study also utilized the classroom much differently than traditionally aged students used the classroom. They were typically leaders in group activities, more verbal in the classroom, and tended to be very task oriented and serious when in class. There is evidence that adult undergraduates are very concerned with the quality of their education, and that they value the development of community within the classroom (Chartrand, 1990; Dill & Henley, 1998; Donaldson & Graham, 1999; Graham, 1998; Kasworm, 2003), and this was true for most participants in the study. Several of the students in the study talked about being irritated at how the “kids” acted in class; either using the classroom as a social environment or wasting time going over specific things that could be learned on one’s own time. In spite of a lack of academic self efficacy, adult learners expect academic rigor and quality (Harrington, 1993; Kasworm & Pike, 1994).

The participants in the study had a need to connect what they were learning in the classroom to previous experiences and future situations. Adult education has long
recognized Dewey's (1948) philosophy of experiential education. For adult learners, education needs to be related to the whole of life's experiences and requires the active participation of the learner (Knowles, 1984). Adults tend to connect what they are learning to previous situations and possible future situations (Donaldson & Graham, 1999; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999; Tweedell, 2000). Practical application of learning was most valued by this study's participants. Consistent with adult learning theory, adult learners prefer pragmatic and experiential methods of teaching (Kasworm, 1990; Knowles, 1984; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). Making the classroom environment relevant to real life may be a key persistence factor for non-traditional students (Sandler, 2000), particularly since it is often the sole and most important connection they have with their college education.

Evidence of a Strong Personal Striving to Achieve Aspirations

The major finding of this research was not directly related to the research questions, but systematically permeates them all: the fact that all the participants in the study exhibited a strong personal striving to achieve their aspirations. This finding was a direct result of qualitative research methods. While the concept of "personality characteristics" and their impact on persistence was alluded to in the literature, understandably no study in the literature search delved into this elusive area.

In Knowles (1984) concept of andragogy, adults are motivated by internal factors rather than external factors. This was true for the participants in this study. For many, the development of this personal striving to achieve their aspirations seemed to have been a result of challenging life circumstances. In spite of such challenging life circumstances and a lack of academic self efficacy, they were determined to achieve their goal of
attaining their bachelor's degree: a paper giving them societal recognition for status and achievement. One of Houle's (1961) three groups of learners are goal oriented learners; learners out to accomplish some identifiable objective. All the participants in this study were definitely goal oriented learners. Some also exhibited Houle's other category of learning for learning sake, but none of the participants exhibited social learning tendencies.

Bean and Metzner's (1985) model of non-traditional student persistence stressed intent to leave as a significant predictor for attrition. Intent to persist was found to be significant by Cabrera, Nora and Castaneda (1993). Intent to leave or persist was determined in these studies by a question about whether a student intended to re-enroll in the subsequent semester. Both studies also found that goal commitment was a significant factor in persistence, defined by the importance of achieving the degree. While both intent to persist and goal commitment would be a part of one's personal striving, this personality characteristic is much more inclusive of one's general approach to life, rather than narrowly defined by attaining a college degree.

These previous studies also determined that academic performance and background (high school performance) were significant. In fact, several studies have indicated a very strong relationship between academic self efficacy and academic success (Cubeta, Travers, & Scheckley, 2001; Kasworm & Pike, 1994; Kennedy & Scheckley, 1999; Sandler, 2000). This study, however, found that academic self efficacy was not that important. It seemed the intent to achieve personal aspirations overcame fears of failure. Most of the participants had been marginal high school students. Some had even failed once in college. They reported being scared to death to enter or re-enter college.
While some of the participants carried their personal striving to achieve their aspirations into a goal of excellent grades, many of the participants got by with passing grades. One participant (Kelly) flunked and had to take several courses over, yet the goal to achieve the overall prize of the degree was enough to keep her going.

Rather than intent to persist, Sandler’s (2000) research on the persistence of non-traditional students found that career decision making self efficacy had the largest total effect and the greatest influence on all other variables in his study. Most of the participants in this study entered college with a specific career goal, or were able to quickly identify that goal after a couple of semesters; therefore this study would support that research finding.

