Counselor Educators’ Perceptions of Nontraditional Master’s-Level Counseling Students and How Those Perceptions Shape Teaching Practices

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COUNSELOR EDUCATORS’ PERCEPTIONS OF NONTRADITIONAL MASTER’S-LEVEL COUNSELING STUDENTS AND HOW THOSE PERCEPTIONS SHAPE TEACHING PRACTICES

by

Pamela J. Jordan

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate College in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy Counselor Education and Counseling Psychology Western Michigan University August 2018

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COUNSELOR EDUCATORS’ PERCEPTIONS OF NONTRADITIONAL MASTER’S-LEVEL COUNSELING STUDENTS AND HOW THOSE PERCEPTIONS SHAPE TEACHING PRACTICES

Pamela J. Jordan, Ph.D.
Western Michigan University, 2018

Graduate students age 40 and older, defined as “nontraditional” for this study, consistently represent approximately 20% of the graduate student population (United States Department of Education National Center for Education Statistics, 2015). Master’s degree programs in counseling may attract a higher percentage of these students, as some studies suggest that careers in fields such as counseling are sought out by adults changing careers at midlife and later (Bluestone & Melnik, 2010; Schaefers, 2012). These nontraditional students bring to the classroom their own characteristics of age, life stage, and experience, and they have distinct strengths and challenges that set them apart from traditional students.

While a few studies have been conducted that explore the experience of older graduate students, no research has yet investigated faculty perceptions of this group of students and how these perceptions impact faculty teaching practice. In addition, there is a lack of research exploring the experiences of faculty teaching nontraditional students in master’s-level counseling programs. How have counselor educators responded to these students in their classrooms? The purpose of this qualitative study was to describe faculty perceptions of and experiences with their nontraditional (age 40 and up) master’s-level counseling students, and to explore the ways in which those perceptions and experiences shape faculty teaching practices. This study focused on
the faculty members who are teaching in these programs, allowing their perspectives and experiences to emerge through open-ended survey questions.

A purposive sample of 52 full-time counselor education faculty was solicited via network sampling. The participants anonymously completed an electronic survey with open-ended questions at a time and location of their convenience. Surveys were analyzed using qualitative content analysis (Schreier, 2012). Major perception-related findings from the study included student characteristics such as (a) respect, (b) experience, (c) enthusiasm, (d) perfectionism, (e) rigidity, (f) greater need for faculty support, and (g) a high number of demands external to the program. The issue of age discrimination also emerged in the survey responses, as several participants reported perceptions of ageist bias, both expressed by nontraditional students toward younger faculty, and expressed by faculty and others toward nontraditional students. Major practice-related findings included (a) providing individual discussion, tutoring, and/or processing when needed, (b) referring to institutional resources such as technology support, and (c) honoring the student’s life and work experience. Responses were sorted by participant age, which revealed a clustering of certain perception-related and practice-related response themes by participant age, suggesting age-based differences in both perception and practice. Implications for future research and practice are also discussed in this study.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I tell my students that a dissertation is simply the story of a research project. If this is true, many important characters never make it onto the story’s pages. Despite their influence and impact on the story, they are silent in its telling. For this research project’s story, that cast list begins with my dissertation committee: Dr. Stephen Craig, who helped articulate the original question, Dr. Jennifer Foster, who helped shape the methodology and analysis, and Dr. Karen VanDeusen, who helped prompt the second round of analysis. Thank you all for so generously giving your time.

Throughout the story’s development, many other important characters appeared. That long list includes the mentors, coworkers, and classmates whose encouragement enabled me to tell this story, as well as the many friends who upheld me when my own story included loss and struggle and my work on this story faltered: Dr. Suzanne Hedstrom, Dr. Janet Glaes, Denise Johnson, Francesca Caparotti-Jones, Dr. Tamara Dindoffer, Dr. Victor Kennerly, Dr. J. Frederick Bland, Dr. Tezonia Morgan, Dr. Katie Gamby, Dr. Camille Humes, Betty Buss, Richard Baldwin, Dr. Brian Russ, Dr. BaoChun Hind, Dr. Sarah Bryan, Jeffrey Konfara, Adam Osborne, Monica Michael, Laura Kellicut, Toni Latham, Dr. Scott Monsma, Dr. Joan VanDessel, Rachel Anderson, Dan Nordyke, Amber Wackford Vlietstra, Jared Ransom, Meagan Ransom, Amy Sparling, Cathy Swanson, Bethany Schutter, Rachel Watson, The Rev. Dr. Jared Cramer, and Bethany Cramer. Thank you all for your support. To my classmate, colleague, co-presenter, and friend Dr. Ashley Wildman, who showed up very early in the process, and to my dissertation coach Mary Ebejer, who appeared more recently: your instruction, assistance, and
encouragement gave life to this story. Thank you a million times for your kindness and generosity. To my professors, students, and supervisees, past and present, thank you for seeding the idea for this research. To all the counselor educators who participated in the survey, thank you for helping to move the plot along.

The story would never have been told without the love and encouragement of those closest to me: my family, especially Matthew, Hannah, and Francis Elmore, and my love, William Dickinson, whose unwavering support made this story’s telling possible. Thank you all for your roles in my story, and for pushing me to complete this one.

This dissertation is dedicated to my father, David Jordan Woloshin, who lost his battle with cancer before this work’s completion. He taught me to love words, showed me how to be open-minded, and inspired me in my life’s work. He epitomized perseverance in his tenacious work to complete his own Ph.D. while working and raising a house full of kids. His memory inspires me still.

Pamela J. Jordan
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Dave Williams began a master’s degree in counseling at the age of 52 after leaving his longtime career as a church pastor. Prior to his entry into the counseling master’s degree program, Dave’s personal history contained several significant traumas, losses, and health crises, including a divorce, the death of a child, a closed head injury, and many years in recovery from a battle with addiction. During Dave’s first year in the degree program, additional family difficulties came to the fore as he and his wife struggled to meet the challenges of a daughter with a substance abuse problem and a son with autism, while simultaneously dealing with Dave’s elderly father’s declining health and eventual death. These events together with emergent health issues of his own resulted in Dave struggling to keep up with coursework as he missed some class meetings and completed some assignments late. Though this caused concern to the program’s faculty, his instructors reported that Dave’s work was done well, and in class discussions and activities he showed openness, thoughtfulness, empathy, and a willingness to learn.

His name has been changed, but Dave Williams is a real person who gave his permission for a portion of his story to be used here. Dave represents the older or “nontraditional” student, and his story demonstrates the strengths these students often bring to the counseling profession. His story also demonstrates some challenges these students may present to counselor education faculty in the classroom.

Dave’s story illustrates the multifaceted combination of variables that older or nontraditional students bring to a counseling graduate program. Older students are in a different stage of development than their younger classmates, and bring additional years of life experience
to the profession. Their family situations are often complex. They may be working full time and established in a career; they may be looking to transition to a new career or to enhance their position with their current employer. The issues these students may face during their graduate training are neither simple nor easily quantifiable.

Student age can serve as a proxy to represent these varied issues in the research. In a defining article on nontraditional undergraduate students, the United States Department of Education describes age as a “surrogate variable that captures a large, heterogeneous population of adult students who often have family and work responsibilities as well as other life circumstances that can interfere with successful completion of educational objectives” (United States Department of Education National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2017, para. 1). For undergraduates, the age most frequently selected by researchers to represent the low end of the nontraditional category is 25. The statement by the Department of Education about nontraditional undergraduates’ family, work, and life circumstances also captures many of the elements in a nontraditional graduate student’s life that may compete with their academic endeavors. However, the literature reveals no such defining article for graduate students, nor any consistent age to mark the lower boundary of the nontraditional category for them.

With so many factors competing for their limited time and energy, the questions that come to mind about older students’ enrollment in graduate school often center on motivation. Older students may enter graduate counseling programs due to outside forces, such as restructuring or outsourcing, or due to internal processes, like a change in vocational direction. Many graduate programs appear to target this demographic, citing optimistic job projection forecasts and offering classes geared to the working adult’s schedule, including online, weekend, and evening program formats. As older adults enroll in these programs, classes become a diverse
mix of students at various ages and life stages. If managed well, this diversity may add value to the educational experience for both younger and older students. This study sought to discover faculty perspectives related to the issue of teaching students of diverse ages, by exploring faculty perceptions of older or nontraditional counseling master’s degree students and inquiring as to how these perceptions and experiences have shaped faculty teaching practices.

**Background**

Members of the baby boomer generation are growing older. However, as a recent article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* points out, this age cohort still has many healthy years ahead in which they might “gain new skills and the credentials that will help them move into a new work-life chapter” (Vacarr, 2014, para. 4). Vacarr criticizes universities for not intentionally working to serve the educational needs of older students. Despite this seeming failure, the Council of Graduate Schools has reported twice in the last decade on the increase of the proportion of older graduate students (Redd, 2007; Bell, 2009). Government data indicate overall student enrollment in American graduate programs has grown steadily over the last several decades, more than doubling since 1987 (NCES, 2015). Survey data show postbaccalaureate enrollment by students aged 40 and over has more than kept pace with that of students under 40, and has held steady at around 20% of overall graduate enrollment since 1987. (See Table 1.) These percentages are reflected in graduate counseling programs, and these programs may attract an even higher percentage of older students. For example, in the master’s-level counseling program at which the researcher is a faculty member, data collected between 2001 and 2017 indicate 42% of students were at least 40 when they enrolled in the program. That figure varies from year to year: it has been as high as 53%, but has never been lower than 33% (T. Korman, personal communication, November 27, 2017).
Table 1

**U.S. Graduate Enrollment 1987-2015**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total US Graduate Students</th>
<th>Total US Graduate Students Age &lt;40</th>
<th>Total US Graduate Students Age 40+</th>
<th>Enrollment Growth from 1987: Age &lt;40</th>
<th>Enrollment Growth from 1987: Age 40+</th>
<th>% of Graduate Students: Age &lt;40</th>
<th>% of Graduate Students: Age 40+</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1987</td>
<td>1,373,251</td>
<td>261,371</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>80.97%</td>
<td>19.03%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>1,498,138</td>
<td>330,189</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>77.96%</td>
<td>22.04%</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td>1,599,258</td>
<td>366,516</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>77.08%</td>
<td>22.92%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>1,659,775</td>
<td>387,351</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>76.66%</td>
<td>23.34%</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>1,676,396</td>
<td>393,850</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>76.51%</td>
<td>23.49%</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>1,707,140</td>
<td>405,308</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>76.26%</td>
<td>23.74%</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>1,696,518</td>
<td>388,452</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>77.10%</td>
<td>22.90%</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>1,987,654</td>
<td>444,709</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>77.63%</td>
<td>22.37%</td>
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<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>2,058,169</td>
<td>458,409</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>77.73%</td>
<td>22.27%</td>
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<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>2,178,677</td>
<td>470,253</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>78.42%</td>
<td>21.58%</td>
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<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>2,732,945</td>
<td>525,087</td>
<td>99%</td>
<td>101%</td>
<td>80.79%</td>
<td>19.21%</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>2,814,096</td>
<td>544,649</td>
<td>104%</td>
<td>108%</td>
<td>80.65%</td>
<td>19.35%</td>
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<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>2,831,992</td>
<td>547,094</td>
<td>105%</td>
<td>109%</td>
<td>80.68%</td>
<td>19.32%</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>2,943,644</td>
<td>562,659</td>
<td>114%</td>
<td>115%</td>
<td>80.89%</td>
<td>19.11%</td>
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Source: NCES, 2015
At the same time, the Occupational Outlook Handbook projects 20% growth in employment of mental health counselors between 2014 and 2024. If that projection proves accurate, it will be an increase of nearly three times the national average of total job growth for all occupations (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015). It seems likely that institutional marketing departments are aware of these population trends and projections. University marketing campaigns might use such projections to appeal to adults considering graduate education. In one market-based approach, the prospective student is invited to “ignite your career with a degree in counseling” (Spring Arbor University, 2017). Other schools’ counseling programs appeal to a prospective student’s sense of calling or altruism, inviting them to “empower others with a degree in counseling” (Capella University, 2017), to “put yourself at the forefront to impact social change” (Lamar University, 2017), to “be known for bringing hope and healing” (George Fox University, 2017). The search website Top Counseling Schools offers this approach: “In today’s uncertain job market, many adults are staying competitive by going back to school. Online degree programs are an enticing option for the working professional who doesn’t have the time to study full-time” (TopCounselingSchools.org, 2017, para. 1). This example displays a market-based approach, additionally appealing to a prospective student’s fear of job loss and offering “staying competitive by going back to school” as the solution.

Counselor education departments are increasingly offering courses and even entire programs geared toward the schedule of the working adult. Satellite campuses, evening and weekend classes, and online classes are all tailored to meet the needs of adults who are established in careers, entrenched in a location, or for other reasons unable to uproot and relocate or otherwise reconfigure their lives to attend graduate school. A counseling department might offer evening and weekend classes at satellite sites while maintaining a more traditional class
schedule on the main campus, or a program might offer a cohort-based evening-only schedule. These options are among those offered by master’s-level counseling programs known to the researcher. Finally, a counseling department might offer an entire master’s degree program in an online format. The examples of this option are numerous and growing, as evidenced by the 62 online master’s degree programs that have been accredited by the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Academic Programs (CACREP), 45 of which received accreditation in the last decade (CACREP, 2018).

While institutional marketing departments are designing campaigns to appeal to older students and counselor education departments are designing programs to appeal to working adults, some counselor educators themselves might not be a part of this discussion. In fact, faculty may fully realize the impact of their institution’s efforts only after those efforts have resulted in a demographic shift in the classroom as the proportion of older students increases. This has been observed in the researcher’s own experience, both as a student and as a faculty member.

Some scholarly literature has been devoted to the phenomenon of older or “nontraditional” students, but most of this research has focused on the experience of undergraduates, with students as the participants of interest (Bannister, 2009; Bauman et al., 2004; Chau & Good, 2004; Chartrand, 1990; Dill & Henley, 1998; Hermon & Davis, 2004; Quimby & O’Brien, 2006; Wyatt, 2011). Three studies that researched graduate students emerged from the literature (Gutierrez, Mullen, & Fox, 2017; Hostetler, 2004; Uyder, 2008). Four studies researched the nontraditional student phenomenon from the faculty perspective (Brinthaupt & Eady, 2014; Day, Lovato, Tull, & Ross-Gordon, 2011; Harvey-Bishop, 1980; Zosky, Unger, White, & Mills, 2003); all these explored faculty or supervisors serving
undergraduate students. Faculty teaching older graduate students has not been studied in the research; further, the topic of faculty teaching older or nontraditional students in master’s-level counseling programs has not been researched at all.

Nontraditional master’s degree students bring their own characteristics of age, life stage, and experience, and these students have distinct strengths and challenges that set them apart from traditional students. How have counselor educators responded to this group in their classrooms? This study was conducted in an effort to capture the perspective of the faculty who teach students working toward a master’s degree, specifically in counselor education graduate programs. It sought the experiences of those faculty members, and explored how their perspectives have shaped their teaching practices.

**Statement of the Problem**

Older, “nontraditional” graduate students have doubled in number over the last 30 years (NCES, 2015). To date, though a few quantitative and qualitative studies have been conducted to look into aspects of the nontraditional graduate student experience, no research has explored faculty perceptions of this group of students and how these perceptions impact teaching. Of the four possible groups of interest – nontraditional undergraduate students, nontraditional graduate students, faculty teaching nontraditional undergraduate students, and faculty teaching nontraditional graduate students – only the first three have been looked at as participants in the research. No studies emerged in the literature that specifically researched faculty teaching nontraditional graduate students. Only one published study was identified that specifically examined aspects of the experience of older counseling trainees, and the faculty perspective on older or nontraditional counseling students is entirely absent in the literature. If enrollment in counseling master’s degree programs reflects the figures of overall graduate program enrollment,
nontraditional students (age 40 and over) represent around 20% of the counseling classroom. The literature provides no single, clear definition of nontraditional graduate student; moreover, researchers into the nontraditional graduate student experience have chosen various ages to mark the low end of the “nontraditional” category. For the current study, age 40 was chosen as the lower boundary of the nontraditional classification for graduate students. Although graduate students in their 30s may also feel themselves to be nontraditional students, age 40 was chosen with the understanding that faculty participants would base their responses on estimates of students’ ages. In addition, developmental theorists including Erikson (1968), Jung (Hoy, 1984), and Levinson (1986) have used age 40 to mark the transition to a new developmental stage.

One-fifth or more of master’s degree counseling students bring these unique sets of strengths and challenges to the classroom, yet no research has explored the faculty perspective on this group. A study of counselor educators’ perceptions of and teaching practices with nontraditional master’s degree counseling students could begin a conversation that will move the entire profession forward.

Researchable Problem

When students enroll in a master’s degree counseling program, they bring with them a wealth of experience from life and from their previous occupations. This experience may find ready application in the work of counseling and might facilitate in the older student a more developed sense of empathy. Zosky and colleagues point out that “Non-traditional students’ learning may be enhanced by their life experience, which contributes maturity, work ethic, and a framework within which to integrate academic and theoretical concepts” (2003, p. 190). Gutierrez and colleagues (2017) found student age to be significantly positively correlated with emotional intelligence and affective empathy, and negatively correlated with stress and distress.
This suggests that older counseling students may tend to be more able to empathize with clients while being better able to manage their own stress levels. At the same time, these older students often have more life demands than younger students, such as an existing career, a home, children, and aging parents (McGrew, 2010). In addition, as “digital immigrants” in a class full of “digital natives” (Prensky, 2001, pp. 1, 3), older students may be less familiar with computers than their younger peers, and therefore may bring a lower degree of technology knowledge (Ellis, 2013). Finally, older students, being in a different developmental stage than their younger classmates, may respond to and benefit from a different style of instruction than their younger peers (Knowles, 1978; Mezirow, 1978; Burton, 2011). These factors can introduce challenges, both for the nontraditional student and for the instructor.

**Studies Addressing the Problem**

Several studies have researched aspects of the issue of nontraditional students or adult learners. In most of these, students were the research participants of interest (Bannister, 2009; Bauman et al., 2004; Chau & Good, 2004; Chartrand, 1990; Dill & Henley, 1998; Gutierrez et al., 2017; Hermon & Davis, 2004; Hostetler, 2004; Quimby & O’Brien, 2006; Uyder, 2008; Wyatt, 2011). Nearly all these studies used undergraduate students as participants; only three (Gutierrez et al., 2017; Hostetler, 2004; Uyder, 2008) researched graduate students. Of these three articles describing nontraditional graduate students, one (Gutierrez et al., 2017) specifically studied master’s-level counseling students. Four studies researched the nontraditional student phenomenon from the faculty or field instructor perspective (Brinthaupt & Eady, 2014; Day, Lovato, Tull, & Ross-Gordon, 2011; Harvey-Bishop, 1980, Zosky et al., 2003); all these explored faculty teaching or supervising nontraditional undergraduate students. The literature
revealed no studies that researched faculty teaching nontraditional graduate students in counseling or any other program of study.

One study, Zosky et al. (2003), researched issues closely related to the current problem, comparing traditional and nontraditional undergraduate social work students in their field practicum placement by surveying 28 field instructors regarding their perceptions of differences between the two groups. These field instructors evaluated their nontraditional students’ competence to be significantly higher than that of traditional students on all skills-based variables and two out of six values-based variables. The researchers found that “Prior life experience accounted for 35% of the variance in the variable of preparation for field practice” (Zosky et al., 2003, p. 196).

A conceptual article by Burton (2011) highlights the traits of older counseling students who are embarking on a second career in counseling. The article focuses specifically on second career counseling students’ different needs for supervision as compared to traditional first career counseling students. As a way to address these needs, Burton suggests a constructivist supervision model, which allows older students’ life experience to be leveraged. The article highlights current constructivist approaches in the literature, and offers a constructivist approach that goes beyond current models (Burton, 2011).

Deficiency Statement

To date, most researchers who have studied older or nontraditional graduate students have been either studying the phenomenon generally or researching those preparing for careers in fields other than counseling. Only one published study emerged from the literature that specifically researched counseling students; although the study’s participants were of various ages and its focus was not specifically on older counseling students, the researchers made some
age-based correlations (Gutierrez et al., 2017). Moreover, none of the research focused on the faculty who are preparing these students for their future as counselors. Zosky and colleagues cite research indicating that nontraditional students are more receptive to teaching that recognizes principles of adult learning, compared to traditional students who are more receptive to traditional pedagogical approaches to learning (Sheehan, McMenamin, & McDevitt, in Zosky et al., 2003). Specifically, the authors assert that “non-traditional students’ learning may be enhanced by their life experience, which contributes maturity, work ethic, and a framework within which to integrate academic and theoretical concepts” (Zosky et al., 2003, p. 190). It is likely that 20% or more of master’s-level counseling students bring these strengths, along with challenges, into the classroom, yet the faculty perspective on older or nontraditional counseling students is entirely absent in the literature. Though a few studies have been conducted to research aspects of the nontraditional graduate student experience, research is lacking in studies of faculty perceptions of older counseling students and the ways these perceptions and experiences may impact their teaching.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative study is to describe full-time counselor educators’ perceptions of nontraditional students who are enrolled in a counseling master’s degree program, to capture their experiences with that group, and to explore the ways in which those perceptions and experiences shape their teaching practices.

Available data on graduate students age 40 and over indicate this group is growing at the same pace as that of graduate students under 40, and currently represents about 20% of all graduate students in the U.S. (NCES, 2015). Counseling master’s degree programs with evening, weekend, and online course options have also grown in number, and these options appeal to
working adults. These programs may have been implemented to respond to market demand, with little thought to faculty preparation for an influx of older working adults. This study focused on the faculty members who are teaching in these programs, allowing their perspectives and experiences to emerge through open-ended survey questions.

**Research Questions**

This study sought to answer two main research questions:

1. What are counselor educators’ perceptions of nontraditional (age 40 and up) master’s-level counseling students?

2. How have these perceptions and experiences shaped faculty teaching practices?

**Conceptual Framework**

This study focuses on faculty perceptions and their impact on teaching practices. Adult learning theories, such as Knowles’s theory of andragogy (1978) and Mezirow’s theory of transformative learning (1978), speak to this issue. These theories, as well as relevant studies and articles, will be reviewed in greater detail in Chapter 2. In addition, since the research problem involves older or nontraditional master’s-level counseling students, many of the theoretical constructs that inform the current study revolve around the student experience. These are included to set the problem in context: Erikson’s theory of identity development (1950), Super’s theory of career development (1975), and Schlossberg’s theory of life transitions (2012) speak to significant aspects in the life of an older or nontraditional master’s-level counseling student. Maslow’s hierarchy of needs (1943) and Frankl’s idea of the centrality of a search for meaning (1946) are also important theories to be considered relative to a return to school at midlife and beyond, and may be especially fitting when that schooling is toward a career in the counseling field. Several studies are included that touch on various aspects of the older or nontraditional
student experience, including studies on midlife, the concept of the midlife crisis, and midlife career change. Figure 1 graphically represents the conceptual framework and how theoretical constructs and relevant literature are used in the current study.

Figure 1.

Conceptual Framework and Relevant Literature
Definitions of Key Terms

The following key terms are used in this dissertation:

- **Master’s-level counseling program**: a program that offers a master’s degree that fulfills academic requirements for students pursuing a license as a professional counselor or its equivalent.

- **Nontraditional graduate student**: a student of at least 40 years of age, studying for a graduate degree. This term will be used interchangeably with *older graduate student* throughout this dissertation.

- **Nontraditional master’s-level counseling student**: a student of at least 40 years of age who is studying for a counseling master’s degree as defined above.

Methodology Overview

This qualitative study explores the experiences of full-time counseling faculty members who are teaching master’s-level counseling students, including students who are 40 and older. These faculty members were surveyed regarding their perceptions of their nontraditional students and their experiences with that group, and how those perceptions and experiences shape their teaching practices.

A purposive sample of 50 to 75 full-time counselor education faculty was solicited via network sampling. These counselor educators took an electronic survey with open-ended questions anonymously at a time and location of their convenience. Surveys were analyzed using qualitative content analysis to reveal themes (Schreier, 2012).

Significance of the Study

This study attempts to address the gap in the research literature related to the training of nontraditional students, age 40 and older, who are preparing for a career in the counseling field.
By researching counselor educators’ perceptions of their older students and the ways those perceptions may have shaped their teaching practices, this study begins to bring to the surface any perspectives that may help or hinder in the preparation of older students for the counseling profession. This research was conducted in hope of beginning a discussion around the issue of training older adults for a career in counseling. This is important for two reasons: first, this group represents an estimated 20% or more of students in counseling classrooms. Second, and possibly more significant, CACREP standards (2016) speak to the importance of counselor educators being equipped to work with diverse students; such diversity would include diversely aged students, including students of middle age and beyond. This study, and the ensuing conversations and research related to the topic, may be especially important for counselor education doctoral programs as they provide academic preparation for those seeking to teach future counselors.

**Chapter Summary and Dissertation Overview**

The overall enrollment of students in graduate programs shows steady growth. The number of graduate students aged 40 and over, currently about 20% of all graduate program enrollees, is increasing at the same pace as that of graduate students under 40. As many of these older graduate students seek master’s-level training for a career in counseling, this study was conducted to explore faculty perceptions of these nontraditional counseling students and the ways in which these perceptions have shaped faculty teaching practices.

The remainder of the dissertation reviews the relevant literature (Chapter 2), describes the methodology for the research (Chapter 3), details the study’s findings (Chapter 4), and discusses the study’s implications, as well as the researcher’s conclusions and recommendations for further research (Chapter 5).
CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Overall student enrollment in American graduate programs has grown steadily over the last several decades, more than doubling since 1987. Survey data show postbaccalaureate enrollment by students aged 40 and over has more than kept pace with that of students under 40, and has held steady at around 20% of overall graduate enrollment since 1987 (NCES, 2015). Older graduate students, being in a different phase of life than their younger classmates, bring diverse strengths and experiences to the classroom. Moreover, a class in which 20% of the students are 40 and over is likely to introduce some challenges to the instructor, but as yet the issue of teaching these nontraditional students, from the perspective of the faculty, has not been researched.

This chapter surveys the history and research literature relevant to older or nontraditional students and the faculty members who instruct and supervise them. Although the current study looks at the faculty experience, this chapter includes literature dealing with elements of the nontraditional student experience. This is done for two reasons: first, a great deal more information exists related to the student experience. Second and perhaps more important, any literature that relates directly to the student experience relates indirectly to the faculty experience; it is therefore included here to help set the research problem in context.

The literature review begins by covering several theoretical constructs that relate to the teaching of nontraditional master’s-level counseling students, including pertinent theories of adult learning, adult development, career development, and life transition. The next section reviews recent studies of people in their middle years, including the notion of midlife crisis. The chapter then reviews recent research on adults changing careers at midlife, both generally and to
careers related to counseling, and reviews studies dealing with topics around nontraditional students and the faculty who work with them. Finally, it briefly discusses the experience of age discrimination among older students. This literature review will demonstrate the need for research related to teaching nontraditional master’s-level counseling students, specifically research exploring the perspective of the faculty who serve as their instructors.

**Related Theoretical Constructs**

When discussing issues around training nontraditional students for the counseling field, several key theories come into play: Knowles’s and Mezirow’s theories of adult learning deal directly with theoretical aspects of teaching adults, and Erikson’s human development theory, Super’s career development theory, and Schlossberg’s life transition theory provide context. This section will briefly review these theories, as well as some points of connection between them, illustrated by Maslow and Frankl.

**Knowles’s Andragogical Process Model**

Malcolm Knowles introduced the term “andragogy” into American educational literature in 1968 (Knowles, 1978). In defining the differences that should exist between educating children and educating adults, Knowles begins with Eduard C. Lindeman’s pioneering efforts to capture those differences, quoting Lindeman’s 1926 publication *The Meaning of Adult Education*:

*In conventional education the student is required to adjust himself to an established curriculum; in adult education the curriculum is built around the student’s needs and interests. Every adult person finds himself in specific situations with respect to his work, his recreation, his family-life, his community-life, et cetera – situations that call for adjustments. Adult education begins at this point. (Lindeman, in Knowles, 1978, p. 10)*
Lindeman’s theory elevates experience as “the adult learner’s living textbook” (p. 11), and posits that adults will respond less to “authoritative teaching” and “rigid pedagogical formulae” (p. 11). Instead, adults need to be “led in the discussion by teachers who are also searchers after wisdom and not oracles: this constitutes the setting for adult education, the modern quest for life’s meaning” (p. 11).

In his later work, Knowles and his colleagues summarize Lindeman’s observations that adult learning is life-centered, self-directed, and experience-based, that adults are motivated to learn by their own needs and interests, and that individual differences among adults increase with age; moreover, he notes that research supports Lindeman’s assumptions, and these ideas now form “the foundation of adult learning theory” (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2015, p. 55). After introducing the topic of adult education and surveying its evolution to the present day, Knowles and colleagues present the andragogical process model for learning. They contrast the content-oriented model of pedagogy to the process-oriented model in eight dimensions: learner preparation, climate, planning, needs, objectives, learning plans, learning activities, and evaluation. These contrasting elements reveal the andragogical process model as one in which learners participate actively in all aspects of their own training in a trusting, warm, and mutually respectful relationship with those facilitating their learning (Knowles et al., 2015).

Drawing from psychotherapeutic theory categories, Merriam and Bierema (2014) describe five types of adult learning theories: behaviorist, cognitivist, humanist, social learning, and constructivist. A counseling instructor who emphasizes skill acquisition could be said to have a behaviorist orientation to learning; an instructor who emphasizes students’ cognitive development might have a cognitive orientation; one who emphasizes mentoring might have a social learning orientation; an instructor who emphasizes self-directed learning could lean
toward a humanist or a constructivist orientation (Merriam & Bierema, 2014). Knowles and his colleagues pick up the threads of these theoretical categories and demonstrate that each may have a part in the andragogical process model. For instance, in the dimension of establishing a climate conducive to learning, the authors point out that concern for the environmental facilitation of interaction among the learners is supported by the behaviorists’ concept of immediacy of feedback, the importance placed on the learner having an active role is supported by [John] Dewey, and the utilization of the constructive forces in groups is supported by field theorists and humanistic psychologists. (Knowles et al., 2015, p. 108)

Knowles’s theory is not without its critics. Some have criticized Knowles for an approach based in a psychological paradigm that views the person in terms of internal psychological processes, without a full recognition of a person’s interactions within society and the impact of those interactions:

There is little or no awareness that the person is socially situated, and to some extent, the product of the sociohistorical and cultural context of the times; nor is there any awareness that social institutions and structures may be defining the learning transaction irrespective of the individual participant. (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007, p. 88)

Others take this criticism further, stating that Knowles’s theory is grounded in a white, male, Western, middle-class worldview, an approach that ignores the structures of dominance inherent within these categories and also ignores non-Western value systems and other ways of knowing. Sandlin (2005) summarizes the issues represented in these critiques: first, buried within the theory is the assumption “that education is value neutral and apolitical,” an assumption that “fails to acknowledge that knowledge is inherently value laden and serves to socialize and shape
behavior” (p. 27). Second, critics say andragogy promotes the notion of a generic and universal adult learner whose values are white, middle-class, male, and Western: it “upholds ideals of individualism, self-fulfillment, self-reliance, and self-directedness and… assumes tacitly that these ideals are valued universally by all peoples and all cultures” (p. 27-28). Critics further assert that, by making these assumptions and valuing only one worldview, andragogy ignores and silences voices that are not white, male, Western, and middle-class, and therefore “does not allow for differences in learning preferences” (p. 28). Sandlin’s third category echoes that expressed by Merriam et al. (2007): because the theory removes the learner from the contexts of his or her social location, “andragogy ignores the relationship between self and society… [and describes] the individual in psychological terms separate from social, political, economic, and historical contexts” (Sandlin, 2005, p. 28). Finally, though andragogy upholds “mainstream values,” by representing itself as neutral it escapes critical analysis and thereby “[reproduces] inequalities, … [sustains] hegemonic social arrangements, and… [supports] exploitative structures and conservative agendas” (p. 28).

These critiques are valuable, and may serve to caution those involved in adult education and help them to build an awareness of their own related assumptions regarding their work and their students. However, if combined with a high degree of awareness and reflexivity, Knowles’s ideas may still have some applicability in the graduate classroom.

**Mezirow’s Transformative Learning Theory**

In 1978, sociologist and educator Jack Mezirow published an article in *Adult Education Quarterly* in which he urged “the recognition of a critical dimension of learning in adulthood that enables us to recognize, reassess, and modify the structures of assumptions and expectations that frame our tacit points of view and influence our thinking, beliefs, attitudes, and actions” (2009,
p. 18). With that article, Mezirow revealed the thinking that would become Transformative Learning Theory, which he defines as “learning that transforms problematic frames of reference to make them more inclusive, discriminating, reflective, open, and emotionally able to change” (p. 22).

The theory of transformative learning originated as grounded theory research on the unprecedented increase in women returning to college in the U.S. The study found that women pursuing higher education tended to go through ten phases in their learning, beginning with a disorienting dilemma and progressing through stages of self-examination, critical reassessment of assumptions, the recognition that their discontent was connected to the transformation process, an exploration of options for action including new roles and relationships, planning a course of action, acquiring skills for implementing the plan, trying on new roles, building competence and confidence in those new roles and relationships, and finally, reintegrating into their life with the new perspective (Mezirow, 2009).

Mezirow states that transformative learning is a reconstructive theory, one that seeks to establish a model to explain the learning process. It fits well in this chapter because “its focus is on adult learning, and its primary audience is adult educators” (2009, p. 21). In fact, Mezirow asserts that “transformative learning is not an add-on. It is the essence of adult education” (1997, p. 11). He suggests that learning is transformative in the sense that it transforms one’s frames of reference by changing, replacing, or learning new meaning schemes and perspectives. These transformations may be dramatic or incremental, and often require that a person critique their own assumptions related to the world and to themselves.

