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Undergraduate Nontraditional Adult Students' and University Administrator Perceptions of Supports for Program Completion

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This is to certify that the doctoral study by

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Walden University
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Abstract

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by

Sarah Ellison

MS, Walden University, 2015

BS, University of La Verne, 2012

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

Walden University

November 2022

Abstract

The problem investigated by this study is the low completion rates of nontraditional undergraduate adult students attending a 4-year university located in the West coast region of the United States. In 2020, the program completion rate was less than 44% at the study site and 45.8% for nontraditional undergraduate adult students nationally. The purpose of this qualitative instrumental case study was to explore undergraduate nontraditional adult students' and university administrators' perceptions and experiences of supports needed for success as it relates to retention, persistence, and program completion. Using Knowles's andragogy and Tinto's persistence theories as the conceptual framework, research questions focused on the perceptions and experiences of nontraditional adult students and university administrators. Interviews were conducted with five undergraduate nontraditional adult students who were 21 years of age or older at the time of enrollment and six university administrators responsible for overseeing student success programming within the academic colleges. Qualitative analysis was conducted using a priori and open coding. Perceptions were synthesized into four themes. Students perceived the campus structure and interaction with university support services professionals were critical and university resources were beneficial and necessary to their success. Administrators perceived that university culture changes and flexible services were needed to support successful program completion, retention, and persistence for undergraduate nontraditional adult students. Findings may contribute to positive social change by informing stakeholders of university culture and support systems for nontraditional students, leading to improved success in retention, persistence, and program completion.

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Dedication

To my daughters, Isabelle Nicole and Nadia Alise, mommy finished! Your hugs and kisses helped push mommy through to the finish line. To my husband, thank you for your support and dedication to my success.

To all of my friends and family, your well wishes and check-ins inspired me to persist and not give up during the hardest of times.

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This journey towards completing a dissertation is definitely not one I saw myself completing. It has been a very fulfilling experience, and one that I am so grateful to have accomplished. I would like to take this time acknowledge my dissertation chair, Dr. Cathryn Walker. There is no possible way to put into words how much you influenced my life, and I am forever grateful to you.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

The higher education environment consists of many diverse student populations and several departments of academic professionals and higher education leaders dedicated to providing services designed to aid students in their success and retention. Nontraditional adult students are students who may have experienced delayed enrollment, attend school part-time, are employed full-time while attending school, are financially independent of their parents, may be responsible for the care of dependents, and are typically over the age of 21 years at the time of enrollment (Rabourn et al., 2018). Nontraditional adult learners constitute a growing student population that often struggles with retention, persistence, and degree completion. Nontraditional adult students in the United States had a reported dropout rate of 46% in 2018 (Shapiro et al., 2018) and low university completion rates of 45.8% in 2020 (Causey et al., 2020). Inadequate university support services provided to nontraditional adult students may be a factor in their poor retention. However, researchers have focused thus far on traditional undergraduate learners' experiences with support services and have not considered the experiences of nontraditional adult undergraduate students (Chen, 2017; Johnson, 2018; Powers & Wartalski, 2021; Schroeder & Terras, 2015). Higher education administrators' acknowledgment and acceptance of the reality of today's students and their nontraditional pathways may lead to a better understanding and development of beneficial support services at both the national and institutional levels, ultimately leading to greater nontraditional adult student success (Shapiro et al., 2018). Many personal and institutional barriers keep nontraditional adult students from succeeding at the university

level (Hunter-Johnson, 2017). If nontraditional adult students continue to be a marginalized group, their success related to program completion, retention, and persistence will continue to present difficulties and challenges (Hunter-Johnson, 2017). To better understand nontraditional adult students' views and priorities, higher education professionals should analyze undergraduate nontraditional adult students' perceptions of support and success as it relates to retention, persistence, and program completion.

On the national level, university leaders have tailored student-centered support services, and advising practices in a one size fits all approach, catering to the needs of traditional student populations (Johnson, 2018; Powers & Wartalski, 2021; Schroeder & Terras, 2015). University leaders have focused less on the needs of undergraduate nontraditional adult students in terms of providing the necessary academic resources to support academic planning and acclimation to the higher education system (Powers & Wartalski, 2021; Schroeder & Terras, 2015). According to Rabourn et al. (2018), the undergraduate nontraditional adult student experience needs to be explored more extensively to ensure that this student population receives the proper support to succeed at the undergraduate university level. The lack of concern and attention regarding the needs of undergraduate nontraditional adult students can make this student population and other nontraditional student populations feel alienated or isolated from the university (Kim et al., 2020).

This study contributes to the gap in practice and literature by adding a new perspective regarding undergraduate nontraditional adult student success, persistence, and retention at 4-year postsecondary institutions. The study site is a large, residential, 4-year

state institution classified as having “high” research activity, high graduate coexistence, comprehensive programs, majority undergraduate programs, and an undergraduate profile of having more selective, higher transfer-in for the undergraduate profile (Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education, 2021). According to Kahu and Nelson (2018), incorporating a cultural lens to introduce students to the higher education environment can aid 4-year universities in enhancing student success and retention. In this study, I explored the experiences and perceptions of nontraditional undergraduate adult students and university administrators regarding support for successful program completion, retention, and persistence at the undergraduate level. The information gained from this study may assist researchers and university administrators in understanding this student population, as well as helping academic professionals connect with and provide support services catered to the needs of undergraduate nontraditional adult students.

In this chapter, I introduce the study by examining the background of the problem and describing the problem in more depth. I then present the purpose of the study, followed by the research questions (RQs) that I used to explore the problem and phenomenon of the needs of undergraduate nontraditional adult students and successful program completion, retention, and persistence. Chapter 1 also includes overviews of the conceptual framework and nature of the study; definitions of key terms; and a discussion of the study's assumptions, scope and delimitations, limitations, and significance.

Background

There is a significant body of research regarding student success and persistence in higher education, the more prevalent studies being those written by Tinto (1975, 1993),

Astin (1985, 1993), Pascarella (1980), and Chickering and Gamson (1989). Tinto established a longitudinal model that included environmental and social considerations for student departure from college. Tinto's (1975, 1987, 1993) assertion was that the stronger the social or academic integration a student experienced, the greater the likelihood the student would remain enrolled in school. Researchers have used Tinto's model as a foundation for many studies on student success and persistence (Aljohani, 2016; Stephen et al., 2020). More recent studies pertaining to student success have focused heavily on traditional student populations, traditional students being middle class, and recent high school graduates attending 4-year residential schools who do not work and are not financially independent (K. W. Cho, 2019).

Research pertaining to undergraduate nontraditional adult student success in a 4-year university setting is still fairly new, and many factors of student success and persistence for this population are still being explored. Researchers who undertook early work on student success and persistence focused on traditional students attending 4-year private and public university institutions (Rabourn et al., 2018). Experts in higher education have recognized the need for change in developing more inclusive higher-quality educational environments focused on continuous improvement (Caruth, 2018; McNair, Albertine, et al., 2022). With the increase in nontraditional adult student enrollment and a national focus on graduation rates, university leadership should become more aware of the institutional impact of current student success metrics and services on the retention rates and persistence of nontraditional adult undergraduate students (Dorius et al., 2017).

Problem Statement

The problem investigated by this study is the low completion rates of nontraditional undergraduate adult students attending a 4-year university located in the West coast region of the United States. This public university in the Western United States has a large population of nontraditional adult undergraduate students, who, for this study, were defined as students over the age of 21 at the time of enrollment. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, as cited in Pelletier, 2010) distinguishes nontraditional adult students as meeting one of seven characteristics: postponed enrollment into postsecondary education, enrolled in college part-time, employed full-time, financially independent for financial aid purposes, is a single parent, responsible for dependents other than a spouse, or a custodial parent, or does not have a high school diploma. According to institutional data personnel at the study site, the 2020 completion rate for nontraditional adult undergraduate students aged 21 and older at the time of enrollment at the local study site was below 44%.