Donaldson and Graham’s (1999) Model of College Outcomes for Adult Students helps explain the finding of personal striving for success. In their model, prior experience and personal biographies influence all the other domains. This is certainly evident in these data. The personal biographies of the participants illustrate the development of resilience and perseverance. Prior poor academic performance, previous failure, lack of support, ego damaging messages, abuse, severe poverty, depression, job loss, and permanent disability were all examples of life circumstances that could have meant failure. Instead, these participants used these biographies to develop goals, and were determined to succeed in spite of these barriers, first in life, then subsequently in college.

The psycho-social and value orientation domain of the model (Donaldson & Graham, 1999) takes into consideration the internal psychological characteristics and values students bring to the educational experience. Again, these students’ personal
striving to achieve their aspirations overcame an initial lack of self efficacy and confidence, as well as a lack of value for higher education from their family of origin. As they became more comfortable with their role as a student and began experiencing some success, they began to interact in a more positive way with the classroom environment; they became leaders, more verbal, more likely to be significantly engaged in the classroom learning process.

Overwhelmingly, the participants wanted to be role models for their children. They wanted their children to be proud of them, and wanted to make sure their children saw, in practice, the value of an education. Students talked about “changing the family tree” (Tom) and “breaking the cycle of blue collar workers (Arthur) in their families. This directly relates to Erikson’s (1963) stage of development generativity vs stagnation; the idea that man needs to be needed and a concern for establishing guidance for the next generation. This motivation to be role models would also fit with Donaldson and Graham’s (1999) model within the value dimension. The students are influenced by the value to create a legacy for their children, and this value was a factor in their persistence. This motivation to attend college was not found in the literature, probably because most of the studies on non-traditional students are quantitative studies, and this information was something participants shared as a result of open ended questions.

Most of the participants did not inherit this value from their family of origin. In fact, there was a surprising lack of value and support from the participants’ families of origin. For 12 of the 15 students, higher education was either discouraged or not perceived to be important. Eleven of the 15 participants will be their family’s first college graduate. Some of this might be explained because the parents of the older
students would have been post World War II workers when the workplace was significantly different.

For all the participants, the decision to come to college was triggered by either a major life event or by dissatisfaction with their current employment situation. John suffered a construction accident that left him permanently disabled and unable to return to his loved work. He decided to return to school to use his brain rather than his brawn in the same industry. Patti came to school as a result of a divorce. For non-traditional students, divorce is the single most reported reason to return to school (Brown, 2002). Kasworm (2002) discusses major life changing events as often being the reason for a return to school. Life altering events that propel people into school is also a well researched area of adult education. Mezirow (1990) asserts “Reflection on one’s own premises can lead to transformational learning” [italics original] (p. 18). This reflection is often a result of an event that forces people to examine set belief systems. In many of the stories, participants told of having to reflect upon a life altering circumstances and to reframe their life’s goals. Behind job related motivations, Merriam and Cafarella (1999) cite life transitions as a motivator for adults to seek learning experiences. Aslanian and Brickell (1980) found that 83 percent of their sample could cite some event or change in their life as the reason for furthering their education.

Another sub-theme within the broader context of personal striving for success was a self description for a value of lifelong learning. Half of the participants in the study were planning to attend graduate school sometime in the future. Houle’s (1961) typology of learners included learning oriented learners; learners who seek knowledge for it’s own sake. This research suggested the idea that all persons have a desire to learn (Griffith,
While all the participants certainly had a goal of attaining their degree, many talked about loving the process of learning. Vicky, for example, indicated she will always be taking classes even after her degree because she loves the learning.

**Personal Reflections**

I loved doing this research! Conducting individual interviews and seeking themes certainly played to my strengths as a professional social worker. I had lots of fun. I found I had a lot in common with some of the female participants, particularly surrounding the issues of re-entering school at a much later age: getting the brain working again, struggling with balancing all life’s responsibilities, organization, and just generally fitting in a huge undertaking with an already busy life. When appropriate, I would make reference to myself in some of those areas to increase empathy. I also had many advantages my participants did not: my family is grown, I have financial resources and I have incredible support from each of my family members. I was also raised with a value for higher education. Both my parents had post graduate degrees, so it was not a matter of “if” you were going to college, it was “where.” Because of my training, I was able to sufficiently bracket myself out of the process to hear their stories as objectively as possible.