In Mezirow’s view, transformative learning is transcultural, and “attempts to provide the model – constructs, language, categories, and dynamics – to understand how adults learn in
various cultural settings” (2009, p. 21). Mezirow observed humans’ proneness to confirmation bias, or “strong tendency to reject ideas that fail to fit our preconceptions” (1997, p. 5). He labeled this construct the frame of reference, which is “a predisposition with cognitive, affective, and conative (striving) dimensions” (2009, p. 22). Transformative learning is learning to think critically about that set of assumptions via rational discourse with others, which brings biases and inconsistencies to light and allows them to be addressed.

Transformative learning theory speculates as to the way “adults learn to reason for themselves… rather than act on the assimilated beliefs, values, feelings, and judgments of others” (Mezirow, 2009, p. 23). Mezirow asserts that the theory captures the process that takes place in successful counseling, when a client learns to “differentiate between the anxiety that is a function of the childhood trauma and the anxiety warranted by his or her immediate adult life situation” (p. 26); he also states that transformative learning may also capture the insight that fuels positive cultural shifts.

Mezirow asserts that educators of adult learners need to be aware that their students’ “immediate focus is on practical, short-term objectives… subject matter mastery, attainment of specific competencies, or other job-related objectives;” however, the adult learner’s long-term goal “is to become a socially responsible autonomous thinker” (1997, p. 8). The task of the educator is to help students work toward short-term objectives as well as the long-term goal; this requires the educator to help students gain awareness of their own and others’ frames of reference, as well as the ability to critically assess them. He describes such education as “learner-centered, participatory, and interactive, and it involves group deliberation and group problem solving” and goes on to recommend such techniques as “learning contracts, group projects, role play, case studies, and simulations” (p. 10) as methods that will move students forward in
examining their own assumptions and frames of reference. In such a classroom, Mezirow states, “the educator functions as a facilitator and provocateur rather than as an authority on subject matter” (1997, p. 11; italics original).

Like andragogy, transformative learning theory has also received criticism. Howie and Bagnall (2013) find the theory to be inadequate, calling it “conceptually problematic, except at the level of a conceptual metaphor” (p. 816). They sum up the current critiques of the theory and categorize them into four groups: first, those that make suggestions for the theory’s improvement, which have over time helped weed out “some of the theory’s minor deficiencies” (p. 819); second, “arguments that suffer from a circular causality dilemma, in which it is futile to argue whether one event comes before another” (p. 820); third, opinions that reject the theory due to a difference in philosophy; and fourth, criticisms that “make small but consequential criticisms that call into question an element of the theory” (p. 820). Howie and Bagnall themselves fall into the fourth camp, and view transformative learning as less of a theory and more of a conceptual metaphor. They cite the theory’s “increasingly ambiguous language” (p. 823) and “termininological meaninglessness” (p. 829), as well as its lack of validation, analysis, quantifiability, and predictiveness, among other concerns. These concerns, they assert, are not issues if transformative learning is simply a metaphor for learning rather than a theory.

Though these criticisms are well taken, for the sake of the current research they serve to demonstrate that transformative learning has been an influential movement in the realm of adult learning.

**Constructivist Models**

Some counselor education models embrace and expand on elements of adult learning theories. The text *Handbook of Counselor Preparation: Constructivist, Developmental, and*
Experiential Approaches (McAuliffe & Eriksen, 2011) counters the traditional instructor-centered pedagogical model of teaching with an invitation to counselor educators “to embrace the challenge of reflexively examining, or deconstructing, your common assumptions and methods in all areas of counselor education” (McAuliffe, 2011a, p. viii). The book, a compilation from various authors, includes several chapters on different aspects and strategies of the constructivist model, as well as chapters exploring the applications of the proposed model to 17 key courses spanning the counseling curriculum. In one chapter, McAuliffe explores the development of a counselor from beginning student, to intern, to beginning practitioner, to veteran counselor. The author gives an initial nod to the pioneering work of Erikson, Levinson, and Super in the realm of adult development, then focuses the remainder of the chapter on counselor development and Ronnestad and Skovholt’s Phases of Therapist/Counselor Development (PTCD) model. This model maps counselor development in terms of phases and associated tasks, in order to guide counselor educators and supervisors as they work with their students, interns and supervisees (McAuliffe, 2011b).

While this and other developmental models are helpful and informative, they ignore the fact that students are themselves at different phases of psychological development. In other words, little or no attention is paid to the intersection of a student’s phase of counselor development with their phase of life. For example, how might the work and classroom behavior of a 45-year-old beginning student differ from that of a 25-year-old beginning student? How about an intern? How might the tasks associated with counselor development vary due to their different phases in the lifespan? What benefits and challenges are introduced to the classroom by students at various stages of life? Burton (2011) calls out this disconnect between developmental models of supervision and lifespan development theory. He points out the challenges of
community, identity, and academic environment for those who have embarked on a second career as counselors, asserting that awareness of these challenges will lead to increased efficacy of instruction and higher student retention. In addition, Burton appeals for “more research into the convergence of stage models with life-span development models as a way of addressing life focused transitions into the counseling field by older second career counselors” (p. 5), and further states that “professors and supervisors could benefit from empirical data that would inform the performance of supervisory tasks with second career counselors beyond the frustration that often accompanies many of their interactions with these students” (p. 8). Both instructors and students would benefit from research in this area.

Burton (2011) asserts that a constructivist approach to counselor education addresses an older counseling student’s need for meaning, in that older students’ life experiences can be brought to the fore in working with problems that seem unresponsive to standard clinical approaches. He states that challenges with the academic environment are also addressed by a constructivist approach, which allows for the development of autonomy as students build their skills and knowledge through active means. He does point out that a constructivist approach is not always called for: the model is not advisable, for example, in supervising those with poor interpersonal skills or who are failing to learn.

Knowles’s andragogical process model and the constructivist models share several elements in common: both focus on autonomy, self-direction, and active participation of students in their own learning process; both encourage respect for and utilization of students’ life experiences; both allow students to develop meaning and create connections. Midlife adult students pursuing training as counselors may benefit from learning environments that allow them to be self-directed and active participants in their learning, that embrace their interests and life
experience, and that are characterized by warmth, trust, and mutual respect. Constructivist models also share elements of transformative learning theory: both view the student’s educational need as not merely to acquire skills, but to deconstruct assumptions in order to build a transformed self.

The next section summarizes Erikson’s human development theory, to contextualize the instruction of the nontraditional graduate student in terms of the student’s lifespan development.

**Erikson’s Human Development Theory**

In 1950, psychologist Erik Erikson theorized an eight-stage theory of human development. Although Erikson was grounded in psychoanalytic theory, having undergone psychoanalysis and trained under Anna Freud, he rejected the Freudian idea that the human personality is exclusively determined by early childhood experiences and fixed by the age of five (Slater, 2003). Erikson’s model, though influenced by Freudian thought, includes developmental stages of adolescence, young adulthood, middle age, and old age, and thereby encompasses the entirety of a full life (Slater, 2003). This was a significant departure from the prevalent thinking in human development up to that point.

Erikson departed from Freud in other significant ways as well, viewing development as chiefly psychosocial, rather than in Freud’s psychosexual terms. Erikson posited that people must negotiate between their own biological forces and the sociocultural forces of the world in which they live. He theorized that each of the eight stages is characterized by two things: a crisis as the negotiation between the inner and outer worlds takes place, and a corresponding virtue if the crisis is negotiated successfully. He used the word *crisis* “…in a developmental sense to connote not a threat of catastrophe, but a turning point, a crucial period of increased vulnerability and heightened potential, and therefore the ontogenetic source of generational strength and
In contrast to Piaget, who theorized that a person must successfully complete a stage in order to progress to the next, Erikson stated that the person moves through every stage, but may not successfully negotiate that stage’s crisis (Slater, 2003). Moreover, “Each stage is a conflict between polar opposites that upon resolution leaves a sense of both the positive and the negative in the form of a ratio” (Slater, 2003, p. 54). Successfully negotiating the crisis of the current stage means reconciling the conflicting forces between self and society; if a person is able to successfully negotiate the crisis, he or she emerges from that stage with that stage’s virtue and is able to carry that virtue into the succeeding stages (Slater, 2003). If a person is not able to successfully complete a stage, the ability to negotiate further stages may be reduced, which can result in a less healthy personality and a reduced sense of self. (Erikson, 1950).

In order to provide context, a brief summary of Erikson’s stages follows: in Stage I, infancy, the crisis is trust vs. mistrust and the virtue is hope; in Stage II, early childhood, the crisis is autonomy vs. shame and doubt and the virtue is will; in Stage III, childhood, the crisis is initiative vs. guilt and the virtue is purpose; in Stage IV, school age, the crisis is industry vs. inferiority and the virtue is competence; in Stage V, adolescence, the crisis is identity vs. role confusion and the virtue is fidelity; in Stage VI, young adulthood, the crisis is intimacy vs. isolation and the virtue is love; in Stage VII, adulthood, the crisis is generativity vs. stagnation and the virtue is care; in Stage VIII, old age, the crisis is ego integrity vs. despair and the virtue is wisdom (Erikson, 1950, 1968).

The current research concerns educators working with students in Erikson’s seventh stage, generativity vs. stagnation (E. Erikson, 1950, 1968; J. Erikson, 1997). This stage, which
Erikson calls simply adulthood, spans approximately age 40 through 64. If negotiated successfully, the virtue produced is care:

During this period work and family relationships confront one with the duties of caretaking and a widening range of obligations and responsibilities, interests, and celebrations. When this is satisfactorily cohesive, all can go well and prosper. It’s a wonderful time to be alive, cared for and caring, surrounded by those nearest and dearest…. One may also become involved in the community and many of its diverse activities. (Erikson, 1997, p. 111-112)

This stage encompasses the generative act of establishing and guiding the next generation (Erikson, 1980), with the major task of this stage being the “responsibility for the next and succeeding generations” (Fiske, 1980, p. 251). In addition to parenting, the drive toward productivity and creativity may find other generative outlets, as Slater points out:

Parenting, here, means more than being a biological parent. It means parenting one’s creations as well. The adult begins to realize the temporary nature of life and so, may strive for self-transcendence through children and work. Ultimately, one’s creations are the only chance to have something succeed oneself in the world. The parent might say, “I see myself in my creations.” (Slater, 2003, p. 62-63)

Erikson believed “the ability to lose oneself in the meeting of bodies and minds leads to a gradual expansion of ego interests and to a libidinal investment in that which is being generated” (1968, p. 138). In other words, intimacy and love, the successful resolution of Stage VI, would lead a person to an increased ability to invest outside self, a key element of generativity. However,
where such enrichment fails altogether, regression to an obsessive need for pseudointimacy takes place, often with a pervading sense of stagnation, boredom, and interpersonal impoverishment. Individuals, then, often begin to indulge themselves as if they were their own – or one another’s – one and only child; and where conditions favor it, early invalidism, physical or psychological, becomes the vehicle of self-concern.

(Erikson, 1968, p. 138, italics original)

In this “ongoing dialectic between the self and society” (Fiske, 1980), a person seeking to resolve this crisis of generativity vs. stagnation may seek expression in leisure time activities, such as community involvement, or in careers, such as education and health care. A career in counseling may be seen as meeting that generative need.

Erikson’s theory has been criticized in various ways throughout the years. Franz and White (1985) assert that Erikson focused on the development of identity and its antecedents and consequences, and neglected to apply the same focus to the development of intimacy, with the result that both the process of individuation and that of attachment are misrepresented. By prioritizing autonomy, the authors say this misrepresentation overlooks “half the human experience – that is, the communal, interpersonally connected part that is essential to both males and females” (p. 225). Since individuation is seen as a masculine virtue and connection is seen as feminine, this neglect has been seen by feminists as insulting. However, Franz and White argue the inattention “prevents Erikson from achieving his goal of a universal theory of human development” (p. 225-226). Sorell and Montgomery (2001) agree that the theory’s principal concern is identity development. These authors, taking a critical feminist stance, assert that Erikson’s “emphasis on the experience of White, middle class, European and American men” as well as his “optimistic incorporation of the ideals of American consumer capitalism inspired by
the growth economy of the 1950s and 1960s” (p. 99) call into question his theory’s relevance and utility, particularly in the current multicultural context. Sorell and Montgomery declare that, although Erikson comes from a position of unexamined “androcentric bias,” the theory “could, and should, be revised to reduce the most obvious bias of emphasizing the triumph of independence over connectedness in the content of developmental conflicts” (p. 122). This revision would require a blending of Erikson’s theory with the ideas of feminist theorists as well as those from other nondominant viewpoints (Sorell & Montgomery, 2001). The authors end their article with a statement recognizing that development of trust, autonomy, a chosen identity, generativity, etc. is a luxury not afforded to those who live in chaos and distress.

Indeed, Erikson was socioculturally situated within his era, and his theory reflects this. As is so often the case, older theories appear shortsighted when viewed through the lens of a few decades of hindsight. Although Erikson appears shortsighted today, his ideas on human development were the first to look beyond childhood and explore the reality of continuing growth throughout adulthood. In the current study, Erikson serves to help frame the experiences of people at midlife and beyond, and to contextualize them for the research problem related to faculty perceptions.

Super’s Career Development Theory

While Erik Erikson looked at how people developed psychologically throughout life, Donald Super was concerned with how people developed vocationally. Super first put forth his theory of career development in 1953, in response to a colleague’s critique that vocational counselors are too busy with their practice to develop career development theories (Super, 1953). Super’s theory begins with Frank Parsons’ 1909 trait factor theory, which studies a person’s talent, skills, and personality and attempts to match them to occupational requirements (Parsons,
in Super, 1953). Super draws out the fact that this match may require compromise on the part of the individual, noting that the counselor’s role is to help the person make that adjustment constructively, and stressing that this process of adjustment may be ongoing as the person passes through different stages of life. Super believed that these compromises may mean that the career does not satisfy all of an individual’s abilities and interests, and they may need to find other outlets in order to find satisfaction both in work and in life (Super, 1953).

This early expression of theory evolved into Super’s (1975) life-span, life-space model, which had a stagewise developmental thrust. In this model, Super divided the life span into five stages pertaining to career and work: growth (birth to age 14), exploration (age 15 to 24), establishment (age 25 to 44), maintenance (age 45 to 64), and decline (age 65 and up). These stages are plotted from left to right over a multi-striped arc in which each stripe represents a life role: homemaker or parent, worker, citizen, leisurite, student, and child:

The simultaneous and sequential nature of these roles, together with waxing and waning during the course of the life cycle, can be depicted as a rainbow in which the bands of color vary in width at any one cross-section of the arc, and each individual’s arc varies in width as it goes from left to right with the rainbow. (Super, 1975, p. 31)

Super called this model the Life-Career Rainbow (Super, 1980). He later revised the model to include the elements that may limit a person’s career choices, which he termed lifestyle factors: environmental determinants, such as the state of the labor market and employment practices; situational determinants, such as historical and socioeconomic factors; and personal determinants, such as psychological and biological health (see Figure 2). Super’s 1980 revision of the model was developed to aid counselors in conceptualizing careers with multiple dimensions or roles, and the time and emotional commitments made to each role. A refinement
of Super's earlier life span, life space ideas, the revised model seeks to recognize the decision points and determinants of career decisions. Super (1980) also discusses the idea of self-

![Diagram of the Life-Career Rainbow](image)

**Figure 2.**


actualization in each role, conflicts between roles, how roles are selected, and touches on the use of the model in career education and counseling. The author expands the original set of roles to include homemaker and pensioner, and discusses the four theaters in which those roles are played (home, community, school, workplace). According to Super, the potential spillover of a role into a theater other than that where it typically belongs, such as taking work from the office home to work on over the weekend, can cause both role conflict for the person and confusion for
others in the person’s life. At the same time, “it may also enrich the life of those in that theater, as when a parent shares some of the interesting events of the workplace with spouse and children while at meals” (1980, p. 285). He discusses serial as well as simultaneous careers, using the term “life-style” for simultaneous life roles, “life space” for the area structured by a sequence of roles, “life cycle” for the combination described by that role sequence, and “career pattern” to define the entire structure.

In discussing life cycle and career pattern in this revised model, Super graphically represents the “waxing and waning of roles” (1980, p. 288) by shading in the appropriate band of the rainbow model with a shaded line that grows wider as the time given to the corresponding role grows. This shading represents how time and emotional energy invested in one band can encroach on the time and emotional energy available for another. For example, Super cites the way an individual’s role as a worker can suffer

when the individual takes on domestic responsibilities with the roles of spouse, homemaker, and parent. It is only as one or more of these becomes less time consuming, as when children leave home, that the remaining roles can again take up more time.

(Super, 1980, p. 289)

Super also describes the changes in emotional investment that can occur over a person’s career pattern, suggesting that the level of emotional involvement can be shown on the graphic using a depth of color, with lower levels represented in paler hues and higher levels in deeper tones of the same color. He introduces a second graphic to describe the decision points along the career pattern, representing those decision points as circles along the corresponding role band. Additional graphic elements are introduced to illustrate steps in the decision making process and the “personal and situational determinants” (Super, 1980, p. 294) of those decisions.
Like Erikson’s theory, Super’s theory has been criticized for its culturally bounded assumptions. Hughes and Thomas point out that all career development theory is grounded in individualism, in which all social experience is structured around autonomy. They state that these theories are limited in applicability to those from and in collectivistic cultures, in which social experience is structured around “collectives such as the family, the peer group or religion” (2005, p. 42). Individualistic cultures reward and recognize personal achievement, which encourages competition, whereas “collectivistic cultures tend to favour attitudes and values that emphasise security, duty, obligation, authority, and hierarchy” (p. 42). The authors specifically critique Super’s lifespan, lifespace theory of career development, asserting that its ideas of autonomous self-concept and independent decision making do not fit well in collectivistic contexts, and its instruments for assessing career interests and career maturity may be unsuitable in such cultures. The theory’s constructs may also be less applicable to those with allocentric or collectivist traits even within individualistic cultures (Hughes & Thomas, 2005).

White (2014) also critiques Super’s assumptions, but for different reasons. In her dissertation study of the career development of 29 lesbian and gay persons, White found that the life-span portion of the theory seems to fit participants well. However, her research suggests the theory’s life-space aspect does not acknowledge “the over-arching influence of oppressive forces, such as homophobia and discrimination, on the life-space of sexual minorities,” a reality that “exerts a powerful influence on career decision and development” (p. 95). White asserts this “systemic oppression and discrimination inform the quality of all situational aspects of life-space,” and suggests this applies not only to sexual minorities, but to other marginalized groups (p. 95). Super’s theory presents an optimistic vision of career possibility without barriers, either real or perceived. Fouad and Byars-Winston (2005) point out that most career development
theories, including Super’s, overlook “differences among racial/ethnic groups in perceptions of career-related opportunities and barriers” (p. 223).

Although Super’s life-span, life-space theory is limited and culturally bounded, unlike its predecessors it presents career development as a lifelong process. Super’s Life-Career Rainbow model furthers this idea, showing the many reassessments of role and identity that can take place over a person’s lifetime. This may be helpful to counselor educators seeking to understand the decision process for their nontraditional students. In addition, the model may help instructors as well as students conceptualize via graphic representation the changes in time and emotional investment that occur as students add the role of student to their existing roles of (adult) child, leisurite, citizen, worker, spouse, homemaker, parent, and/or pensioner.

Schlossberg’s Life Transition Theory

Super’s career development theory speaks to the ways a person’s career impacts and is impacted by other aspects of life and alludes to the transitions in all nine roles and all four theaters that occur over a person’s lifetime (Super, 1980). These transitions are the primary focus of Counseling Adults in Transition: Linking Schlossberg’s Theory with Practice in a Diverse World, which addresses various life transitions in adulthood and provides a counseling model for working with adults going through such transitions (Anderson, Goodman, & Schlossberg, 2012). The authors studied adults navigating various life transitions including career, relationship, and individual, whether those transitions are anticipated (such as a planned retirement) or unanticipated (such as the unexpected loss of a job, spouse, or home). They also review other theoretical perspectives for understanding adulthood – developmental, contextual, and lifespan – and contrast them with the transition model.
The transition model may be especially salient with students who seek to train for a new career in midlife or later because, while transition is experienced continuously by adults, their “reactions to transitions depend on the type of transition, their perceptions of the transition, the context in which it occurs, and its impact on their lives” (Anderson et al., 2012, p. 59). A work transition, for example, may be a result of a person’s own choosing to seek a different job, or a result of a closure, layoff, or downsizing. The authors refer to these events as “triggers,” noting that “There are many triggers—what they have in common is that they create” (p. 168). These triggers of transition are an important part of an older student’s story, along with several other factors:

As you listen to your clients in transition, pay attention to what they tell you about what has triggered their transition, the timing of it in their lives and in the world situation, and the concurrent stress they are experiencing. All these will have an impact on the meaning of the transition as well as on your clients’ ability to manage it. It is also useful to keep in mind the degree to which your clients make the choice, how much control they feel they have over the transition, and their past experience with similar transitions. (Anderson et al., 2012, p. 171)

The older master’s-level student could be making a switch from a previous career to counseling due to one or multiple factors (triggers) – internal issues, relationships, work changes, or some combination (Anderson et al., 2012). This is not to say that counselor educators must be career counselors to their students, but their relationships with students, and therefore their instructional strategies, might benefit by the knowledge.

Anderson and her colleagues point out that for adults in midlife, “meaning and purpose may become central concerns” (2012, p. 179). They posit that this time of dealing with these
existential issues may result in an increased attention to spiritual aspects, and that a person in this phase might choose at this point in life to change to a career that allows expression of this sense of purpose and social significance and for greater holism and authenticity. This may mean that, regardless of the event that triggered the decision, midlife adults may choose to pursue training toward other careers, including counseling, in order to address the inner drive for meaning and purpose in their lives.

**Theory Connections**

In this overview of theories pertinent to the training of nontraditional master’s-level counseling students, a theme seems to emerge: the need for purpose and fulfillment can be seen in each. This aligns with Maslow’s work on human motivation and Frankl’s work on meaning, though those theories are not specifically oriented to the middle years.

Maslow began his seminal article on human motivation with a summary of conclusions from a previous article. Among these was his conclusion that “Any motivated behavior, either preparatory or consummatory, must be understood to be a channel through which many basic needs may be simultaneously expressed or satisfied. Typically an act has more than one motivation” (1943, p. 370). Before setting forth the hierarchy of needs for which he is best known, Maslow asserted that even physiological needs like hunger and thirst cannot be isolated from all other needs. He further declared that the only time a person’s motivation is exclusively focused on one physiological need is when that need is so extreme that it overwhelms and dominates every other drive.

“Another peculiar characteristic of the human organism when it is dominated by a certain need is that the whole philosophy of the future tends also to change” (Maslow, 1943, p. 374). Maslow makes this observation in the context of a starving person who is unable to see past
hunger, but he goes on to apply this statement to the person who finds other needs unfulfilled:

“Again, as in the hungry man, we find that the dominating goal is a strong determinant not only of his current world-outlook and philosophy but also of his philosophy of the future” (p. 376).

Viewed through the lens of Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs, the drive to seek out and train for a new career at midlife and later may be best attributed to the need for self-actualization. Indeed, the very term “self-actualization” refers to a person’s fulfilling their potential, becoming what they are meant to be. After the physiological, safety, love and belongingness, and esteem needs are fully or mostly satisfied,

…we may still often (if not always) expect that a new discontent and restlessness will soon develop, unless the individual is doing what he is fitted for. A musician must make music, an artist must paint, a poet must write, if he is to be ultimately happy. What a man can be, he must be. This need we may call self-actualization…. The clear emergence of these needs rests upon prior satisfaction of the physiological, safety, love and esteem needs. We shall call people who are satisfied in these needs, basically satisfied people, and it is from these that we may expect the fullest (and healthiest) creativeness. (Maslow, 1943, p. 382-383)

Maslow also hypothesized that “any conscious desires (partial goals) are more or less important as they are more or less close to the basic needs” and further, that a behavior “is psychologically important if it contributes directly to satisfaction of basic needs” (1943, p. 384). A person’s work, by which that person feeds and houses self and family, can be seen as contributing quite directly to satisfaction of basic needs. This might help explain the drive to pursue a more satisfactory career path later in life. Slater observed the similarities between Maslow’s hierarchy of needs theory and Erikson’s human development theory, remarking that
“both conceive of a person as moving from a self-centered orientation to an other-centered orientation. Maslow’s self-actualizing people appear quite similar to those who are successfully navigating Erikson’s adult stage of generativity versus stagnation” (Slater, 2003, p. 54). This assertion has implications for the counseling classroom that includes these students, and for the faculty who teach them.

One of Maslow’s contemporaries, Viktor Frankl, originally published his seminal work *Man’s Search for Meaning* in 1946. Frankl was a prisoner at Auschwitz and Dachau until being liberated in 1945, and his book begins with an account of that experience. In Maslow’s terms, Frankl’s basic physiological and safety needs were clearly unmet during his imprisonment in the concentration camps, or were met at the most meager levels, and even that was constantly threatened. Still, he was sometimes able to transcend the harsh conditions and contemplate higher ideals, such as his love for his wife. He drew strength from these reveries, and was able to find meaning in the midst of suffering:

> In a position of utter desolation, when man cannot express himself in positive action, when his only achievement may consist in enduring his sufferings in the right way – an honorable way – in such a position man can, through loving contemplation of the image he carries of his beloved, achieve fulfillment. (Frankl, 1984, p. 49)

Even in the face of great suffering, when the most basic of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs were unmet, Frankl believed that humans’ primary motivation is not food, shelter, or safety, but the need to find meaning in our existence. Frankl termed this impulse *will to meaning*, which he contrasted to Freud’s pleasure principle and Adler’s striving for superiority, which he called *will to pleasure* and *will to power*, respectively. Frankl asserted that the will to meaning, if frustrated, is sometimes
vicariously compensated for by a will to power, including the most primitive form of the will to power, the will to money. In other cases, the place of frustrated will to meaning is taken by the will to pleasure. That is why existential frustration often eventuates in sexual compensation. (p. 112)

Frankl’s logotherapy focuses on a client’s future, “that is to say, on the meanings to be fulfilled by the patient in his future” (p. 104). Logotherapy also seeks to blur the client’s focus on certain mental processes, “the vicious circle formations and feedback mechanisms which play such a great role in the development of neuroses. Thus, the typical self-centeredness of the neurotic is broken up instead of being continually fostered and reinforced” (p. 104). The goal of logotherapy is to help clients find meaning in their lives. This meaning is, in part, found in work:

Everyone has his own specific vocation of mission in life to carry out a concrete assignment that demands fulfillment. Therein he cannot be replaced, nor can his life be repeated. Thus everyone’s task is as unique as is his specific opportunity to implement it. (p. 113)

Major life changes, such as a change of career later in life, may be driven by deeply significant motives. Concepts such as care (Erikson, 1968) and purpose (Anderson et al., 2012) display similarities to Maslow’s self actualization and Frankl’s will to meaning. It is possible these forces are at the heart of many career changes in the research that follows.

Research Relating to the Training of Nontraditional Master’s-Level Counseling Students

This section provides a brief overview of recent research and conceptual work on the topics of midlife, midlife career change, and older or nontraditional students. The section begins with a look at midlife in general, as well as recent research on issues around the midlife crisis, in order to provide context for the following subsection on people who change careers at midlife,
which in turn provides context for the final subsection on those who pursue additional education at midlife or later, and the faculty who teach them.

Midlife

Lachman calls the middle years “the most overlooked” period in the human lifespan, citing the dearth of research about this stage (2015, p. 327). In 2016, more than 84 million Americans were age 40 to 59 (United States Census Bureau, 2017). Despite the fact that those in their 40s and 50s comprise more than a quarter of the U. S. population (United States Census Bureau, 2017), this is the one stage with no dedicated journals or publications (Lachman, 2015). One reason given for this research deficit is that researchers find it difficult to include middle-aged participants “given their busy lifestyles with multiple demands of work and family. I have heard many a student and colleague claim it is hard to get middle-age participants, and they just focus on young students and retired older adults” (Lachman, 2015, p. 328).

Lachman and colleagues (2015) present this period of midlife as pivotal in three ways: “(a) balancing growth and decline, (b) linking earlier and later periods of life, and (c) bridging younger and older generations” (p. 20). They point to the “exalted placement” given to the middle years by 16th and 17th century European art, which depicted age 50 as an apex (p. 20). The authors set out to define midlife, stating that since age-based definitions are not static, “midlife may be better considered in terms of roles (e.g., mentor, parent), timing of life events, and life experience” (p. 21). Pew research indicates nearly half of adults in their 40s and 50s are raising or supporting a child and also have a parent over 65. Moreover, “not only do many provide care and financial support to their parents and their children, but nearly four-in-ten (38%) say both their grown children and their parents rely on them for emotional support” (Parker & Patten, 2013, p. 27).
**Midlife crisis.** The term *midlife crisis* is attributed to Canadian psychiatrist Elliot Jaques, who published an article in 1965 describing a drop in productivity that he observed in composers and artists around age 35, and suggesting a similar decline begins around this age for everyone (The Telegraph, 2003). Freund and Ritter (2009) explore the evaluation of goal achievement, an aspect thought to define midlife and provoke midlife crisis, and assess the evidence for a strict definition and a moderate definition of the term (Freund & Ritter, 2009). Finally, they suggest that a lenient concept of the term *midlife crisis*, which is characterized by “challenges to life management” and which “does not regard the occurrence of a midlife crisis as normative,” resolves the debate between proponents and opponents of the term, and has “the potential to stimulate new research directions exemplifying processes of the interaction of social expectations on the one hand and personal goals on the other, and their importance for developmental regulation” (Freund & Ritter, 2009, p. 589).

Cheng, Powdthavee, and Oswald (2017) analyzed longitudinal data sets from Australian, German, and British surveys taken over periods of ten years or more from 1984 to 2010. When they looked at the data cross-sectionally, the researchers found “evidence for a U-shaped relationship between life satisfaction and age” (p. 130), where the low point in life satisfaction showed up among those in their 40s or 50s. They then viewed the data longitudinally, looking at within-person changes, and found a similar change in individuals’ life satisfaction over time, with the average low points at ages between 39 and 50 (Cheng et al., 2017). The authors conclude that the results support the idea of a nadir in happiness and well-being occurring at midlife.
Lachman quotes from the *Midlife in the US* (MIDUS) study, the country’s largest longitudinal study of this age group (Brim, Ryff, & Kessler, in Lachman, 2015). The study’s findings do not support the u-bend or nadir narrative. Rather,

They show that a majority of middle-age adults are satisfied with their life and stay that way or even improve over a 10-year period. They also expect their future satisfaction to be even higher, and this optimism can motivate them to achieve their goals and strive for growth or improvement (Lachman, Röcke, Rosnick, & Ryff, in Lachman, 2015).

Lachman points out that the notion of the u-bend persists, and is “interpreted as evidence for the midlife crisis” (Lachman, 2015, p. 330). She calls this commonly held belief a misconception, and speculates that its influence on attitudes and health may be profound (Lachman, 2015). While acknowledging the realities of multiple and varied responsibilities and the beginning signs of age-related declines in physical and cognitive ability, Lachman asserts that “midlife can also be a peak time in many areas, including earnings, position at work, leadership in the family, decision-making abilities, self-confidence, self-esteem, and contributions to the community” and that “The empirical evidence for a midlife crisis as a regular occurrence is weak at best” (p. 331).

Lachman and colleagues include the conceptions of Jung and Erikson, who viewed the midlife period as a critical one in terms of linking: Jung stressed the important link between early and later life, and Erikson emphasized the person’s role as link between the young and the old (Lachman et al., 2015). The authors assert that the association of midlife with stress and crisis may be a result of certain writings from the 1960s and 70s, “which were based largely on clinical samples and therefore focused on the problems rather than the triumphs of those in middle age” (Lachman et al., 2015, p. 21). Although there are some stresses that may tend to cluster during
this stage, such as the demands associated with multiple roles, the negative bias of these earlier works does not seem to be borne out in research with more representative samples. Still, “there are many misconceptions about midlife, with the most common myth centered on the midlife crisis” (p. 21). The authors cite research which indicates only 10 to 20% reported a midlife crisis in the U.S.: about half of that group reported anxiety around aging, and the rest connected their distress to “events such as divorce, job loss, or health problems, which can occur at any age period” (Wethington, in Lachman et al., 2015, p. 21). Even so, the authors point out that rates of depression, stress, and suicide are high among those in the middle years, and emphasize the need to study this stage in order to better meet the mental health needs of those in midlife (Lachman et al., 2015).

Lachman and colleagues (2015) summarize the current research, including the ongoing longitudinal MIDUS study (Brim, Ryff, & Kessler, in Lachman et al., 2015), and assert that this period is one of tradeoffs that they characterize as “the intersection of growth and decline”:

Midlife holds a unique place in that it is neither at the low point or the high point on these trajectories. On the one hand, for example, happiness is on an upward course. In contrast, many cognitive and physical functions, including speed of processing, memory, lung function, and muscle mass, are on a downward path. Midlife has a somewhat unique advantage in the life course with the juxtaposition of gains and losses. (p. 24)

The authors cite research that suggests better health and higher cognitive function at midlife and beyond are associated with supportive relationships, regular exercise, and positive beliefs about their own self-efficacy (Lachman et al., 2015).
Midlife Career Change

This section gives an overview of the scholarly research around midlife career change, viewed in two categories: first, the work regarding midlife career change in general, from any career to any other career, will be reviewed; second, the studies involving participants with target careers in psychology and education will be examined.