The completion rate for undergraduate nontraditional adult students is concerning at the study site and reflects low levels of nontraditional adult undergraduate degree completion nationally. Nontraditional adult students across the United States have a reported dropout rate of 46% in 2018 (Shapiro et al., 2018) and a university completion rate of 45.8% in 2020 (Causey et al., 2020). According to Rabourn et al. (2018), nontraditional adult students' experiences need to be explored more extensively to ensure that this student population receives the proper support to succeed in terms of retention, persistence, and program completion at the undergraduate university level. The need for

this exploration further illustrated the gap in practice and in the literature on undergraduate nontraditional adult student perceptions and experiences regarding program completion, persistence, and retention. This study contributes to the literature by providing information related to a deeper understanding of this specific student population and their needs to be successful in an undergraduate university setting.

In this study, I investigated the experiences and perceptions of nontraditional undergraduate adult students pursuing their degrees at the study site and university administrators in charge of student success programming at the study site. The perceptions and experiences of the undergraduate nontraditional adult students provided a greater understanding of services that support these students' program completion, persistence, and retention at the study site. In addition, university administrators' perceptions of nontraditional adult students yielded information that stakeholders could use to develop future programs and services to support nontraditional adult student success.

Purpose of the Study

Through an extensive review of the literature on this topic, a gap in practice regarding support services was identified concerning the needs and hindrances of undergraduate nontraditional adult students' perceptions and reported experiences of what contributes to or hinders their program success and persistence at the undergraduate level. The gap in practice and literature is focused on the lack of attention given to the needs and experiences of nontraditional adult students and what contributes to their program completion, retention, and persistence at the undergraduate level. The purpose of

this qualitative instrumental case study was to explore undergraduate nontraditional adult students' and university administrators' perceptions and experiences of supports needed for success as it relates to retention, persistence, and program completion. Researchers have noted that focused research surrounding the needs and strategies to improve retention and persistence are necessary to strengthen the success of nontraditional adult students in higher education (Kara et al., 2019; Merriam, 2018). To address this call for research, I explored the perceptions and experiences of nontraditional adult students attending the study site and university administrators in charge of student success programming at the study site.

An understanding of nontraditional undergraduate student experiences and student support strategies are needed to inform higher education leaders regarding factors that affect nontraditional students' success at the undergraduate level (Montanari et al., 2022; Remenick & Bergman, 2021). A deeper understanding of nontraditional adult students' perceptions and experiences may provide higher education institution leaders with more information to adequately address their needs and expectations. This study may lead to improved student success models of support as it relates to retention, persistence, and program completion for nontraditional adult students at the undergraduate level.

Research Questions

The research questions (RQs) that were addressed are as follows:

RQ1: How do undergraduate nontraditional adult students attending a traditional postsecondary 4-year institution describe their perceptions of support towards program completion, retention, and persistence at the study site?

RQ2: What do university administrators describe as supports to successful program completion, retention, and persistence for undergraduate nontraditional adult students?

Conceptual Framework

The theories that constituted the framework for this study were Knowles's (1984) theory of core adult learning principles and Tinto's (1975) theory of student retention. Knowles established five characteristics that differentiate adult learners from other learners and four key principles that pertain to adult education as a whole. Within an educational environment, adult learners require an awareness of learning and thrive on self-directed activities versus instructor-directed lectures and activities (Morrison & McCutheon, 2019). The characteristics and principles associated with Knowles's theory of core adult learning principles address the distinctive learning approaches and values associated with adult learners in an educational environment. According to Knowles (1984), the five significant concepts of the adult learner that need to be realized are self-concept, adult learner experience, readiness to learn, orientation to learning, and motivation to learn. These features may be relevant to adult students when working with university support services to help with academic-related guidance and issues. The four principles detailed in Knowles's theory of adult learning andragogy (1984) include

- Adult students need to be involved in the planning and evaluation of their instruction
- Adult students' experiences (including their errors) provide the foundation for learning activities

- Adult students are most interested in learning when the subject is relevant to their job or personal life
- Adult student learning environments should be problem centered rather than content driven

Using the theory of core adult learning principles (see Knowles et al., 2020) as the additional theory that formed the conceptual framework helped facilitate the exploration of nontraditional students' learning processes. Knowles et al. (2020) articulated that central principles that influence how adults learn include experiences and opportunities that include (a) self-directed, (b) transformational, (c) experiential, (d) mentorship, (e) orientation of learning, (f) motivation, and (g) readiness to learn. Using Knowles's theory (2020) to support the conceptual framework, I explored nontraditional adult learners' and administrators' perceptions and experiences of support in a university setting pertaining to nontraditional adult student retention, persistence, and program completion. The key elements of Knowles's theory applied to the design of the research questions that focused on nontraditional students' and administrators' perceived experiences of success and barriers to retention and degree completion at the study site. Based on Knowles's theory (1984), key principles of adult learning that were used to design interview questions were aligned with the research questions. I designed the interview protocols that aligned questions to the key adult learning principles, how nontraditional adult students described their life experiences related to their learning, and the university supports that strengthened their learning experiences, including perceived targeted supports and barriers at the study site. I explored the perceptions, experiences, and recommendations

of both nontraditional students and university administrators regarding nontraditional adult students' perceptions of university services to support successful retention, persistence, and program completion. Nontraditional adult students may become more interested in their degree focus and coursework when they see their program and coursework as applicable to their career focus or advancement (see Knowles, 1984). Knowles's model served as a lens for understanding the experiences, perceptions, described behaviors, and interactions of the student and other adult experiences at the study site. Knowles's theory provided a lens to view nontraditional undergraduate students' academic and social adult relationships and experiences in a university setting. According to Suh and Hodges (2020), the principles associated with Knowles's theory of adult learning andragogy help investigate the experiences and motivations of nontraditional students that help drive their academic success at the undergraduate level.

Contemporary research on the persistence and retention of college students has foundations based on the works of Tinto (1975, 1993, 1999), which over the years has been used to support and challenge research of student success, persistence, and retention (Sriram et al., 2020). Tinto's model of student retention considered intrinsic and external factors that influence student behavior as it pertains to persistence and retention. However, Tinto's (1993) work did not specifically reference nontraditional adult students' experiences (Aljohani, 2016; Potter, 2022). Tinto's central premise was that students are more likely to remain in school and succeed as they feel more integrated into the academic and social culture. Tinto's work has been applied to adult student populations; however, during his work, nontraditional student populations were not as large as they

are today and were not categorized differently than traditional students (Tight, 2020). Tinto's work on student retention explored nontraditional undergraduate adult student experiences pertaining to their success and persistence. Tinto considered university students' integration into the university culture and internal and external factors that influence the retention of university students. Based on Tinto's theory, key principles of student retention theory that support student retention were used to align interview questions to explore how nontraditional adult students described their life experiences. Hence, employing an instrumental case study approach and conducting interviews to explore the experiences and perceptions of nontraditional adult students and university administrators aligned to the purpose of the study and design of the research and interview questions. I used a qualitative methodology design and instrumental case study approach to explore the phenomenon of nontraditional adult student persistence, retention, and program completion at the study site. I interviewed two participant populations regarding the nature of the study. I designed the interview protocols for both populations using the key elements of Knowles's theory of adult learning and Tinto's theory of student retention. Subsequently, the framework aligned with the problem and focus of this study. Higher education professionals have used the works of Tinto to inform their practice and work with many student populations (Smith & Tinto, 2022). Tinto's key assumptions can also be used to support and advance the understanding of undergraduate nontraditional adult student retention and persistence (see Pendakur et al., 2019). Tinto's work regarding student retention was used to support the exploration of

undergraduate nontraditional adult student experiences relating to their success, retention, and persistence.