I was amazed with most of the participants’ vulnerability, having never met them. I was honored to hear the life stories of most of the female participants. What powerful stories! The men had to be coaxed a little and tended to share primarily only the recent past, but all were very open and honest. We laughed a lot, and cried some. Luckily, I came prepared with Kleenex, as every good social worker always does. As I heard these stories, I was struck by the resilience of the participants who were given some very
challenging life circumstances. Pondering this for weeks I was ultimately led to the first theme of personal striving to achieve their aspirations.

At the end of the interviews, I would always reflect the participant’s strengths and accomplishments. In the case of Tom, I was reflecting about the fact that he had turned his life around at such an early age, and how unusual that was. I told him I knew that because I had worked in substance abuse treatment, and my husband was an attorney representing many drunk drivers. He asked who my husband was, and subsequently went on to tell me he wouldn’t be here if it were not for him, as it was my husband who had successfully gotten a restricted drivers license for him and the sentence of only probation. He said “your husband is mostly the reason I’m here…I don’t think I would have done this without him.” Needless to say, I needed the Kleenex!

The challenging part was the data reduction. I was constantly moving themes from one area to another until it felt like a fit. It wasn’t until I was actually writing this chapter that I was successful in discerning the appropriate language for the personal striving theme. I had to step back and look at the whole rather than the sum of the parts.

The entire process was fun and affirming for me, and it also changed me. While I had always had a respect for non-traditional students in terms of their multiple responsibilities, I hadn’t always put that into practice as a faculty member particularly with regard to my classroom policy on attendance. I will certainly be listening with different ears and noticing more.

Suggestions for Further Research

The evidence of the strong personal striving to achieve their aspirations speaks of the need for an analysis of the personal strivings of non-traditional students, or perhaps a
comparison of those personal strivings with traditionally aged students. This was found as a result of qualitative research methods, and could be explored quantitatively to assess the personal strivings of older students.

Research regarding other areas of personality characteristics, such as “possible selves” might also be explored to see whether positive self perceptions might have any impact on persistence. The concept of possible selves represents an individual’s idea of what they might become and what they fear of becoming in the future (Markus & Nurius, 1986).

As with any qualitative study, the study of more participants in different institutions is suggested to see whether the themes are supported with greater numbers and across other types of colleges and universities.

The participants in this study enjoyed strong immediate family support, and in some cases, significant sacrifices were made by family members. How families are affected when an adult member of the family decides to come to college might be explored in depth in another qualitative study. It would be interesting to find out, from the spouse and children’s perspective how the experience has changed the family.

The gender difference regarding expectations and type of support from faculty found in this study was intriguing, and one that was not found in the literature. A strong suggestion is made to study this further to see if this is consistent with a larger population and associating findings in the data with general gender differences.

Another strong suggestion is made to repeat this study with students who did not persist to graduation. These students made it. What about the ones who did not? In the
areas of child care, lack of program flexibility and advising, I was left wondering if the lack of these supports had been attrition factors.

Institutional and program policy analysis regarding admission criteria and program flexibility regarding course substitutions and life experiences might be appropriate.

The fact that this study did not find a clear pattern regarding what might traditionally be considered appropriate for non-traditional students (weekend/evening courses, on-line offerings) suggests the need for a large quantitative study regarding these issues. That said, I learned from attempting to find a participant pool for this study, there are very few non-traditional students in each program at the same place in their academic career at this institution, so the development of these types of offerings might not be feasible. Still, knowing what they want might be helpful to an institution.

Another suggestion is to repeat this study with non-traditional students attending the university at the off campus sites. These sites are designed to address the specific needs of non-traditional students. As with this study, once particular themes are developed the possibility of doing a larger quantitative study regarding persistence factors might be appropriate.