**Changing from one career to another.** Observing that traditional explanations of midlife career change seemed at odds with one another, McQuaid (1986) used her dissertation research to develop a grounded theory of midlife career change. She saw a conflict between developmentalists’ position that career change in midlife is based in midlife crisis (personal) and vocational theorists’ assertion that such career change results from vocational instability (professional). Seeing no theories of midlife career change to guide the research, she used her dissertation research to develop a grounded theory based on the lived experiences of those who were changing careers. McQuaid interviewed 20 career changers between 35 and 50 years old; she also interviewed confidants for 11 of her primary participants. Analysis of these interviews resulted in a theory with two component parts: a four-phase chronological model of career change containing phases of predisposition, confrontation, action, and adjustment, and a three-factor descriptive model made up of aspects from the first career, the second career, and the transitional period between them (McQuaid, 1986). This theory does not seem to have been picked up for any of the ensuing research.

In the last decade, several articles have been published on the topic of career change at midlife. Hiltz-Hymes and her colleagues (2015) studied 116 men and women, graduate students and recent alumni, who began their pursuit of doctoral degrees in midlife. Nearly half of the participants in this group were seeking the degree as part of a career change. The researchers
sought to measure participants’ life satisfaction related to their pursuit of advanced degrees. The term “midcourse correction,” which the authors used to express participants’ efforts, captures the idea of an intentional change in direction fueled by a process of midlife review that yields regrets and disappointments. They found a high degree of life satisfaction and satisfaction with their doctoral education, with 91% and 79%, respectively, responding in the top two options of the five-item Likert scale. Moreover, the differences between the career changers and non-changers were not statistically significant (Hiltz-Hymes et al., 2015).

Barclay, Stoltz, and Chung (2011) proposed an integration of Super’s life-span, life-space model (growth, exploration, establishment, maintenance, disengagement) with Prochaska and colleagues’ transtheoretical model of change (pre-contemplation, contemplation, preparation, action, maintenance). This integration model aligns parallel stages of the two models: disengagement with pre-contemplation, growth with contemplation, exploration with preparation, establishment with action, and maintenance with maintenance. The authors then presented interventions for each stage in the resulting model. Huebner and Royal (2013) also proposed an approach that makes use of these two models along with narrative techniques, citing the idea that adults in midlife may be seeking meaning and self-actualization and asserting that these approaches may help increase work satisfaction for these clients.

Schaefers’s literature review (2012) discusses the trend of baby boomers moving into “encore careers” that “reflect their values, address the desire to give back, and accommodate evolving life priorities” (p. 84). These midlife career changers are frequently drawn to encore careers in the social sector, defined by Bluestone and Melnik as “the set of industries covering health care and social assistance, educational services, nonprofit community and religious organizations, the performing arts, museums, libraries and government” (2010, p. 3); these
researchers projected the social sector would create 6.9 million new jobs in the decade between 2008 and 2018 (Bluestone & Melnik, 2010). Schaefers (2012) gives an overview of some of the barriers facing older workers who seek these positions, such as discrimination, being seen as overqualified, and financial strain, and goes on to suggest ways career counselors might help those transitioning into these encore careers.

Pierce and Hawthorne point out that nontraditional graduate students “are likely to encounter different obstacles in completing advanced degrees than traditional students” (2011, para. 1). Their conceptual article focuses on the various roles graduate faculty play in the lives of their students – teacher, advisor, and mentor – and recommends ways that educators can work with their nontraditional students. The authors begin by reminding faculty that a mix of traditional and nontraditional students in the classroom means a variance of knowledge and skill; they recommend addressing this variance by assigning group work, clearly discussing time expectations, and incorporating the use of campus support services into assignments. In addition, the authors remind faculty of the competing obligations in nontraditional students’ lives, and recommend faculty “be aware of these conflicts and remain open to strategies designed to assist struggling students” (2011, para. 7).

Horton (2010) writes a personal reflection about students’ need for mentoring out of his own experience as both an adult/nontraditional student and as a faculty member currently teaching members of that population. He quotes the U. S. Department of Education’s National Center for Education Statistics research that finds nontraditional students “much more likely than traditional students to leave postsecondary education without a degree” and “most at risk of leaving during their first year, regardless of their degree objective” (NCES, in Horton, 2010, p. 40). Horton reflects on the lack of mentoring received while pursuing his own education and
attributes much of this unintentional shortfall to the fact that he and his professors were “roughly the same age” (p. 41). He advocates for intentional mentoring of the older student, pointing out that age discrimination can mean that chances for employment decline as a person ages, “so whatever can be done to advance, or pre-advance career prospects for the midlife student should be consciously undertaken at both the individual professorial and greater institutional level. Leaving it to chance will not suffice” (p. 42).

Horton’s article seeks to raise awareness of the issues faced by midlife students, and “to ensure that mentoring midlife students is a deliberate, on-going activity” (p. 43). He challenges faculty to be vigilant and proactive, to look for opportunities and to make time to mentor midlife students, to remember lessons of their own mentors, and to hark back to their own “stress in alien situations” and reflect on the fact that older students might not know how to reveal that stress and ask for help (p. 43).

**Changing to counseling and related fields.**

In a recent dissertation study, Hoffman (2015) interviewed men who had become clinical psychologists at midlife. This narrative study explored the experience of ten men between 38 and 62 years old who had completed or were near completion of their training in clinical psychology. The researcher’s analysis of the interviews resulted in a model of personal and professional identity development comprised of seven themes: awakening, searching, transitioning, adjusting, reviewing, re-emerging, and owning (Hoffman, 2015).

Expanding the literature search to include studies of individuals who made midlife career changes into education yielded additional results, as several researchers have studied those switching to education from a different career (Christensen, 2003; Coladonato, 2013; Lee, 2010; Marinell & Johnson, 2014; Mercora, 2003; Robertson & Brott, 2013; Stafford, 2008). Of this
latter category, the bulk of studies around making a change at midlife to a career in counseling or a related field are dissertations; only two items (Marinell & Johnson, 2014; Robertson & Brott, 2013) were published in peer-reviewed journals. This may be indicative of a growing nature of and interest in this topic.

Robertson and Brott (2013) surveyed 102 male veterans who participated in the Troops to Teachers program, focusing on the extent to which their life satisfaction is “explained by five career transition factors (readiness, confidence, control, perceived support, and decision independence)” (p. 69). Several themes emerged from the open-ended question portion of the surveys, including insights about the transition related to preparation, attitude, and rewards of a new career in teaching. The respondents also revealed connections between their new career and life satisfaction, with the largest number of responses involving “the veterans’ desire to help others or to serve others and the importance of this task to their overall life satisfaction” (p. 74).

Marinell and Johnson (2014) used two decades of survey data on education to compare first career teachers to second career teachers in terms of racial and gender diversity. Although the percentage of second career teachers nearly doubled in the years studied (1988-2008) such that, by 2008, nearly one-third of teachers in their first year were second career teachers, the researchers found that “midcareer entrants did not dramatically change the gender and racial composition of the entering teaching force” (p. 768).

Several researchers have studied the motivations and reasons behind individuals’ decision to change to a career in education. Christensen (2003) conducted a phenomenological dissertation study of nine second-career teachers, looking at the factors that motivated their decisions to change careers and become teachers. She found seven themes of motivation, including three themes that had not been listed in previous literature: “the role of spousal
support, the role of teacher/friend/family member encouragement, and the role of a Professional Development School” (p. iv). Similarly, Mercora’s (2003) dissertation study explored the various factors that contributed to individuals’ choice to change to a career in education, using grounded theory methodology to analyze the focus group-style interviews of 17 participants. The themes that emerged from the interviews included altruism, working with children, a passion for learning or for the specific subject, and self-fulfillment. Using interviews, journals, and classroom observations, Lee (2010) inquired into the career change motivations and reflections of 12 second-career teachers whose level of teaching experience at the time of data collection ranged from student teaching to 20 years. He analyzed the data using an interpretive phenomenological method, which also uncovered the common experiences and various reflections on the change. He identified six themes: reflection, or the value of prior work experiences; inspiration, or a sense of calling; preparation, or the quality of teacher training; assimilation, or adjusting to school culture; perception, or their sense of self-efficacy; and vision, or outlook on the future of education.

Coladonato (2013) used Q methodology to analyze data from 43 teachers and administrators related to their attitudes about second career teachers. The study “identifies and examines 5 major shared viewpoints held by practicing teachers and school administrators” about second career teachers (p. 1). He found that second career teachers and more recent graduates tended to hold positive views about the qualifications of second career teachers, and that older teachers and administrators tended to hold more negative views about second career teachers’ qualifications and preparation.

Stafford (2008) conducted a mixed method study of both first career and second career teachers, examining the differences between the two groups in terms of their value for the novice
teacher induction and mentor support programs designed to facilitate their growth in competency, and their beliefs about the effectiveness of those activities. The researcher analyzed existing data from an induction program evaluation survey, then conducted focus group interviews with first career and second career teachers to gather explanations and clarifications on the survey findings. She found that, although both groups benefit from the professional and emotional support of induction and mentoring programs, the two groups value and benefit from them differently: whereas the first career novice teachers “received and welcomed emotional support, affirmation, and guidance from their mentors,” the second career novice teachers “referred to their mentors as peers, coaches, and friends. They did not feel their mentors actually mentored them…. None of them spoke of being emotionally supported or affirmed” (p. 107). The “one-size-fits-all” (p. 112) induction program for novice teachers was less valued by the more self-directed second career teachers, who saw them as less beneficial. Due to these findings, the researcher recommended the development of “a strong induction program that considers age, life stage, and adult learning needs” (p. 113). These recommendations might find ready application in counselor education as well.

These dissertations and articles provide insight into the factors that motivate adults’ career change, their experiences, and the attitudes of those they work with toward them. Most germane to the current study, several authors discussed the educational and support needs of those changing careers and called for awareness and openness to alternative teaching methods on the part of instructors.

The next section explores the research touching on older students as well as the faculty who teach them.
Nontraditional Students and Faculty

This section reviews the research literature around nontraditional students and the faculty who serve as their instructors, and is organized by participant group: nontraditional undergraduate students, nontraditional graduate students, and faculty teaching nontraditional undergraduate students. The fourth potential group of participants, faculty teaching nontraditional graduate students, has not been studied in the research.

Several studies have looked generally at nontraditional students or adult learners. Most of these have used students as the research participants of interest (Bannister, 2009; Bauman et al., 2004; Chau & Good, 2004; Chartrand, 1990; Dill & Henley, 1998; Gutierrez et al., 2017; Hermon & Davis, 2004; Quimby & O’Brien, 2006; Uyder, 2008; Wyatt, 2011). Further, nearly all these studies used undergraduate students as participants; only two (Gutierrez et al., 2017; Uyder, 2008) researched graduate students. Of these two, one (Gutierrez et al., 2017) researched students studying for a master’s degree in counseling. Four studies researched the nontraditional student phenomenon from the faculty perspective (Brinthaupt & Eady, 2014; Day, Lovato, Tull, & Ross-Gordon, 2011; Harvey-Bishop, 1980; Zosky et al., 2003); all these explored the viewpoint of faculty or supervisors serving undergraduates, rather than graduate students.

Each of these studies defines the nontraditional or older student or adult learner, though the definitions themselves are inconsistent. Many define the term based on student age: most studies use the age range of 25 and older to define the group (Bauman et al., 2004; Brinthaupt & Eady, 2014; Chao & Good, 2004; Day et al., 2011; Harvey-Bishop, 1980; Quimby & O’Brien, 2006; Wyatt, 2011), though two studies (Dill & Henley, 1998; Hermon & Davis, 2004) use age 24 as the bottom boundary of the definition. Some researchers choose to define the central qualifier in terms of role. For example, Dill and Henley define nontraditional students as “24
years old or older [with] at least 1 year in a nonacademic role, such as housewife or employee” (1998, p. 27), adding a role component to the age element, and Chartrand defines nontraditional students in terms of holding “two or more major life roles in addition to the student role” (1990, p. 68). Bannister uses the broad definition of nontraditional students put forth by the university at which she conducted her dissertation research, which defines this group as “25 years of age or older, married, a parent, or returning to school” (2009, p. 8). The U.S. Department of Education defines nontraditional undergraduates using seven variables, many of which are interrelated: delayed enrollment, part-time enrollment, financial independence, full-time employment while enrolled, the presence of dependents, the status of single parent, and a non-standard high school diploma; undergraduates with one of these characteristics were defined as minimally nontraditional, while those with four or more were considered highly nontraditional (NCES, 2017).

Nontraditional graduate students are not so clearly defined in the literature. Uyder’s dissertation research defines the nontraditional graduate student as age 30 and older (2008). Hostetler (2004) uses age 35 to mark the bottom edge of the category for her dissertation research. In their conceptual article, Pierce and Hawthorne base the term “nontraditional” not on age alone, but also on the presence of a gap after the completion of the bachelor’s degree: in contrast to traditional graduate students, “who move from undergraduate programs into graduate school,” they define as “nontraditional” those students who have returned to school to pursue an advanced degree at 35 or older, after a gap of five years or more (2011, para. 1). Some researchers describe the distinctions between traditional and nontraditional graduate students in terms of place in their career: while a traditional graduate student is defined as a recent college graduate who has not yet begun their career, nontraditional graduate students tend to be older
than traditional students on average, have been out of college for five or more years, and are currently professionally employed or transitioning careers (Skopek & Schuhmann, 2008; White, 2000). Table 2 shows a list of potential characteristics of nontraditional graduate students found in the literature.

Table 2

Potential Characteristics of Nontraditional Graduate Students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Potential Characteristic</th>
<th>Reference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age (lower limit varies by researcher; older on average)</td>
<td>Hostetler, 2004; Uyder, 2008; White, 2000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dependents</td>
<td>McGrew, 2010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aging parents</td>
<td>McGrew, 2010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gap of at least 5 years between undergraduate and graduate study</td>
<td>Pierce &amp; Hawthorne, 2011; Skokek &amp; Schuhmann, 2008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working full time</td>
<td>White, 2000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Established in career</td>
<td>McGrew, 2010; White, 2000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transitioning to a new career</td>
<td>White, 2000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of confidence</td>
<td>White, 2000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less skilled with technology than traditional graduate students</td>
<td>Ellis, 2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greater emotional intelligence than younger graduate students</td>
<td>Gutierrez et al., 2017</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concrete, pragmatic approach to learning</td>
<td>White, 2000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Undergraduate students.** The studies for which undergraduate students were the participants of interest can be grouped into a few themes. Some researchers studied issues of student stress, distress, and wellness (Chartrand, 1990; Dill & Henley, 1998; Hermon & Davis, 2004; Quimby & O’Brien, 2006). Others examined nontraditional students’ reasons for entering or reentering college (Bauman et al., 2004; Chau & Good, 2004), and perceptions of the college experience (Chau & Good, 2004). Still others looked at nontraditional students’ use of the institution’s support services (Bauman et al., 2004), and support services’ impact on student engagement and satisfaction (Bannister, 2009; Wyatt, 2011).

Within the studies that looked at issues of student stress, distress, and wellness, Chartrand (1990) sought to use measures collected from students at the beginning of an academic year to predict personal distress levels and academic performance. She found the first two measures, self-evaluation and commitment to the student role, had a direct effect on the third measure, student role congruence; this measure in turn directly affected academic performance and personal distress. Dill and Henley’s 1998 study compared 47 nontraditional students with a closely matched group of 47 traditional students, using a 210-item Likert scale survey of daily events, to discover which daily events were found to be stressful. The researchers found no significant difference between the two groups’ perceptions of stressful events. Hermon and Davis (2004) used Myers, Sweeney, and Witmer’s 1998 Wellness Evaluation of Lifestyle (WEL) to assess differences in wellness between traditional and nontraditional-age college students on 16 wellness dimensions across the five Adlerian life tasks (spirituality, self-regulation, work/leisure, friendship, love). The researchers used the results to make recommendations to college counselors designed to help nontraditional students achieve greater wellness.
Quimby and O’Brien (2006) surveyed 209 nontraditional female undergraduate students with children to discover the factors influencing the students’ psychological well-being. Using scales and subscales from various questionnaires (The Attachment Style Questionnaire, The Social Provisions Scale, the Self-Efficacy Expectations for Role Management measure, Rosenberg’s Self-Esteem Scale, the Satisfaction with Life Scale, and the Brief Symptom Inventory), researchers evaluated students on confidence, perceived social support, self-efficacy, and well-being. They discovered connections between the factors such that secure attachment, self-efficacy, and social support had value in predicting psychological distress, self-esteem, and life satisfaction.

Two studies looked at questions having to do with students’ reasons for entering or reentering college. Bauman and colleagues (2004) surveyed 53 nontraditional undergraduates about their reasons for entering or reentering college, the likelihood of using campus services tailored for nontraditional students, and their sources of social support. They used their findings to make recommendations that colleges run similar surveys in order to develop specialized services for nontraditional students. In Chau and Good’s qualitative study (2004), the researchers interviewed 43 undergraduates (mean age = 38) to identify their reasons for being in college and their perceptions of their college experiences, and synthesized the collected data using grounded theory methodology. They identified a central concept, hopefulness, interacting with themes of motivation, financial investment, career development, life transition, and support systems, and suggested applications of this information for the counseling needs of nontraditional students.

Two studies looked directly at student support services. Bannister’s 2009 phenomenological study examined several research questions related to student support services’ impact on nontraditional undergraduate students at Kansas State University. By interviewing 20
students and five student support staff members and observing five student support staff offices, the researcher saw six themes emerge pertaining to nontraditional students’ engagement and satisfaction: commitment, expectations, support, involvement, learning, and feedback. Wyatt’s 2011 qualitative study explored the question of how a university successfully engages nontraditional students. Using focus groups, in-depth interviews, and student journal entries, researchers collected personal stories touching on student engagement and the college experience, as well as students’ expectations and needs related to college success. As was the case in many of the studies, Wyatt applied findings to recommendations for increasing retention and graduation rates for nontraditional students.

**Graduate students.** Uyder’s (2008) research on graduate students spanned some similar categories as the undergraduate research. Like Chau and Good (2004), this study explored students’ experiences and perceptions. The students in this study, all of whom were preparing for a second career, were enrolled in a lockstep cohort M.Ed. Program designed for working adults. The study’s results suggested that this style of program setup addressed some of the needs of this group, specifically their needs for predictability and meaningful connection, and alleviated many adjustment issues this group tends to face.

Though none of the research on older or nontraditional graduate students discusses older students in graduate counseling programs exclusively, the counselor education literature yielded an article and three dissertations relevant to the current research. Gutierrez and colleagues (2017) conducted a study of 305 master’s level counseling students of various ages ($M = 30.73$ years; $SD = 10.83$), in which the researchers explored the relationships between emotional intelligence, empathy, stress, distress, and student demographics. They found student age to be significantly positively correlated with emotional intelligence and affective empathy, and negatively
correlated with stress and distress. This suggests that older counseling students may tend to be more able to empathize with clients while being better able to manage their own stress levels.

Two dissertation studies examined differences and similarities between older and younger students in counseling and related programs. In a study of cognitive complexity among students training for careers in counseling and social work, Simmons (2008) found no significant relationship between students’ cognitive complexity and their age. In his dissertation study on the resilience characteristics of master’s-level counseling students, Machuca found counseling students age 40 and older were more resilient than their peers between age 20 and 29 (2010). His findings also suggested counseling students 40 and older appear to have a higher level of equanimity, or a more balanced perspective in life. Older adult participants, in comparison with young and middle age adult participants, also presented a higher level of existential aloneness, defined as the recognition of one’s own path and acceptance of one’s own life. (p. 134)

Hostetler (2004) conducted dissertation research on graduate students in various programs who were 35 and over (mean age = 47), in which she studied role strain and satisfaction in 166 students from two universities, pointing out that “the older adult assumes the role of student along with all of his or her other roles” (p. 10). She found that, while having psychological support from friends and technological support from the institution were significantly correlated with satisfaction, it was professors’ helpful attitudes that were the strongest predictor of participants’ satisfaction with the student role. Hostetler asserted that a gap existed in faculty perception of the nontraditional student, and that greater understanding on the part of faculty would produce better advising.
These studies may have implications for counselor educators’ teaching practices with their nontraditional master’s degree students.

**Faculty and field supervisors.** At a time when the numbers of nontraditional students in university classrooms were beginning to increase at rates previously unseen, Harvey-Bishop (1980) conducted a dissertation study that sought to evaluate faculty perceptions of and attitudes toward nontraditional undergraduate students. This research was conducted with an eye toward developing a healthy learning environment for the older student.

One way to determine the most effective method to recruit, retain, and teach the older student was to examine each facet of the university. With this examination, alternatives to current methods of interaction with the older student could be determined (Harvey-Bishop, 1980, p. 4).

The study suggested that a positive attitude toward older students correlates positively with the number of years of teaching. Brinthaupt and Eady (2014) surveyed 171 faculty members from a community college and a university. The survey had participants rate statements about attitude, perceptions, and behaviors toward adult learners on a 1-5 Likert scale. Results suggested that teachers who have positive attitudes toward adult learners also make more accommodations, and that teachers who make more classroom accommodations for adult learners also have more professional experience (e.g., workshops, presentations, publications) related to adult learners. In their qualitative study, Day and colleagues (2011) interviewed faculty to explore perceptions of adult learners, as well as faculty understandings of characteristics of those learners. The researchers also looked at pedagogical concerns, such as faculty preparation for teaching adult learners and how instructors modify teaching strategies for adult learners. The researchers interviewed eight faculty members, three from a four-year university and five from a community
college, all of whom had at least five years’ college level teaching experience, including teaching adult students. The interviews revealed three basic themes in faculty perceptions – the tenacious adult learner, the multitasking adult learner, and the well-prepared adult learner, noting with the last that “adult learners were better prepared, in the sense that they bring greater life experience and can draw on this experience in the classroom,” and that lack of preparation was perceived in these students’ lack of confidence in their skills (Day et al., 2011). When asked about any teaching adaptations they made for this group, participant responses were grouped into building on experience, active strategies, and structure. The interviews also revealed that participants had limited training in teaching adults.

These three studies, though outwardly covering different elements of the topic, seem linked in purpose. Harvey-Bishop’s (1980) research aimed to help develop a healthy learning environment for the older student. Day and colleagues (2011) examined faculty understanding of and preparation for teaching adult learners. The results of Brinthaupt and Eady’s (2014) study suggested a relationship between teachers’ professional experience, their positive attitudes toward adult learners, and their willingness to make classroom accommodations for adult learners.

In addition to the aforementioned research, the literature yielded some conceptual work related to the training of older students in graduate counseling programs. Burton (2011) highlights traits of older counseling students and their different needs for supervision as compared to traditional first career counseling students. As a way to address these needs, he suggests a constructivist supervision model, which allows older students’ life experience to be leveraged. The article refers to current constructivist approaches in the literature, and offers a constructivist approach that goes beyond current models (Burton, 2011).
From all the literature, only one study emerged that had a similar focus to the current study. Even so, there were several crucial differences between that research and this. In a study comparing traditional and nontraditional undergraduate social work students in their field practicum placement, Zosky and colleagues (2003) surveyed 28 field instructors regarding their perceptions of differences between the two groups. The surveyed field instructors evaluated their nontraditional students’ competence to be significantly higher than that of traditional students on all skills-based variables (establishing client relationships, case planning, client assessments, case management, interviewing, conducting appropriate interventions, and conducting practice evaluations) and two out of six values-based variables (maintaining professional boundaries and promoting self-determination). Moreover, they found that “Prior life experience accounted for 35% of the variance in the variable of preparation for field practice” (p. 196).

Zosky and colleagues’ study (2003) focused on field practicum supervisors’ perceptions of their older students preparing for careers in mental health fields. In this way, its focus is similar to that of the current study. However, several elements of Zosky et al. are distinct from the current study. First, although there are similarities, an undergraduate social work curriculum is somewhat different from a graduate counseling program in both level and content. Second, Zosky and colleagues’ research related to nontraditional undergraduate students, which the researchers defined as “age 25 or older, or married, or parenting” (p. 193). The current study focuses on the phenomenon of returning to school for graduate training in counseling after a significant period of time in another career. While there may be similarities between the two groups, such as divided student attention resulting from multiple roles, the students’ median ages are likely quite different. Third, Zosky and colleagues’ purpose in surveying field practicum supervisors was to find out whether a difference existed “in field practicum performance
between traditional and nontraditional undergraduate social work students” (p. 192), while the current study is seeking counselor educators’ perceptions of their older students and how those perceptions have shaped their own teaching. Where Zosky and colleagues focused on measuring and comparing the students’ performance, the current study seeks to find eventual application in faculty teaching practices.

Zosky and colleagues posit that “non-traditional students’ learning may be enhanced by their life experience, which contributes maturity, work ethic, and a framework within which to integrate academic and theoretical concepts” (Zosky et al., 2003, p. 190), citing a study that found nontraditional students to be “more andragogical in their approach to learning” (Sheehan, McMenamin, & McDevitt, 1992, p. 488). Sheehan and colleagues (1992) found that nontraditional students carried a higher grade point average than their traditional counterparts. This phenomenon was also observed by Zosky and colleagues in 1999, when they discovered nontraditional students’ GPAs were significantly higher than traditional students at graduation, with means of 3.28 and 3.02 respectively (Zosky, White, Unger, & Mills, in Zosky et al., 2003).

**Themes.** Though at first glance these studies and conceptual articles seem to explore different aspects of the topic of nontraditional students, further examination reveals a common theme of student retention and success. The studies that used faculty as participants looked at faculty perceptions and attitudes toward their nontraditional students, and recommended approaches to increase student success. These studies are germane to the current research in that they sought information that could be applied in ways that might improve conditions, services, or teaching methods for older students, or otherwise increase student success.
Student Diversity and Ageism

For the purposes of the current study, ageism was noted as a potential factor that might be seen in some survey responses. This section bracketed the issue prior to data collection, in an effort to keep it from influencing the results.

Summary

This chapter gave an overview of the scholarly literature relevant to the teaching of nontraditional master’s-level counseling students. In order to provide context, it compared the enrollment rates and classroom representation of graduate students under 40 years old to the enrollment rates and classroom representation of graduate students 40 and older. It then surveyed the related theoretical constructs of adult development, career development, transition, and adult learning, as well as connections among these theories and between the theories and students preparing for a career switch to counseling at midlife or later. It discussed research on adults making career changes at midlife, both generally and changing to careers in the fields of psychology and education. It then reviewed studies related to the phenomenon of the older or nontraditional student, both undergraduate and graduate, as well as studies and conceptual work related to those who teach and supervise them. It concluded with a brief bracketing mention of age discrimination, and allowed for the possibility that survey responses might discuss or exhibit ageism.

The literature demonstrates that the phenomenon of students coming to the counseling field later in life has not been researched from either the student or the faculty perspective. The time is ripe for research questions related to faculty perceptions of this group of students and the practical impact of those perceptions on faculty teaching practices.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

This chapter describes the research methodology proposed for this study. It begins with a restatement of the problem before proceeding to the research design and approach, as well as the rationale for that design and approach. It continues with a statement on the researcher’s own identity relative to the research topic. It then describes the research population, sample, site, instrumentation, data collection and analysis procedures, and limitations and delimitations.

Restatement of the Problem

The literature provides no clear definition of nontraditional graduate student, and researchers into the nontraditional graduate student experience have chosen various ages to mark the low end of the “nontraditional” category. For the current study, age 40 was chosen as the lower boundary of the nontraditional classification for graduate students, understanding that faculty participants would base their responses on estimates of students’ ages. In addition, developmental theorists including Erikson (1968), Jung (Hoy, 1984), and Levinson (1986) have used age 40 to mark the transition to a new developmental stage.

Although students age 40 and older comprise around 20% of American graduate school classrooms (NCES, 2015), there is a paucity of research on the issues related to the faculty who instruct those students in master’s-level counseling programs. The current study sought to address this gap in the research literature. By studying faculty perceptions of their older students and how those perceptions and experiences may have shaped their teaching practices, this research begins to bring to the surface perspectives that may help or hinder the preparation of older students for the counseling profession. This research has been conducted in hope of beginning a discussion around the issue of training older adults for a career in counseling. This
study, and the ensuing conversations and research related to the topic, may be especially important for counselor education doctoral programs and faculty as they provide academic preparation to those seeking to teach future counselors.

The study sought to answer two questions:

1. What are counselor educators’ perceptions of nontraditional (age 40 and up) master’s-level counseling students?

2. How have these perceptions and experiences shaped faculty teaching practices?

**Research Design, Approach, and Rationale**

Creswell explains that qualitative designs are especially suited to exploratory studies, as it enables a researcher “to study a group or population, identify variables that cannot be easily measured, or hear silenced voices” (2013, p. 47). This initial study on counselor educators’ perceptions of nontraditional master’s-level counseling students is qualitative, in order to explore these perceptions and their practical impact on teaching. In addition, a qualitative design fits the research question this study sought to answer, allowing participants to describe their perceptions and experiences and how they shape their teaching.

This study used a generally qualitative approach (that is, not belonging to any specific qualitative tradition) to seek the themes and sub-themes among these faculty perceptions and the influence of these perceptions on teaching practice. Faculty members’ experiences were collected via open-ended survey questions.

**Statement of Positionality and Management of Reflexivity**

My interest in and involvement with this topic is twofold: first as a student and second as a faculty member. I have observed the phenomenon of nontraditional master’s-level counseling students in my own experience, both as a student and as a faculty member. While I was studying
for my Master of Arts degree in counseling, I was in that category, along with several of my classmates. In my doctoral program practicum and internship, I taught and supervised many master’s degree students who were in that category as well. Now, in my fourth year as a full-time faculty member in a master’s-level counseling program, I find between 25% and 50% of my students are 40 and older.

I began my training for a counseling career at age 25, but family needs and cross-country moves necessitated a long hiatus in that training. I was 42 when I returned to graduate school, and 46 when I completed my master’s degree and attained my limited license as a professional counselor (the precursor to the full license as a professional counselor in the state of Michigan). A year later, I entered graduate school again to begin the pursuit of a specialist certification and then a doctorate. These latter educational experiences give me some insight into the world of the older student. In addition, although counseling was my first career choice, in the years between my initial graduate work in my twenties and my return to graduate school in my forties, I worked in professional positions outside the counseling field, so I have some sympathy for those who seek to train for a career change at midlife. Moreover, in my second M.A. program, my classes contained a much higher proportion of students who themselves were older and were changing careers. Like me, they were in a different phase of life than our younger classmates, with different personal and professional experiences and concerns – taking care of a home, managing a career, parenting teenagers, launching adult children, caring for aging parents.

As a faculty member in a master’s-level counseling program, my teaching experience has included students in their early twenties as well as students in midlife and beyond. I find both groups bring valuable contributions to the classroom, but I see some distinctions between these two groups. As a student and as a faculty member, I have encountered some faculty members
who embrace these differences and welcome the classroom contributions of older students, and others who seem less enthusiastic about this group. My hope for this research is to generate discussion and further research around the relevant issues, which could lead to increased training of counselor educators in pedagogical techniques and approaches in support of nontraditional counseling students.

Further reflections on my own experiences as a student and as a faculty member are included in the current document in the form of two reflexive journals: the first, written prior to data collection, has been included in full; the second, written during the data analysis phase, is excerpted (see Appendix E). The topic of reflexivity is discussed further in the section on Trustworthiness.

Population, Sample, and Site

The population of interest in this study is counselor educators teaching full-time in master’s-level counseling programs that include training for nontraditional counseling students.

Sample Criteria and Selection

For the current study, the sample’s inclusion criteria were as follows: all participants must be currently full-time counseling faculty members with at least three years of full-time experience instructing master’s-level counseling classes containing a mix of traditional and nontraditional students. For the purposes of this study, faculty whose instruction takes place entirely online were excluded from the sample.

Eighty potential participants responded to the survey invitation; of these, 23 surveys were incomplete, one was a duplicate, and four were completed by respondents who did not meet all the qualification criteria. The final sample consisted of 52 participants. The study’s proposed sample size was 50 to 75. This was based on similar peer-reviewed, published studies that used
qualitative surveys to ask about participants’ perceptions, with sample sizes of 61 (Utrai nen, Ahonen, Kangasniemi, & Liikanen, 2011) and 71 respectively (Burkholder, Hall, & Burkholder, 2014). The latter of these is especially relevant to the current study, as it was a survey of counselor educators regarding their perspective on a code of ethics issue and its impact on their teaching.

Participants for this study were selected by means of a purposive sample (Creswell, 2013), in which all participants met the criteria listed above. These participants were recruited by means of network sampling: an invitation was published on a listserv for counselor educators and supervisors, Counselor Education and Supervision Network (CESNET). This listserv was especially appropriate to the current study, since its target population, counselor educators, is the study’s participant pool. Moreover, several recently published studies that sought the perspectives of counselor educators, as the current study did, recruited participants through CESNET (e.g., Burkholder & Burkholder, 2014; Burkholder et al., 2014; Lerma, Zamarripa, Oliver, Cavazos Vela, 2015; Mellin & Pertuit, 2009; Neukrug, Peterson, Bonner, & Lomas, 2013; Sangganjanavanich & Balkin, 2013; Trepal & Stinchfield, 2012). Three invitations were published on CESNET, on Dec. 13, 2017, January 9, 2018, and January 31, 2018. Personal contacts and referrals who met the study’s inclusion criteria were also invited to participate in the survey; those who were invited in personal conversation were also sent an email invitation. In addition, the researcher gathered the names of institutions with counseling master’s degree programs from the CACREP website, and sent approximately 415 personalized invitation emails to department chairs and other contact persons from that list of institutions.
Data Collection Site

Counselor educators who fit the inclusion criteria and agreed to participate in the research took an online survey at a time and location of their convenience. Surveys were expected to take approximately 15 to 25 minutes. Although the surveys were anonymous, participants were offered the opportunity to request the study’s findings by submitting their email addresses at the end. This data validation process, member checking, helped to ensure rigor of the data collected (Creswell, 2013).