I used the conceptual framework and the key elements of each theory to analyze the information obtained from the participant interviews. In the data analysis process, I conducted a priori coding, a deductive coding process to analyze the participants' responses in relation to the conceptual framework. I examined participants' responses for the presence of the key elements of both Tinto's theory of student retention and Knowles's theory of adult learning. I identified deductive codes that included perceptions of support, experiences, success, access to resources, quality of services, description of university supports, lack of services, campus support, and administration perception. Using the conceptual framework to conduct a priori coding, I examined the participant responses for the presence or absence of a priori codes from the interview transcriptions. This information was used in the analysis to identify themes associated with the research questions and to respond to the research questions.

Nature of the Study

I investigated the phenomenon of low completion rates of nontraditional adult students at the undergraduate level attending the study site, a 4-year university located in the West coast region of the United States. The nature of this study was a qualitative case study approach to allow for the collection and exploration of undergraduate nontraditional adult student and university administrator perceptions, and descriptions of university supports concerning completion, retention, and persistence at the study site for nontraditional adult students. An instrumental case study approach was suitable for this

research study because it is a popular approach among qualitative researchers and is considered valuable when exploring contemporary phenomena (see de Vries, 2020). In this instrumental case study, I considered the experiences and perceptions of two participant populations at the study site. I explored undergraduate nontraditional adult students' and university administrators' perceptions regarding their personal experiences towards program completion, retention, and persistence. Hence, the purpose of this qualitative instrumental case study was to explore undergraduate nontraditional adult students' and university administrators' experiences and perceptions of supports towards successful program completion, retention, and persistence of nontraditional adult students. I used a priori coding, a form of deductive coding based on the key elements of the framework, in vivo coding, based on the participants' actual words (see Saldana, 2016), and open coding, an inductive coding process, to identify codes, categories, and themes to address the purpose of the research study and answer the research questions. The findings of this study can be used to help promote further recommendations regarding the success of nontraditional adult students at the undergraduate level regarding successful program completion, persistence, and retention.

Definitions

Many of the terms used throughout this study, including nontraditional adult student, persistence, retention, university supports and student success, have been defined in several different ways and adapted over time as the student population at the university level has become more diverse. Nontraditional students can be defined as adult students over the age of 21 at the time of enrollment (Kasworm, 2018; Rabourn et al., 2018) and

as students that delayed enrollment into college, attended the university part-time, worked full-time while taking classes, were financially independent, and had dependents other than a spouse (Lewis, & Bailey-Webb, 2019)

Nontraditional adult students: For the purpose of this study, nontraditional adult students were defined as students who are 21 years or older at the time of enrollment and have an association with one or more of the characteristics outlined by the NCES (Kasworm, 2018; Lewis, & Bailey-Webb, 2019). NCES defined nontraditional students as having one or more of the following characteristics: delaying postsecondary enrollment, being independent for financial aid purposes, having one or more dependents, being a primary caregiver, not having a traditional high school diploma, attending school part-time, and being employed full-time (Choy, 2002).

Persistence: Persistence is defined as continued enrollment toward degree completion (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2019). Persistence can be envisioned as a behavioral commitment to one's studies and is measured by the consideration of time a student remains enrolled within the institution making progress towards the completion of their program (Roland et al., 2018).

Program Completion: Program completion for undergraduate students is defined as the last day of the term completing your degree requirements, usually the last day of final exams (regardless of the date one graduated from the university; Cal State East Bay, n.d.).

Retention: The terms retention and persistence have been employed interchangeably in many studies pertaining to higher education and student success. For

this study, retention is defined as an institutional-level measure of success toward degree completion, and persistence will be considered an individual or student-level measure of success towards degree completion (see Hagedorn, 2006; Savage et al., 2019).

Student Success: The term student success is often recognized as a priority for higher education institutions and, in its simplest definition, refers to the graduation and retention of students (Deeken et al., 2019). While the definition of student success can be adapted and defined in many ways, for this study, student success is defined simply by progress towards program completion.

University Administrator: The term administrator within the higher education context is used to identify an individual within a university leadership role (Gander et al., 2019). For this study, university administrator refers to individuals serving in student services leadership roles.

University Supports: The term university supports within the higher education context is used to identify services, support programs, or supports used in general to aid student success efforts in retention, persistence, and graduation efforts at the university level (Cox & Strange, 2010). For this study, university supports, university support services, and supports were used interchangeably when referencing supports to aid student success efforts for retention, persistence, and program completion for undergraduate nontraditional adult students.

Assumptions

According to Ravitch and Carl (2019), research assumptions in qualitative approaches are premises that are believed to be true and are not confirmed by the

researcher. In acknowledging the assumptions of a research study, the researcher supports the quality of the data collected and the interpretation and analysis of data (Ravitch & Carl, 2019). I made the following assumptions during this study:

- All student and university administrator participants would answer questions honestly and thoughtfully.
- Both student and university administrator participants selected would have the understanding and knowledge to respond to the established interview questions.
- Undergraduate nontraditional adult students attending a 4-year institution at the university level may not be well supported based on study site completion rates.

The focus of the study was to explore the students' experiences and perceptions in relation to their retention, persistence, and program completion as nontraditional undergraduate adult students attending a traditional 4-year institution. I also considered the perceptions and experiences university administrators had as they pertained to the successful retention, persistence, and program completion of undergraduate nontraditional adult students at the university site. By examining both populations' perceptions and experiences of the phenomenon of low graduation rates for nontraditional adult students from these two population's perceptions, additional information was gleaned to address the problem and provide information that could be used to strengthen the university supports for nontraditional students.

Scope and Delimitations

This study focused solely on the experiences and perceptions of university administrators and currently enrolled undergraduate nontraditional adult students

attending the study site, where the traditional student population is reportedly larger. By interviewing undergraduate nontraditional adult students regarding their program experiences and perceptions of what supports have helped them remain enrolled and their experiences that may have contributed to challenges, I gained a deeper understanding of the experiences of this student population at the target university. Consequently, the information gained has served to provide a deeper understanding regarding the gap in program completion rates between the traditional and nontraditional students.

I explored the phenomenon of program completion, retention, and persistence of nontraditional adult undergraduate students. Researchers use the instrumental case study as instrumental cases "are considered reasonably typical of a class of instances" (Stake, 1995, p. 3). This case study is bound to explore the specific population of students who met the criteria of being nontraditional at the local university study site. Findings from this instrumental case study are bounded to the university study site and the nontraditional, adult, undergraduate student population. The study findings are not transferable to other undergraduate student populations and university settings.

Limitations

Limitations related to the study include the generalization of potential findings, as the study focused on the responses of nontraditional adult students from one 4-year university in the West coast region. Potential limitations of the study also included the availability of administrators and access to students to participate in this study at the study site, a 4-year university located in the West coast region of the United States.

However, I overcame these limitations by focusing on fewer participants to allow more time to schedule and collect detailed data.

My experience in higher education and my role as a university administrator working with student advising and programs to support student success was another possible limitation of this study. I overcame this limitation by using reflexive bracketing, an audit trail, a consistent protocol related to the data collection process, a self-designed interview protocol, a researcher's diary, and member checking (see Candela, 2019; Maher et al., 2018; Sorsa et al., 2015). These strategies have been found to contribute to the quality of the data collection and analysis process in qualitative research (see Candela, 2019; Maher et al., 2018; Sorsa et al., 2015).

Significance

Higher education administrators' acknowledgment and acceptance of today's students' reality and nontraditional pathways may lead to a better understanding and development of beneficial support practices at both the national and institutional levels, ultimately leading to greater adult learner success (Shapiro et al., 2018). Higher education professionals and researchers should analyze undergraduate nontraditional students' perceptions of support and success to better understand their views and priorities so that support services for this specific student population can be better designed. Researchers reported some reasons why nontraditional students leave their university programs include the management of multiple roles, course availability, challenges related to coursework, lack of self-confidence in academic capability, lack of university support,

financial costs associated with attending school, and feeling out of place (Bohl et al., 2017; Kasworm, 2018).