Suggestions for Practice

If students are required to take orientation and a freshman seminar, these could be developed specific to the needs of non-traditional students. These students could benefit from a family orientation to college, and practical information regarding university services, fees, and location of important services, such as the bookstore, financial aid office, banking facilities and food operations. They do not need to hear about being away
from home and binge drinking. They could greatly benefit from taking a learning inventory to assist them with their confidence and academic self efficacy.

There needs to be consistently individualized advising and program flexibility throughout the institution. Individualized advising that takes into account a student's competency needs to be implemented. Some colleges in this particular study seemed willing to waive courses for competency while some did not. There were no differences between the more technical colleges and the liberal arts colleges, but obvious differences in individual programs, and with individual advisors. The culture change necessary for this greater flexibility has already begun at the university as a directive from the Academic Vice-President, who is calling for more flexibility, particularly for transfer students. Accreditation and program independence are issues that would need to be addressed.

The participants in this study indicated they were attracted to this university because of locality or because of a unique program, such as professional tennis management. One area for research might be exploring students within a 90 mile radius from this campus currently taking courses at the University of Phoenix or Cappella University to find out why they were attracted to those universities as opposed to this particular university.

While academic freedom issues prevent the dictating of classroom policies, instructors who care about meeting the needs of this population might take heed of the data regarding faculty support and policies requiring attendance and doctor's excuses for this population.
Parking? What can I say? I do not know of a college campus for which this is not a problem.

Conclusion

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe the social and academic experiences of non-traditional students pursuing a bachelor's degree on the main campus of a traditionally oriented residential university and how these experiences promote or impede their persistence to graduation.

This qualitative study provided depth and insight not found in previous quantitative studies on factors for adult undergraduate persistence. Several of the themes represented in this study reflect support for results found in previous research. Three of the themes, however, are not found in the literature and therefore clearly add to the body of knowledge for adult undergraduates. The strong personal striving characteristic, the motivation to attend and stay in college to be a role model for their children, and the gender difference regarding the use of and expectation for faculty support are clear findings and should be considered in future models of persistence.

As previously indicated, while the concept of personality characteristics and their impact on persistence was alluded to in the literature, no study found had delved into this elusive area. Quantitative studies focused on background characteristics which tended to measure concrete factors such as high school GPA, parental education, income, and gender. The theme of strong personal striving to achieve aspirations broadens the idea of motivation and intent to persist to include an entire way of approaching life, not just college persistence. This is about how they approach life barriers, challenges and goals, not simply about how they persisted to their bachelor degree. Looking at personal
strivings in other areas of a student's life might be a predictor for success in academic life.

We know that adults influence children. These participants wanted to be role models for their children. They wanted their children to be proud of them, and wanted to influence their perception of the importance of an education. Most of the persistence literature focuses on factors for persistence rather than motivation for entering school. Participants in this study were highly motivated to attend and then stay in school for their children's future. More than economic security, they wanted to instill an intrinsic value for education in their children. Some of the literature found family responsibilities as an impediment to persistence. In this study, children were a motivator and encourager to stay in school.

The gender differences in the use of and expectations for faculty support are a remarkable new finding, and one that should be explored further. Women sought out faculty and shared personal information about their lives when it impeded their education, whereas men did not. Additionally, women expected support and understanding for these life experiences. None of the studies in the literature review compared gender differences, nor did they address the kind of faculty support utilized. This finding is new information that paves the way for further research.

Because the university's main campus is geared to the traditionally aged student, I anticipated hearing stories about the lack of online classes, evening classes and weekend offerings or other issues about "survival" in a sea of younger students. This was not the case. Because of strong personal striving, I believe these students would have survived
on any college campus. The internal motivation to achieve their bachelor’s degree was so strong; they were going to do it, regardless of the barriers.

This participant pool came to this particular university for a couple of reasons: because of the uniqueness of the program offering or because of convenience to the main campus. Some of them, because of a life changing event, were attending school full time and time offerings for courses are not an issue. Others are working and seem to have the flexibility in their work schedules to attend when courses are offered. The participants were almost evenly divided on the issue of on line courses: some wanted more, some did not like on line courses. What was expected by this population was an understanding about their unique situation as older students and that they had a life and responsibilities outside the college scene. They needed to be perceived as adults, treated as adults and recognized for the multiple roles in their lives. And they needed support.