Instrumentation

Participant perspectives were collected using an open-ended survey format, using the Qualtrics online survey tool (https://www.qualtrics.com). The first section of the survey asked for participants’ demographic information, including age, gender, race/ethnicity, and highest degrees. It also requested that participants give the age at which they acquired their master’s degree in counseling, their current academic position, and the length of time they have been a full-time counseling faculty member. In addition, it asked participants to estimate the percentage of a typical class made up of students age 40 and older, then asked them to estimate how many counseling students age 40 or older who they have taught over the course of their time as a counselor educator, and provided answer choices in ranges: 5 or fewer, 6-10, 11-20, and more than 20. It then asked for information about participants’ institutions and programs, related to campus distribution and program setup. Next, it asked participants whether, in their opinion, their program is geared toward working adults, and if so, in what ways. Finally, this section asked whether participants had received training in teaching older adults, age 40 and over, and if so, whether that training had taken the form of formal academic coursework, post-graduate training such as seminars, or both. Appendix D contains the survey instrument.
The survey’s second section provided three case vignettes, each of which illustrated a student who is in the nontraditional category as defined in this research. These vignettes were created from composites of students taught by the researcher and her colleagues. The purpose of the case vignettes was to give participants concrete examples of some of the relevant characteristics and issues related to nontraditional counseling students and to begin prompting their recollections of their own students. Each vignette was followed by two open-ended questions: the first asked participants their perceptions of the case, and the second asked if they would change their teaching or interaction style for the class or for the individual, and if so, how.

The three case vignettes and accompanying questions were followed by six additional open-ended questions. These questions asked participants to describe some of the characteristics, both positive qualities and challenges, they have noticed about these students. These questions, as well as the first question on each case vignette, were formulated to elicit participants’ perceptions of their master’s-level students, per the first research question. These case vignettes are included in Chapter 4 and in Appendix D.

The survey then asked participants if they have modified their approach or teaching practices as they have worked with nontraditional master’s-level students, either to capitalize on the positive qualities or to accommodate their challenges, and asked for examples. This question, as well as the second question on each case vignette, was formulated to elicit participants’ thoughts on how their perceptions of and experiences with nontraditional master’s-level counseling students have shaped their teaching practices, per the second research question.

The survey concluded with a request for participants to tell about a nontraditional student who stood out in their memory, and an invitation to relate anything additional about their experience with nontraditional master’s-level counseling students. These questions were
designed to draw out experiences with students that previous prompts may have missed, per the first research question. The survey instrument is provided in Appendix D.

**Data Collection Procedures**

Potential participants received an invitation via email. Participant recruitment emails and reminders were composed based on the Dillman survey method (Dillman, Smyth, & Christian, 2014). Those who elected to participate were directed via a link to the online survey on the Qualtrics website. The survey’s initial screen contained a brief description of the research, the participant inclusionary criteria, and a link to the survey’s informed consent statement (see Appendix D). Participants who consented by opting to move forward at this point were directed to the remainder of the survey.

All survey responses were anonymous. This was ensured in two ways. First, the survey itself did not request any identifying information from participants. Second, two options in the Qualtrics survey tool allow for anonymization of data: creating and disseminating an anonymous link to the survey, and anonymizing responses, by which the survey tool removes participants’ IP addresses and location data. Participant anonymity was safeguarded by the researcher’s choice of both these options.

Participants were given the option at the end of the survey to provide their email address for a post-analysis member check. After data collection, this contact information was disconnected from the survey responses and saved in a separate file in order to ensure participant anonymity. Scripts for all invitation emails are provided in Appendix B. The script for the post-analysis member check email is provided in Appendix G.
Data Analysis

Once the surveys were collected, the responses were analyzed using qualitative content analysis (Schreier, 2012), with the help of NVivo 11 qualitative analysis software. Qualitative content analysis is performed in several steps. First, the coding frame was created, using a combination of concept-driven and data-driven strategies (Schreier, 2012): major categories of perceptions and practices were initially created from the categories of the survey questions (concept-driven), and were revised and augmented as the responses were read and the data emerged (data-driven). For example, the data that emerged from the survey responses informed the coding frame in both small and large ways. For example, the survey responses led to the modification of the categories of “demeanor with faculty” and “demeanor with classmates” to “relationship with faculty” and “relationship with classmates,” as well as to the creation of all the categories related to the second research question.

During this latter phase of coding frame development, half of the survey responses were read for the purpose of creating subcategories (Schreier, 2012): as the data emerged, subcategories were created within the main categories, a process that continued until saturation was reached. Descriptions of each category and subcategory were documented in a coding guide (see Appendix E).

After the coding frame was developed and documented, it was tested by coding a portion of the responses in a pilot phase. This effort consisted of selecting the first 25 survey responses and applying the categories from the coding frame, ensuring reproducibility or inter-rater reliability by having an assistant code the same responses, then comparing the two codings to assess the coding frame and calculating the percentage of agreement between the two. This double-coding of all collected material, allowing a cross-check to ensure consistency of results,
is known in qualitative research as intercoder agreement (Creswell, 2013). Stemler (2001) suggests an intercoder agreement rate of 95%. The person chosen to assist in the analysis was a disinterested third party, a faculty member from an unrelated discipline who was trained in the coding procedure for qualitative content analysis. This first consistency check resulted in an agreement rate of over 97% in most categories and subcategories. This check informed where modifications were needed in the coding frame; the frame and coding guide were then modified and the data re-coded as necessary to ensure greater consistency for the remainder of coding.

The process allows for no further modifications to the coding frame after the conclusion of the pilot phase (Schreier, 2012). After all modifications were applied to the coding frame and guide, the remaining surveys were double-coded as in the pilot phase to ensure consistency (Schreier, 2012; Schreier, 2013). Consistency checks were performed at three more points during the coding: after 35 surveys were coded, again after 45 surveys were coded, and once more at the conclusion of coding (Stemler, 2001). The final intercoder agreement rate between the two codings was over 94.5% on three subcategories within the Research Question 2/Response category; for all other subcategories, the intercoder agreement rate was over 96%.

Table 3 shows the correspondence between the study’s research questions and the corresponding interview questions.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Survey Question</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What are faculty perceptions of nontraditional (age 40 and up) master’s-level counseling students?</td>
<td>What is your perception of Emily’s (Robert’s, Melissa’s) case?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>In a typical master’s-level course that you have taught, approximately what percentage of the class is at least 40 years old?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Can you describe some of the characteristics you’ve noticed about nontraditional (age 40+) master’s-level counseling students in the area of demeanor with faculty (demeanor with classmates, academic performance, counseling skills, outside supports, challenges with school, challenges outside of school, other)?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What are some positive qualities you’ve noticed about these age 40+ students?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What are some challenges you’ve noticed about these age 40+ students?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Please tell about a nontraditional (age 40+) counseling student who stands out in your memory. Include any aspects of the experience that made an impression on you – the student’s demeanor, positive contributions to class or classmates, challenges, impact on you as an instructor, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Is there anything else you’d like to tell me about your experience with nontraditional (age 40+) master’s-level counseling students?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3—Continued

| How have these perceptions and experiences shaped faculty teaching practices? |
|---|---|
| [Referring to vignette] How might you alter your teaching (or interaction) style in this class (or for this student)? | As you’ve worked with nontraditional (age 40+) students, have you changed any of your teaching practices either to make the most of these students’ positive qualities or to accommodate their challenges? If so, how? Please give an example if you can. |

Data Storage

Data from the study, including survey responses and written analysis, was stored in a password-protected document on the researcher’s personal computer, with a password-protected backup file stored on a remote file server through Western Michigan University. These files were maintained throughout the data collection and analysis phases and will be maintained for three years following the completion of the study and publication of the researcher’s dissertation, after which the files will be deleted.

Trustworthiness

The quantitative ideals of validity and reliability are paralleled in qualitative research with the ideal of trustworthiness (Creswell, 2013). This ideal speaks to the credibility of the research. In the current study, trustworthiness was ensured at several points, including instrument construction, participant selection, data collection, and data analysis.

To reduce bias in the formulation of the survey, the researcher solicited the assistance of three newer counselor educators with under three years of full-time faculty experience, all of
whom were ineligible to participate in the study due to the inclusion criteria. To eliminate bias in participant selection, study participants were anonymous.

To confirm accuracy and ensure credibility in data collection, survey results were validated via member checking: each participant who chose to provide an email address at the end of the survey was contacted after the results were analyzed and provided with the study’s findings (themes and sub-themes), in order to provide feedback as to whether the themes identified in the analysis represent their responses and to check the interpretations against their own experience (Burkholder et al., 2014). The results of the member checking process are discussed in Chapter 4.

To ensure rigor and dependability in data analysis, the researcher solicited the assistance of a peer reviewer to provide an external check of the study’s findings. The peer selected was a counselor educator and qualitative researcher who did not participate in the survey. This individual was emailed the raw data from all the survey’s qualitative questions as well as the theme summary in Appendix G. The result of this peer review is discussed in Chapter 4.

A measure of trustworthiness was also built into the chosen data analysis method. Qualitative content analysis calls for double-coding, whereby the researcher either codes the collected material twice, separated by 10 to 15 days, or enlists an assistant to perform the second coding. This double-coding process is done first at the pilot coding phase, when the coding frame is being tested and adjusted with a segment of the collected material, after which the two codings are compared for agreement. Once the two codings reach 95% agreement, the remainder of the material is also double-coded, with periodic consistency checks taking place along the way (Schreier, 2012; Schreier, 2013; Stemler, 2001). This double-coding of all collected material,
allowing a cross-check to ensure consistency of results, is known in qualitative research as intercoder agreement (Creswell, 2013).

Additionally, the use of a qualitative analysis software tool allowed the researcher to handle the collected material in a consistent way (Thyer, 2010), thereby ensuring a more dependable and less biased outcome. The use of qualitative analysis software, together with careful manual inspection, also adds to the rigor and validity of the analysis process by helping the researcher find all instances of searched-for strings of text (Welsh, 2002).

Finally, to ensure overall integrity of the process, the researcher bracketed herself out of the study (Creswell, 2013) by way of reflexive journaling. Reflexive journals are intended to clarify any biases on the researcher’s part, allowing the reader to learn of any experiences that may have prejudiced or otherwise shaped the study. These journals were written at two junctures in the study: first, at the study’s outset, prior to data collection, potentially biasing experiences were journalled and included in an appendix (see Appendix F); second, after data collection and throughout the process of analysis, potentially biasing thoughts related to the survey responses were journalled and excerpted in Appendix F.

These eight measures – peer review of the instrument, participant anonymity, intercoder agreement, member checking of data analysis, peer review of the analysis, use of qualitative analysis software, and reflexive journaling both pre-collection and during analysis – were taken in order to minimize bias and ensure the trustworthiness of the study’s findings.

**Limitations and Delimitations**

Several limitations might potentially influence the study’s results. First, since those who responded to the survey request self-selected into the study, and hence may have been those with interest in the topic and a high value for teaching, the sample may be less than representative of
the counselor educator group as a whole. Second, as is the case with all self-reporting, participants’ responses were subjective and one-sided, and therefore may be flawed. Third, faculty may misperceive the age of students, and therefore may not be fully accurate when offering perceptions of their 40+ students. Fourth, although the open-ended survey style allows participants to include anything that comes to mind, a participant might not have felt prompted to recall some potentially important facet of their experience or the impact of their perceptions on their teaching. Fifth, participants may have been prone to giving socially or academically acceptable answers, rather than honest or accurate ones. Sixth, it is not clear that participants’ responses would differ between their traditional and nontraditional students; an additional survey question to that effect, placed after the case vignettes, might have helped to ascertain differences in teaching practices between the two groups. Finally, the participants and the researcher, operating under time constraints, might have overlooked important details during the survey or in the analysis.

Delimitations include the population of interest and the sampling method. Participants were counselor educators, who may have characteristics that set them apart from educators in fields other than counseling. In addition, they were full-time faculty members, and as such may not fully represent the perspectives of part-time and adjunct faculty. The study also excluded faculty who teach exclusively in online settings. These factors narrow the transferability of the study’s results, particularly to outside the fields of counseling and counselor education. Also, the survey was intentionally one-sided, including only the perspectives of counselor educators on their nontraditional students; the students’ perspectives regarding their faculty or their institutions were not included. As to the sampling method, although the post on CESNET was published to the listserv’s membership of over 3900, since CESNET is an open listserv it is not
possible to say how many members are full-time counselor educators as opposed to part-time counselor educators, doctoral students, or master’s-level counselors; as such, it was not possible to calculate the survey’s response rate.

Summary

There is a paucity of scholarly research on the phenomenon of students age 40 and older seeking graduate training for a career in counseling, and a complete lack of scholarly research on educating these students. This qualitative study sought to capture the perspectives of counselor educators on this population of counseling students, using open-ended survey and qualitative content analysis methods to discover their perceptions and experiences of this group, as well as the ways in which those perceptions and experiences may shape their teaching.
CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

This chapter gives the study’s findings. It begins with a brief summary of the participants’ demographic information, then presents the themes that emerged from the survey’s open-ended questions. The survey itself is included in Appendix D.

Trustworthiness of Analysis

The qualitative ideal of trustworthiness (Creswell, 2013) was ensured at the point of instrument construction by peer review, and at the points of participant selection and data collection by participant anonymity and reflexive journaling. At the point of data analysis, the credibility of the research was ensured by the processes of intercoder agreement, member checking of data analysis, peer review of the analysis, use of qualitative analysis software, and an additional round of reflexive journaling during analysis. This section will discuss the results of the member checking, peer review of the analysis, and the second reflexivity journal.

To confirm accuracy and ensure credibility in data collection, survey results were validated via member checking: each participant who opted to provide an email address at the end of the survey was contacted after the results were analyzed and provided with the study’s findings (themes and sub-themes), in order to provide feedback as to whether the themes identified in the analysis represent their responses and to check the interpretations against their own experience (Burkholder et al., 2014). Twenty-six participants provided email addresses for member checking, and were emailed on March 4, 2018 using the script and theme summary in Appendix G. Of those emailed, four participants responded. (A fifth participant responded with a blank email, and did not reply to follow-up attempts by the researcher.) All four respondents affirmed the themes from the summary. Their emails included the following statements: “Yes, I
agree with the themes.” “The themes seem to include my experience.” “I believe the themes you identified accurately reflect my experiences, and where they did not, it was easy to see that the theme could readily reflect the experiences of others.” “I did not see any outliers in the themes and for the most part they represent much of which could be expected.”

To ensure dependability in data analysis, the researcher engaged a peer reviewer to provide an external check of the study’s findings. This peer, a counselor educator and qualitative researcher who did not participate in the survey, was emailed the raw data from all the survey’s qualitative questions as well as the theme summary in Appendix G. After reviewing both documents, the peer reviewer stated, “The themes appear to fit what I saw in the ‘raw’ data.” The reviewer went on to suggest viewing the survey responses to look at how faculty perceptions might impact their teaching practices, and suggested grouping participant perceptions by positive and negative perceptions to see if the two groups reported different types of practices. The researcher had independently arrived at a similar idea, and the reviewer’s suggestion served to affirm the next step of analysis.

Finally, after data collection and throughout analysis, the researcher journaled potentially biasing thoughts related to the survey responses; excerpts of this reflexivity journal are included in Appendix F.

**Demographic Information**

The survey gathered 80 participants. Of these, 23 surveys were incomplete and were discarded, 4 completed surveys were discarded because participants did not meet eligibility requirements, and 1 completed survey was a duplicate and was discarded. This left the final participant count at 52, which was within the range of the study’s proposed sample size of 50 to
The demographic information gathered from participants is described in the following paragraphs and represented in Tables 4 through 9.

Participants ranged in age from 33 to 73 ($M = 52.08; SD = 11.33$). Of the 52 participants, 29 (or 55.77%) self-identified as female, 22 (or 42.31%) as male, and 1 (or 1.92%) as nonbinary. The survey’s race/ethnicity field was left open, allowing participants to describe their own race or ethnicity in their own terms. Thirty-nine of the participants (or 75%) described their race/ethnicity as White or Caucasian, with another participant (or 1.92%) self-describing as Caucasian/Irish. Three participants (5.77%) described themselves as African American, and 2 (3.85%) self-described as Multiple or Mixed. Two participants (3.85%) described themselves as Caucasian/Hispanic and 2 (3.85%) as International. One participant (1.92%) self-described as Biracial Japanese-American, 1 (1.92%) as Latino/Native American, and 1 (1.92%) as Puerto Rican.

Fifty-one of the 52 participants held doctoral degrees: 43 (82.69%) Ph.D.s, 6 (11.54%) Ed.D.s, and 2 (3.85%) Psy.D.s. The remaining participant (1.92%) listed a M.A. as the highest degree earned. Twenty-one (40.38%) participants listed their current rank as Professor, 18 (34.62%) as Associate Professor, and the remaining 13 (25%) self-reported as Assistant Professors. Length of tenure as full-time counseling faculty members ranged from three years to 38 years ($M = 12.58; SD = 7.78$). For 49 of the participants, responses to the question “At what age did you complete your master’s degree in counseling?” ranged from 23 to 53 ($M = 31.06; SD = 7.35$); the remaining three stated their master’s degrees were in a field other than counseling.
### Table 4

**Demographic Variables: Gender, Race/Ethnicity, Highest Degree, Academic Rank**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Levels</th>
<th># of Participants</th>
<th>% of Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender</strong></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>55.77%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>42.31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Nonbinary</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.92%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Race/ethnicity</strong></td>
<td>White/Caucasian</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>75.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Caucasian/Irish</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.92%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5.77%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Multiple/Mixed</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.85%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Caucasian/Hispanic</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.85%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>International</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.85%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Biracial Japanese-American</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.92%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Latino/Native American</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.92%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Puerto Rican</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.92%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Degree</strong></td>
<td>Ph.D.</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>82.69%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ed.D.</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>11.54%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Psy.D.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.85%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M.A.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.92%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Rank</strong></td>
<td>Professor</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>40.38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Associate Professor</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>34.62%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Assistant Professor</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>25.00%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 5

Demographic Variables: Age, Years as Full-Time Counselor Educator, Age of Counseling Master’s Degree Completion

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Range</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>33-73 years</td>
<td>52.08</td>
<td>11.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Length as full-time counselor educator</td>
<td>3-38 years</td>
<td>12.58</td>
<td>7.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age of counseling master’s degree completion</td>
<td>23-53 years</td>
<td>31.06</td>
<td>7.35</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Participants were asked to estimate the percentage of students age 40 and older in a typical course. Twenty-eight (53.85%) estimated this number to be less than 25%, 22 (42.31%) estimated it to be between 25% and 50%, and two (3.85%) estimated the number to be between 50% and 75%. They were also asked to estimate how many students aged 40 and above they had taught throughout their time as counselor educators, and 49 of the 52 participants responded.

Table 6

Participants’ Estimated Percentage of Students Age 40 and Up

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Estimated percentage of students 40+ in typical course</th>
<th># of participants</th>
<th>% of participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Under 25%</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>53.85%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25% - 50%</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>42.31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50% - 75%</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.85%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over 75%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total: 52</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 7

*Participants’ Estimated Number of Age 40+ Students Taught Over Career*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Estimated number of students 40+ in career</th>
<th># of participants</th>
<th>% of participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5 or fewer</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.92%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Between 6 and 10</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9.62%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Between 11 and 20</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>11.54%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than 20</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>71.15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No response</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5.77%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total: 52</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Thirty-seven (71.15%) stated they had taught more than 20 students aged 40 and above, 6 (11.54%) answered they had taught between 11 and 20 students in this age group, 5 participants (9.62%) stated they had taught between 6 and 10 students age 40 and over, and 1 participant (1.92%) estimated they had taught 5 or fewer students in this age group. Three participants (5.77%) did not respond to the question.

Next, participants were surveyed as to the nature of their program and institution. The survey presented several options related to campus distribution and class setup, and asked participants to select all applicable categories. Here, 28 of the 52 participants said their institution had a main campus only; 6 said their institution had a main campus and one satellite location; 14 participants said their institution had a main campus and two or more satellite locations. Thirty-five participants said their program offered evening classes; 16 said their program offered weekend classes; 25 said their program offered some courses online.
Table 8

Nature of Participants’ Programs and Institutions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nature of program and institution</th>
<th># of participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Main campus only</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Main campus, one satellite</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Main campus, two or more satellites</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evening classes</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weekend classes</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some courses offered online</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The next portion asked participants whether, in their opinion, their program is geared toward working adults, and if so, in what ways. Forty-three of the 52 participants (82.69%) responded in the affirmative, and 9 (17.31%) stated their opinion that their program is not geared toward working adults. All 43 of those who responded that their program is geared toward working adults also responded to the follow-up question. Forty-one participants spoke of the times classes are offered, including late afternoon or evening, weekend, and back-to-back or stacked classes, as indicators that their programs are geared toward working adults. Sixteen respondents alluded to location convenience: 12 cited online or hybrid course offerings, 3 mentioned satellite campuses, and one listed both satellite campuses and online options. Ten participants reported format characteristics such as year-round class offerings, part-time enrollment, accelerated format, program extension options, or a cohort model. Fourteen pointed to specific aspects of their program, citing elements such as small class size, highly supportive
faculty and staff, policies developed with the working adult in mind, home book delivery, and internship placement options designed to accommodate students’ work schedules.

In the final questions of this section, participants were asked if they had received training in teaching adults age 40 and over. Thirteen of the 52 (25%) responded that they had received such training: 6 participants stated they had taken formal academic coursework in teaching older adults, 5 stated they had taken post-degree training such as conference sessions or workshops, and 2 stated they had taken both formal academic coursework and post-degree training in the subject. Thirty-nine participants (75%) stated they had not received training in teaching adults age 40 and over.

Table 9
Participants’ Opinions on Their Programs’ Target Demographic & Participants’ Training in Teaching Age 40+ Students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Level</th>
<th># of participants</th>
<th>% of participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Program geared toward working adults?</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>82.69%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>17.31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Received training in teaching adults 40+?</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>25.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If “Yes”: Formal academic coursework</td>
<td></td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If “Yes”: Post-degree training</td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If “Yes”: Both formal academic coursework and post-degree training</td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>75.00%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Presentation of Categories and Subcategories

Participants’ responses to the survey’s open-ended questions were analyzed using qualitative content analysis. To find the themes in this study, the researcher constructed a coding frame that combined concept-driven and data-driven categories (Schreier, 2012). The main headings, Perceptions and Practices, were suggested by the two research questions, and the survey questions suggested the initial creation of the major categories within the Perceptions heading. These headings and categories were concept-driven, also known as a priori or deductive (Bernard, Wutich, & Ryan, 2017). As themes emerged from the survey responses, the data-driven or inductive part of the process came into play. This led to revision of the initial subcategories as well as the creation of additional subcategories, including all those under the Practices heading.

These themes were identified by a process that involved reading through participant responses at least twice prior to beginning the coding process: first individually, reading each participant’s full response, and then cross-sectionally, reading all responses to each question. Responses were then read again and coded into appropriate categories; if the participant expressed a variety of thoughts within a response, that response was coded into all the appropriate categories and subcategories. Finally, responses were sorted by participant age, and tables were created to display that breakdown by decades (Table 10; Tables 12-23).

In the following presentation, the categories and subcategories found in the survey responses are divided into two groups, corresponding to the two research questions. For ease of reference, each group is also represented in a figure (Figure 3, Figure 4), and responses sorted by age group are represented in tables (Table 10, Tables 12-23). Minor corrections (e.g., spelling) have been made to some of the following quoted comments for ease of reading.
Figure 3. Categories and Subcategories for Research Question 1.
Counselor Educators’ Perceptions: Research Question 1

The study’s first research question sought counselor educators’ perceptions of their students who are 40 and over. The topics that emerged from the research were sorted by the responses coded during the pilot phase (data-driven, or analytical), and then into categories and subcategories informed by the questions in the survey (concept-driven, or descriptive). These categories included relationships with faculty, relationships with classmates, academic performance, specific academic demands, counseling skills, outside supports, and external demands. Within these broad groupings, several salient subcategories emerged (see Figure 3).

**Relationships with faculty.** Participant comments regarding age 40+ students’ demeanor with faculty, as well as other aspects of that relationship, were coded into this category. They were further divided into the following subcategories.

**Respect.** The word respectful and related words such as polite, appropriate, cordial, deferential, and formal appeared frequently in participants’ responses \((n = 29)\). One participant elaborated on this perception, stating the belief that nontraditional students “often come from a background where there is great respect for teachers.” Similarly, another participant wrote of a perception that students aged 40 and older were “more formal as they had a more hierarchical relationship with faculty during their undergraduate experiences years ago.” A few put this perception in comparative terms, stating that nontraditional students are “respectful and more formal than traditional students,” or that they “show more deference and respect toward professors.”

Although 29 of the 52 participants \((56\%)\) wrote of students’ respect for faculty, the number of participants who wrote of this perception varied by participants’ age (see Table 10). Three of the 8 \((37.5\%)\) participants in their 30s mentioned respect or its synonyms, while 10 of
the 16 participants in their 40s (63%), 6 of the 10 in their 50s (60%), 9 of the 15 in their 60s (60%), and 1 of the 3 in their 70s (33%) mentioned respect in this context.

Table 10

**Perception Subcategories: Relationships with Faculty**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>30s (n=8)</th>
<th>40s (n=16)</th>
<th>50s (n=10)</th>
<th>60s (n=15)</th>
<th>70s (n=3)</th>
<th>All (N=52)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Respect</td>
<td>3 (37.5%)</td>
<td>10 (63%)</td>
<td>6 (60%)</td>
<td>9 (60%)</td>
<td>1 (33%)</td>
<td>29 (56%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enthusiasm</td>
<td>4 (50%)</td>
<td>11 (69%)</td>
<td>3 (30%)</td>
<td>3 (20%)</td>
<td>1 (33%)</td>
<td>24 (46%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over-familiarity</td>
<td>1 (12.5%)</td>
<td>2 (12.5%)</td>
<td>4 (40%)</td>
<td>2 (13%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>9 (17%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greater need for</td>
<td>1 (12.5%)</td>
<td>1 (6%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>2 (13%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>4 (8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>outside-class faculty support</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enjoyment</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>1 (6%)</td>
<td>2 (20%)</td>
<td>6 (40%)</td>
<td>3 (100%)</td>
<td>12 (23%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dismissiveness</td>
<td>4 (50%)</td>
<td>6 (37.5%)</td>
<td>1 (10%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>11 (21%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age-biased</td>
<td>2 (25%)</td>
<td>3 (19%)</td>
<td>3 (30%)</td>
<td>3 (20%)</td>
<td>1 (33%)</td>
<td>12 (23%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>toward younger faculty</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: percentages do not add up to 100%.*

**Enthusiasm.** Several participants (n = 24) used terms such as enthusiastic, eager, open to learning, encouraging, and appreciative to describe their perceptions of nontraditional students’ demeanor toward faculty. Some of these participants paired these terms with respect. For example, one participant described the perception that students aged 40 and above are usually “very respectful students who are eager to learn so they are delightful to interact with.” Another stated that these students “appreciate faculty who have clinical experience and draw from it in
the classroom.” Another wrote of the perception of these students as “very respectful and they are usually excited to learn,” and another of seeing these students as “generally gracious, eager to please, very much about doing things the right way.”

Statements such as “most are mature and ready to learn” were also coded into the enthusiasm subcategory. As with the previous theme, some of these statements appeared to have an element of comparison; however, in these references, rather than a between-group comparison, comparing nontraditional students to their younger classmates, what emerged was a within-group comparison, where the participant seemed to be comparing some members of the nontraditional group to others in that group. While either might be inferred from the above quote, a within-group comparison seems to be indicated by the participant who wrote of the perception that “some are eager to learn more and open; some are more resistant and not quite willing to change very set ways of interacting that they’ve learned as paraprofessionals.”

The numbers for this category also varied by age (see Table 10): 4 of 8 (50%) participants in their 30s wrote of enthusiasm or its synonyms; the number for participants in their 40s was 11 of 16 (69%); those in their 50s, 3 of 10 (30%); those in their 60s, 3 of 15 (29%); those in their 70s, 1 of 3 (33%).

Over-familiarity. Some participants (n = 9) reported that they perceived this group as “sometimes more ‘chummy’ or feeling a closeness or affinity with faculty rather than peers.” This was echoed by other participants, who wrote statements such as “some are too friendly” and “tend to use my first name, which I set boundaries around.” One participant put it this way:

Most of the nontraditional students I’ve worked with have seemed to come from an angle of “partnering” with faculty members. At times, there has been more of an awkwardness for me to force the use of professional titles, such as calling the professor, “Doctor”.
Another participant reported this perception with a note of empathy: “My nontraditional students really want to bond with the faculty. They want to be recognized by the faculty as having life experience, so they sometimes struggle with boundaries with faculty, but this is understandable and a normal developmental process.”

The total who reported this perception included 1 of 8 participants in their 30s (12.5%), 2 of 16 (12.5%) in their 40s, 4 of 10 (40%) in their 50s, and 2 of 15 (13%) in their 60s; none of the participants in their 70s mentioned this perception (see Table 10).

Greater need for outside-class faculty support. Some participants ($n = 4$) related the perception that “older students often need additional support from the faculty.” Other participants made similar statements, such as “nontraditional students can require more out of class time and support” and “they need more mentoring on different things than younger students.”

This perception was reported by 1 of 8 participants in their 30s (12.5%), 1 of 16 participants in their 40s (6%), and 2 of 15 (13%) in their 60s; it was not mentioned by any participants in their 50s or 70s (see Table 10).

Enjoyment. Some participants ($n = 12$) commented on enjoyment of a perceived commonality with nontraditional students with such statements as

I truly enjoy my 40+ students. There is a commonality that I share with most of them. We have experienced many years of life and with that comes wisdom and knowledge. I really enjoy discussions of their life experiences and it adds so much to the involvement with the younger members of the program. These students want to be in the program. They respect education and want to get the most out of their coursework.
Other participants commented more generally on their enjoyment of these students, without specifying a perceived characteristic. This perception is revealed in such statements as “I would like to have more nontraditional age 40+ students,” “I wish more would apply to our programs,” “Always refreshing to have their perspective in the classroom,” “I enjoy teaching older adults of this age range,” “I have always enjoyed them in the classroom setting,” and “I would prefer older students in general. Young people are great but the majority of our students have experience in the field and bring this to the classroom.”

These statements were made by 1 of 16 participants in their 40s (6%), 2 of 10 participants in their 50s (20%), 6 of 15 participants in their 60s (40%), and 3 of 3 participants in their 70s (100%); none of the participants in their 30s wrote of this perception (see Table 10).

**Dismissiveness.** Several participants (n = 11) reported that nontraditional students, in the words of one, “can be very appropriate, or can be dismissive, as [they] see [themselves] as having little to learn.” This was echoed by the participant who stated,

Generally I think my nontraditional students could be described as gracious, respectful and professional. Occasionally, they have attitudes like “I already know this and you can’t teach me anything I don’t already know” and/or “I’m an adult with family and responsibilities, so you should cut me slack on requirements”.

Another participant stated the perception that some nontraditional students “are arrogant and display an over-exaggerated level of confidence that is disproportionate to their ability,” and another reported seeing in some an “insistence that they ‘know’ more than you.”

These perceptions of dismissiveness, or the related terms arrogant, overconfident, and less open to feedback broke down by age group: 4 of the 8 participants in their 30s (50%) reported such perceptions, as did 6 of the 16 participants in their 40s (37.5%) and 1 of the 10
participants in their 50s (10%); none of the participants in their 60s or 70s reported such perceptions (see Table 10). Specifically, the word *arrogant* was used by two participants, both under the age of 50.

**Age-biased against younger faculty.** Related to the category of dismissiveness, several participants \((n = 12)\) brought up the perception of nontraditional students carrying an ageist bias toward younger faculty. Some of these responses were prompted by Case Vignette 3 (see Table 11), as was the case with the participants who wrote, “Potentially Melissa may be unaware that her comments show an ageism bias” and “[Melissa] has good intentions with regard to being inclusive and sensitive, but that she has not yet reflected on her potential to fall into ageism when dealing with younger people in positions of authority.”

Table 11

**Case Vignettes from Survey**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case</th>
<th>Story</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1: Emily</td>
<td>Emily is a 40-year-old White female in her first year as a counseling master’s degree student. She is married and has three children in elementary school. During first day introductions, she told the class that she is training for a career in counseling after being out of the workforce since her first child’s birth 11 years ago; she also said that in those years she has developed a strong self-care routine. Emily has missed some class due to family schedule conflicts. Today she has emailed you 30 minutes before an assignment is due, explaining why she is unable to make the assignment’s deadline and requesting an extension.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Robert</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Melissa</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Aside from the prompts of Case Vignette 3, several related statements appeared in later portions of the survey. For example, one participant reported having witnessed older students “be disrespectful to faculty who are younger than them.” Another perceived some in this group to be “unwilling to take feedback from younger persons (whether peers or profs).” Another found nontraditional students to be “courteous, but somewhat avoidant of faculty who are younger.”

By participant age group, the perception of nontraditional students being age-biased toward younger faculty was reported by 2 of 8 participants in their 30s (25%), 3 of 16 participants in their 40s (19%), 3 of 10 participants in their 50s (30%), 3 of 15 participants in their 60s (20%), and 1 of 3 participants in their 70s (33%) (see Table 10).

Some participants also wrote of the perception of their nontraditional students as the recipients of others’ ageist bias. These statements are covered in a later part of this section on the first research question. In addition, related reflections on the ageism issue dealt with participants’ proposed solutions. These statements are covered in the section on the second research question.

**Relationships with classmates.** Participants’ perceptions of age 40+ students’ relationships with their classmates, both within and outside of class were coded to this category, and further divided into the following themes.

**Leadership.** Several participants \((n = 12)\) used the word *mentor* to describe their perceptions of nontraditional students’ relationships with their younger classmates. Other frequently used terms in the same vein included *supportive, encouraging, nurturing, leader,* and *role model:* “They often mentor others and provide a lot of support to their classmates. They are often socially very mature and demonstrate emotional stability and flexibility.” One said of older students’ demeanor with classmates,
My experience is that they are often of an appropriate peer level. However, I do notice more 40+ students taking on leadership roles, and trying more so to take care of the other students, for example, bringing in coffee and donuts on Saturday mornings.