On the national level, university leaders have tailored student-centered support services and advising practices specifically to the needs of traditional student populations and have not acknowledged the needs of nontraditional undergraduate adult students in terms of providing the necessary academic resources to support academic planning and acclimation to the higher education system (Kasworm, 2018; Powers & Wartalski, 2021). According to Rabourn et al. (2018), the nontraditional undergraduate adult student experience needs to be explored more extensively to ensure this student population receives the proper support to succeed at the undergraduate level. The lack of focus and attention regarding the needs of nontraditional adult students can result in this student population feeling alienated or isolated from the university culture (Merriam, 2018). A central aspect of support services is academic advising which includes advisors, advisor administrators, and students engaging in meaningful and supportive relationships, both personal and educational (Higgins, 2017). According to Chen (2017), university officials need to improve academic advising and student support services to better meet nontraditional students' needs.

Tippetts et al. (2022) recommended further investigation regarding the advising experiences among nontraditional adult students at the undergraduate, maintaining that higher education administrators could use further research to improve academic services for nontraditional student populations. Through developmental academic advising practices, academic advisors focus on supporting the whole student, and students who

engage more with advisors better understand their degree requirements, university timelines, policies, procedures, and resources (Wei, 2022). For higher education professionals, it is imperative to comprehend the perceptions of undergraduate nontraditional adult students and what is needed to support their success and understand what may impede their success.

With expected increases in nontraditional adult student enrollment, understanding any adaptations in support services for nontraditional adult students may allow for more effective student-centered practices; nontraditional adult students have less opportunity to successfully participate in the higher education setting due to the youth-centric university culture serving as a barrier to their success (Chen, 2017). The findings from this study may be of interest to scholars in the fields of nontraditional adult student services in higher education. This research study provided beneficial insights regarding the perceptions of undergraduate nontraditional adult students' experiences that could assist university administrators in developing and improving university support services for nontraditional adult students. Obtaining a better understanding of nontraditional adult student experiences and considering ways to improve services and increase undergraduate program completion, retention, and persistence rates could lead to positive social change through higher graduation rates and increased potential for better career outcomes and financial security for this student population and future generations of nontraditional adult students.

Summary

Although research on university student retention and persistence has been extensive over the past decades (Manyanga et al., 2017), these studies focused mainly on traditional student populations and did not include a review of the perceptions or experiences of successful retention and persistence from a nontraditional undergraduate adult student perspective. Nontraditional adult students represent a growing student population within the university system, and the rate at which they are retained and complete their degree programs has not received much attention. The purpose of this qualitative instrumental case study was to explore undergraduate nontraditional adult students' and university administrators' perceptions and experiences of supports needed for success as it relates to retention, persistence, and program completion.

In Chapter 1, I introduced the study, examined the background of the problem and described the problem in detail. I presented the purpose of the study, followed by the research questions (RQs) that I used to explore the problem and phenomenon of the needs of undergraduate nontraditional adult students and successful program completion, retention, and persistence. Chapter 1 also included overviews of the conceptual framework and nature of the study; definitions of key terms; and a discussion of the study's assumptions, scope and delimitations, limitations, and significance.

In Chapter 2, I include a review of the literature on nontraditional undergraduate adult students' retention, persistence, and success. I also describe two vital theories to adult learning, nontraditional student success and retention. I also provide a review of key, current, scholarly research studies regarding the support of nontraditional

undergraduate adult student success toward degree completion, as well as motivation for persistence and retention of this specific student population at the university level.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The higher education environment consists of many diverse student populations, and the proportion of nontraditional adult student populations is increasing in postsecondary institutions (Chen, 2017; Lewis & Bailey-Webb, 2019). The problem investigated by this study is the low completion rates of nontraditional undergraduate adult students attending a 4-year university located in the west coast region of the United States. A significant number of nontraditional adult students are not successful in completing their program requirements (Soares et al., 2017). This problem of nontraditional adult students not fulfilling their degree requirements is globally significant (Glowacki-Dudka, 2019; Rubin & Wright, 2017). When students are not successful in college, they miss the opportunity to gain the knowledge and skills necessary for success in future employment and continued educational opportunities (Lynch & Lungrin, 2018). When nontraditional adult students are not successful in terms of retention, persistence, and graduation rates, universities cannot fulfill their institutional goals. University officials may observe a decline in numbers that pertain to student success. (Dewberry & Jackson, 2018; Rubin & Wright, 2017). Administrators at this study's target institution seek to improve undergraduate nontraditional adult students' graduation and retention rates. The study site graduation and retention rates for nontraditional adult students have not improved to a significant level despite the efforts of the university's administration to address this problem.

Nationwide, nontraditional undergraduate adult students at the university level comprise an estimated 40% of the total college student population (Kamer & Ishitani,

2021; Noel-Levitz & Lumina, 2019). This statistic is projected to increase by 11% by 2026 (Hussar & Bailey, 2018). Nontraditional adult students have varied characteristics and needs. It is important to explore their needs effectively and provide support systems that can address those diverse needs (Rabourn et al., 2018). The diversity of the nontraditional adult learner student population is shaping a new form of demand relating to student support services for postsecondary education institutions in the 21st century (Soares et al., 2017). Soares et al. (2017) used manifestos as tools to spark new insight into recognized challenges and posited the leverage and interplay of the nontraditional adult learner and system elements were critical to promoting innovative practices for student success. Creating insights that map out who nontraditional adult learners are and what they need, researchers can develop recommendations for using better data to inform institutional decisions and better alignment between federal policies based on nontraditional adult student realities (Soares et al., 2017).

Improved reporting on outcome measures such as persistence and graduation rates for nontraditional undergraduate adult students is critical to identifying trends and developing targeted support programs for nontraditional adult students (Stephen et al., 2020). Similarly, exploring the perspectives of nontraditional undergraduate students regarding their experiences as adult learners will help to provide insight to university administrators on the needs of this population and again support the development of effective interventions for support (Kara et al., 2019; McNair, Albertine, et al., 2022). Researchers, however, have focused studies on support services for traditional undergraduate students, unintentionally excluding non-traditional undergraduate students'

experiences (Chen, 2017; Lewis & Bailey-Webb, 2019; Potter, 2022). With more studies focused on the experiences of traditional adults, the experiences of nontraditional adult students often gets overlooked. Rabourn et al. (2018) used data from the 2013 and 2014 administrations of the National Survey of Student Engagement and found that nontraditional adult learners reported having fewer interactions with university staff and faculty and expressed dissatisfaction with non-supportive campuses. Higher education leaders have constructed and adhered to policies that favor traditional college students, making it increasingly important to explore adult learner experiences to understand and ensure this population is properly supported (Rabourn et al., 2018).

Accordingly, in this qualitative instrumental case study I explored undergraduate nontraditional adult students' and university administrators' perceptions and experiences of supports for program completion, retention, and persistence of nontraditional adult students at the study site. Information from nontraditional undergraduate students regarding their experiences may inform the planning and design of student support strategies that effectively promote retention for this group (Renner & Skursha, 2022). Improving the completion, retention rates for nontraditional undergraduate adult students can result in positive outcomes for their educational achievement, economic advancement, family well-being, and the country's advancement, where more adults engage effectively in a knowledge-based economy.

To achieve this purpose, a comprehensive review of the literature was necessary. The literature review provides empirical and theoretical information regarding the experiences of nontraditional undergraduate adult students that enabled a better

understanding of the research topic and guided the interpretation of findings from the study. The literature review comprises three sections, the literature review strategy, the conceptual framework comprising Tinto's theory of student retention and Knowles's andragogy theory of adult learning, and a review of the literature related to key variables and concepts for the study.