Some of their stories of persistence were remarkable. Many persisted to graduation in spite of a lack of support and several obstacles. Many initially doubted themselves. Many were told they couldn’t or shouldn’t be pursuing their dream. And yet, in spite of these formidable challenges, just like “The Little Engine That Could”, even though most were not quite sure they could (I think I can, I think I can) - they did it! (I knew I could, I knew I could).
REFERENCES


Brinkerhoff, E. Y. (2000). A study of factors that contribute to adult undergraduate student success at the University of Massachusetts Amherst (Doctoral dissertation,


*Dissertations Abstracts International, 56/05*, 1674.


Lundquist, C., Spalding, R., & Landrum, R. (2002). College student’s thoughts about leaving the university: The impact of faculty attitudes and behaviors. *Journal of
College Student Retention, 4(2), 123-133.


APPENDIX A

Donaldson and Graham’s Model of College Outcomes for Adult Students
Figure 1. Donaldson and Graham's Model of College Outcomes for Adult Students

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
APPENDIX B

Colleges at Ferris State University Granting Four Year Baccalaureate Degrees
The College of Arts and Sciences has the following departments:
- Biology
- Humanities, Language and Literature
- Math
- Physical Sciences
- Social Sciences

The College of Business Education has the following departments
- Criminal Justice
- Education Leisure Studies and Wellness
- Media Production

The College of Business has the following departments
- Computer Information Systems
- Management, Marketing, Accounting, Finance, Economics and Statistics

The College of Allied Health has the following four year programs
- Nursing
- Environmental Health & Safety Management
- Medical Technology, Health Care Systems Administration
- Medical Records Administration

The College of Technology has the following four year programs
- Automotive Engineering Technology
- Automotive and Heavy Equipment Management
- Facilities Management
- Construction Management
- Electrical and Electronics Engineering Technology
- Computer Networks and Systems
- Heavy Equipment Service Engineering Technology
- Heating Ventilation and Air Conditioning
- Manufacturing Engineering Technology
- Quality Engineering Technology
- Mechanical Engineering Technology
- Product Design Engineering Technology
- Plastics Engineering Technology
- Rubber Engineering Technology
- Survey Engineering
- Welding Engineering Technology
APPENDIX C

Interview Outline
Interview Outline

I. Background Information
   A. Demographics
   B. Motivation to attend college
   C. Prior experience and personal biography related to college attendance
   D. Explore external environment (community, work)
   E. Explore the meaning of getting a college education for the student

II. What role does family support have in persistence?
   A. Identify family members
   B. Identify family support systems
   C. Explore specifically how family members have supported or impeded progress toward graduation

III. What role does faculty support have in persistence?
   A. Identify faculty members who were influential in students' progress
   B. Explore specifically how faculty members supported progress toward graduation
   C. Explore academic advising and whether that was supportive
   D. Explore how faculty might have been more supportive toward goals
   E. Explore how the student used the faculty

IV. What role do institutional policy and services have in persistence?
   A. Explore admission, orientation, registration and staff services and how they supported or impeded progress toward graduation
   B. Explore how university services above could have been more supportive
V. What role does the classroom environment have in persistence?

A. Explore classroom experiences, particularly those classes that the student felt was useful in the development of knowledge and skills needed to attain degree

B. Specifically explore the factors in those classes that enhanced their educational experience

C. Explore how the student used the classroom environment
APPENDIX D

Initial Email to Department Heads
Initial Email to Department Heads

Hello!

My name is Wendy Samuels and I am an associate professor in social work here at Ferris State University. I am also a doctoral student in Western Michigan University’s Department of Education, and have been part of the Ferris cohort for this program. As you are well aware, part of the requirement is research for the dissertation. I am very excited to begin this phase of my education!