Another participant wrote of a perception that older students “tend to be supportive of younger students and are good role models.” These “leader” terms convey participants’ perceptions of some positive aspects of the gap in age between nontraditional students and their younger peers.

Table 12

Perception Subcategories: Relationships with Classmates

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>30s (n=8)</th>
<th>40s (n=16)</th>
<th>50s (n=10)</th>
<th>60s (n=15)</th>
<th>70s (n=3)</th>
<th>All (N=52)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Leadership</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>1 (6%)</td>
<td>3 (30%)</td>
<td>7 (47%)</td>
<td>1 (33%)</td>
<td>12 (23%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental role</td>
<td>4 (50%)</td>
<td>4 (25%)</td>
<td>1 (10%)</td>
<td>3 (20%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>12 (23%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collegiality</td>
<td>1 (12.5%)</td>
<td>5 (31%)</td>
<td>2 (20%)</td>
<td>5 (33%)</td>
<td>2 (67%)</td>
<td>15 (29%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age barrier</td>
<td>2 (25%)</td>
<td>7 (44%)</td>
<td>1 (10%)</td>
<td>1 (7%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>11 (21%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apprehension</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>2 (12.5%)</td>
<td>3 (30%)</td>
<td>4 (27%)</td>
<td>1 (33%)</td>
<td>10 (19%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Percentages do not add up to 100%.

One of the 16 participants in the 40s age group (6%) reported this perception of leadership, as did 3 of 10 in their 50s (30%), 7 of 15 in their 60s (47%), and 1 of 3 in their 70s (33%). No participants in their 30s reported this perception (see Table 12).

**Parental role.** Participants did not perceive the age gap in universally positive ways. Several participants (n = 12) described a mix of positive and negative elements related to this age gap. Words such as *parental, motherly, fatherly,* and *caretaking* came up frequently in the responses to the question about this interaction. One participant reported the perception that older students...
seem to get along well [with younger classmates]. If there is someone very young they might take them under the wing (mother them). If they feel like the “older” person they might distance themselves but that is rare. Our cohorts tend to have lunch and mix pretty well even if there is an age gap.

Another participant stated, “In some cases, the older students have taken on ‘mother’ or ‘father’ type roles where they listen and give advice to the younger classmates.”

While these quotes may seem to convey a mixed perception of this parental role, several other participants reported the “tendency to parent younger students” as a challenging aspect of their nontraditional students. One participant commented that “a number [of nontraditional students] struggle with accepting feedback from younger students but give feedback more like a parent or uncle than a colleague.” Some reported the perception that their nontraditional students “sometimes talk down to younger students.” One participant seemed to connect these two ideas, stating the perception that older students could be “motherly at times. Sometimes condescending to the younger students.” Another spoke of this parental-role phenomenon as a temporary piece of some students’ development: “Some women (60+) who have been my students adopt an initial ‘mothering’ posture with the younger students. This quickly dissipates as their comfort level increases and they begin to view themselves as students rather than caretakers.”

Four of the 8 participants in their 30s (50%) wrote of their perception of their nontraditional students taking on a parental role with classmates, as did 4 of the 16 in their 40s (25%), 1 of the 10 in their 50s (10%), and 3 of the 15 in their 60s (20%). None of the participants in their 70s reported this perception (see Table 12).

**Collegiality.** Aside from the age-related dynamics, several participants \( (n = 15) \) described their perceptions of their older students’ demeanor with classmates in egalitarian terms such as
respectful, collaborative, and collegial. They spoke of strong connections and enthusiastic relationships between the two age groups: “In my experiences, they have really developed a give-and-take relationship with younger classmates where the younger classmates definitely respect them and their experiences, but also help them with technology and other things they might not be as comfortable with.”

This perception was reported by 1 of 8 participants in their 30s (12.5%), 5 of 16 in their 40s (31%), 2 of 10 in their 50s (20%), 5 of 15 in their 60s (33%), and 2 of 3 in their 70s (67%) (see Table 12).

**Age barrier.** Several participants (n = 11) alluded to a perception that their older students seem to have different comfort levels with older and younger classmates. For example, one participant stated, “I have observed strong relationships in my classes between traditional and nontraditional (40+) students; however, I have also observed that the 40+ students form particularly strong relationships especially with each other.” Another participant also reported the perception that nontraditional students develop a stronger bond with one another than with younger classmates, and elaborated on this perception in terms of safety:

My nontraditional students are sometimes a bit impatient with their younger classmates, and they seem to frequently express and/or demonstrate feeling more comfortable with other nontraditional students than with the traditional students. They sometimes seem to assume that they will not be able to find things in common with the traditional students, and they also seem to sometimes have an undertone that they do not feel safe with the traditional students, as though the age difference creates a divide or a barrier.

Several participants reported similar perceptions, seeing nontraditional students as having “a hesitancy to socialize with younger classmates.” One participant stated, “Some older students
seem to feel self-conscious with younger students. I once had an older student withdraw from the program when she learned that most of her classmates were newly out of college.”

This age barrier perception was observed by 2 of the 8 participants in their 30s (25%), as well as 7 of 16 in their 40s (31%), 1 of 10 in their 50s (10%), and 1 of 15 in their 60s (7%). The perception was not reported by any participants in their 70s (see Table 12).

**Apprehension.** For several survey participants \( (n = 10) \), this perception of nontraditional students’ insecurity about fitting in with their younger peers seemed to overlap somewhat with that of older students’ intimidation and anxiety around their return to the classroom. One participant expressed this perception in neutral terms, reporting that “sometimes [nontraditional students] are a little quiet in class because they feel like they have been out of the classroom for so long.” Others wrote in more negative terms, reporting the perception that “sometimes the over 40 students will spread their anxiety around like it’s a free gift and get the younger students riled up that day,” and stating “I’ve noticed students over 40 can be incredibly competitive and can really get the ire up of other students – more so than a younger student could.”

This perception of apprehension was reported by 2 of 16 participants in their 40s (12.5%), 3 of 10 in their 50s (30%), 4 of 15 in their 60s (27%), and 1 of 3 in their 70s (33%). None of the participants in their 30s mentioned this perception (see Table 12).

**Academic performance.** This category was used to code participants’ general statements about age 40+ students’ academic performance (e.g., classroom behavior, grades). These statements were divided into the following subcategories.

**Engagement.** Many participants \( (n = 30) \) wrote of their older students’ engagement in class. Terms that came up multiple times in this context included high motivation, commitment, strong work ethic, persistence, diligence, and eagerness to learn, as illustrated in the following
comment: “I’ve typically observed stellar performance from non-traditional students. They’ve almost always seemed very motivated and have interpreted the value of completing course assignments.” Others commented on these students’ high level of engagement and interaction in class, and their ability to bring depth, maturity, and connections to real-world experiences to class discussions and assignments: “Most are mature and less entitled than their younger counterparts. They are more interested in learning than grades. They have interesting life experiences they can share, which inspires younger students.”

Of the 30 participants who reported this perception of engagement, 2 were in their 30s (25% of the 8 in that age group), 12 were in their 40s (75% of the 16 in that age group), 7 were in their 50s (70% of the 10 in that age group), 8 were in their 60s (53% of the 15 in that age group), and 1 was in their 70s (33% of the 3 in that age group) (see Table 13).

Table 13

Perception Subcategories: Academic Performance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>30s (n=8)</th>
<th>40s (n=16)</th>
<th>50s (n=10)</th>
<th>60s (n=15)</th>
<th>70s (n=3)</th>
<th>All (N=52)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Engagement</td>
<td>2 (25%)</td>
<td>12 (75%)</td>
<td>7 (70%)</td>
<td>8 (53%)</td>
<td>1 (33%)</td>
<td>30 (58%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pushiness</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>1 (6%)</td>
<td>1 (10%)</td>
<td>1 (7%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>3 (6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transition</td>
<td>1 (12.5%)</td>
<td>1 (6%)</td>
<td>2 (20%)</td>
<td>1 (7%)</td>
<td>1 (33%)</td>
<td>6 (12%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perfectionism</td>
<td>3 (37.5%)</td>
<td>4 (44%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>1 (7%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>8 (15%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strong/above average</td>
<td>1 (12.5%)</td>
<td>6 (37.5%)</td>
<td>4 (40%)</td>
<td>7 (47%)</td>
<td>1 (33%)</td>
<td>19 (37%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Variability</td>
<td>3 (37.5%)</td>
<td>7 (44%)</td>
<td>6 (60%)</td>
<td>6 (40%)</td>
<td>1 (33%)</td>
<td>23 (44%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: percentages do not add up to 100%.*
**Pushiness.** The classroom demeanor of nontraditional students is not always perceived as positive. One participant wrote of nontraditional students, “sometimes they are arrogant and put pressure on the class system, sometimes they put high expectations on the professor, and sometimes they disrupt class by monopolizing discussion time.” Others wrote of similar perceptions, particularly around the discussion aspect: “They tend to try to monopolize the class discussion. Their input is usually very good, but I need to redirect so the other students have the opportunity to speak.” Another wrote, “They tend to want to sit around and discuss everything to death – without learning theory first,” and wrote of a student who “continually talked and derailed the class discussion by about 40 minutes.”

While only a few participants’ responses were coded into this subcategory \((n = 3)\), it is reported here for its contrast to the previous subcategory. In terms of the age group breakdown, participants were in their 40s (1 of 16, or 6%), 50s (1 of 10, or 10%), and 60s (1 of 15, or 7%) (see Table 13).

**Transition.** Challenges noted by some participants \((n = 6)\) in the area of academic performance included insecurity and difficulty adjusting or re-acclimating to academia after a long academic gap. One participant commented, “It can be difficult to adjust back to the demands of being a student, often after many years out of school.” Similarly, some participants noted a perceived difficulty transitioning from professional to student, as expressed in the following quote:

On a few occasions, I have had students who are older who have difficulty transitioning from the “expert” role they’ve had before they joined the program, to a “novice” role in a new field. Some of these students excel academically and others have to be remediated.
Occasionally we have counseled out students who had idealized versions of what counseling is and how they can fit in to the profession.

Another participant framed this adjustment as a temporary issue, stating,

We often get nontraditional students who are in leadership positions in their previous professions. The transition to being in school can be more difficult for these students, but once they embrace their role, they are no different from traditional students in their struggle to balance school with “real” life.

One of the 8 participants in their 30s (12.5%) reported this perception, as did 1 of the 16 in their 40s (6%), 2 of the 10 in their 50s (20%), 1 of the 15 in their 60s (7%), and 1 of the 3 in their 70s (33%) (see Table 13).

**Perfectionism.** Several survey respondents \((n = 8)\) mentioned a perception that some nontraditional students have, in the words of one participant, “perfectionistic tendencies.” Another participant wrote of perfectionism’s effect, stating, “They set very high standards for themselves, which sometimes makes them less flexible.” Similarly, another stated that “sometimes the perfectionism is a bit of a challenge.” One participant paired this perception with an interpretation, writing that nontraditional students “sometimes struggle with a heightened degree of perfectionism, as they feel they have something to prove.”

Of the 8 participants who reported perceptions of perfectionism in their nontraditional students, 3 were in their 30s (37.5% of the 8 participants in that age group), 4 were in their 40s (44% of the 16 participants in that age group), and 1 was in their 60s (7% of the 15 participants in that age group). None of the participants in their 50s or 70s reported this perceptions (see Table 13).
**Strong.** Several participants \((n = 19)\) reported the perception that nontraditional students tend to be strong or above average in terms of classroom performance. This was reported by 1 of the 8 participants in their 30s (12.5%), 6 of the 16 participants in their 40s (37.5%), 4 of the 10 participants in their 50s (40%), 7 of the 15 participants in their 60s (47%), and 1 of the 3 participants in their 70s (33%) (see Table 13).

**Variability.** Many of the study’s participants \((n = 23)\) perceived no significant academic differences between nontraditional students and their younger peers. One noted that older students “perform at about the same level as younger students,” another that they are “not significantly different than younger students.” Another participant stated that there was “a wide range of academic performance,” another that it “runs the gamut, as with any age group,” and yet another that academic performance “varies by other factors that are not just age-related.”

This perception was reported by 3 of the 8 participants in their 30s (37.5%), 7 of the 16 participants in their 40s (44%), 6 of the 10 participants in their 50s (60%), 6 of the 15 participants in their 60s (40%), and 1 of the 3 participants in their 70s (33%) (see Table 13).

**Specific academic demands.** While participants’ perceptions of general academic performance were coded into the previous category, this category was used to code participants’ perceptions of nontraditional students’ challenges with specific aspects of their coursework. These elements became the following categories.

**Technology.** The category of specific academic demands was used when participants wrote of their perception of specific skill deficits particular to the academic endeavor. The most mentioned of these perceived skill deficits was technology. Even apart from the prompting of Case Vignette 2, many participants \((n = 25)\) mentioned their perception of their nontraditional students’ struggles with technology. One stated that “technology is the biggest challenge,” a
sentiment that many participants echoed. Another wrote, “I have noticed that nontraditional students are certainly at risk for struggling with technology.” One participant observed that “sometimes the technology deficit is really terrifying to them and that can breed resistance,” and another stated the perception that the struggle with technology is “more anxiety than ability.” (It is worth noting that this perception was not universal, as one participant stated, “I have not noticed a technology deficit in students who are 40+ years old in our students.”)

Of the 25 participants who reported technology as a point of struggle for their nontraditionally-aged students, 6 were in their 30s (75% of the 8 participants in that age group), 10 were in their 40s (62.5% of the 16 participants in that age group), 2 were in their 50s (20% of the 10 participants in that age group), 6 were in their 60s (40% of the 15 participants in that age group), and 1 was in their 70s (33% of the 3 participants in that age group) (see Table 14).

Table 14

Perception Subcategories: Specific Academic Demands

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>30s (n=8)</th>
<th>40s (n=16)</th>
<th>50s (n=10)</th>
<th>60s (n=15)</th>
<th>70s (n=3)</th>
<th>All (N=52)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>6 (75%)</td>
<td>10 (62.5%)</td>
<td>2 (20%)</td>
<td>6 (40%)</td>
<td>1 (33%)</td>
<td>25 (48%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic rigor</td>
<td>5 (62.5%)</td>
<td>5 (31%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>6 (7%)</td>
<td>1 (33%)</td>
<td>17 (33%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Variability</td>
<td>1 (12.5%)</td>
<td>5 (31%)</td>
<td>3 (30%)</td>
<td>2 (13%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>11 (21%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: percentages do not add up to 100%.

**Academic rigor.** Other specific academic skill deficits perceived by participants (n = 17) included writing and APA format use, and some participants mentioned a perceived struggle with academic rigor and pace. One participant stated the perception that “often statistics and memorizing seems to be a little harder.”
Five of the 8 participants in their 30s (62.5%) reported this perception, as did 5 of the 16 participants in their 40s (31%), 6 of the 15 participants in their 60s (7%), and 1 of the 3 participants in their 70s (33%). None of the 10 participants in their 50s reported this perception.

**Variability.** Some participants \( (n = 11) \) expressed the perception that the academic skills of nontraditional students showed “no consistent differences with ‘traditional’ students.” One stated, “Most do fine and meet the challenges we present. I don’t believe this is related to age. We see challenges in students at all age levels.” Another expressed the perception that nontraditional students might have “difficulties with academic writing, but this is hardly confined to older students.”

One of the 8 participants in their 30s (12.5%) reported this perception of variability, as did 5 of the 16 in their 40s (31%), 3 of the 10 in their 50s (30%), and 2 of the 15 in their 60s (13%). None of the participants in their 70s mentioned this perception.

**Counseling skills.** The survey asked participants directly about their nontraditional students’ counseling skills, and participants also gave additional comments on the topic elsewhere in the survey. This category was used to code participants’ comments relating to nontraditional students’ counseling skills, and their ability and willingness to learn counseling skills. These comments were divided into the following subcategories.

**Experience.** Many participants \( (n = 34) \) wrote positively of their older students’ *experience* (both life and professional) as well as their *maturity, empathy, insight, and ability to relate course material to real life situations.* Some expressed the perception that these characteristics translate into strong counseling skills. For example, one participant wrote, “Life experience counts. [Nontraditional students] often have a better understanding of family dynamics and other interpersonal situations than students just out of undergraduate.” Another
wrote of the perception that older students “tend to better empathize with some clients due to their greater life experience.” Other participants expressed related ideas: “I have found frequently more life experience adds to the development of counseling skills so nontraditional students often develop better counseling skills than traditional students.” One participant commented on older students’ “life experience, capacity for contributing a different perspective” and further stated that there is “usually maturity in multiple areas, some clarity and stability that more traditional aged students might lack.” Another wrote of older students possessing a “richer understanding of the human endeavor than do younger students,” and framed the contrast between traditional and nontraditional students’ counseling skills in terms of younger students being “more likely to look for specific techniques instead of relying on their own personal characteristics to form a therapeutic relationship.”

One participant reported the perception that nontraditional students “tend to over-empathize or over-identify or have a lot of transference/countertransference experiences with clients.” This participant’s perception demonstrates that the empathy born of experience is not universally seen as a positive characteristic. Other participants expressed the perception that life and work experience can lead to rigidity or resistance; their statements are addressed in the next section.

Of the 34 participants who mentioned the perception of nontraditional students’ life and work experience in a positive light, 10 were in their 40s (62.5% of the 16 in that age group), 9 were in their 50s (90% of the 10 in that age group), 13 were in their 60s (87% of the 15 in that age group), and 2 were in their 70s (66% of the 3 in that age group). None of the participants in their 30s wrote about this perception (see Table 15).
Table 15

*Perception Subcategories: Counseling Skills*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>30s (n=8)</th>
<th>40s (n=16)</th>
<th>50s (n=10)</th>
<th>60s (n=15)</th>
<th>70s (n=3)</th>
<th>All (N=52)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Experience</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>10 (62.5%)</td>
<td>9 (90%)</td>
<td>13 (87%)</td>
<td>2 (66%)</td>
<td>34 (65%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resistance</td>
<td>3 (37.5%)</td>
<td>1 (6%)</td>
<td>6 (60%)</td>
<td>5 (33%)</td>
<td>1 (33%)</td>
<td>17 (33%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Variability</td>
<td>5 (62.5%)</td>
<td>9 (56%)</td>
<td>6 (60%)</td>
<td>3 (20%)</td>
<td>1 (33%)</td>
<td>24 (46%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: percentages do not add up to 100%.*

**Resistance, rigidity, blind spots.** Several participants (n = 17) expressed the view that older students’ greater life and work experience do not always translate into strong counseling skills. This sentiment appeared in various forms, including resistance to learning, rigidity, and reticence to look at blind spots. One participant commented, “some learn very quickly; others, especially those in helping related careers have picked up a lot of bad habits that they need to unlearn.” Another wrote,

I often enjoy non-traditional students but one disadvantage of non-traditional students, if they have worked in the field, is that sometimes they are not open to new learning experiences, as I think it is difficult for them to consider alternative ways to approach helping.

Still another commented,

It’s interesting... I’ve seen a real range of different starting points in relation to counseling skills. There have been a few fantastic students. At the same time, there were others who assumed they were very good at counseling, when their developmental level was more that of a lay helper. There have also been some students who have come from related disciplines – who have been in the field for many years in pastoral counseling or
social work, for example – who are somewhat resistant to learning counseling theory and skills.

Another participant also wrote of the double-edged nature of experience, stating the perception that older students’ maturity and life experience helps them. They know that change evolves and they don’t fall into the “I have to fix this right now” trap. However, there are students (already know it all) that are resistant to learning new skills and process. A student with many years as a classroom teacher might fall into a lecturing stance. A student who is a former minister might judge a client or start quoting scripture.

Several participants wrote about their perceptions of some nontraditional students’ need to “unlearn.” This emerged both in comments about personal bad habits of relating as well as in comments on techniques gained in previous professions. One participant wrote that nontraditional students displayed a “normal range of challenges, compared to traditional students. However, when challenges present, they are often harder to ‘un-train’ due to resistance.” This theme also appeared in the form of participants’ comments about their perceptions of students’ rigidity or lack of openness to learning new skills, as well as tendencies toward advice-giving and the desire to “fix” clients. One participant wrote about a perception of “the ‘I already know everything and I’m just jumping through this degree hoop’ student. I find them very frustrating. Their rigid perception of the field keeps them from being open to new ideas.”

Related to this perception of intrapersonal rigidity, a few participants wrote of a sense that some nontraditional students struggle with or resist lessons around multiculturalism and diverse populations. One participant wrote of the perception that nontraditional students
“occasionally struggle with multicultural competencies.” Another wrote, “Some come in with stereotypes or prejudices that have a negative impact on their development as counselors.”

Another participant stated a similar perception:

I had anticipated that there would be a higher level of maturity that might translate into stronger skills, but this hasn’t been consistent based on age. Some students over 40 have been more natural and mature, and others have never been challenged to look at their own blind spots.

This perception of resistance was reported by 3 of the 8 participants in their 30s (37.5%), 1 of the 16 participants in their 40s (6%), 6 of the 10 participants in their 50s (60%), 5 of the 15 participants in their 60s (33%), and 1 of the 3 participants in their 70s (33%) (see Table 15).

**Variability.** As with academic performance, many participants \((n = 24)\) expressed the view that age was not a factor in the development of counseling skills: “I see no difference in skill acquisition once they enter into the learning experience fully. With some it takes longer but that is also true for more traditional students.” Several participants stated that they have found this aspect to be “as mixed as students who are younger,” that counseling performance is “wide ranging (larger range than academics),” and that it “varies by other factors that are not just age-related.”

The perception of variability was reported by 5 of the 8 participants in their 30s (62.5%), 9 of the 16 participants in their 40s (56%), 6 of the 10 participants in their 50s (60%), 3 of the 15 participants in their 60s (20%), and 1 of the 3 participants in their 70s (33%) (see Table 15).

**Outside supports.** This category was intentionally left unexplained and without example, to allow participants to fully write in their own perceptions of their nontraditional students’
supports outside the classroom without prompting. The following themes emerged from their responses.

**Family/friends.** Several participants \((n = 13)\) reported their perception that nontraditional students have strong family and friend networks that provide support for their academic pursuits. For example, one participant wrote of the perception that “Often the older students have more supports in place. They may have grown children who are also in school with whom they talk. They may also have a spouse who is very supportive.” Another echoed this perception and added an internal program component: “Many have families/parents that are supportive and help with personal responsibilities or children. Our students often develop peer support systems within the program.”

Table 16

**Perception Subcategories: Outside Supports**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>30s (n=8)</th>
<th>40s (n=16)</th>
<th>50s (n=10)</th>
<th>60s (n=15)</th>
<th>70s (n=3)</th>
<th>All (N=52)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Family/friends</td>
<td>3 (37.5%)</td>
<td>4 (25%)</td>
<td>3 (30%)</td>
<td>3 (20%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>13 (25%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Workplace</td>
<td>1 (12.5%)</td>
<td>1 (6%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>2 (13%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>4 (8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counselors</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>1 (10%)</td>
<td>1 (7%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>2 (4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strong</td>
<td>1 (12.5%)</td>
<td>3 (19%)</td>
<td>4 (40%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>8 (15%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Active</td>
<td>1 (12.5%)</td>
<td>2 (12.5%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>2 (13%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>5 (10%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>non-support / absent support</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Variability</td>
<td>4 (50%)</td>
<td>3 (19%)</td>
<td>3 (30%)</td>
<td>6 (40%)</td>
<td>3 (100%)</td>
<td>19 (37%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: percentages do not add up to 100%.*
In the context of external supports, family members and friends were mentioned by 3 of the 8 participants in their 30s (37.5%), 4 of the 16 participants in their 40s (25%), 3 of the 10 participants in their 50s (30%), and 3 of the participants in their 60s (20%). None of the participants in their 70s mentioned this perception (see Table 16).

**Workplace.** A few participants \((n = 4)\) listed job security, financial security, or an understanding workplace among their nontraditional students’ perceived outside supports. One participant wrote of the perception that “older students often have a spouse to support them. Also, most older students are working and have longevity in their job, which helps financially and provides security.” Another wrote, “some bosses are flexible about time and allow students to leave early so they can get to class on time.”

Perceptions of workplace-related supports were mentioned by 1 of the 8 participants in their 30s (12.5%), 1 of the 16 participants in their 40s (6%) and 2 of the participants in their 60s (13%). None of the participants in their 50s or 70s reported this perception (see Table 16).

**Counselors.** Apart from family, friends, and workplace, a few participants \((n = 2)\) mentioned nontraditional students’ specific connections to the counseling field in the context of outside supports. One stated the perception that older students “usually have friends who are accomplished in [the] counseling field.” Another said of nontraditional students, “I find that they are usually more open to seeking counseling for themselves. They may have become interested in the field because of a good experience with counseling.” Although the number of participants mentioning this perception was small, this perception stands alone and is captured here because of the nature of its relationship to the work for which the students are preparing.
One of the participants who reported this perception was in their 50s (10% of that age group), and the other was in their 60s (7% of that age group). None of the participants in their 30s, 40s, or 70s mentioned this perception (see Table 16).

**Strong support.** Several participants \((n = 8)\), rather than listing specific sources of support, reported the perception that nontraditional students had strong or numerous supports. One participant stated, “Many non-traditional students have more outside supports than non-traditional students,” and another wrote that older students “Usually have a strong base from which to operate.”

Of the participants expressing this perception, 1 was in their 30s (12.5% of the 8 participants in that age group), 3 were in their 40s (19% of the 16 participants in that age group), and 4 were in their 50s (40% of the 10 participants in that age group). None of the participants in their 60s or 70s reported this perception (see Table 16).

**Active non-support/absent support.** By contrast, a few participants \((n = 5)\) reported the perception that nontraditional students had fewer external supports than their younger peers. Some mentioned their perception that for nontraditional students, the people in their lives can create additional tension when they are not as supportive, as in this response:

This depends on the student. Sometimes these are strong if the student has older children who can help with technology and other things. Sometimes the student recognizes that this is their time to do something for them[elves] and are quicker to set boundaries with family and friends. Other times supports are harder to come by if kids are younger and still need their parent or if the significant other is not there or does not support their decision to go to school.
One participant expressed this perception of non-support in terms of support directionality, stating that “Some have solid outside support and others are the support for others.” Another participant wrote about this perception this way:

Some have tremendous support from family and are encouraged in their degree pursuit. Others may be lacking familial support. Flexibility of the workplace varies as well. Some bosses are flexible about time and allow students to leave early so they can get to class on time. Occasionally, a student has a rigid boss and runs into difficulty. We work with them whenever possible.

When asked more generally about this population’s challenges, several participants wrote of a perception of their older students’ lack of outside supports:

The nontraditional students that I have worked with were more often the people who were busy providing support to others, not the beneficiaries of others’ support. Many of them struggle with finding time for self-care because of their commitments. Very few, if any, have people looking out for them as they undertake the demands of graduate education.

Another participant wrote of the sense that the older students have less supports and more responsibilities than the traditional-aged students. As more and more students are moving directly from their undergraduate degree to a graduate program, I think it’s just more natural for parents and families to support this progression. Many of my traditional-aged students still live at home and don’t have full-time jobs, whereas the nontraditional students don’t necessarily have a built-in support system.
This participant went on to write of older students’ more developed ability to find outside supports: “At the same time, I would assume that the nontraditional students have learned to utilize their community supports much more so than the traditional-aged students.”

Another participant, in enumerating nontraditional students’ challenges, included domestic violence in the list. This response was counted in this category.

One of the 8 participants in their 30s (12.5%) reported a perception of fewer external supports, as did 2 of the 16 participants in their 40s (12.5%) and 2 of the participants in their 60s (13%). None of the participants in their 50s or 70s reported this perception (see Table 16).

**Variability.** Several participants \((n = 19)\) wrote of the variability of external supports. One participant wrote, “I’ve had students with strong supportive families and who are deeply embedded in their community. I have others who have moved across states to come to the program and have no one.”

This perception of variability was reported by 4 of the 8 participants in their 30s (50%), as well as 3 of the 16 participants in their 40s (19%), 3 of the 10 participants in their 50s (30%), and 6 of the 15 participants in their 60s (40%), and all of the 3 participants in their 70s (100%) (see Table 16).

**External demands.** Participants’ perceptions of their nontraditional students’ challenges external to the academic demands of the class were coded to this category. As can be inferred from the previous section, there are a number of external demands that provide further context to any outside supports that participants identified. More items were coded to this category than to any other perception-related category, with approximately a third more participant statements than the next highest category. This suggests a strong perception on the part of participants that their nontraditional students have many demands on their lives. Some participants wrote lists of
challenges such as this one: “Parenting, poverty or other financial restrictions, jobs, distances to travel, domestic violence, divorce, health issues…” Words that came up several times included responsibilities, balance, juggling, and time management. These demands appeared even outside of the related prompt of Case Vignette 1.

**Family, work, finances.** Participants cited family obligations, job demands, and financial challenges as areas of perceived struggle external to academia for their nontraditional students. These subcategories are listed together here, as many participants mentioned a combination of these concerns, noting the role conflict and competing demands. Participants’ mentions of issues related to time management are included in this section as well, since several participants mentioned all these items together. For example, one participant wrote of the perception that “job and family conflicts can create time pressure and scheduling issues.” In the words of another participant,

> the over-40 age group are the people who are not only responsible for themselves but also for the generation that follows and sometimes the one after that, if grandchildren are already part of the picture – and they can also be the ones taking care of the generation that came before. Furthermore, in addition to caregiver responsibilities, most of the nontraditional students I’ve worked with have worked full-time – and so there were economic challenges – so challenges in the realms of time, energy, financial resources – all were affecting the nontraditional students I’ve worked with.

This was echoed by another participant, who wrote of the perception of students’ struggle with “time management, particularly managing the competing demands on one’s time. Financial challenges may exist as older learners may not want to take out student loans when they may be well into retirement before paying them off.” Others alluded generally to “complex life
circumstances” or “managing a very busy life.” One participant wrote of the perception that these students sometimes struggle because they may have a great deal of responsibility in their work settings. They may be in leadership positions at work creating stress for them as they work to keep all the balls in the air. They may also have teenagers in the home at the same time, which can be quite challenging.

And another wrote of the perception that nontraditional students “have more difficulty with school/life balance and most give up their free time to school work. Therefore, they may be more likely to experience burnout.”

In the context of external demands, family was mentioned by 41 participants overall, including all 8 of the participants in their 30s (100%), 14 of the 16 participants in their 40s (87.5%), 7 of the 10 participants in their 50s (70%), 10 of the 15 participants in their 60s (67%), and 2 of the 3 participants in their 70s (67%). Work and financial challenges were mentioned by 19 participants overall, including 2 of the 8 in their 30s (25%), 5 of the 16 in their 40s (31%), 2 of the 10 in their 50s (20%), and 10 of the 15 in their 60s (67%); this concern was not reported by participants in their 70s. Time management was mentioned by 20 participants overall, including 1 of the 8 in their 30s (12.5%), 1 of the 16 in their 40s (6%), 5 of the 10 in their 50s (50%), 11 of the 15 in their 60s (73%), and 2 of the 3 in their 70s (67%) (see Table 17).

**Health concerns.** A few participants (n = 4) mentioned nontraditional students’ health challenges, either generically or in very specific terms:

I had a student with breast cancer, and one with throat cancer. They would both go to their respective chemotherapies and then come straight to class, despite having a bag with them in case they would get sick, and at some points not be able to talk. This taught me
that each student is in their program to walk their own path, none are really comparable.

And when they graduate they will be exactly what they needed to be. Knowing that some trials will take more to achieve than others.

Another participant wrote of a student who displayed age-related cognitive decline over the course of their time in the program, and discussed the challenge this presented to faculty as the student neared graduation.

All 4 participants who reported students’ health challenges in the context of external demands were in their 60s, representing 27% of the 15 participants in that age group (see Table 17).

Table 17  
*Perception Subcategories: External Demands*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>30s (n=8)</th>
<th>40s (n=16)</th>
<th>50s (n=10)</th>
<th>60s (n=15)</th>
<th>70s (n=3)</th>
<th>All (N=52)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Family</td>
<td>8 (100%)</td>
<td>14 (87.5%)</td>
<td>7 (70%)</td>
<td>10 (67%)</td>
<td>1 (33%)</td>
<td>41 (79%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work/finances</td>
<td>2 (25%)</td>
<td>5 (31%)</td>
<td>2 (20%)</td>
<td>10 (67%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>19 (37%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time management</td>
<td>1 (12.5%)</td>
<td>1 (6%)</td>
<td>5 (50%)</td>
<td>11 (73%)</td>
<td>2 (67%)</td>
<td>20 (38%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>4 (27%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>4 (8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Variability</td>
<td>2 (25%)</td>
<td>1 (6%)</td>
<td>2 (20%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>5 (10%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: percentages do not add up to 100%.*

**Variability.** As with some of the other categories, a few participants (n = 5) wrote of the variability of the category of external demands. This was mentioned by 2 of the 8 participants in their 30s (25%), as well as 1 of the 16 in their 40s (6%), and 2 of the 10 in their 50s (20%); it was not mentioned by any participants in their 60s or 70s.
Other characteristics. This category was used to gather counselor educators’ perceptions of their nontraditional students that were more general or did not fit into one of the above categories. This category was broken down into the following subcategories.

Ageism from others. Several participants wrote about the perception of age-related bias, though the directionality of that bias was not universal. As mentioned previously, some participants wrote of perceptions of their nontraditional students expressing an ageist bias toward younger faculty. Others (n = 4) wrote of these students as the recipients of ageism from others, both faculty members and fellow students. One participant wrote,

If I really analyze myself, I suppose I might speak more casually to nontraditional students, with an air of mutual understanding. I sometimes feel like I should side with the nontraditional students when younger students make ageist remarks. I try to consider how my parents would respond to any given situation to increase my empathy with older students who have been out of the classroom for some time.