Literature Search Strategy

Literature search strategies are an important component of the development of a dissertation, as a well-developed strategy for research review will provide a structure and focus for research topics used to support the corresponding study. The literature search strategy involved an in-depth review of peer-reviewed research articles using the following databases and search engines - ERIC database, Walden University Library database system, and Google Scholar. The literature search also involved articles and other publications produced by professional and government organizations and books on relevant subjects for the research topic. Keywords related to the phenomena being studied were used in the search to ensure that articles most relevant to the research topic were found. The keywords used in the search included *nontraditional student, adult learner, adult learner barriers, adult learner motivation, adult learner retention, student retention theories, andragogy, Tinto's theory of retention, barriers to retention, Knowle's andragogy theory of adult learning, barriers to retention,* and *adult learner success*. The conceptual framework is reviewed in the next section, and connections are made to the studied phenomenon.

Conceptual Framework

The problem and phenomenon I investigated in the instrumental case study was the low completion rates of nontraditional undergraduate adult students attending a 4-year university located in the West coast region of the United States. The focus and interest of this research study were the supports that aid successful program completion, retention, and persistence for nontraditional adult students enrolled in undergraduate programs. The National Academic Advising Association (NACADA, 2017) stated the importance of understanding learners in terms of their fundamental motivations is critical to supporting their success. Tinto (1975), in the theory of student retention, noted the decision for students to drop out and not complete their program requirements arises from a combination of student characteristics and the extent of their academic, environmental and social integration in an institution. In the andragogy theory of adult learning, Knowles (1984) established five characteristics that differentiate adult learners from other learners and four key principles that pertain to adult education. The principles associated with Knowles's theory of adult learning andragogy are helpful in investigating the experiences and motivations of students that help drive their academic success (Hamlin, 2020). Both Tinto's view of student retention and Knowles's adult learning theory in the context of adult learner-student experience served as the basis for the conceptual framework of this study.

Tinto's Theory of Student Retention

Tinto's theory of retention, first developed in 1975, is regarded as the best-known conceptual framework for college student retention. Tinto (1975) postulated that

voluntary student departure is a process that occurs over time due to the meanings students ascribe to their interactions with the social and academic dimensions of the institution. Thus, Tinto framed social and academic integration as necessary for student retention. “Social integration involves the extent to which there is congruency between the student and the college or university’s social systems” (Xu & Webber, 2018, p. 4). The social systems of the school involve the institution’s values, beliefs, norms, and attitudes. Social integration is formal (such as extracurricular activities offered by the school) and informal (such as contact with peers). Xu and Webber (2018) found that earning passing grades and attending classes represented a student’s compliance and serves as representation of academic integration. Like social integration, academic integration has considerations for formal and informal contexts. (Johnson & Goldman, 2022). While integration can be formal and informal, processes within this realm should be considered to understand the overall effect on the student experience. Tinto expanded further on the integration process in his work and sets the stage for the impact it can have on the persistence of nontraditional adult students.

Tinto further described the integration process as a three-stage process involving separation, transition, and incorporation (Aljohani, 2016; Nicoletti, 2019). Tinto (1975) argued that the students’ persistence or departure from school reflects their success or failure in navigating these three stages and achieving incorporation into the school community. According to Tinto’s framework, new college students detach themselves from their previous communities during the separation stage. The student is said to be in the transition stage once the disassociation process has started, but the student has not yet

acquired the values and norms of the college community (Tinto, 1975). Once completing the first two stages, the student can begin the integration process (Aljohani, 2016; Nicoletti, 2019). Many characteristics can influence a student's transition through the integration process, ultimately influencing their academic and social success.

Under Tinto's (1975) model, academic and social integration also depends on the student's characteristics, such as personal attributes, high school experiences, and family background. Academic and social integration determines the students' goals and institutional commitment. Goal commitment refers to the commitment of the student to obtain a degree, and institutional commitment refers to the commitment to a particular college. As both facets of integration increase, the student's commitment to their educational goals and level of participation within the school increases (Atif et al., 2013; Demetriou & Schmitz-Sciborski, 2011; Nicoletti, 2019). While Tinto's model of student retention is widely accepted and cited in many educational works, there are areas of his model in which Tinto does not address aspects of student success for diverse and underrepresented student populations.

There are several criticisms against Tinto's model of retention (Lee et al., 2018). One such criticism is that the model does not address the role of finances in student retention. Tinto's theory also does not address the effect of external factors within the institution's immediate environment on student retention. Student retention or withdrawal may also be influenced by economic factors and financial statuses, such as financial aid eligibility and additional expenses associated with being a student. Another limitation of

Tinto's model is that insufficient consideration is given to differences in the educational experiences of students from different backgrounds and cultures (Xu & Webber, 2018).

Regardless of the criticisms, Tinto's theory of retention has been referenced and supported in several studies and the evidence supports the contribution of social and academic interaction to support student retention. The model is widely and dominantly used in many empirical studies to examine issues of student retention and departure (Chrysikos et al., 2017; Xu & Webber, 2018). In the context of this study, this theory provided a way of examining students' and administrators' perceptions and experiences of supports for success towards program completion, retention, and persistence at the study site for undergraduate nontraditional adult students.This model also provided a different view from which to understand why retention of nontraditional undergraduate adult students remains low at the institution despite efforts to address the problem by the school's leadership. Understanding key connections to the education and program completion, retention, and persistence of the nontraditional adult student may help shape support systems for an environment conducive to success.

Knowles's Andragogy Theory of Adult Learning

Knowles served as a pioneer in adult education and is responsible for the methods and principles used in adult education known as andragogy. Knowles (1980) described the concept of andragogy as "the art and science of helping adults learn" (as cited in Corley, 2011, p. 2). There are five assumptions for adult learners Knowles proposed under this theory. The first assumption is that adult learners must value the material and its usefulness before embarking on the learning journey. Adult learners invest significant

energy into probing the benefits of learning the material and the consequences associated with not learning the material (Knowles, 1984; Loeng, 2018; Merriam, 2018). The second assumption is that the self-concept of adult learners is autonomous and self-directing (Loeng, 2018; Merriam, 2018). Adults resist situations where they feel the will of others is being imposed on them, and adults have a psychological need to be seen and treated as competent in self-direction (Ozuah, 2005; Perera & Sutha, 2021). Therefore, the adult learner shifts from dependency towards self-directedness as they mature and then can direct their own learning, (Deveci & Saleem, 2022). The third assumption of andragogy is that experience plays a significant role in adult learning and growth (Loeng, 2018; Merriam, 2018). Unlike traditional college students, nontraditional undergraduate adult learners come into college with a lot of experience. Adult learners draw on these life experiences to facilitate the learning process, and as a result, adult learning practitioners tend to adopt techniques and employ strategies that will help students both inside and outside the classroom (Ozuah, 2005; Rabourn et al., 2018).

The fourth assumption of andragogy, or adult learning, is regarding orientation to learning. In pedagogy, the orientation to learning is subject-based or subject-centered; in andragogy, the orientation to learning is life centered, task centered, and problem centered (Loeng, 2018; Merriam, 2018). As noted previously, adults learn when such learning can help them solve real-life problems. Thus, the best way to present materials to adults is in the context of real-life issues and situations (Balakrishnan, 2021; Corley; Knowles, 1984). The fifth assumption is that adult learning addresses the adult's motivation to learn. Adults respond to extrinsic motivation; however, the most effective

motivators for adult learning are intrinsic (Abedini et al., 2021; Corely, 2011; Leong, 2018; Ozuah, 2005). Based on these assumptions, Knowles (1984) developed the following recommended implications for practice:

- The climate for adult learning should be cooperative.
- The specific needs and interests of the adult learner should be assessed.
- Learning objectives should be developed based on the learner's needs, skill level, and interests.
- Adult students need to be involved in the planning and evaluation their instruction.
- The quality of the adult learning experience should be evaluated frequently, and adjustments made as needed.

For example, effective educators must explain the reasons for specific skills because adult students need to know the material's value. Adult students learn by doing, so effective instruction would include tasks the adult learner can perform versus memorization of content. Since adults are problem focused and learn best if the subject can be used for problem solving, effective instruction should also involve solving real-life problems (Corley, 2011; Housel, 2020). Knowles's insights reflected in adult learning theory are beneficial as institutional leaders consider how to best support undergraduate nontraditional adult students in a university setting.