My research topic is the experience of non-traditional students on the main campus of Ferris State University, and how their experiences here have assisted or impeded their persistence toward graduation. Specifically, I am studying the support of family, faculty, the affect of university policy and services and their use of the classroom. My research questions involve what role family and faculty support have in persistence to graduation, what role university policies play in the same, and what role the classroom environment plays in supporting or impeding an adult undergraduate’s journey toward graduation. If you are interested in reading my proposal, I would be happy to share it with you. The study is a qualitative study, and I will be conducting open ended interviews with the students.

I am asking for your help. I would like to identify at least five non-traditional students (over age 25) in your college who are within two semesters of graduation that I might contact to see if they are interested in participating in this study. Students who have persisted in spite of some identified obstacles would be ideal.

The results of this study will be available to you and your departments once the students have graduated. I would like the names of five students by January 14, 2005. If
you are able to get me their names yet this semester (Fall 2004), that would be terrific, as I would be able to arrange interviews during the semester break. If possible, if you can give me any preliminary information about the students, such as their age, gender and race/ethnicity that would certainly help me with the development of the initial sample. If you have an email address, that would also be helpful, but I can certainly get in touch with the students through the FSUI mail system.

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me. I eagerly await your response.

Wendy Samuels, MSW, CSW
Associate Professor
Social Work Program
ASC 2102
231-591-5896
samuelsw@ferris.edu
APPENDIX E

Initial Email to Potential Participants
Hello!

My name is Wendy Samuels, and I am an associate professor in social work here at Ferris State University. I am also a doctoral student at Western Michigan University. In that role, I am conducting research for my dissertation about adult undergraduates on the main campus of Ferris State University. Your name was given to me by your department head, and I am hoping that you will be interested in helping me with my research.

First, I would like to congratulate you. Your name was given to me because you have been identified as someone who is within two semesters of graduation. Good for you! I am studying adult undergraduates, students over the age of 25, who have made it to graduation on a traditionally oriented campus. By a traditionally oriented campus, I mean that the campus is primarily geared to students who are younger. I am interested in finding out about your experiences here, and how they have helped or impeded your journey toward your degree.

While there is no “reward” for participating in this research, you would be part of an effort to assist Ferris in better meeting the needs of their adult undergraduates. The results of the research will be available to FSU administrators and departments upon request and only after the students in the study have graduated. What I would be asking you to do is to be interviewed by me for about 2 hours. I’ll be asking you about your academic and social experiences as a FSU undergraduate. The general interview outline will be provided for you ahead of time to enable you to think about your responses in
advance. Please know that you are under no obligation to participate in this research, and you can change your mind at any time in the process without consequence.

If you are interested in learning more about participating in this research, I am asking you to simply reply to this email to that effect. After I’ve heard from you, I will be contacting you to establish a time to go over the information about the study and to conduct the interview if you consent.

If you have any questions in the meantime, please do not hesitate to contact me at 231-591-5896 or email me at samuelsw@ferris.edu.

Thank you so much for your consideration!

Wendy Samuels, MSW, CSW
APPENDIX F

Approval Letters From the Human Subjects Institutional Review Boards
You have agreed to become part of a research study that is looking at the experiences of non-traditional students on the main campus of Ferris State University. I sincerely appreciate your assistance with this project. I know how valuable your time is, and I promise to respect the fact that you are giving some of that time for the benefit of the university.

We know a great deal about the success of traditional-aged college students. We also know that the same factors that predict success for younger students do not apply to older students. It is important for each university to understand its particular non-traditional student population to better meet the needs of their adult undergraduates. The purpose of this qualitative research study is to describe the social and academic experiences of non-traditional students on the main campus of Ferris State University and how these experiences promote or impede their persistence to graduation. This project is Wendy Samuels' dissertation project.

The intent of this study is to better understand the experiences of the non-traditional student so that Ferris can do what it can to better meet the needs of these students. As in all research, there may be unforeseen risks to the participant. One potential risk of this project is that you may be upset by recalling your experience at Ferris State University. Another risk is the probability you will be identified by readers of the research. There will be no identifying information in the study. You will be identified only by your college, not by your department or major, reducing the chances for identification. Additionally, if there were some clearly identifiable characteristics about you that would be identifiable through the context of the study, these would be removed. I will honor any request by you not to share sensitive information. One way in which you may benefit from participating in this study is the ability to tell your story, particularly if you have ideas for improvement. You will also have the knowledge that you will be helping those adult undergraduates following in your steps.