Another wrote of the perception that nontraditional students have mistrust of the educational system as a whole. They may feel somewhat out of place with their younger cohorts. I’ve seen several nontraditional students deal with ageism from their peers or faculty members in a very passive way – I’ve wondered sometimes if they feel there is nothing they can do when experiencing microaggressions.

Both these participants were in their 30s. Two additional participants alluded to the idea that age bias can go both ways; one of these participants was in their 40s, and the other in their 60s (see Table 18).
Table 18

Perception Subcategories: Other Characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>30s (n=8)</th>
<th>40s (n=16)</th>
<th>50s (n=10)</th>
<th>60s (n=15)</th>
<th>70s (n=3)</th>
<th>All (N=52)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ageism</td>
<td>2 (25%)</td>
<td>1 (6%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>1 (7%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>4 (8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>2 (20%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>2 (4%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: percentages do not add up to 100%.

General variability. In addition to the topic-related variability documented in previous sections, two participants, both of whom were in their 50s (see Table 18), expressed the impossibility of making general statements about nontraditional students. This theme might be characterized as a perception of diversity. Representative quotes from this theme include the statement that older students have “different challenges than their peers, but no qualitative difference,” and another that related the participant’s inability to write a comment “that fits for the majority of these students (no trends are coming to mind).” One participant put it this way:

These students have all been VERY different from one another. I can’t lump them together in a tidy way. I’ve had students who had been nurses, pastors, school counselors, business men and women, vets, teachers, homemakers, you name it, even a faculty member from another department.

How Counselor Educators’ Teaching Practice May Be Shaped: Research Question 2

The study’s second research question looks at the ways in which counselor educators’ teaching practices may have been shaped by their perceptions of their nontraditional students. The themes that emerged from the survey broke down into eight categories: refer to existing policy, potential for flexibility, provide individual attention outside class, refer to another for...
**RQ2: How Counselor Educators’ Teaching Practice May Be Shaped**

- Refer to Existing Policy
- Potential for Flexibility
  - Discussion
  - Tutorial
  - Process
- Provide Individual Attention
- Refer to Another for Help
  - Technology Support / other tutoring resource
  - Student’s advisor
- Adjustment in Classroom or Course Structure
  - Honor of student’s experience
  - Adjustment of process/approach
  - Adjustment of content
- Introspection and Self-Awareness
- No Classroom/Course Modifications
- Program-Level Accommodations

*Figure 4.* Categories and Subcategories for Research Question 2.
help, adjustment in classroom or course structure, introspection and self-awareness, no classroom/course modification, and program-level accommodations (see Figure 4).

**Refer to existing policy.** Participants’ statements indicating that they enforce or remind students of existing policy were coded to this category \((n = 17)\). Many participants responded that they would take this action with a student if presented with situations such as those in the first two case vignettes—reminding the student of the attendance policy or of the point penalty for a late assignment, for example. Of the 17 participants who responded this way, 4 were in their 30s (50% of the 8 participants in that age group), 8 in their 40s (50% of the 16 in that age group), 2 in their 50s (20% of the 10 in that age group), and 3 in their 60s (20% of the 15 in that age group). None of the participants in their 70s gave this response (see Table 19).

Several participants who responded this way added another comment indicating understanding of the student’s situation. For example, one participant wrote, “I would empathize with Emily, but I would remind her of my late policy, which is to reduce her grade by a full letter grade for being late.” These responses were coded into the “Refer to policy” category.

However, some participants \((n = 24)\), while referring to policy, added a willingness to work with the student on the issue. For example,

If Emily has missed significant class time, I have already had a discussion with Emily about how I can help make the transition from out of the workforce for 11 years to maintaining the demands and responsibilities of graduate school. I am glad to permit an extension on the assignment’s deadline but note that it carries with it the penalties noted in the syllabus for late work.

Another participant wrote,
I always take these situations on a case by case basis. I would meet with Emily to see when she could turn in the assignment. I generally do not penalize for the first late assignment. After this, if the pattern continues, then I follow my late assignment policy. I would generally not change my teaching or classroom management.

Still another stated,

I would explain/reference the late policy in my syllabus for the course with that assignment and explain that I can work with students a lot better as soon as they know a conflict is coming up than when I am finding out about a situation last minute. Depending on more information, I may give an exception to the policy for a day or two or use the policy to help the student adjust to the expectations of our department.

These responses suggest a posture of concern for the student, without bending policy or lowering standards. They are captured in Table 19 under the heading “Policy reminder and flexibility.” Of the 24 participants who wrote such a response, 6 were in their 30s (75% of the 8 participants in Table 19)

**Practice Subcategories: Refer to Existing Policy and Potential for Flexibility**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>30s (n=8)</th>
<th>40s (n=16)</th>
<th>50s (n=10)</th>
<th>60s (n=15)</th>
<th>70s (n=3)</th>
<th>All (N=52)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Refer to existing policy</td>
<td>4 (50%)</td>
<td>8 (50%)</td>
<td>2 (20%)</td>
<td>3 (20%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>17 (33%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Policy reminder and flexibility</td>
<td>6 (75%)</td>
<td>6 (37.5%)</td>
<td>7 (70%)</td>
<td>5 (33%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>24 (46%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flexibility</td>
<td>6 (75%)</td>
<td>7 (44%)</td>
<td>3 (30%)</td>
<td>14 (93%)</td>
<td>3 (100%)</td>
<td>33 (63%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: percentages do not add up to 100%.*
that age group), 6 in their 40s (37.5% of the 16 in that age group), 7 in their 50s (70% of the 10 in that age group), and 5 in their 60s (33% of the 15 in that age group). None of the participants in their 70s responded in this way (see Table 19).

**Potential for flexibility.** When a participant made a statement indicating they would take into account the student’s situation and make allowances, or allowing for that possibility, that response was coded here \((n = 33)\). For example, in response to Case Vignette 1, one participant stated, “I would grant the exception to the deadline and include in my syllabus ways for such situations to be brought to the attention of the instructor without jeopardy of grade penalty.” Several participants stated that extensions were not a problem, noting as one did that “students sometimes encounter family emergencies or work situations which may require us to be flexible with the student while these are getting resolved.” Another participant supplied a similar response and went further, tying the response explicitly to student self-care:

> I would allow an extension. I am flexible and in our program, we emphasize wellness. If the student continues to have a problem managing assignments, she might have problems. School should be a top priority, but not always prioritized over other important facets of the students’ lives.

One participant indicated such flexibility was dependent upon timing:

> My response would depend on the assignment and the timing in the semester. I usually grant requests for extensions because things come up and because I can only grade one assignment at a time. If I plan to get everything graded over the weekend, for example, and she can get it in before noon Sunday, then I’m fine with that. If this is the end of the semester and it is a major assignment and she isn’t close to finishing, then this seems like
a bigger issue with managing the overall schedule and demands and also with communication (30 minutes seems a little late for contact about an assignment).

Another participant, responding to Case Vignette 2, wrote,

Since Robert was able to manage the first two assignments successfully, I might question what got in the way this time. If it was required that the assignment got turned in through the LMS to check for plagiarism, I would tell him that he needs to figure out how to submit the paper through the LMS within the next 24 hours. I would accept this paper as on-time and explain to him that this would be the only time I would do so.

This solution was echoed by several others: “I would probably accept the hard copy this time, but tell him future assignments must be submitted as instructed.”

Several participants wrote that flexibility would depend upon the circumstance. For example, one participant wrote, “I might be willing to discuss the circumstances that prevented his access to the course management system. However, apprehension is not an excuse for a lack of follow-through.” Similarly, another stated, “If there is no evidence that the student engaged in steps to remedy his circumstance, then the expectation is that the student complete the same requirements as his classmates.” One participant wrote regarding the scenario in Case Vignette 1,

Without understanding her explanation I am not really able to make a clear determination. I would likely want to know if there was something from a learning perspective that interfered with her ability to be more prompt. If so I would offer assistance. If not I would ask when she anticipated submitting the assignment.

Another framed this position in terms of frequency:

Unless Emily has a history of missing deadlines, I would grant her an extension. My first impulse is to believe people when they are overwhelmed and try to work with them. If
asking for extensions was a re-occurring problem, I would meet with her to discuss the issue.

Commenting more generally on flexibility, one participant wrote a comment that included a reflection on a program-wide approach:

I am more patient and flexible but still hold high expectation. We offer flexible schedules and frequently support students in taking a leave of absence when needed. We are willing to work with the student to find a path to success. We pay attention when students take time off and encourage them to return.

Of the 33 participants who reported flexibility as a response, 6 were in their 30s (75% of the 8 participants in that age group), 7 in their 40s (44% of the 16 in that age group), 3 in their 50s (30% of the 10 in that age group), 14 in their 60s (93% of the 15 in that age group), and 3 in their 70s (100% of those in that age group) (see Table 19).

Provide individual attention outside class. This category was used to code participant responses indicating they would provide individual help or attention to a student, offering to meet or assist in any way, or seeking understanding of student needs and situations. Many of the survey’s participants chose this option as all or part of a proposed response, and this category had the most responses coded to it, with about 25% more statements than the next highest category. This suggests that counselor educators may often choose a one-on-one meeting or conversation with a nontraditional student for at least part of their response to an issue.

Although many of these statements were prompted by the three case vignettes, one participant wrote a comment outside these prompts, indicating they would meet with a nontraditional student, and have done so, for various reasons: “I have also met with them one on one to discuss issues that might be creating obstacles for them or to boost their morale.”
These statements about one-on-one meetings with nontraditional students appeared in three varieties: discussion, tutorial, and process, and many participants wrote of various combinations of these three types of meetings.

**Discussion.** Most participants (n = 47) responded to the three scenarios provided in the vignettes with an intention to have an individual discussion with the student. For example, responding to Case Vignette 1, one participant wrote of choosing to “support [the] extension and request [a] meeting to discuss her transition back to school while parenting three young children.” Others proposed similar solutions, and included a statement about frequency: “I would offer grace initially, but if it became routine, I would have to talk with her about deductions in her grade and if this is a good time for her to be pursuing her master’s.” One participant wrote at length on this aspect:

I tell all of my students that sometimes life gets in the way. Assignment due dates are negotiable based on life circumstances. However, if a pattern emerges in which the student demonstrates an inability to succeed in the classroom, we may need to address this. I would respond to this particular student by granting the extension and closely monitoring her continued progress in the course. I would further inform her that I was getting a little concerned with her missing class and work to help her define her approach to the graduate program.

Another participant wrote regarding Case Vignette 1, specifying how that discussion would be tailored for that student’s stated values:

I would meet with Emily to find out how she believes her transition back to school is going, and whether she sees herself experiencing any challenges. I would encourage her to consider how carving out time for a self-care routine and managing those boundaries
might be similar and could be applied to what she is experiencing now between home and school. I don’t think it would change my classroom management. I already ask students to let me know if they will not meet an assignment deadline, but I would work with Emily to anticipate the need for an extension sooner.

Several participants stated they would choose a one-on-one discussion to respond to the student in Case Vignette 3. However, two distinctly different approaches emerged from the surveys. While both groups wrote of confronting Melissa on the discrepancies between her words and her stated values, some participants, like the following three, were diplomatic in their confrontation:

I would remind the student that we use an experiential model for all our courses, which means a combination of didactic and reflective application of all content areas. Since she is already aware of the need to use people-first language, she can build on this as she gets perspective on the filters she uses to determine what is authentic competence on the part of her professors.

I would meet with her privately and acknowledge her contribution to our program and her experience in a related field. I would also have a discussion with her about triangulation, her need for power and recognition, subversion, tactfulness, and ask her to try to take an observational stance to her behavior and its effect on everyone involved, and to evaluate her behavior based on its impact, both real and possible.

I would reach out to this student and ask to meet with her. Then I would discuss this behavior with her as a concern (i.e. respect for others) and how this could affect her in her role as a counselor. I would try to use this as a “teachable moment” beyond the immediate situation.
Other participants, like the following two, were more direct in their confrontation:

I would ask for a private meeting with this student and directly address what I heard and give her an opportunity to explain herself and her comments. Any indicators of narcissism/arrogance would be pointed out and addressed. Inhospitable comments and demeaning remarks about instructors, classmates, clients, etc., need to be explored and are not tolerated.

I would challenge Melissa in the moment. I would ask her why she would assume that a faculty member with a doctorate in our field, and many years of experience (despite age) would not be prepared to teach? I would challenge Melissa’s inherent assumptions about people, and the incongruence with her “people first” approach.

Some participants wrote of using a one-on-one meeting for direct remediation with the student in this vignette:

I would pull Melissa aside and let her know part of this educational process is submitting to others, regardless of their age, and learning tolerance. I would issue a reprimand in writing and note this in her file so if future incidents arise, the case would be built if dismissal was necessary.

A few participants, responding to this vignette, stated they would choose to tackle ageist bias in a one-on-one meeting:

I would be aware of how Melissa treats her classmates, especially those who are younger than her. I would find an opportunity to talk with her before or after class to understand where she is coming from. I would also work to help her understand that she is exhibiting ageism towards her younger classmates. I would want her to become aware of this and the damage that it can do to others.
Another participant wrote of using a more oblique approach to confront a display of ageism:

I would ask Melissa to talk with me during break, after class, or at another convenient time for her and me and talk with her about this comment and what I have heard. I would talk with her about this, say that I see that being older and having more experience can be very beneficial and also say that the professors here are teaching because they are qualified to help students to learn and grow to become professional counselors. I would try to reinforce that while age, experience, and competence do correlate, that it is a mistake to only use age and experience to determine competence (I might relate this to multicultural competence or I might not depending on the discussion together).

Nearly all respondents included a component of discussion in their responses to one or more of the case vignettes. Exceptions were the participants in their 40s, for whom 13 of the 16 participants (81%) responded with such a statement, and those in their 70s, for whom 1 of the 3 (33%) responded in this way (see Table 20).

Table 20

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Practice Subcategories: Provide Individual Attention Outside Class</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Response</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tutorial</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Process</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: percentages do not add up to 100%.*

**Tutorial.** Many participants (n = 20), responding to Case Vignette 2, indicated they would meet with the student to help him with the technology: “I would take the time to sit down
with Robert before or after class and walk him through how to attach his assignments to [the course management system].”

This direct tutoring, content-level approach was echoed by many participants. Some stated this option as a standalone solution, including the participant who wrote, “I would help the student learn the system by showing him individually,” and the one who stated, “I would offer remediation and make sure he completed his prerequisite courses in learning Blackboard.” Others indicated a combination of direct technology tutoring with referral to another source, such as the following three: “I would offer to work with Robert regarding teaching and training him on the use of technology. I would also share our technology training videos and potentially help him make an appointment with our technology staff member.” “I would accept the paper, however, I would suggest in the future he contact the IT help desk who can walk him through submitting work on-line. I would also offer to ‘tutor’ him during my office hours.”

I would ask Robert if he contacted the IT Help Desk to see if the problem he is having can be resolved. It may be a matter of settings on his computer or a malfunction of the LMS on campus. I would then ask if Robert would like some help navigating the LMS system until he gains confidence in using it.

Some participants indicated a potential classroom accommodation, followed by an offer of direct help: “If he is not the only student having issues with the LMS, we could go over some basics in class. If he is the only student, I’d meet with him and show him.”

Three of these tutorial responses came from participants in their 30s, representing 37.5% of the 8 participants in that age group; 7 such responses came from those in their 40s (44% of the 16 in that age group), 3 from those in their 50s (30% of the 10 in that age group), 6 from those in
their 60s (40% of the 15 in that age group), and 1 from those in their 70s (33% of those in that age group) (see Table 20).

**Process.** Several participants \( (n = 7) \) responded to the vignettes with a combination of content-level and process-level interactions. For example, one participant wrote regarding Case Vignette 2,

I would ask him to come in and walk through the course management system with him again. I might have the GA have him practice submitting materials. I would explore his anxiety vs. lack of knowledge…. I would let him know that this is common and that we will work through it. I might make him a reminder sheet to assist him at home.

Another participant echoed this approach: “This happens often. I personally meet with my students to teach them. I also refer them to services in campus to train them. I would process his feelings about having to learn technology.” One participant wrote of the choice to “invite him to meet. Ask him what he thinks he needs to maximize his progress.” Another stated,

It is possible that there were problems with the on-line platform or with internet in his home (or the like) but it is also possible he is not comfortable with on-line submissions. I would need to explore this with him.

And another participant wrote,

I would have an open conversation regarding the student’s difficulties with use of the online system. I would want to get a sense of not only his apprehension and competence, but also his willingness to learn, provided that the appropriate resources and assistance were given. I would be more inclined to help him cultivate those skills than entirely exempt him from this.
Some of the participants who responded to Case Vignette 3 with a one-on-one meeting also used terms that suggested a process-oriented approach: “If I heard her directly, I would meet with her to discuss her fear of not learning. I would use lots of empathy in that meeting.”

Another participant wrote,

I would ask to meet with Melissa. I would ask her how the program was going for her, what was an area of ease and what was more challenging. I would ask her how she felt about her career change and if the transition was going as she hoped. I would ask if she felt that her experience was being honored by peers and faculty. I would then share that I had overheard her comment and that I was concerned about it. I would hear her out. If she had concerns about the competency of the former faculty member, I would encourage her to talk to that person individually and if the concern was not resolved to talk with the chair. I would be clear that our department wants to hear her concerns but that her way of raising the concerns with her peers was divisive and did not address her problems.

These process responses came from 1 of the 8 participants in their 30s (12.5% of those in that age group), as well as 1 of the 16 in their 40s (6%), 4 of the 10 in their 50s (40%), and 1 of the 15 in their 60s (7%). No such responses came from participants in their 70s (see Table 20).

**Refer to another for help.** When a participant stated they would refer the student to another source for help, that response was coded here. These responses included referrals to tutoring resources such as technology support, the library or writing center, a graduate assistant, or a peer mentor, as well as referral to the student’s advisor.

**Referral to technology support or another tutoring resource.** Many participants \((n = 29)\) wrote referral-type responses to the three vignettes. For example, several participants responded to Case Vignette 2 with the statement that they would refer the student to staff in technology
support, or the equivalent office, for tutoring services. Others proposed referrals to a peer, a
graduate assistant, the library staff, the university learning center, or the student’s teenaged
children. These options were sometimes offered as a standalone solution, and sometimes as a
part of a combined approach, as in the following:

I would accept the hard copy of Robert’s assignment without hesitation. In my opinion, it’s more important that a student complete the work than submit it in the proper format. I would ask Robert what happened that caused him to feel less comfortable using the course management system for the third assignment, since he had some prior success. Then, I would recommend that Robert seek assistance with learning how to use the course management system – at my university, such services are available to all students through the library and through our information technology department. We also have graduate assistants who might provide Robert with some support in using the technology. I would not change the way I teach the course, or allow him to turn in hard copies all the time – especially as the program requires students to use the course management system. I feel it would be a disservice to Robert to not help him learn the technology. I would not manage my course any differently. My expectation would be that Robert would turn in his assignments electronically after 1-2 more tries with the online system.

Five of the 8 participants in their 30s (67.5% of that age group) wrote referral-type responses, as did 8 of the 16 participants in their 40s (50%), 7 of the 10 in their 50s (70%), 7 of the 15 in their 60s (47%), and 2 of the 3 in their 70s (67%) (see Table 21).

Referral to student’s advisor. A few participants (n = 3) stated their response to a student in a vignette would include a referral to the student’s advisor. Two participants chose such a referral for the student in Case Vignette 3:
I would overlook the comment and then, with faculty, discuss the appropriateness of her perspectives to see if all are hearing the same concerns. If so, then the advisor might speak with her and note this concern as such prejudice will impact her working relationships with both university and clinical site professionals.

I would let Melissa’s advisor know that it may be helpful for them to meet with the student for support and understanding about education and life experience and how both of these can support professors in being a maximum aid to students.

One participant also proposed the student’s advisor as a possible referral in Case Vignette 1:

As the instructor I would meet with Emily to discuss her concerns and mine and invite her to make a plan for success with me. As a faculty we might share the concern in our student of concern meetings. This might result in asking the advisor to also meet with Emily to discuss ways to cope successfully.

One of these responses came from a participant in their 40s (representing 6% of the 16 participants in that age group), and 2 from participants in their 60s (13% of the 15 in that age group). Participants in their 30s, 50s, and 70s did not write of referral to the student’s advisor (see Table 21).

Table 21

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Practice Subcategories: Refer to Another for Help</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Response</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tutoring</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advisor</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: percentages do not add up to 100%.
Adjustment in classroom or course structure. This category includes adjustment in what is done on a day-to-day basis in the classroom, as well as adjustment in course structure to accommodate the needs of older students.

Honoring the student’s experience. A theme that emerged clearly in this category was experience. The notion of honoring nontraditional students’ life and work experience appeared to be a strong theme, as some form of the phrase “honor (or highlight) the experience” came up several times ($n = 13$) in survey responses.

Several participants responding to the student in Case Vignette 3 indicated they “would try to honor her experience but also emphasize that this is new learning and being open to new learning and new ideas is important to developing as a counselor.” Another participant’s approach to the scenario also utilized the student’s experience, though with a different emphasis:

I would try to create a sense of egalitarianism in the classroom from day 1 in Melissa’s class. I always tell my students that I have as much to learn from them as they do from me, and I strongly believe that. I ask students for examples from their personal and professional experiences, no matter their level of education or experience in the counseling field. In this scenario, I might call on Melissa a little more frequently than I would other students who I knew were new to the field, to share examples or provide a response. Still, she would not be my “go to” student to answer all of my questions. After getting to know Melissa as a student, if I felt any hesitation or resistance throughout the semester, I might meet with her individually to address her comfort in my classroom and the program as a whole. In general, this is something I would do for all of my students, though.
Aside from the prompts of the vignettes, several participants made reference to allowing nontraditional students’ experience to come to the fore in class, using words such as *honor* and *highlight*, as in the following excerpt: “I am diligent to honor their experiences and often encourage all of my students to share since they will learn as much from one another as they will from their instructors.” Another participant offered,

I have modified my approach over the years to highlight the experience that nontraditionally aged students bring into my classroom. For example, in ethics, I might ask what their experiences have been communicating with children/grandchildren that are struggling with an issue—what worked, what doesn’t work, etc.

Another wrote of having “tried to include and ‘capitalize’ on their life experience, as I would with any other aspect of diversity (without asking a student to speak for their group, yet also looking for ways to bring that student’s experience alive in the classroom).”

Some participants wrote specifically of making the most of their nontraditional students’ professional experience:

For me it seems really important to let all students bring their experiences into the classroom. I see my job as facilitating learning—not as the expert in all things counseling. If I have students that work in crisis units—I will ask them to bring in examples of clients when we talk about crisis response. I will ask students to bring in examples of groups they’ve co-led, if they’ve done that before.

This approach was echoed by another participant, who wrote, “If they have experience working in the field, I ask them about these experiences and how they have been handled and if they think what we are learning would be useful for the situation being described.”
Two of the 8 participants in their 30s (25%) wrote of honoring the experience of nontraditional students, as did 1 of the 16 in their 40s (6%), 3 of the 10 in their 50s (30%), 6 of the 15 in their 60s (40%), and 1 of the 3 in their 70s (33%) (see Table 22).

Table 22

*Practice Subcategories: Adjustment in Classroom or Course Structure*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>30s (n=8)</th>
<th>40s (n=16)</th>
<th>50s (n=10)</th>
<th>60s (n=15)</th>
<th>70s (n=3)</th>
<th>All (N=52)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Honor of students’ experience</td>
<td>2 (25%)</td>
<td>1 (6%)</td>
<td>3 (30%)</td>
<td>6 (40%)</td>
<td>1 (33%)</td>
<td>13 (25%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjustment of process</td>
<td>5 (62.5%)</td>
<td>7 (44%)</td>
<td>3 (30%)</td>
<td>8 (53%)</td>
<td>1 (33%)</td>
<td>24 (46%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjustment of content</td>
<td>1 (12.5%)</td>
<td>5 (31%)</td>
<td>2 (20%)</td>
<td>3 (20%)</td>
<td>1 (33%)</td>
<td>12 (23%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: percentages do not add up to 100%.*

*Adjustment of process.* Many participants (n = 24) wrote of various process-related adjustments they would make (or had made) for their nontraditional students. These included various changes to teaching style, classroom management, or manner, and were shared by participants in response to case vignettes as well as to other survey questions. For example, some participants reported having implemented a buddy system. One participant wrote in response to the survey’s question on modifications, “Yes, I have had to greatly alter how I teach class. One of the things I have done is to pair up a young person with a person over 40. It gives them both an opportunity to hear a different generational perspective.” Another participant wrote of the
same technique, stating, “I actually pair them with younger students, our group process integrates them into modified cohorts, and in class we use their life experience.”

Some participants stated their responses to the needs of nontraditional students have included modifying their teaching practices in order to permit more and deeper discussion:

I have started “flipping” the classroom to allow more space in the class for discussion. Older students tend to prefer discussing to listening to a lecture. I also allow time in the classroom for assignments. For example, if I have a group assignment, I allow time for the group to get together to work and plan. When people are really busy, meeting with a group is challenging. At the same time, many seem to like the group assignments. I also allow time for extra instruction on APA style and technology and so on.

Other participants alluded to an emphasis on discussion in their classrooms, such as the following two: “I ask them to share their experiences with others during discussion,” and “I much prefer discussing to me talking at students.”

Some participants responded to Case Vignette 3 with the idea of intentionally building a connection with a potentially challenging student. For example, one participant wrote,

Situations like this underscore for me the importance of maintaining a confident and assertive teaching style that maintains my authority in the classroom but does not convey arrogance about what I do not know. I often share my perception of my own limitations of knowledge and experience in teaching counseling students as I believe this to be appropriate professional role modeling. I would probably be aware of the importance of making a strong early connection with Melissa after what I had become aware of in this vignette.

Another participant wrote,
I learned from one of my very skillful supervisors that the best way to help folks who are in this particular place with regard to self-awareness and social justice constructs is to maintain contact with the person and remain affable…. I may have made it a point to include a few vignettes in class that would have highlighted ageism so that students would have had an opportunity to talk about it, and I would have been careful to show that ageism can be bidirectional.

One participant referred to a connection-building approach, using physical proximity and humor to help manage the group:

In cases like this, I have asked students for corrections and feedback. I also tend to be open about my knowledge level in certain areas. When a student is dominating group discussions, I will listen, but also move closer to allow me to interrupt without being rude so that other people can talk. I also use a ton of humor in the classroom, which can help in situations like this. When I first started teaching, instances like this really threw me off. Now that I have a few years of teaching older students, I’m more confident in what I know and how I teach so it doesn’t bother me if students are more vocal about correcting me. Now, I do still struggle to balance voices in group discussions when there are really talkative people.

Another participant wrote,

I don’t think my curriculum changes but I might check in with certain students more frequently. For example, I had a 60+ year old male student who struggled with technology and I will frequently make sure that he understands and a walk through PowerPoint with him or other activities that involve technology because I know it makes
him anxious. I also tried to encourage and empower all students and ensure that everyone
has a voice in my classes.

Five of the 8 participants in their 30s (62.5%) wrote of making adjustments to process, as
did 7 of the 16 in their 40s (44%), 3 of the 10 in their 50s (30%), 8 of the 15 in their 60s (53%),
and 1 of the 3 in their 70s (33%) (see Table 22).

Adjustment of course content or structure. Several participants \((n = 12)\) wrote of
content-related modifications they had made or would make to a course for their nontraditional
students. These too were shared in response to case vignettes as well as to other survey
questions. For example, one participant stated,

I would ask students to write what they hope to gain from the course and sign their name.
I would then review each comment and share the major themes with the course the
following week. I would seek to meet the objectives of the course and the unique
preferences of the students enrolled.

Another participant wrote of “providing more in class explanations of APA style writing,
grammar, punctuation, technology assistance etc.” Another made reference to having “adjusted
point structure to leave room for students who simply will not prioritize the assignments (for
competing demands, or other reasons not related to the 40+ population, but benefitting them as
well).” Still another responded that “course structure is designed to accommodate students who
may experience a multitude of challenges, whether due to generational, cultural, or other aspects
of their identities and experiences.”

One of the 8 participants in their 30s (12.5%) wrote of making adjustments to course
content or structure, as did 5 of the 16 in their 40s (31%), 2 of the 10 in their 50s (20%), 3 of the
15 in their 60s (20%), and 1 of the 3 in their 70s (33%) (see Table 22).
Introspection and self-awareness. A few participants \((n = 5)\) gave responses indicating an awareness of their own part in the age dynamic related to their work with nontraditional students, and wrote of how that process of self-reflection had impacted their teaching at the individual or program level. Their responses were coded to this category. For example, one participant wrote the following statement regarding Case Vignette 3:

Every class that I teach begins with guiding values and principles that are collectively developed by the class. While I am sure that after overhearing this student, I would be more sensitive to any slight criticism (which I will have to keep in check), but in instances where any inappropriate statements were raised by Melissa, I would reflect this response back and inquire about how this statement measures up with the guiding values of the class.

Another participant’s response to this vignette reflected awareness of the student/faculty age dynamic:

Given that I am 34 and female, my demographics may come into play here as well. Depending on the class content, I may devise a class activity designed to encourage conversation about some of the things that may be playing out for Melissa. She probably isn’t the only one feeling vulnerable in their new identities as students and it may be beneficial for everyone to discuss current anxieties about being in school, becoming counselors, etc.

Aside from the prompts of Case Vignette 3, some participants’ responses also included comments on their own age relative to that of their nontraditional students, including the following two:
Given my age, I just have to be careful to not let my ego get in the way and feel threatened when my students have more experience than me. In the end, I’m the one with the Ph.D. and know how to facilitate the learning environment. But, if there is a student with life experience doing something else – it’s important to highlight that and not take it as a signal that I’m not good enough or smart enough.

I mentioned this before, but my biggest challenge is managing the talkers. I am younger than these students. I am really introverted. And I am really non-confrontational. So I have a hard time shutting down talkers – especially when they have stronger personalities and opinions – to give space for the quieter students to share.

Similarly, a more senior participant reflected back on early-career interactions with students:

Again, these kinds of experiences are not uncommon (for a variety of challenges) and have been incorporated into my teaching and classroom management style along the way. When I was a younger professor I think this was more challenging for me because some students didn’t want to take feedback from me as a younger professor. I also see this with my new-professional colleagues and in my mentoring role attempt to support them while also responding to student comments in my classes that infer some student bias/blind spots.

These introspection or self-awareness responses were given by 4 of the 8 participants in their 30s (50%) and 1 of the 10 participants in their 50s (10%) (see Table 23).
Table 23

**Practice Subcategory: Introspection**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>30s (n=8)</th>
<th>40s (n=16)</th>
<th>50s (n=10)</th>
<th>60s (n=15)</th>
<th>70s (n=3)</th>
<th>All (N=52)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introspection</td>
<td>4 (50%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>1 (10%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>5 (10%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Modifications to teaching.** One of the survey questions asked participants, “As you’ve worked with nontraditional (age 40+) students, have you modified your approach or any of your teaching practices, either to make the most of these students’ positive qualities or to accommodate their challenges? If so, how? Please give an example if you can.”

Forty percent of the survey’s participants stated they had modified their approach or teaching practices (see Table 24). However, this seems to break down by age group: while two-thirds of participants in their 60s and 70s reported they had made such modifications, the majority of participants in their 30s, 40s, and 50s stated they had not made such modifications in their teaching or approach for their nontraditional students. Several participants stated that they do not modify the way they teach based on a student’s age. For example, one wrote,

> I like having older students in the room. They bring a lot of life experience and insight to discussions. But when it comes right down to it they are all really unique in their talents and challenges, in their confidence and in their anxieties. I try to respond to each based on their own needs.

Another stated, “I wouldn’t offer an accommodation based on age – I offer accommodations based on disabilities or life situations (which occur for both traditional and nontraditional students).”
Table 24

*Modifications to Teaching Practices Related to Age 40+ Students, by Participant Age*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>30s (n=8)</th>
<th>40s (n=16)</th>
<th>50s (n=10)</th>
<th>60s (n=15)</th>
<th>70s (n=3)</th>
<th>All (N=52)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>1 (12.5%)</td>
<td>6 (37.5%)</td>
<td>3 (30%)</td>
<td>9 (60%)</td>
<td>2 (67%)</td>
<td>21 (40%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>6 (75%)</td>
<td>8 (50%)</td>
<td>7 (70%)</td>
<td>5 (33%)</td>
<td>1 (33%)</td>
<td>27 (52%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No response</td>
<td>1 (12.5%)</td>
<td>2 (12.5%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>1 (7%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>4 (8%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Stories**

Near the end of the survey, participants were invited to share a story of a memorable nontraditional student, and several obliged. Their stories represented successes as well as struggles. For example, one participant reflected on a challenging student:

My most difficult student came from the 40+ age group. This student was outspoken – often inappropriately – attacking and critical of faculty. Her focus was what she perceived as injustice to herself or a classmate and was confrontational in her approach to remediating the problem. As I reflect back, I don’t think I handled the situation well. She complained, went to the Dean, encouraged her classmates to do the same. I found myself avoiding her. I had two face to face meetings but they were not successful. Obviously, this changed me. I know now to redirect individuals who are demoralizing and would sit with them and reflect on our dispositions for being a counselor.

Another participant wrote of a student whose personal struggles contributed to the classroom, yet also needed to be addressed in counseling:

I had a student… who had assisted in caring for her parents until their death…. She had so much rich experience to share with our younger students, and really added to the
learning environment. However, she also had some transference that needed to be addressed through professional counseling.

One participant wrote about several students’ inspirational personal growth:

I can think of at least 5 students who grew exponentially compared to their younger counterparts, which was beautiful to see. They seemed more secure in their identity and therefore, more open to growing. These are students who inspire others and really help the whole group move forward in their growth.