Criticisms of andragogy as a theory include being described as culture blind because of its emphasis on self-directed learning and the establishment of non-threatening roles for the instructors and distributors of vital collegiate information where they serve as

facilitators (Loeng, 2018; McCray, 2016). In contrast, Glowacki-Dudka (2019) stated higher education administrators, faculty, and adult learner practitioners should embrace the value of working with nontraditional adult students and serve as resources for knowledge and direction related to educational and professional growth. However, despite this criticism, the theory has been validated through numerous studies and has been used to study various issues in higher education relating to nontraditional adult learners. For instance, Youde (2018) studied how adult learning theory served as a useful framework of analysis in the context of blended learning to meet the needs of adult learners and concluded the andragogical model offered a critical lens that was valuable in the blended learning approach and influenced adult learner perceptions of academic quality and success. McKenna et al. (2020) demonstrated how the use of andragogy in curriculum design makes the courses more beneficial and relevant for adult students. Rabourn et al. (2018) used the andragogical lens in their study, which reviewed data from the 2013 and 2014 administrations of the National Survey to identify characteristics of adult learners and compare their engagement with traditional-aged students. Rabourn et al.'s study, using regression analysis, revealed that adult learners were more likely to take online courses, transfer between institutions, enroll part-time, and reported fewer interactions with faculty and peers and less supportive campuses. It is important to consider the value of andragogy and Knowles's contribution to the field of adult education as researchers explore the experiences of nontraditional adult students as it relates to their success and retention in a traditional university setting.

Knowles's model served as a lens for understanding the behaviors and interactions occurring in the student and other adult experiences at the target institution (Chen, 2014; Rabourn et al., 2018). In the context of my instrumental case study, this conceptual framework supported understanding how undergraduate nontraditional adult students perceived their educational experience, in addition to helping identify perceived supports that promote success towards degree completion, retention, and persistence. The conceptual framework also supported a foundation for understanding university administrators' views of undergraduate non-traditional adult students' supports for successful program completion, retention, and persistence.

Literature Review Related to Key Concepts and Variable

In today's higher education landscape, the traditional student is no longer the norm as it is increasingly more common for students to be working adults, campus commuters, part-time students, and have attended more than one institution (Zerquera et al., 2018). Nationwide, nontraditional adult students at the university level are among the fastest-growing student populations (Noel-Levitz & Lumina, 2019). Nontraditional adult students and their experiences continue to be viable topics for academic research, and continued work in the field is needed to minimize the impact of inequality to provide a more equitable higher education landscape (Wong & Hoskins, 2022). Researchers have shown that nontraditional adult students are among particular student populations lost at much higher rates, in terms of persistence and attrition, than their traditional counterparts (Ellis, 2019). Many university system personnel have unknowingly created established systems by university officials that set nontraditional adult students up for failure as soon

as they arrive at the university (Glowacki-Dudka, 2019). Due to their growing numbers, it is critical to understand nontraditional adult students' perceptions and experiences more deeply to develop and provide effective university support systems to aid in successful retention and persistence (Housel, 2020). University admission criteria now incorporate more ways to evaluate and admit nontraditional adult students, recognizing their nontraditional attributes and experiences as strengths to their capability of being successful in their retention and graduation (Sandlin, 2019). With increasing numbers of nontraditional adult students attending college, it is important to review the characteristics of nontraditional adult students and understand their barriers to success as well as factors that may support their success. Employers are seeking to hire professional staff with high levels of cultural competency and educational achievement. Completing a higher education degree gives university graduates a competitive advantage in a rapidly changing and growing labor market (Horowitz, 2018). Understanding and aiding nontraditional adult students in retention and degree completion is imperative to support their overall academic and professional success after college. In the next section, I include a review of the characteristics of non-traditional students and highlight how these traits inform their experiences as nontraditional adult students in the higher education environment.

Characteristics of Nontraditional Adult Students

There are distinct differences between traditional and nontraditional adult students (Slover & Mandernach, 2018). Many characteristics distinguish nontraditional adult students from their traditional counterparts; age is one of the primary characteristics of

nontraditional adult students (Iloh, 2018). While previous studies differentiate nontraditional adult students simply by age, today's nontraditional adult student populations are diverse and require different supports to overcome barriers to their academic success (Iloh, 2018; Rotar, 2017). The differences between traditional and nontraditional adult students go beyond age and include all-around influences from cultural and developmental backgrounds (Iloh, 2018). Additional subgroup characteristics of nontraditional adult students include but are not limited to: (a) employment; (b) parental role; (c) family role; (d) life events; (e) work experience; (f) work status; (g) socio-economic status; (h) persistence (Kasworm, 2018). Concerning the characteristics identified, nontraditional adult students are more likely to invest their time in pursuits that enhance their learning experience, emphasizing meeting with academic and career mentors and focusing less on general campus activities and events (Grabowski et al., 2016). According to Chen (2017), one of the primary reasons that nontraditional adult students struggle with success and connectedness in the postsecondary education setting is due to the competing nature of their life roles that go along with adulthood. Chen explored the concept of undergraduate diversity and described the importance of higher education institutions addressing the life phase and learning needs of adult learners, as they are a significant makeup of the undergraduate student population. Nontraditional adult students approach the university setting with the expectation of consumer-oriented services compared to traditional students, who focus on the overall university experience (Breneman, 2022). Nontraditional adult students can be more conscientious regarding the quality of their education and often expect their educational experience to be accountable

and in line with their professional needs and are more likely to need support to cope with obligations from home and work (Rabourn et al., 2018). When institutional leaders of higher education do not address these unique needs and expectations, they fail to create a supportive environment for success and receive sharp criticism from this population (Iloh, 2018; K. S. Rogers, 2018).

Educational institutions and their staff need to be active and supportive of student needs and retention efforts, as student retention is vital to the well-being of students, institutional programming, and the advancement of society (Sorensen & Donovan, 2017). Institutional administrators within higher education are not adequately addressing the needs of nontraditional adult students (Tumuheki et al., 2018). According to Kamer and Ishitani (2021), the nontraditional adult student population is very diverse and presents with challenges related to enrollment, engagement, and retention, which requires a deeper understanding of their characteristics, experiences, and needs. Kamer and Ishitani explored the persistence behavior of first-time, nontraditionally aged students at 4-year institutions that focused on the best practices for meeting the educational needs of nontraditional adult students. Utilizing the human capital theory framework to assess how students' background, enrollment, and financial factors influence first-time, nontraditional student retention across multiple years of enrollment, Kamer, and Ishitani found nontraditional adult students were at the highest risk of departure during the first year of enrollment. According to MacDonald (2018), universities will not be successful in retaining and graduating nontraditional adult students without understanding their

needs and developing systems specifically focused on addressing the barriers to their success.