Participation in this study involves being available for a two-hour interview, with the possibility of a follow up interview if clarification is needed. The general outline of the interview is attached for your review. The interview will be open ended. You will be telling me your story.
This interview will be audio taped, and will take place in FLITE at your convenience. You will be given a copy of the written results of your part of the study before it is completed to make sure I have captured the essence of your story, and to ensure that you do not feel you can be clearly identified in the study. I will honor your request to leave any portion of your information out of the written dissertation.

This study is being done in partial fulfillment of my doctoral work and will be published as a doctoral dissertation. To protect your confidentiality, the names in the dissertation will be changed. Initially, the only people who will read the dissertation are the three members of my dissertation committee. If you would like, I will provide you their names. Eventually, Ferris student affairs administrators and your own department will have access to the dissertation. This will only happen after you graduate, to prevent the possibility of identification while you are still a student. Please be aware that this doctoral dissertation is being published as a public document and may be read by other interested parties.

Please know that you can refuse to participate in this study, you can stop participation at any time, and you can refuse to answer any questions during the interview.

If at any time, you need to contact me, please do not hesitate to do so. My name is Wendy Samuels. My office number is 231-591-5896, and my email address is samuelsw@ferris.edu. My faculty advisor’s name is Louann Bierlein Palmer. Her office number is 269-387-3596. You may also contact the Chair, Human Subjects Institutional Review Board (231-387-9293) or the Vice President for Research (231-387-8298) if questions or problems arise during the course of the study.

This consent document has been approved for use for one year by the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board (HSIRB) as indicated by the stamped date and signature of the board chair in the upper right corner. Do not participate in this study if the stamped date is older than one year.

Again, I thank you for your time. Your input is valuable, and I look forward to working with you on this project. Your signature below indicates that you have read and/or had explained to you the purpose and requirements of the study and that you agree to participate.

Signature ___________________________ Date ___________________________

Consent obtained by: ___________________________ Date: ___________________________
TO: Ms. Wendy Samuels  
From: C. Meinholdt, HSRC Chair CM  
Re: HSRC Application #041201 (Title: The persistence of adult undergraduates on a traditionally oriented college campus)  
Date: January 3rd, 2005

The Ferris State University Human Subjects Research Committee (HSRC) has reviewed your project, “The persistence of adult undergraduates on a traditionally oriented college campus” and approved it under the category of expedited (2F) on January 3rd, 2004. However, reviewers expressed some concern about the method of recruiting participants for your study. Specifically, asking department chairs to identify participants by age could be construed by some individuals as a possible invasion of privacy. A simple way to avoid such a possible misunderstanding would be for department chairs (or you) to describe the study criteria and allow students to volunteer themselves. Also, reviewers suggested that for two hours or more of their time, participants might appreciate being compensated with small gift certificates, a fast food coupon or some other recognition of their contribution to the study.

Your application has been assigned a project number (#041201) which you may wish to refer to in future applications involving the same research procedure. Also, project approvals are now receiving an expiration date one year from the date of approval. As such, you may collect data according to procedures in your application until January 3rd, 2005.

Best wishes for a successful research endeavor and please let me know if I can be of future assistance.
APPENDIX G

Demographics of Participants
Table 1

Demographics of Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage (of whole population)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25-30</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31-35</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36-40</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41-50</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51+</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Race/Ethnicity</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>87% (79%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7% (1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African/ American</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7% (7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>College</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allied Health Services</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>20% (13%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7% (19%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arts and Sciences</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>27% (13%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>13% (20%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education and Human Svcs.</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>33% (19%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Children</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Married</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Single Parents</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