Another participant also reflected on a student’s personal evolution:

I taught a student who had been through some very challenging life experiences. Her sense of the world had been shocked out of place. Brilliant as she was, her defining characteristic was “perfection.” I worked with her to allow herself to be imperfect as a counselor, writer, test-taker, etc. After her many years of practice (she was in her mid-40s at the time), she yielded her need to be perfect. It was a truly amazing metamorphosis.

**Presentation of Emergent Themes**

After the initial analysis, two additional themes emerged. First, the responses to the vignettes were analyzed to look for indications of how participants’ perceptions might shape their teaching practices, based on their own report. Second, since the concept of ageism emerged in a few different ways, all such responses were analyzed by participant. Descriptions of these two themes follow.

**The Impact of Perception on Practice**

Some participants responded to one or more of the case vignettes using empathy language, e.g., “Emily may be struggling…,” “She is adjusting…,” or “I imagine she is feeling overwhelmed….” Participants who reported perceptions of the students using empathy language
in the three case vignettes were more likely to choose a flexible response to those hypothetical students’ situations. Conversely, participants who reported perceptions without using empathy language seemed to be less likely to demonstrate flexibility in their response. For example, regarding Robert, the student in Case Vignette 2, one participant wrote the following perception: “Robert is facing a lot of new things – which can be intimidating. Being a new student is hard enough, but when you add new technology and maybe Robert is the oldest in the class, it can be an extra challenge to manage that stress.” Related to the practical response to this scenario, the same participant then wrote,

I would accept the hard copy – unless for some reason it needed to be turned in online.

Then, I would ask that he bring a laptop or a flash drive with his next assignment so I could show him how to submit the assignments online during class time one weekend. I would also add time for extra instruction about technology when necessary. In my experience, though, this usually isn’t necessary because other students will jump in and support students like this at the beginning – as they are learning the technology.

By contrast, another participant expressed the perception that “Robert does not know how to work with technology.” This participant then stated that, in response,

I would first check to make sure that the school’s system was not down. Then I would inform Robert that he’s going to fail the assignment. Then I would encourage Robert to make some time to meet with institutional technology.

Similar perception/practice pairings were observed in participants’ responses to the other two vignettes. Interestingly, Case Vignettes 1 (Emily) and 2 (Robert) received about twice as many empathetic participant responses as Case Vignette 3 (Melissa). This last vignette’s student seemed much less likely to elicit empathy from participants. However, 10 participants gave a
perception response that indicated some empathy for Melissa and some insight into what was going on for her, speculating that she was feeling anxious, insecure, and vulnerable. For example, one participant stated,

I believe this student has some anxiety and nervousness about the program and her classes. I suspect she feels a bit out of place as she has already been a “professional,” and this transition back to being a student is challenging her.

These 10 participants gave practice-related responses that reflected this empathy and insight. For example, the aforementioned participant followed up the above statement, writing, “I would encourage her at every opportunity to make meaning out of the material and experiences as a life-long learner and challenge her to get her money’s worth in the program.” Another wrote the following perception and practical response answer pair:

I would assume she feels insecure and is overcompensating by putting others down. I would also want to capitalize on what knowledge she has by asking her to contribute in class…. I would invite her to share her knowledge. I personally learn a lot from all of my students. If I heard her directly, I would meet with her to discuss her fear of not learning. I would use lots of empathy in that meeting.

By contrast, another participant wrote this perception/practical response answer pair regarding the same hypothetical student:

She is over-qualified to learn anything from anyone her [junior]. She is also closed-minded…. I would pull Melissa aside and let her know part of this educational process is submitting to others, regardless of their age, and learning tolerance. I would issue a
reprimand in writing and note this in her file so if future incidents arise, the case would be built if dismissal was necessary.

This finding and some of its implications will be explored further in Chapter 5.

**Ageism**

Ageism was mentioned or alluded to by 20 out of the 52 participants. Seven of those 20 mentioned ageism outside the related prompts of Case Vignette 3. Of these seven, four participants referenced a perception of some older students harboring ageist attitudes toward younger faculty or students, as demonstrated through condescension, avoidance, or disrespect; two participants referenced a perception of the older student as the recipient of others’ ageist attitudes; one participant mentioned both.

Within the prompt of Case Vignette 3, 14 participants mentioned or alluded to ageism. Of these, 11 used *ageism, ageist,* and related words to characterize Melissa’s attitude toward those younger than herself; some of these participants connected the concept of age discrimination to the cultural competence and social justice elements that are included in counselor training. The other three participants indicated the possibility of ageism being “both prejudice against those older and younger” or “bidirectional.”

The emergence of ageism as a theme in the survey responses resulted in additional literature being added to the current work, in order to give background to this issue. This study’s ageism theme and its implications will be discussed at greater length in Chapter 5.

**Summary**

This study used an open-ended survey design to discover counselor educators’ perceptions of their nontraditional (age 40+) students, and the ways those perceptions may shape
their teaching practice. This chapter includes the themes of participants’ responses, as well as the categories those responses were grouped into.

The perception-related themes were grouped into eight categories, suggested by the survey questions: relationships with faculty included themes of respect, enthusiasm, dismissiveness, over-familiarity, greater need for outside-class faculty support, participant enjoyment of 40+ students, and age bias against younger faculty; relationships with classmates included leadership, parental role, collegiality, age barrier, and apprehension. The academic performance category included themes of engagement, transition, pushiness, perfectionism, and variability; specific academic demands included themes of technology, academic rigor, and variability. The counseling skills category included themes of life and work experience, resistance/rigidity/blind spots, and variability. The outside supports category included themes of family/friends, workplace, counselor support, and absent support or active non-support; the external demands category included themes of family, work/finances, time management, health concerns, and variability. The final miscellaneous category included themes of nontraditional students as recipients of age bias, and general variability.

The practice-related themes emerged from participant responses and were also grouped into eight categories: refer to existing policy and potential for flexibility had no subcategories or themes. The category of provide individual attention outside class included subcategories of discussion, tutorial, and process; the category of refer to another for help included tutoring from technology support or another tutoring resource (such as the institution’s library or writing center, a graduate assistant, or a peer mentor), and advisement from the student’s advisor. The adjustment in classroom or course structure category included themes of honor of student experience, adjustment of process or approach, and adjustment of course content or structure.
The introspection and self-awareness category contained no subcategories or themes. An additional category covered the reports of those participants who responded that they do not modify their teaching based on a student’s age. A final category covered participants’ accounts of the modifications or accommodations that have been made at the program level. The section included a few of the stories related by participants of nontraditional student successes and struggles. Finally, the chapter briefly described two themes that emerged from the analysis: the impact of perception on practice, and ageism. These themes will be discussed further in Chapter 5.
CHAPTER 5
DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Statistics from the Department of Education indicate that the number of nontraditional graduate students in the United States has doubled in the last 30 years, and that students age 40 and older consistently represent approximately 20% of the graduate student population (NCES, 2015). Master’s-level counseling programs likely reflect these numbers. In fact, enrollment in counseling programs by students 40 and older may be higher, as some studies suggest that counseling is among the fields that may be sought out by adults looking to change careers at midlife and later (Bluestone & Melnik, 2010; Schaefer, 2012). These nontraditional students bring with them their own characteristics of age, life stage, and experience, and they have distinct strengths and challenges that set them apart from the traditional students in the classroom.

While a few studies have been conducted that explore the experience of older graduate students, no research has yet explored faculty perceptions of this group of students, or how these perceptions may impact faculty teaching practices. In addition, there is a lack of research exploring the experiences of faculty teaching nontraditional students in master’s-level counseling programs. How have counselor educators responded to these students in their classrooms? The purpose of this qualitative study was to describe faculty perceptions of and experiences with their nontraditional (age 40 and up) master’s-level counseling students, and to explore the ways in which those perceptions and experiences shape faculty teaching practices.

This final chapter succinctly answers the main research questions. It goes on to discuss the study’s major results and their relationship to existing studies as well as the implications for future research and for the field.

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Insight into Research Questions Through Emergent Themes

The intent of distilling the participants’ survey responses into themes was to provide insight into the research questions noted in Chapters One and Three. The research questions for this study were: a) What are counselor educators’ perceptions of nontraditional (age 40 and up) master’s-level counseling students? and b) How have these perceptions and experiences shaped faculty teaching practices? Each theme helps lend understanding to counselor educators’ work with nontraditional students.

What Are Counselor Educators’ Perceptions of Nontraditional Master’s-Level Counseling Students?

This study began with the premise that counselor educators’ perceptions of their nontraditional students might have an effect on their teaching. It was important, then, to seek an understanding of those perceptions. Counselor educators are a diverse group, and their perceptions of older students are not uniform. Older students themselves are also not a monolithic group, yet as a sizable group in graduate counseling programs, they are an important subset of the graduate school population. Several study participants stated the impossibility of making generalizations about this group of students, and this assertion appeared in several categories as variability themes. In addition, the perception-related themes that emerged were not universally positive or negative, even within each participant’s response. Survey participants observed both strengths and challenges to be characteristic of their nontraditional students. It seems age can bring benefits to the counseling classroom, such as experience, enthusiasm, and engagement, while it can also bring challenges such as perfectionism, rigidity, and an overly familiar demeanor with faculty.

In addition, many participants wrote of a perception of their older students’ greater need for faculty support outside the classroom, and reported the perception of a high number of
external demands competing for nontraditional students’ time and energy. Even with all these seeming drawbacks, several participants expressed enjoyment of nontraditional students and asserted that their presence in the classroom contributes to learning. Some participants even expressed a preference for older students. Despite the challenges, many of the counselor educators who participated in the survey seemed to appreciate nontraditional students and value their presence in the classroom.

**How Have These Perceptions and Experiences Shaped Faculty Teaching Practices?**

More than half of the survey’s participants asserted that they do not make classroom or course adjustments for their nontraditional students, or that their teaching methods are geared to accommodate everyone. However, nearly all participants wrote of the ways they had worked or would work to support older students’ learning both within and outside the classroom, including providing individual discussion, tutoring, and processing when needed. Moreover, several participants enumerated the ways in which their program strives to accommodate the needs of nontraditional students.

Perhaps more significantly, several participants seemed to indicate that their older students’ presence, while challenging, causes them to confront their own vulnerability and proneness to self-doubt. This type of self-awareness on the part of counselor educators can only benefit them in their work, which in turn benefits their students.

**Relationship of Results to Existing Studies**

Many of the themes that emerged from the survey were represented to some degree in the research, shown in the following tables. Table 21 shows the perception-related themes, organized by valence: positive characteristics or strengths within each category are grouped and preceded by a plus, while negative characteristics or challenges are likewise grouped and preceded by a
### Cross-walk Table of Response Themes and Related Literature: Perception

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response Themes</th>
<th>Related Literature</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Relationships with faculty:</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+ respect, enthusiasm, participant</td>
<td>Brinthaupt &amp; Eady, 2014; Day et al., 2011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>enjoyment of age 40+ students</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>– dismissiveness, over-familiarity, greater</td>
<td>Empirical research lacking; literature yields only popularly-oriented first-person articles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>need for outside-class faculty support,</td>
<td>(Hanlon, 2016; Klotz, 2015; Reynolds, 2016)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>age-biased against younger faculty</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Relationships with classmates:</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+ leadership, collegiality</td>
<td>Brinthaupt &amp; Eady, 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>– parental role, age barrier, apprehension</td>
<td>Day et al., 2011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Academic performance:</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+ engagement</td>
<td>Brinthaupt &amp; Eady, 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>– transition, pushiness, perfectionism</td>
<td>Anderson et al., 2012; Brinthaupt &amp; Eady, 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Specific academic demands:</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>– technology, academic rigor</td>
<td>Ellis, 2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Counseling skills:</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+ life and work experience</td>
<td>Gutierrez et al., 2017; Zosky et al., 2003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>– blind spots, resistance, rigidity</td>
<td>Erikson, 1968</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Outside supports:

| + family, friends, workplace, counselors | Christensen, 2003 |
| – active non-support, absent support | Gap in literature |

External demands:

| – family, work, finances, health | Day et al., 2011; Lachman, 2015; Parker & Patten, 2013; Schaefers, 2012 |

Other themes:

| – age discrimination from others | Mallman & Lee, 2016; Simi & Matusitz, 2016 |

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### Table 26

**Cross-walk Table of Response Themes and Related Literature: Practice**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response Themes</th>
<th>Related Literature</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Refer to existing policy</td>
<td>Gap in literature</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Potential for flexibility</td>
<td>Brinthaupt &amp; Eady, 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide individual attention outside class</td>
<td>Brinthaupt &amp; Eady, 2014; Hostetler, 2004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Refer to another for help</td>
<td>Gap in literature</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjustment in classroom or course structure</td>
<td>Brinthaupt &amp; Eady, 2014; Day et al., 2011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introspection and self-awareness/self-adaptation/self-management</td>
<td>Gap in literature</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other modification or accommodation</td>
<td>Uyder, 2008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No classroom modification</td>
<td>Brinthaupt &amp; Eady, 2014</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 22 shows the response-related themes and their relationship to existing literature. Perception themes are also grouped by valence in the writeup that follows the tables.

**Counselor Educators’ Perception of Nontraditional Students**

**Relationships with faculty.** This study’s finding of counselor educators’ perceptions of their nontraditional students as *enjoyable* and *enthusiastic* is also found in Brinthaupt and Eady (2014), whose findings suggested that faculty liked having adult learners in classes for the diversity, motivation, and real-life application they brought to the classroom. Similar faculty perceptions of older students were also found in Day et al. (2011), along with the perception that older students are “more civil” (p. 79), which mirrors the current study’s theme of counselor educators’ perception of their nontraditional students’ *respect* for faculty.

The theme of counselor educators’ perceptions of *dismissiveness*, *over-familiarity*, and *age bias against younger faculty* were not found in peer-reviewed scholarly research literature. However, several popularly-oriented first-person articles allude to these perceptions (Hanlon, 2016; Klotz, 2015; Reynolds, 2016).

**Relationships with classmates.** In the current study, counselor educators reported perceptions of their nontraditional students’ relationships with younger classmates characterized by *leadership* and *collegiality*. The faculty surveyed by Brinthaupt and Eady (2014) perceived that their older students “blend in well with their traditional students,” which is similar to the collegiality theme.

In the same category, this study also found themes indicating that counselor educators perceive their nontraditional students taking a *parental role*, feeling *apprehensive*, and sensing the presence of an *age barrier* with their classmates. These perceptions were not found in the
reviewed literature. Faculty participants in the Day et al. (2011) study perceived their older students as lacking in confidence, but that perception related to the students’ academic skills.

**Academic performance.** The theme of faculty perception of older students’ engagement in the classroom was similar to Brinthaupt and Eady’s (2014) findings, where faculty participants indicated they found their older students were “generally better at time management, more motivated, and can work more independently than their traditional students” (p. 136).

Participants in the current study reported perceptions that their nontraditional students struggle with transition to the classroom environment. Anderson and colleagues (2012) wrote at length about transition; in their book, the type of transition experienced by older graduate students would likely come under the heading of work transitions. Also in the current study were themes of pushiness and perfectionism, which may mirror Brinthaupt and Eady’s findings regarding faculty reports that their older students were “more grade conscious than their traditional students” (2014, p. 136).

**Specific academic demands.** Participants in the current study reported a perception that their students struggled with technology and with aspects of academic rigor. Ellis’s research (2013) with undergraduates over age 55 indicates that some nontraditional students may find it difficult to keep up with the technological expectations of the classroom.

**Counseling skills.** In the current study, several participants reported the perception that nontraditional students’ life and work experience benefited their counseling skill development. Gutierrez and colleagues’ (2017) study of master’s-level counseling trainees suggested that older students demonstrated higher empathy and emotional intelligence. Zosky and colleagues’ (2003) research with field practicum instructors of bachelor’s-level social work students suggested that
nontraditional students demonstrated more skill than traditional students in a litany of skill-based activities.

Some participants in the current study listed challenges in this area as well, including resistance, rigidity, and blind spots. Although these specific themes did not appear in recent literature, they are perhaps alluded to in Erikson’s statement about the “pervading sense of stagnation, boredom, and interpersonal impoverishment” that may result if his Stage VI is not successfully completed (1968, p. 138).

Outside supports. Counselor educators who participated in the current study listed several perceptions of their nontraditional students’ sources of support outside the classroom, including family, friends, workplace, and students’ own counselors. Although the workplace and counselor themes did not emerge in the reviewed literature, the support of family and friends was also listed by Christensen (2003) as important motivators for those embarking on a midlife career change to education.

The current study’s themes of active non-support and absent support were not covered in the reviewed literature.

External demands. Many participants in the current study reported the perception of multiple demands outside of school competing for the time and attention of their nontraditional students. These external demands included family, work, finances, and health. Several recent studies had similar findings, including Day et al., who found that “most adult learners have responsibilities beyond schoolwork, such as children and jobs” (2011, p. 80), Parker and Patten (2013), who profiled the generation “sandwiched” between aging parents and teenaged or adult children and providing support to both, and Schaefer (2012), who cited the financial strain that comes with making a career transition at midlife. Related to the health theme, Lachman (2015)
acknowledged the reality of physical decline in an otherwise positive assessment of the phenomenon of midlife.

Other themes. Mallman and Lee’s (2016) study of nontraditional first-year undergraduates found that older students felt marginalized by the institution’s higher expectation and fewer institutional supports, as well as by encounters of stigmatization from classmates. Simi and Matusitz also found evidence of such institutional marginalization of older students, stating, “Whether it is policy, curriculum, attitudes, teaching environment, or financial aid, adult undergraduates report being abandoned, receiving prejudice, and rejected from opportunities” (2016, p. 397). The current study’s theme of ageism emerged from the comments of participants who expressed the perception that their older students were the recipients of age discrimination from classmates and faculty members.

Counselor Educators’ Practice of Teaching

Refer to existing policy. Although this theme emerged from the survey data, it appears to be absent in the literature. This response bore some similarity to the “no modification” response in the sense that participants stated they would not make a change in their teaching or interaction style to accommodate a student, with the exception that participants reported they would point out to the student any existing policies related to an issue.

Potential for flexibility. Many participants in the current study indicated a potential for flexibility with their nontraditional students. Interestingly, some participants who responded with a “no modification” response or a “refer to existing policy” response followed that statement with an indication of flexibility related to a deadline, which was coded as a reminder of the policy followed by flexibility. Similarly, Brinhaupt and Eady (2014) found faculty to be “more flexible with class deadlines for their adult learners than for their traditional students” (p. 136).
Provide individual attention outside class. Most participants in this study stated they would provide various types of individual attention to nontraditional students. This was also a finding in Brinthaupt and Eady (2014), whose faculty participants indicated that “they are more likely to speak with a nontraditional student after or outside of class than with a traditional student” (p. 136). Similarly, Hostetler’s study of graduate students found that professors’ helpful attitudes were the strongest predictor of participants’ satisfaction with the student role (2004).

Refer to another for help. Although this theme emerged strongly from the survey data, it appears to be absent in the literature.

Adjustment in classroom or course structure. Many participants in the current study stated they would encourage their nontraditional students to speak up in discussions, and several wrote about honoring the life and work experience of these students in class. Participants in Brinthaupt and Eady’s study stated “they make a special effort to encourage their adult learners to participate in class discussions” (2014, p. 136); Day et al. wrote about faculty building on students’ life experience, saying “Inviting students to share their pertinent experiences to enrich what they were covering in class was a major strategy participants used with adult learners” (2011, p. 80).

Introspection and self-awareness. This theme from the current study was not covered in the reviewed literature.

Other modification. Several participants in the current study wrote about program-level adjustments and modifications intended to accommodate nontraditional students. Uyder’s (2008) dissertation study on graduate students’ experiences and perceptions suggested that a lockstep cohort program model addressed some of the needs of nontraditional graduate students and alleviated many adjustment issues this group tends to face.
No modification. Several participants in the current study stated they made no modifications for their nontraditional students. Faculty who participated in Brinthaupt and Eady’s study “reported not treating their adult learners any differently from their traditional students, other than by encouraging their nontraditional students to participate in class” (p. 136).

Discussion of Major Results

As is true of any other relationship, nontraditional students and faculty both enter into the teacher-student relationship with their own biases and preconceptions. Each brings a complex mix of prior experiences, biases, age, and career stage, and these aspects likely influence the way interactions are interpreted. These interpretations can in turn affect actions on both individuals’ parts. With that caveat regarding reciprocal influence, the discussion of this study’s findings follows.

Perceptions

For the first category, Relationships with Faculty (see Table 10), many responses varied by participants’ age group. The subcategories of greater need for outside-class faculty support and age-biased toward younger faculty showed similar numbers across all ages. However, the perceptions of enthusiasm and dismissiveness were highest for participants on the younger end of the spectrum, while the response of enjoyment was 0% for participants in their 30s and increased steadily through the decades to 100% for participants in their 70s. The perception of respect and over-familiarity were both reported more by participants in their 50s, with the lowest numbers at both ends of the age spectrum. This combination of findings may suggest that younger counselor educators, while they see their older students’ enthusiasm, may also feel dismissed and disrespected by those students: the word “arrogant” (used by two participants) and the terms “dismissive,” “insistence they know more than you,” “disrespectful of younger faculty,” and
“avoidant of younger faculty” (each used by one participant) were all reported by participants under 50. The findings also suggest that, irrespective of their own age, counselor educators may perceive their nontraditional students as holding an age bias toward younger faculty, and this perception may get in the way of younger counselor educators’ ability to enjoy their nontraditional students, perhaps because it affects them directly.

The category of Relationships with Classmates (see Table 12) also showed some variance of response by participants’ ages, with the characteristics of parental role and age barrier being reported more often by participants in their 30s and 40s, and characteristics of leadership and apprehension by those in their 50s, 60s, and 70s. The characteristic of collegiality was reported most frequently by those in their 40s, 60s, and 70s. These responses may indicate that younger counselor educators perceive their nontraditional students’ being somewhat resistant to forming peer-level relationships with younger classmates, and that those relationships that are formed may tend to have a parental quality. Older counselor educators, on the other hand, seem to be more likely to perceive relationships between their traditional and nontraditional students as collegial. It is possible that both groups are reflecting on the same behaviors, and the behaviors perceived by younger participants as parental are seen by older participants as mentoring.

In the Academic Performance category (see Table 13), participants in their 40s, 50s, and 60s reported the perception of their nontraditional students as engaged and academically strong more frequently than did participants in their 30s or 70s. The perception of variability (i.e., participants who reported an inability to generalize academic performance by age) showed a similar pattern. The characteristic of perfectionism was noted most often by participants in their 30s and 40s. Again, this may be a matter of perspective: younger faculty may perceive their
nontraditional students’ engagement in classes as perfectionism, or older faculty may perceive their nontraditional students’ perfectionism as academic strength.

In the category of Counseling Skills (see Table 15), a strong majority of participants in their 40s, 50s, 60s, and 70s reported the perception that their nontraditional students benefit from their life and work experience, while no participants in their 30s reported this perception. The perception of nontraditional students’ resistance to learning new skills showed up in every age group, but was reported most by participants in their 50s, and second most by those in their 30s. Participants in their 30s, 40s, and 50s reported the greatest perception of variability in this category. These perceptions may suggest that older counselor educators find their nontraditional students’ life and work experience to be more transferable to the counseling field, while younger faculty may be more aware of the ways that experience can get in the way of learning the required skills.

The category of Outside Supports (see Table 16) saw the greatest number of variability responses. All participants in their 70s and half of those in their 30s reported this perception that their nontraditional students’ support systems varied greatly. Participants in their 30s, 40s, and 50s reported the perception that their nontraditional students have strong outside supports; these same age groups also listed family and friends as the source of that support. This may indicate that, while counselor educators of all age groups are aware of the variability of their nontraditional students’ support networks, younger faculty may be more aware of their older students’ sources of support.

In terms of challenges faced by nontraditional students, issues with technology and academic rigor were reported most frequently by participants in their 30s and 40s (see Table 14), which may suggest greater concern with these issues on the part of younger faculty, or perhaps a
greater perception on the part of older faculty of their own ability to help students resolve these issues. The external demands of family were reported by all participants in their 30s, and this perception decreased through each successive age group; at the same time, challenges with health and work/finances were most reported by participants in their 60s, and issues with time management were most reported by those in their 50s and 60s (see Table 17). These reported perceptions may indicate a tendency on the part of counselor educators to be more aware of issues that mirror their own.

Participants’ reported perceptions suggest that the qualities characterizing nontraditional master’s degree counseling students may have both positive and negative aspects in the counseling classroom. The additional years of life can yield strengths in the classroom, such as leadership, and challenges, such as a parental tone. The by-product of those years, additional work and life experience, can yield pluses such as high engagement and enhanced empathy, and minuses such as dismissiveness and rigidity.

Counselor educators perceive many of their nontraditional students as having strong support systems outside the academic environment. Even so, they are also perceived as having multiple outside demands, which may compete for their time and attention. The perception of nontraditional students needing more outside support seems to line up with the high number of practice-related responses from counselor educators indicating they would meet privately with a student to address an issue.

Perhaps the most interesting results from the current study were the statements on age discrimination: counselor educators perceived older students as both recipients, and sometimes as perpetuators, of ageist attitudes.
Practices

Older counselor educators were far more likely than younger counselor educators to report that they had modified or would modify their approach or teaching practices to capitalize on the strengths or accommodate the challenges of their nontraditional students (see Table 24). Participants’ replies that were coded as flexibility (see Table 19) showed a similar age distribution, as did the adjustment-related subcategories of honor of students’ experience and adjustment of content or structure (see Table 22). Strategies or solutions for helping students with specific issues were less clearly divided: regardless of age, nearly all participants reported the intention to take the time to privately discuss students’ challenges, and many faculty in every age group (30% - 44%) reported the willingness to provide tutoring to help students over technology hurdles (see Table 20).

The Impact of Perception on Practice

The three case vignettes were written to stir participants’ memories, to help them begin to recall similar situations in their own experience. Case Vignettes 1 (Emily) and 2 (Robert) were intentionally written with easily relatable characters and situations. Case Vignette 3 (Melissa) was intentionally written with a more abrasive character and a more difficult situation. Not surprisingly, Case Vignette 3 received about half as many empathetic responses from participants than did either of the other two vignettes. Those participants whose perception responses reflected that they were able to find some empathy for Melissa, e.g., noting her probable anxiety and insecurity, also gave empathetic practical responses. Moreover, those participants’ responses very often contained an element of introspection, for example reflecting upon their own young age and stating an intention, as one participant wrote, to “not let my ego get in the way and feel threatened when my students have more experience than me.”
This disciplined and intentional non-defensive posture requires not only empathy skills on the part of the counselor educator, but a great deal of self-awareness, preparation, and training. This will be revisited later in this chapter.

The Bidirectionality of Ageism

Psychiatrist Robert Butler is credited with coining the word *ageism* in 1969, a word he defined as “prejudice by one age group toward other age groups”:

*Ageism describes the subjective experiences implied in the popular notion of the generation gap. Prejudice of the middle-aged against the old in this instance, and against the young in others, is a serious national problem. Ageism reflects a deep seated uneasiness on the part of the young and middle-aged— a personal revulsion to and distaste for growing old, disease, disability; and fear of powerlessness, ‘uselessness,’ and death.* (Butler, 1969, p. 243)

He goes on to describe the distrust held by members of each age group toward members of other age groups: “Ageism is also seen in other groups. The young may not trust anyone over 30; but those over 30 may not trust anyone younger” (p. 244). Although Butler named and described ageism in 1969, little research has been conducted on the phenomenon since then. Writing 45 years after Butler’s article, Nelson explains the reason for this dearth of research on ageism: “age prejudice is one of the most socially condoned, institutionalized forms of prejudice in the world— especially in the United States— today” (2014, p. ix).

In the university culture, older students are in the minority (Mallman & Lee, 2016). Age discrimination, or ageism, could be a part of nontraditional master’s-level counseling students’ experience. Simi and Matusitz (2016) note that older students can find themselves with fewer institutional resources and less faculty attention than their younger peers. This can be further
complicated by other factors, such as a student’s race, gender, and socioeconomic status (Butler, 1969; Mallman & Lee, 2016; Simi & Matusitz, 2016). Age discrimination may even come from members of one’s own age group. In an examination of research on social identity theory, Kite and Wagner (2014) found that, contrary to the predictions of social identity theory that members of a group evaluate their fellow group members more positively than members of other groups – a prediction that is true of younger adults and middle-aged adults – “older adults... evaluated younger adults more positively than they did older adults” (p. 150). The authors suggest that attitudes toward older adults may, in many cases, “imply ‘other’ older adults” (p. 153).

Age discrimination could impact student learning, whether such discrimination is perceived by the student to come from peers, faculty, or the institution. Counselor educators need to be aware of and responsive to this issue, since CACREP standards direct that “The academic unit makes continuous and systematic efforts to attract, enroll, and retain a diverse group of students and to create and support an inclusive learning community” (2016, Section 1, Standard K). CACREP standards further specify that counselor educators are to cover issues of social and cultural diversity in the curriculum (2016, Section 2, Standard D2), as well as issues of lifespan development (2016, Section 2, Standard D3). Age is both a diversity factor and a developmental concern, so it follows that counselor educators are expected to competently teach students of varied ages.

Butler’s original conception of ageism includes not only age discrimination toward older people, but also elders’ age discrimination toward those younger than themselves: “The young may not trust anyone over 30; but those over 30 may not trust anyone younger” (1969, p. 244). As one study participant wrote, “ageism can be bidirectional,” referring to the perception that nontraditional students may be recipients of age discrimination by faculty, classmates, and the
institution, as well as perpetuators of age discrimination toward their younger professors and classmates. This observation was consistent with the study’s findings.

Kite and Wagner view ageism through a three-part model – affective, cognitive, and behavioral – and state that “ageist attitudes are best thought of as a constellation of these three factors, each of which can have a positive or negative component” (2014, p. 131). This model may help explain the complexity of the survey’s themes. As mentioned previously, some participants wrote of perceptions of their nontraditional students expressing an ageist bias toward younger faculty. Some of these responses were prompted by Case Vignette 3, but several related statements appeared in other portions of the survey. For example, one participant reported having witnessed older students “be disrespectful to faculty who are younger than them.”

Other participants wrote of nontraditional students as the recipients of ageism from others, both faculty members and fellow students. One participant wrote of the perception that nontraditional students have mistrust of the educational system as a whole. They may feel somewhat out of place with their younger cohorts. I’ve seen several nontraditional students deal with ageism from their peers or faculty members in a very passive way – I’ve wondered sometimes if they feel there is nothing they can do when experiencing microaggressions.

Some participants wrote of how they would work with a student like Melissa, the student in Vignette 3, who seemed to be carrying some ageist attitudes toward younger faculty:

I would be aware of how Melissa treats her classmates, especially those who are younger than her. I would find an opportunity to talk with her before or after class to understand where she is coming from. I would also work to help her understand that she is exhibiting
ageism towards her younger classmates. I would want her to become aware of this and the damage that it can do to others.

Another participant wrote of a similar strategy, and included the possibility of bringing in multicultural competence:

I would talk with her about this, say that I see that being older and having more experience can be very beneficial and also say that the professors here are teaching because they are qualified to help students to learn and grow to become professional counselors. I would try to reinforce that while age, experience, and competence do correlate, that it is a mistake to only use age and experience to determine competence (I might relate this to multicultural competence or I might not depending on the discussion together).

**Multicultural competence.** The issue of multicultural competence in counseling relates to the pioneering work of Derald Wing Sue and David Sue on counseling the culturally diverse. Sue and Sue’s (2016) first cultural competency is awareness of one’s own assumptions, values, and biases: “What makes examination of the self difficult is the emotional impact of attitudes, beliefs, and feelings associated with cultural differences, such as racism, sexism, heterosexism, able-body-ism, and ageism” (p. 56). Related to ageism, this self-examination would need to include an honest appraisal of the discriminating ways one deals with members of various age groups, having “adequately dealt with this question and worked through the biases, feelings, fears, and guilt associated with it” (p. 57). Sue and Sue state that this is a crucial part of being an effective multicultural counselor. Multicultural competence would also preclude the reduction of such a varied group of students to a stereotype.
Implications for Future Research

Future research using the current body of data may include further explorations of the relationships between certain demographic groupings and the qualitative survey responses. In addition, future research may focus on the relationship between the response to the two final questions in the demographic section: “In your opinion, is your program geared toward working adults?” to which nearly 83% of participants answered yes, and “Have you received training in teaching older adults (age 40+)?” to which 25% of participants answered yes. (Although the constructs of “working adults” and “age 40+ adults” are not identical, there is significant overlap between the two.) This aligns with Day and colleagues’ findings (2011), which indicated that faculty had limited training and preparation to teach adult students.

No studies emerged from the literature on the phenomenon of younger faculty and older students, though recent popularly-oriented first-person articles attest to the challenge of the experience from the perspective of the young faculty member (Hanlon, 2016; Klotz, 2015; Reynolds, 2016). A parallel that might be applied here is the relationship of a younger therapist to an older client, though this too is a little-researched area: one recent dissertation (Thurgood, 2016) and two popularly-oriented first-person articles (Ramos, 2016; Scarella, 2016) emerged in a recent search of the literature on this topic. This area is ripe for research.

Other Implications

Just as young therapists-in-training need preparation for working with clients who are older than themselves, young counselor educators-in-training need preparation for working with older students. Counselor education Ph.D. programs need to include training on teaching older adults. Greater skills at working with these students could help faculty to feel more successful. This may be especially important for faculty who are entering the professorate at a young age,
with the prospect of teaching students who are decades older than themselves. They may need help managing the potential intimidation of teaching and supervising the work of nontraditional students, taking a position of authority despite being younger. The age dynamic has similar implications of “what can you possibly tell me,” and young faculty-to-be would benefit from training to help them respond to their students’ needs and avoid adopting a defensive posture.