Barriers to Nontraditional Adult Student Success

Nontraditional students have substantially lower graduation and retention rates than traditional students (MacDonald, 2018). Identifying supports that aid in program completion for this group is critical towards changing the outcomes that predominate for nontraditional undergraduate students. Researchers need to evaluate the challenges non-traditional students have experienced and explore the necessary interventions to effectively address the needs of this population (Chen, 2017). Nontraditional adult students' experiences often conflict when pursuing their educational goals because of the various roles they have in life (Karmelita, 2020). Researchers' findings have demonstrated that nontraditional adult students experience apprehension about enrolling in college and completing a degree, which is affected heavily by their self-belief and other life factors (Alpay et al., 2017). A common stressor for nontraditional adult students is balancing their studies, work, and family responsibilities (He et al., 2018). Some additional challenges noted by researchers that nontraditional adult learners face included difficulty coping with multiple life roles, absenteeism, finances, and lack of university support services (Davis, 2017)

Nontraditional students experience challenges balancing priorities and managing multiple roles. Examples of roles for nontraditional students may include mother, father, partner, employee, and student (see cite). Nontraditional students often have to juggle multiple roles, including being a parent, a caregiver for family members, working

multiple jobs, and other responsibilities (McNally et al., 2019; Zart, 2019). The time constraints and role conflicts are critical concerns for nontraditional adult students as they can affect their success (Zart, 2019). A phenomenological study by Zart (2019) explored the success of five women, undergraduate adult learners, at a predominantly traditional-aged university, focusing on how their experiences facilitated or hindered their overall success. Zart's findings revealed participants were motivated to attend college to serve as role models and to provide for their families, perceived their academic ability and the support they received from family, or were encouraged by professors to facilitate their success. However, participants perceived barriers to success included role conflicts and negative experiences with university services. When students become overwhelmed with their activities and responsibilities, they can become distressed and often may voluntarily withdraw from their degree program (Davis, 2017; Zart, 2019). The duality of the nontraditional adult student role may also affect their record of absenteeism, which can serve as a strong indicator of reduced interaction and connection with the university (Davis, 2017). Disruptions in progression can represent an obstacle to success and degree completion. Dispositional barriers are difficult to identify, quantify or measure; institutional barriers, on the other hand, refer to the structure of educational institutions that may impede student success.

The availability of services and communication systems in the university setting has also been considered a barrier for nontraditional students. Nontraditional students have reported challenges with the availability of classes outside of regular working hours and the absence of a strong streamlined communication system to support enrollment and

advising (Zart, 2019). Many programs and institutions catering to traditional students typically lack adequate support services for nontraditional adult students (Kearney et al., 2018). Institutional leaders within higher education have made efforts to adapt and change traditional operational paradigms, often with little success or impact on adult learners, due to the limited insight into the true needs of the nontraditional adult learner (Deggs, 2018). According to Mitchell et al. (2019), university budget restraints do not allow for sufficient investment in student support services for students, including nontraditional adult students. Remenick (2019) stated that the lack of dedicated support services for nontraditional adult students, such as designated support offices and services, is a significant barrier to their academic success. The absence of available university support systems to support nontraditional students and nontraditional students' negative experiences with university support systems contribute to feelings of inadequacy and lack of self-efficacy in nontraditional students (Kasworm, 2018). Nontraditional students often feel "out of place" as they are often older than the traditional student and do not feel part of the mainstream campus culture that caters to the traditional student (Kasworm, 2018). Considering the needs of nontraditional adult students is important for university administrators who influence the culture of a university (Remenick, 2019).

Higher education leaders should focus on ensuring equal access and support for nontraditional adult students, which represent a growing population of adult learners who often are workers and primary caretakers seeking collegiate degrees (Kasworm, 2018). As noted by Davis (2017), some students may know exactly what they need to do to accomplish their goals but may need guidance to determine which courses to add or drop

and learn about what resources are available to help them succeed. This deficiency in student support services contributes to the high attrition rates recorded among nontraditional adult learners (Davis, 2017; Renner & Skursha, 2022). By assisting students across these barrier categories, university support services can help to strengthen the likelihood of success for this group (Davis, 2017).

Factors that Promote Nontraditional Adult Student Success

By exploring undergraduate nontraditional adult students' and university administrators' perceptions of supports for program success, retention, and persistence of nontraditional adult students towards program completion, it is relevant to identify literature that provides information that contributes to understanding nontraditional undergraduate students' success, retention, and persistence to program completion. Wong and Chiu (2019) found that in the construction of academic success for nontraditional adult learners in the higher education landscape, factors relating to attrition, persistence, support, and university structure need to be considered to promote success in this student population. Attrition of nontraditional adult students is a critical problem for many educational institutions although there are many reasons why a student might fail to graduate, understanding their motivations and need for support could aid in supporting the success of nontraditional adult learners (Bohl et al., 2017). With an increased enrollment of nontraditional adult learners into the university system, the traditional student experience is no longer the norm and has become increasingly more common for students to work full-time or part-time, commute to campus, attend courses part-time, and attend more than one institution (Lin, & Wang, 2018; Zerquera et al., 2018). Goings

(2018), conducted a qualitative study and investigated the academic and social experiences of undergraduate nontraditional adult black male students, which included 13 participants from traditional universities selected for the study. According to the researcher's findings, these students faced many hardships and barriers while attending college, and few targeted programs and services were available to support nontraditional adult students' needs. Goings' (2018) recommended university officials think differently in recruiting and supporting these students to help achieve higher rates of retention and persistence. To discuss pertinent changes needed to support nontraditional undergraduate adult students, university officials will need to involve all levels of leadership to develop and implement successful services and supports for these students. According to Zerquera et al. (2018), more research is needed to investigate how university officials in positions of power interpret the experiences and success of nontraditional adult students.

University leaders need to understand the specific factors that influence student success in the context of their respective universities. Tinto (2015) noted that there is a need for institutional programming that can aid students in improved persistence. This need goes beyond merely helping students to clarify goals or acquire academic skills. Institutional leaders should address issues of a sense of belonging, self-efficacy, and student perceptions of the curriculum to improve student persistence (Tinto, 2015). It is important to note that decisions about how to expand services for nontraditional adult students cannot happen without the influence of the student experience (Glancey, 2018). New approaches and improvements should be considered in the context of how current

programs within the local university site measure up against adult students' genuine needs and expectations (Glancey, 2018).

Persistence and Retention of Nontraditional Adult Students

The theory of academic self-concept encompasses a student's perception of their ability and competence to operate in an academic realm (Demetriou & Schmitz-Sciborski, 2011). When consideration is given that nontraditional adult students represent a significant percentage of university students dropping out, there may be some discordance between students' perceptions of themselves concerning their university experience and their actual institutional experience (Chen, 2017; Fowle, 2018). As a result of discordance, nontraditional adult students often struggle to connect their goals to their educational affairs (Karmelita, 2020). Recognizing that nontraditional adult students are more likely to drop out of their degree programs than their traditional counterparts, current institutional models of student success and retention should consider the experiences of nontraditional adult students (Kasworm, 2018). With student success rates related to retention and graduation being an imperative need for higher education institutions, a review of past and current research pertaining to university student success models from a nontraditional adult student perspective is necessary.

Most research on retention and student success has focused on why students fail to persist and lacks a review and consideration of successful students and why they succeed (Demetriou & Schmitz-Sciborski, 2011; Wong & Chiu, 2019). Urban and Jirsáková (2022) stated that nontraditional adult students demonstrate lower levels of extrinsic motivation but possess a higher intrinsic motivation for learning, making

university integration more important to aid in their belonging and success as students. Many institution organizational supports contribute more to the success and campus integration of traditional students (Balakrishnan, 2021). To learn more about the characteristics of retention and attrition of nontraditional adult students, Wardley et al. (2013) conducted a study where they used a cross-sectional design and a convenience sample of first-year undergraduate students from two universities with multiple geographic locations to determine if there were differences in the level of importance students placed on retention factors depending on age composition and examined the factors' regarding the influence of institutional commitment. According to their study, retention factors did vary for first-year students depending on age, and the academic environment was key to institutional commitment among non-traditional students. Sun (2019) confirmed that nontraditional adult learner engagement, retention, and success continue to be challenges for many universities, and a priority must be placed on establishing nontraditional adult learner-friendly environments that encourage learners to succeed.

Being engaged within the university may be more difficult for nontraditional students based on their background and experiences. Still, student engagement for nontraditional students can be fostered by adopting institutional practices that activate key mediating mechanisms to address self-efficacy, emotions, belonging, and well-being (Kahu & Nelson, 2018). Engagement and integration are significant factors associated with the retention and success of nontraditional adult students (Thompson-Ebanks, 2017),

university leadership's understanding and support are essential to developing effective practices and support systems for nontraditional adult students.