APPENDIX H

Thematic Distributions and Comparisons
### Table 1

**Thematic Distribution Among Participants**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Pattij</th>
<th>Vicky</th>
<th>Jose</th>
<th>John</th>
<th>Eve</th>
<th>Joan</th>
<th>Kathy</th>
<th>Arthur</th>
<th>Jane</th>
<th>Betty</th>
<th>Vanita</th>
<th>Tom</th>
<th>Kelly</th>
<th>Ray</th>
<th>Nicky</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Strong Personal Striving</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. marketability</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. role model</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. family of origin</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. significant life event</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e. attaining degree quickly</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>f. value for lifelong learning</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Gender Differences -</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty Support</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Program Flexibility</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Family Support Critical</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Socially Involved?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. Classroom connection</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Social Divide difficult</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. Classroom leaders</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Institutional Support</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Important</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2  
*Comparison of Themes to Donaldson & Graham’s Model of College Outcomes for Adults*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Prior Experience and Personal Biographies</strong></td>
<td>Strong Personal Striving</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lack of Family of Origin Support</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Significant Life Event</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Adult Cognition</strong></td>
<td>Lifelong Learning Value</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Difficulty in Negotiating the social Divide</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Marketability</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Use of Faculty Support</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Psycho-Social and Value Orientation</strong></td>
<td>Strong Personal Striving</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Desire to be a Role Model</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lack of Family of Origin Support</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Life-World Environment</strong></td>
<td>Use of Faculty Support</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Immediate Family Support</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Attaining Degree Quickly</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Program Flexibility</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Difficulty in Negotiating the Social Divide</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Connecting Classroom</strong></td>
<td>Classroom Leaders</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lack of Social Involvement</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Classroom is Fulcrum of College Experience</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
Table 3
Comparison of Themes to Sandler's (2000) Study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Background Variables - (gender, race/ethnic, income, relatives, financial aid, etc)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Strong Personal Striving</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career Decision Making Self Efficacy</td>
<td>Strong Personal Striving</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cumulative GPA</td>
<td>Strong Personal Striving</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Encouragement</td>
<td>Immediate Family Support</td>
<td>Strong Personal Striving</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial Attitudes/Difficulty</td>
<td></td>
<td>Strong Personal Striving overcame difficulties</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goal Commitment</td>
<td>Strong Personal Striving</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutional Commitment (measuring student's commitment to the university)</td>
<td>Strong Personal Striving</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intent to Persist</td>
<td>Strong Personal Striving</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived Stress</td>
<td>Difficulty in Negotiating the social Divide, Lack of Family of Origin Support, Significant Life Event, Program Flexibility, Use of Faculty Support, Attaining Degree Quickly</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Integration</td>
<td></td>
<td>Lack of Social Involvement Classroom Fulcrum</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
Table 4
Comparison of Themes to Bean and Metzner’s (1985) Model of Nontraditional Undergraduate Student Attrition

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Background Variables</td>
<td></td>
<td>Strong Personal Striving</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Age, Enrollment Status, Residence, Ed Goals, H.S. Performance, Ethnicity, Gender)</td>
<td></td>
<td>overcame background variables</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic Variables</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study Habits</td>
<td>Strong Personal Striving</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic Advising</td>
<td>Program Flexibility</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Absenteeism</td>
<td>Attaining Degree Quickly</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Major Certainty</td>
<td>(not ascertained)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Course Availability</td>
<td>Strong Personal Striving</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Attaining Degree Quickly</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environmental Variables</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finances</td>
<td></td>
<td>Personal Striving Overcame</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hours of Employment</td>
<td></td>
<td>Personal Striving Overcame</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outside Encouragement</td>
<td>Immediate Family Support</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Use of Faculty Support</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Responsibilities</td>
<td></td>
<td>Personal Striving Overcame</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Desire to be Role Model</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>overcame family responsibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>barriers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunity to Transfer</td>
<td></td>
<td>(not ascertained)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychological Outcomes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Utility</td>
<td>Classroom fulcrum</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfaction</td>
<td></td>
<td>Institutional Support Not Crucial</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Commitment</td>
<td></td>
<td>Lack of Social Involvement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stress</td>
<td>Lack of Family of Origin Support</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Program Flexibility</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.