Findings from this study suggest that counselor educators working with nontraditional students need to be able to:

- Honor these students’ experience
- Build upon their strengths
- Scaffold their weaknesses / provide support for their areas of needed growth
- Challenge their blind spots, including ageist attitudes
- Confront ageism in faculty, program, and students
- Conduct open classroom discussions on ageism, including its bidirectionality

Concluding Thoughts

This study was conducted in hope of beginning a discussion around the issue of training older adults for a career in counseling. This study, and the ensuing conversations and research related to the topic, may be especially important for counselor education doctoral programs and faculty as they provide academic preparation to those seeking to teach future counselors. Although students age 40 and older comprise around 20% of American graduate school classrooms (NCES, 2015), the research is lacking on the issues related to the faculty who instruct those 40+ students in master’s-level counseling programs. The current study addresses this gap in the research literature. By studying faculty perceptions of their older students and how those perceptions and experiences may have shaped their teaching practices, this research begins to
bring to the surface perspectives that may help or hinder the preparation of older students for the counseling profession.

When beginning counseling, it is likely a client will feel various anxieties about the experience, and will exhibit that anxiety in various ways. When training master’s degree students, counselor educators know to discuss the possibility that some clients may balk at a younger counselor. Good training enables students to see beyond outward behaviors and empathize with the client as a person, allowing counselors to help clients move past their initial anxieties about this age dynamic in the counseling room. Beginning graduate school is an experience similarly rife with insecurities and anxieties for students, and those anxieties can also be exhibited in various ways. Counselor education Ph.D. students need to be prepared for the likelihood of having a student balk at a younger professor. Good training could enable new professors to see beyond outward behaviors and empathize with the student as a person, which might enable counselor educators to help students move past their initial anxieties about the age dynamic in the classroom.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX A

HSIRB Approval Letter
Date: December 12, 2017

To: Stephen Craig, Principal Investigator
   Pamela Elmore, Student Investigator for dissertation

From: Amy Naugle, Ph.D., Chair

Re: HSIRB Project Number 17-12-14

This letter will serve as confirmation that your research project titled “A Qualitative Exploration of Counselor Educator’s Perceptions of Nontraditional Master’s-Level Counseling Students and How Those Perceptions Shape Teaching Practices” has been approved under the exempt category of review by the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board. The conditions and duration of this approval are specified in the Policies of Western Michigan University. You may now begin to implement the research as described in the application.

Please note: This research may only be conducted exactly in the form it was approved. You must seek specific board approval for any changes in this project (e.g., you must request a post approval change to enroll subjects beyond the number stated in your application under “Number of subjects you want to complete the study”). Failure to obtain approval for changes will result in a protocol deviation. In addition, if there are any unanticipated adverse reactions or unanticipated events associated with the conduct of this research, you should immediately suspend the project and contact the Chair of the HSIRB for consultation.

Reapproval of the project is required if it extends beyond the termination date stated below.

The Board wishes you success in the pursuit of your research goals.

Approval Termination: December 11, 2018
APPENDIX B

Invitation Emails
Subject: Counselor Educators of Nontraditional Students
To: CESNET-L@listserv.kent.edu
Date: Dec. 13, 2017

Dear Counselor Educators:

I am a doctoral student in the Counselor Education and Supervision program at Western Michigan University under the advisement of Dr. Stephen Craig. I am in the final phase of my doctoral program, and I would appreciate your help with my research as I complete this phase. The findings will be used for my dissertation, with a possibility for future presentations and publications.

This research is aimed at full-time counselor educators. You are eligible to participate if:

- You are a full-time counselor educator with three years’ full-time experience
- You teach master’s-level counseling students
- You teach primarily or entirely in a face-to-face setting
- Your classes have included a mix of traditional and nontraditional (age 40+) students

If you do not meet the eligibility criteria, please consider forwarding this request to your colleagues who may be eligible to participate.

The purpose of this qualitative study is to describe full-time counselor educators’ perceptions of nontraditional students who are enrolled in a counseling master’s degree program, to capture their experiences with that group, and to explore the ways in which those perceptions and experiences shape their teaching practices. This survey will include an informed consent and a demographics form.

All responses to this survey will remain confidential and anonymous.

The time it takes to complete the survey is approximately 15-25 minutes. Participation in this study is voluntary and you may withdraw at any time. The risk of participating in this study is minimal.

This study has been approved by the Western Michigan University Institutional Review Board (IRB #17-12-14, expiration date Dec. 11, 2018).

To participate in the survey, please visit the either of the following links:

https://tinyurl.com/CounselorEducatorSurvey

or

https://preview.tinyurl.com/CounselorEducatorSurvey

If you have any questions, you may contact me or Dr. Craig by email or phone:

Pamela Elmore
pamela.j.elmore@wmich.edu
616-340-9860
Dr. Stephen Craig
stephen.craig@wmich.edu
269-387-5114

Thank you in advance for participating in my study.

Pamela Elmore, MA, LPC, CAADC
Doctoral student, Counselor Education and Supervision
Western Michigan University
Dear Counselor Educators:

A few weeks ago, I posted a request for participants in my dissertation study about counselor educators’ perceptions of nontraditional (age 40+) students enrolled in counseling master’s degree programs.

If you have already completed the survey, thank you! If you fit the eligibility criteria below and have not done so yet, please consider completing the survey today. Would you also consider forwarding this request to any of your colleagues who may be eligible?

By way of reminder: I am a doctoral student in the Counselor Education and Supervision program at Western Michigan University under the advisement of Dr. Stephen Craig. I am in the final phase of my doctoral program, and I would appreciate your help with my research as I complete this phase. The findings will be used for my dissertation, with a possibility for future presentations and publications.

This research is aimed at full-time counselor educators. You are eligible to participate if:

- You are a full-time counselor educator with three years’ full-time experience
- You teach master’s-level counseling students
- You teach primarily or entirely in a face-to-face setting
- Your classes have included a mix of traditional and nontraditional (age 40+) students

The purpose of this qualitative study is to describe full-time counselor educators’ perceptions of nontraditional students who are enrolled in a counseling master’s degree program, to capture their experiences with that group, and to explore the ways in which those perceptions and experiences shape their teaching practices. This survey will include an informed consent and a demographics form.

All responses to this survey will remain confidential and anonymous.

The time it takes to complete the survey is approximately 15-25 minutes. Participation in this study is voluntary and you may withdraw at any time. The risk of participating in this study is minimal.

This study has been approved by the Western Michigan University Institutional Review Board (IRB #17-12-14, expiration date Dec. 11, 2018).

To participate in the survey, please visit the either of the following links:

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If you have any questions, you may contact me or Dr. Craig by email or phone:

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Dr. Stephen Craig
stephen.craig@wmich.edu
269-387-5114

Thank you in advance for participating in my study.

Pamela Elmore, MA, LPC, CAADC
Doctoral student, Counselor Education and Supervision
Western Michigan University
Survey Third (Final) Invitation: Listserv Email

Subject: Counselor Educators of Nontraditional Students: Third (Final) Request
To: CESNET-L@listserv.kent.edu
Date: Jan. 30, 2018

Dear Counselor Educators:

In recent weeks, I posted a request asking for help with a research study about counselor educators’ perceptions of nontraditional (age 40+) students enrolled in counseling master’s degree programs. It is my hope that this research will contribute to our profession as counselor educators.

I need about 20 more participants. You can help by completing the survey, if you meet the eligibility criteria below and have not yet done so. You can also help by forwarding this request to any of your colleagues who may be eligible, and asking them to complete the survey as well.

By way of reminder: I am a doctoral student in the Counselor Education and Supervision program at Western Michigan University under the advisement of Dr. Stephen Craig. I am in the final phase of my doctoral program, and I would appreciate your help with my research as I complete this phase. The findings will be used for my dissertation, with a possibility for future presentations and publications.

This research is aimed at full-time counselor educators. You are eligible to participate if:

- You are a full-time counselor educator with three years’ full-time experience
- You teach master’s-level counseling students
- You teach primarily or entirely in a face-to-face setting
- Your classes have included a mix of traditional and nontraditional (age 40+) students

The purpose of this qualitative study is to describe full-time counselor educators’ perceptions of nontraditional students who are enrolled in a counseling master’s degree program, to capture their experiences with that group, and to explore the ways in which those perceptions and experiences shape their teaching practices. This survey will include an informed consent and a demographics form.

All responses to this survey will remain confidential and anonymous.

The time it takes to complete the survey is approximately 15-25 minutes. Participation in this study is voluntary and you may withdraw at any time. The risk of participating in this study is minimal.

This study has been approved by the Western Michigan University Institutional Review Board (IRB #17-12-14, expiration date Dec. 11, 2018).

To participate in the survey, please visit the either of the following links:
https://tinyurl.com/CounselorEducatorSurvey
or
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If you have any questions, you may contact me or Dr. Craig by email or phone:

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Doctoral student, Counselor Education and Supervision  
Western Michigan University
Subject: Counselor Educators of Nontraditional Students
To: [Name of Colleague]
Date: Dec. 13, 2017

Dear [Name]:

I hope this message finds you well.

As you know, I am working on completing my dissertation on counselor educators’ perceptions of nontraditional (40+) master’s-level counseling students. When we last spoke, you indicated an interest in participating in my research. I am now at the point of collecting data. Below you’ll find a link to my invitation email on CESNET (the Counselor Education and Supervision Network Listserv), which gives complete information and a link to the survey itself.

The survey will take about 15-25 minutes to complete. I’d really appreciate your participation!

[link to invitation on CESNET]

Please feel free to forward this email to colleagues who may also fit the participation criteria.

Thank you in advance for your assistance!

Pamela Elmore, MA, LPC, CAADC
Doctoral student, Counselor Education and Supervision
Western Michigan University
Survey Second Invitation: Direct Email to Colleagues

Subject: Counselor Educators of Nontraditional Students
To: [Name of Colleague]
Date: Jan. 9, 2018

Dear [Name]:

A few weeks ago, I sent you an email asking you to consider participating in my dissertation study about counselor educators’ perceptions of nontraditional (age 40+) students enrolled in counseling master’s degree programs.

If you have already completed the survey, thank you! If you have not done so yet, please consider completing the survey today. Would you also consider forwarding this request to any of your colleagues who may be eligible?

Below you’ll find a link to my invitation email on CESNET (the Counselor Education and Supervision Network Listserv), which gives complete information and a link to the survey itself.

[link to invitation on CESNET]

Thank you for your assistance!

Pamela Elmore, MA, LPC, CAADC
Doctoral student, Counselor Education and Supervision
Western Michigan University
Subject: Counselor Educators of Nontraditional Students
To: [Name of Colleague]
Date: Jan. XX, 2018

Dear [Name]:

In recent weeks, I sent you an email asking you to consider participating in my dissertation study about counselor educators’ perceptions of nontraditional (age 40+) students enrolled in counseling master’s degree programs. It is my hope that this research will contribute to our profession as counselor educators.

I’m in the home stretch, but still need X participants. I hope to begin analyzing the results soon. You can help by completing the survey, if you fit the eligibility criteria below and have not yet done so. You can also help by forwarding this request to any of your colleagues who may be eligible, and asking them to complete the survey as well.

Below you’ll find a link to my invitation email on CESNET (the Counselor Education and Supervision Network Listserv), which gives complete information and a link to the survey itself.

[link to invitation on CESNET]

Thank you again for your assistance!

Pamela Elmore, MA, LPC, CAADC
Doctoral student, Counselor Education and Supervision
Western Michigan University
APPENDIX C

Survey Consent Form
Western Michigan University
Counselor Education and Counseling Psychology

Principal Investigator: Stephen E. Craig, Ph.D.
Student Investigator: Pamela Elmore, M.A.
Title of Study: Counselor Educators’ Perceptions of Nontraditional Master’s-Level Counseling Students and How Those Perceptions Shape Teaching Practices

You have been invited to participate in a research project titled Counselor Educators’ Perceptions of Nontraditional Master’s-Level Counseling Students. This project will serve as Pamela Elmore’s dissertation for the requirements of the doctor of philosophy in Counselor Education and Supervision. This consent document will explain the purpose of this research project and will go over all of the time commitments, the procedures used in the study, and the risks and benefits of participating in this research project. Please read this consent form carefully and completely and please ask any questions if you need more clarification.

What are we trying to find out in this study?

The purpose of this qualitative study is to describe counselor education faculty perceptions of nontraditional (age 40+) master’s-level counseling students and to explore the ways in which those perceptions and experiences shape faculty teaching practices.

Who can participate in this study?

You may participate in this study if you are a full time faculty member in a graduate counseling program with at least three years’ experience instructing both traditional (under 40) and nontraditional (40+) master’s-level counseling students in a face-to-face setting. Faculty who are not full-time, who have less than three years of full-time experience teaching master’s level counseling students, or who teach in online-only programs are not eligible.

Where will this study take place?

The survey will be available online and may be completed at a location convenient to the participant.

What is the time commitment for participating in this study?

Phase 1: The survey, including the demographic sheet, is expected to take between 15 and 25 minutes to complete.

Phase 2: After the survey responses are analyzed, each participant who provided an email address will be sent a copy of the analysis via email and asked to check the interpretations against their own experience, then to provide any additions to the researcher via email. Time estimate: 20 to 30 minutes.

Total time commitment: 35 to 55 minutes in two phases for those who choose to participate in Phase 2; 15 to 25 minutes in a single phase for those who do not.
What will you be asked to do if you choose to participate in this study?

Each participant will be asked to complete an anonymous survey lasting 15 to 25 minutes. Participants who provide an email address will be sent a copy of the study’s findings and asked to check them against their own experience, then provide any additions and clarifications via email; this phase is estimated to take 20 to 30 minutes.

What information is being measured during the study?

This study will gather the experiences of counselor educators with nontraditional master’s-level counseling students, their perceptions of those students, and how those perceptions and experiences have impacted their own teaching practices.

What are the risks of participating in this study and how will these risks be minimized?

As the survey is anonymous, risks of participating in the study are minimal.

What are the benefits of participating in this study?

There is no direct benefit to the participant from participating in this study. It is hoped that the study will benefit the fields of counseling and counselor education by beginning a discussion around the issue of teaching nontraditional master’s-level counseling students, which may lead to changes to counselor education doctoral programs as they provide academic preparation to those seeking to teach future counselors.

Are there any costs associated with participating in this study?

Costs to the participant will be limited to the costs of internet access associated with completing the survey.

Is there any compensation for participating in this study?

There is no compensation for participating in this study.

Who will have access to the information collected during this study?

Access to the information collected during the study will be limited to the researcher. In publications and presentations resulting from this study, any identifying information gained from email correspondence will be excluded.

What if you want to stop participating in this study?

You can choose to stop participating in the study at any time for any reason. You will not suffer any prejudice or penalty by your decision to stop your participation. You will experience no consequences if you choose to withdraw from this study.
The investigator can also decide to stop your participation in the study without your consent.

Should you have any questions prior to or during the study, you can contact the primary investigator, Stephen Craig, at 269-387-5114 or stephen.craig@wmich.edu. You may also contact the Chair, Human Subjects Institutional Review Board at 269-387-8293 or the Vice President for Research at 269-387-8298 if questions arise during the course of the study.

This consent document has been approved by the Western Michigan University Human Subjects Institutional Review Board (HSIRB) on December 12, 2017. Do not participate after December 11, 2018.
APPENDIX D

Survey
Thank you for participating in my research!

The purpose of this qualitative study is to describe counselor educators’ perceptions of nontraditional (age 40+) master’s-level counseling students and to explore the ways in which those perceptions shape faculty teaching practices. The findings will be published in the researcher’s doctoral dissertation, with potential for later presentation and publication in book or article form.

You are eligible to participate in this study if you are currently a full-time counseling faculty member with at least three years of full-time experience instructing face-to-face master’s-level counseling classes containing a mix of traditional and nontraditional (age 40+) students.

This survey consists of three parts: a demographic sheet, a vignette section with three case studies and two questions following each, and a final section with six additional questions. It will take approximately 15-25 minutes to complete.

All responses will be anonymous. At the end of the survey, you will have the option to provide your email address to request a copy of the study’s findings for post-analysis member-checking purposes; if you choose to provide your email address, it will be separated from your survey responses in order to maintain anonymity.

By continuing with the survey, you signify that you have read and agreed to the Survey Consent Form. Once you’ve read the consent form, please return to this screen to complete the survey.

Thank you again for your assistance!
**Part 1: Demographic Information:**

What is your age? [open field]

What is your gender? [Female, Male, Nonbinary, Other (please specify)]

Please describe your race/ethnicity: [open field]

What is your highest degree earned? Please select from the following options. [Ph.D., Ed.D., Psy.D., M.A., M.S., M.Ed., Other (please specify)]

At what age did you complete your master’s degree in counseling? [open field]

What is your current academic position? Please select from the following options: [Instructor, Assistant Professor, Associate Professor, Professor, Other (please specify)]

How many years have you been a full-time counseling faculty member? [open field]

In a typical master’s-level counseling course that you have taught, approximately what percentage of the class is at least 40 years old? [less than 25%, between 25% and 50%, between 50% and 75%, between 75% and 100%]

Throughout your time as a counselor educator, approximately how many counseling students have you taught who were age 40 or older? Select the option that best fits your experience. [5 or fewer, 6-10, 11-20, more than 20; Comments (optional)]

Which of the following best categorizes your program and institution (check all that apply): [Main campus only, Main campus with one satellite location, Main campus with two or more satellite locations, Evening classes, Weekend classes, Some online courses, Majority online courses]

In your opinion, is your program geared toward working adults? [Yes/No] (conditional if Yes) In what ways is your program geared toward working adults? [open field]

Have you received training in teaching older adults (age 40+)? [Yes/No] (conditional if Yes) What type of training have you had in teaching older adults (age 40+)? Please check all that apply. [Formal academic coursework, Post-degree training (e.g., conference sessions, workshop), Other (please describe)
Part 2: Case Vignettes

Case Vignette 1

Emily is a 40-year-old White female in her first year as a counseling master’s degree student. She is married and has three children in elementary school. During first day introductions, she told the class that she is training for a career in counseling after being out of the workforce since her first child’s birth 11 years ago; she also said that in those years she has developed a strong self-care routine. Emily has missed some class due to family schedule conflicts. Today she has emailed you 30 minutes before an assignment is due, explaining why she is unable to make the assignment’s deadline and requesting an extension.

- What is your perception of Emily’s case? [open field]
- How would you respond to this student? Would this episode influence you to change anything about your teaching or classroom management in this class or for this student? If so, how? [open field]

Case Vignette 2

Robert is a 55-year-old Black male in his first year as a counseling master’s degree student. He is separated and has two teenaged children. In his first day introduction, he stated that he had recently left his position as a church pastor, and that the work helped him develop a strong sense of empathy for people. Your degree program involves several technological elements, including online library access and the course management system. On the first day of class, you reminded students of the program-wide expectation that all work be turned in to the course management system. Robert has spoken to you to express his unease and apprehension with technology. While he was successful in turning in the first two assignments online, today he has turned in a hard copy of an assignment, telling you he was unable to access the course management system.

- What is your perception of Robert’s case? [open field]
- How would you respond to this student? Would this episode influence you to change anything about your teaching or classroom management in this class or for this student? If so, how? [open field]

Case Vignette 3

Melissa is a 49-year-old White female in her second year as a counseling master’s degree student. She is divorced and has two adult children. In her first day introduction, Melissa told the class that she has been employed in the healthcare field for 25 years, and that she feels strongly about being respectful to patients, including a commitment to using people-first language. Last semester, your youngest colleague told you about an episode on the first day of class in which Melissa raised her hand and asked your colleague, “I don’t mean to be rude, but how old are you?” Melissa is now in your class, which is just beginning. On your way into the classroom on the first day of class, you overhear her talking to a classmate, saying “I hope this semester my professors know what they’re talking about.”
• What is your perception of Melissa’s case? [open field]

• How would you respond to this student? Would this episode influence you to change anything about your teaching or classroom management in this class or for this student? If so, how? [open field]
Part 3: Survey Questions

- Can you describe some of the characteristics you’ve noticed about nontraditional (age 40+) master’s-level counseling students in the area of:
  - Demeanor with faculty? [open field]
  - Demeanor with classmates? [open field]
  - Academic performance? [open field]
  - Counseling skills? [open field]
  - Outside supports? [open field]
  - Challenges with school? [open field]
  - Challenges outside of school? [open field]
  - Other? [open field]

- What are some positive qualities you’ve noticed about these age 40+ students? [open field]

- What are some challenges you’ve noticed about these age 40+ students? [open field]

- As you’ve worked with nontraditional (age 40+) students, have you modified your approach or any of your teaching practices, either to make the most of these students’ positive qualities or to accommodate their challenges? If so, how? Please give an example if you can. [open field]

- Please tell about a nontraditional (age 40+) counseling student who stands out in your memory. Include any aspects of the experience that made an impression on you – the student’s demeanor, positive contributions to class or classmates, challenges, impact on you as an instructor, etc. As you recount the story, please remember to exercise thoughtfulness in maintaining the anonymity of any student and to ensure their identity could not be unintentionally revealed by including identifying information. [open field]

- Is there anything else you’d like to tell me about your experience with nontraditional (age 40+) master’s-level counseling students? [open field]
Part 4: Email Address

Please provide an email address if you would like to participate in member-checking. This will allow the researcher to send you the major themes and sub-themes of the research after the results are analyzed, and will allow you to provide feedback to the researcher on those themes, if you choose to do so.

This step is optional. If you choose to provide an email address, it will be disconnected from your responses so as not to jeopardize the anonymity of your responses.
APPENDIX E

Coding Guide
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Research Question 1</td>
<td>Counselor educators’ perceptions of students age 40+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive qualities</td>
<td>Counselor educators’ perceptions of their 40+ students’ positive qualities -- use this “parent” node for general positive perceptions and those that do not fit within specific “child” categories</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demeanor with faculty</td>
<td>Comments regarding 40+ students’ demeanor with faculty.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demeanor with classmates</td>
<td>Comments regarding 40+ students’ relationships with classmates, both within and outside of class.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic performance</td>
<td>General statements about students’ academic performance, e.g., grades.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counseling skills</td>
<td>Comments relating to students’ counseling skills, and their ability and willingness to learn counseling skills. Code as Positive Qualities such items as empathy and ability to apply life experience.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outside supports</td>
<td>Positive supports outside the academic environment, e.g., family, friends, workplace.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenges</td>
<td>Counselor educators’ perceptions of their 40+ students’ challenges -- use this “parent” node for general perceptions of challenges and those that do not fit within specific “child” categories</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demeanor with faculty</td>
<td>Comments regarding 40+ students’ demeanor with faculty.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demeanor with classmates</td>
<td>Comments regarding 40+ students’ relationships with classmates, both within and outside of class.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic performance</td>
<td>General statements about students’ academic performance, e.g., grades.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counseling skills</td>
<td>Comments relating to students’ counseling skills, and their ability and willingness to learn counseling skills. Code as Challenges such things as rigidity, tendency to give advice, difficulty learning counseling skills.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Description</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outside supports</td>
<td>Challenges relating to supports outside the academic environment, e.g., family, friends, workplace -- code as Challenges if these supports are absent or listed specifically as taxing to the student (e.g., uncooperative spouse).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specific academic demands</td>
<td>Challenges with specific aspects of coursework, e.g., APA, technology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>External demands</td>
<td>Challenges external to the academic demands of the class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral or unclear intention</td>
<td>Neutral comments, as well as those where the participant’s judgment of positive or negative value</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demeanor with faculty</td>
<td>Comments regarding 40+ students’ demeanor with faculty.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demeanor with classmates</td>
<td>Comments regarding 40+ students’ relationships with classmates, both within and outside of class.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic performance</td>
<td>General statements about students’ academic performance, e.g., grades.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counseling skills</td>
<td>Comments relating to students’ counseling skills, and their ability and willingness to learn counseling skills.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outside supports</td>
<td>Neutral or unclear intention -- comment related to supports outside the academic environment, e.g., family, friends, workplace.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specific academic demands</td>
<td>Challenges with specific aspects of coursework, e.g., APA, technology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>External demands</td>
<td>Challenges external to the academic demands of the class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Question 2</td>
<td>How have these perceptions shaped teaching practices?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No modification</td>
<td>Participant response indicating they do not modify the way they teach based on a student’s age</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Description</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Response</td>
<td>Use this “parent” node for participants’ general observations about teaching 40+ students and those that do not fit within specific “child” categories</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjustment in classroom or course structure</td>
<td>Includes adjustment in what is done on a day-to-day basis, as well as adjustment in course structure to accommodate the needs of these students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Existing policy</td>
<td>Enforce or remind student of existing policy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Potential for flexibility</td>
<td>Taking into account the learner’s special situation and making allowances, or allowing for that possibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide individual attention outside class</td>
<td>Counselor educator providing individual help or attention to student: offering to meet or assist in any way, seeking understanding of needs and situation of student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Refer to another for help</td>
<td>Counselor educator referring student to another source</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-awareness /professional growth</td>
<td>Counselor educator’s self-awareness and professional growth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stories</td>
<td>Participants’ stories about 40+ students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General comments</td>
<td>Participant comments that do not apply to perception, modification, or stories</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX F

Reflexivity Journals
Reflexivity Journal #1: Prior to Data Collection

Personal Background and Context

Age:
I was 25 when I started graduate school the first time, pursuing a master’s degree in counseling. Most of my classmates were around the same age. The oldest in our admitting class was probably in his early 30s. The class was evenly divided between those who were married with kids and those who were single. I attended that program for four years, both full and part time. When I was about 10 credits from completion, a family move to another state required me to abandon that degree. Thirteen years later, I restarted my degree pursuit at another school. This time, I was in my early 40s and my classmates were of more diverse ages – mid-twenties through early sixties. A year after completing my master’s degree through that program, I began working toward a specialist certification, taking graduate courses from another school. Again, those classrooms were diverse, agewise. As I was wrapping up the certification classes, I applied to and was accepted into a doctoral program. I received the acceptance call on my 49th birthday. Our admitting class ranged in age from around 30 to around 50. Most students were at the lower end of the range, and two of us were at the upper end. I remember feeling comforted to have another person beginning this process at a more advanced age. Some instructors were younger, but I don’t remember that affecting me. I did, however, think about how many years in the career I’d have ahead of me after completing the degree. That made me very hesitant to take out a student loan, and very resistant to faculty advice to wait until the degree was done to begin full time faculty employment. It struck me that a faculty member who had completed a doctorate in their 30s, graduating with 30 or more years of career ahead before retirement, probably had not considered what it’s like to worry about taking on a mountain of student loan debt with only a decade or so to pay it off.

Life stage and experience:
When I first started graduate school, I was married and had a two-year-old child. By the time I came back to the pursuit of my master’s degree, my child was a late teenager, and the parenting concerns were very different. Since that time, while I have been enrolled in school, I have been through a divorce and the loss of both my parents. I have moved from the suburbs to the city. I began living alone and dating again. I began working at a part time clinical job and a full time academic job. I became a mother-in-law and a grandparent. This phase has been filled with changes and demands that were very different from those I experienced my first time in graduate school.

Classroom Experiences as a Student
As I think back over my graduate experiences after age 40, some encounters with faculty stand out, both positive and negative. Most faculty have seemed neutral, a few have been very
supportive, and a couple have been very harsh. That harshness seemed to be generated by those professors’ preconceived ideas, and specifically focused on certain students. In some classes, I was one of those targeted. I couldn’t tell if the professor had a problem with my age, my gender, another aspect, or some combination of factors, but it was clear they had made up their minds about me ahead of time and had come to a negative conclusion. I feel fortunate that, in the semesters that I took classes with professors who were harsh, I also had interactions with faculty who were very supportive. I’m not sure I would have made it otherwise.

Experiences as an Instructor

I can sense differences between my traditional students and my nontraditional students. Many of these relate to phase of life and development issues, some have to do with years of life and career experience, some relate to different numbers of life commitments outside the classroom, and some have to do with different levels of technology competence. In the classroom, I work to make sure all voices are heard, but I find myself wishing I knew more about how to leverage the diversity of age and experience. Outside the classroom, when grading student work, I find the differences show up in two ways: older students tend to turn in richer work, with writing that reflects their years of experience, but their work tends to be late due to extenuating life circumstances far more often than that of their younger peers.
Reflexivity Journal #2: After Data Collection

I’m impressed by the educators who confess to feeling threatened by their older and/or more experienced students. I think that shows real insight.

I have to keep reminding myself as I write up the results: this is not about the students’ characteristics – it is about the educators’ perceptions of the students’ characteristics.

As I read faculty’s assessments of some of their students as overconfident or even arrogant, I find myself wondering how I came across to my faculty when I was a student. My memory is that I was more in that territory in my 20s during my first stint in a master’s program, than I was coming back to graduate school in my 40s.

I’m a little surprised at how few participants brought up students’ health concerns. I would think that would be an area of dramatic and obvious contrast between older and younger students.

Reading the stories and deciding which to quote is a challenge. There’s one that’s especially compelling, but I don’t want to include it just because it resonates with me.

It’s no surprise to me how many people said technology was a challenge for their 40+ students. What surprised me was the handful who said it wasn’t.
APPENDIX G

Member Checking
Member Check Follow-up Email

Subject: Counselor Educators of Nontraditional Students
To: [Name]
Date: March 4, 2018

Dear Counselor Educator:

Thank you for participating in my study on counselor educators’ perceptions of nontraditional (40+) master’s-level counseling students. When you completed the survey, you provided an email address and indicated an interest in the study’s findings and a willingness to provide feedback on those findings as a process of member checking.

You will find two documents attached. The first is a copy of the survey, to refresh your memory; the second contains the survey’s findings in brief, grouped by categories and themes. The latter also includes the study’s purpose statement and research questions.

Please read through these and respond to this email by March 12, 2018. Your feedback can be a page or a paragraph. It can even be a simple yes or no to indicate that these themes do or do not represent your experience.

Again, thank you for participating in my dissertation research. I appreciate your help!

Best wishes,

Pamela (Elmore) Jordan, MA, LPC, CAADC
Doctoral student, Counselor Education and Supervision
Western Michigan University
Counselor Educators’ Perceptions Survey Findings

Purpose Statement and Research Questions

The purpose of this qualitative study is to describe faculty perceptions of and experiences with their nontraditional (age 40 and up) master’s-level counseling students, and to explore the ways in which those perceptions and experiences shape faculty teaching practices. This study sought to answer two questions:

1. What are counselor educators’ perceptions of nontraditional (age 40 and up) master’s-level counseling students?

2. How have these perceptions and experiences shaped faculty teaching practices?

Themes

The themes from the survey responses are divided into two groups, corresponding to the two research questions above. Each of these groups is presented as a table, with categories and their descriptions in the left column and associated themes in the right column.

RQ1: Perceptions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category &amp; Description</th>
<th>Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Relationships with faculty: <em>Includes participant comments regarding age 40+ students’ demeanor with faculty as well as other aspects of that relationship.</em></td>
<td>Respect, Enthusiasm, Dismissiveness, Over-familiarity, Greater need for outside-class faculty support, Participant enjoyment of 40+ students, Age-biased against younger faculty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationships with classmates: <em>Participants’ perceptions of age 40+ students’ relationships with their classmates, both within and outside of class.</em></td>
<td>Leadership, Parental role, Collegiality, Age barrier, Apprehension</td>
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<tr>
<td>Academic performance:</td>
<td>Engagement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------</td>
<td>------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Participants’ general statements about age 40+ students’ academic performance, e.g., classroom behavior, grades.</em></td>
<td>Transition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pushiness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Perfectionism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Variability</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Specific academic demands:</th>
<th>Technology</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Participants’ perceptions of age 40+ students’ challenges with specific aspects of coursework.</em></td>
<td>Academic rigor, including writing, format, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Variability</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Counseling skills:</th>
<th>Life and work experience</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Participants’ comments relating to age 40+ students’ counseling skills, and their ability and willingness to learn counseling skills.</em></td>
<td>Blind spots</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Resistance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rigidity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Variability</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Outside supports:</th>
<th>Family/friends</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Participants’ perceptions of age 40+ students’ supports outside the academic environment.</em></td>
<td>Workplace</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Counselor support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Active non-support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Absent</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>External demands:</th>
<th>Family</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Participants’ perceptions of age 40+ students’ challenges external to the academic demands of the class.</em></td>
<td>Work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Finances</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Health</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Other characteristics:</th>
<th>Recipient of age bias</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Participants’ comments regarding their perception of age 40+ students that do not fit in one of the above categories.</em></td>
<td>General variability</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## RQ2: Practices

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category &amp; Description</th>
<th>Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Refer to existing policy:</td>
<td>No sub-themes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Participant indicates they would enforce or remind student of existing policy.</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Potential for flexibility:</td>
<td>No sub-themes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Participant indicates they would take into account the student’s special situation and make allowances, or allowing for that possibility.</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide individual attention outside class:</td>
<td>Discussion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Participant indicates they would provide individual help or attention to student.</em></td>
<td>Tutorial</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Processing of emotional aspect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Refer to another for help:</td>
<td>Tech support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Participant indicates they would refer the student to another source for assistance.</em></td>
<td>Library/writing center</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Graduate assistant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Peer mentor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Advisor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjustment in classroom or course structure:</td>
<td>Honor of student experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Participant indicates they would adjust (or have adjusted) to accommodate the needs of age 40+ students, either in day-to-day classroom practice or within the course structure.</em></td>
<td>Connection with student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Allowance for more discussion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Classroom pairing of young students with students over 40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introspection &amp; self-awareness:</td>
<td>No sub-themes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Participant indicates an awareness of their part in the age dynamic and intentional work to manage it within themselves.</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other modification or accommodation:</td>
<td>Program-level accommodations of 40+ students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Participants’ comments regarding their accommodation practices with age 40+ students that do not fit in one of the above categories.</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No classroom modification:</td>
<td>Flexibility for individual but no change to class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Participant indicates they do not modify the way they teach based on a student’s age.</em></td>
<td>No modification</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>