University Administrators' Role in Nontraditional Adult Student Success

The responsibility of student success pertaining to retention and persistence has shifted from a student responsibility to that an institutional responsibility (Tight, 2020). Higher education institutions and university campuses are increasingly diverse and differ in many aspects, such as quality, size, student body make-up, research purposes, and academic settings (Naylor & Mifsud, 2020). Due to the lack of similarity between universities, students have different experiences that can contribute to their success or lack thereof (Woods & Frogge, 2017). The variances between institutional makeup and overall student experience makes it more important for university leaders to understand the specific factors that have a bearing on undergraduate nontraditional adult student success (Stephen et al., 2020). Based on the above premise, Xu (2017) implemented a study to examine the relationship between theoretical orientation and the specific needs of nontraditional adult students within a specific institution. The study's findings were that institutional control over the quality of academic experience represented the most critical factor for reducing the intention to drop out among students, such as the inconsistencies between the specific needs of students and the focus on student engagement and success efforts adopted by university leadership. The ability of students to pay for their education was also found to be another critical factor for student retention. Xu (2017) concluded from the findings that an inconsistency existed between the needs of students in specific academic settings and dominant theoretical frameworks

on academic and social engagement. Therefore, Xu (2017) recommended that localized retention interventions should be based on a sound understanding of students' experiences. This study's findings reflected the need to examine the role of university leadership in student success. Bohl et al. (2017) noted that nontraditional adult students' attitudinal attributes, university leadership, and campus support systems proved to be critical variables for nontraditional adult students' success.

Many nontraditional adult students prefer dedicated services and support offices to aid their success (Goings, 2018). As Kasworm (2018) noted, to address the specific barriers to success for nontraditional adult students, universities must be willing to examine and acknowledge the factors that contribute to or hinder the success of this population s and take the necessary steps to address such factors. Addressing these factors would include reviewing institutionalized practices that create barriers to success for nontraditional adult learners. The findings from this literature review could have implications for the role of university leadership in addressing barriers and promoting success for nontraditional adult students.

Nontraditional adult student retention and graduation rates are a concern for universities in the Unites States, as more scrutiny is being placed on institutions to improve the rates of success for this student population (Ellis, 2019). A generic approach to student services, specifically models developed for work with traditional college students, will not be sufficient to meet the needs of nontraditional adult learners (Chen, 2017; Iloh, 2018; Kamer & Ishitani, 2021). As the literature shows, lack of support or inadequacy in the support services offered by institutions is an important barrier to

success. University leaders are responsible for the university's services and resource allocation, and non-traditional adult student voiced experiences are needed to guide university program planning and governance for this student population (Hunt et al., 2019). The lack of support can be addressed by designing comprehensive support services for nontraditional adult students and allocating sufficient resources to sustain the program (Chen, 2017; Rabourn et al., 2018; Stephen et al., 2020). Comprehensive support programs can involve counseling, academic advising, mentoring, and career services. As noted in the literature, nontraditional students may experience dispositional barriers involving feelings of anxiety and inadequacy, and counseling services is noted to have effectively addressed such barriers (Davis, 2017).

Similarly, nontraditional adult students need advice, guidance, and mentoring to navigate various aspects of college life. Mentoring can have strong implications in aiding students with their focus and motivation to complete their academic goals (Alston & Hansman, 2020). Academic advisors can play a critical role in assisting and mentoring nontraditional students' navigation of the educational terrain and successfully completing their programs (Glowacki-Dudka, 2019; Reinowski, 2020). Academic advisors can help students prepare for courses, guide them on available resources, and counsel them on methods to improve their time management and study skills (Davis, 2017). Such support services are invaluable for nontraditional adult students' academic success and program completion.

Summary and Conclusions

In this chapter, I restated the qualitative study's problem of the low completion rates of nontraditional undergraduate adult students attending a 4-year university located in the west coast region of the United States and purpose of exploring undergraduate nontraditional adult students' and university administrators' perceptions and experiences of supports needed for success as it relates to retention, persistence, and program completion. I provided the literature search strategy to explore the research in relation to the study. In this literature review, I provided empirical and theoretical information regarding the experiences of nontraditional students, which will enable a better understanding of the research topic and guide the interpretation of findings from the study. The literature review is comprised of three sections; the literature review strategy, a conceptual framework comprising Tinto's (1975) model of student retention and Knowles's (1984) andragogy theory of adult learning, and a literature review related to key variables and concepts for the study to summarize what is known about the topic of the study.

The literature on the description of undergraduate nontraditional adult students and the characteristics of nontraditional students were reviewed to provide better insight into the needs of this group. Factors responsible for student success were reviewed to understand what works to improve student success and identify gaps in student support services supported by the literature. A comprehensive review of the literature on the supports needed to achieve success for undergraduate nontraditional adult students was completed to identify the factors that promote success for this group and to understand

better how support services fit into the student success context to form an understanding of the gaps that need to be addressed. The research on college student persistence and undergraduate, nontraditional adult students was included, with reference to two significant theorists Tinto and Knowles, whose theories provided the conceptual framework for this instrumental qualitative study. This chapter served as a review of relevant literature and models of college student retention and persistence, review the contexts in which relevant research has taken place, and present a conceptual framework to inform the qualitative study

Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this qualitative instrumental case study was to explore undergraduate nontraditional adult students' and university administrators' perceptions and experiences of supports needed for success as it relates to retention, persistence, and program completion. This study's findings may help university administrators understand the experiences of nontraditional adult students and assist in the development of supportive programs to aid in the success, persistence, and retention of this student population. Using a qualitative approach is consistent with exploring how social experiences are created and given meaning (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). This study provided a qualitative case study analysis from both the nontraditional students' and university administrators' perceptions and experiences to comprehend the perceived needs of nontraditional adult undergraduate students more deeply as it pertains to support or identified barriers to successful retention, persistence, and program completion. In Chapter 3, I present the research design and rationale, my role as the researcher, the methodology, the issues of trustworthiness, and the ethical procedures associated with this study.

Research Design and Rationale

Given the complexities surrounding the lives of many nontraditional adult students and the transformative effect the pursuit of completing a college degree can have, I sought to gain an understanding of nontraditional adult students' experiences and perceptions of program success in a traditional university setting, while also considering the roles and perceptions of university administrators in charge of student success

programming. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2008), qualitative methods consistently explore how personal and social experiences are created and given meaning. Qualitative research is a methodological pursuit of understanding how people perceive, observe, approach, and experience the world to make meaning of their experiences and phenomena (Ravitch & Carl, 2019). The research design for this study was a qualitative, instrumental case study. The instrumental case study approach was chosen because the design of the study featured characteristics, such as the focus of the study being to gain insights into the perceptions and experiences of study participants, which is consistent with the qualitative research design as described by Creswell and Guetterman (2019). Central concepts of this study included an in-depth analysis of perceptions, attitudes, and experiences of nontraditional undergraduate adult students towards their success and graduation, as well as consideration of the perceptions and attitudes of university administrators in charge of student success programming. Reviewing the experiences and needs of nontraditional undergraduate adult students within the higher education system provided information related to the program completion, retention that may help address the necessary university program supports and gap in completion rates between nontraditional adult students and their traditional counterparts. There are different qualitative designs researchers can select from and use to conduct their research. Qualitative research designs frequently used are basic inquiry, ethnographies, case studies, and phenomenological studies (Smith & McGannon, 2017).

The instrumental case study design method allows researchers to gain an in-depth understanding and explore complex issues related to programs, places, individuals,

documents, or events (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Additionally, each case of qualitative research is a singular and significant process and requires the researcher to be able to adapt their methods and make changes as needed. Researchers organize and analyze the data they collect to determine and establish patterns, if any exist (Taylor et al., 2015). The recognition of patterns ultimately helps researchers determine the results of their study (Taylor et al., 2015). A qualitative case study design can involve entering real-world settings of participants to understand and collect data, which leads to a naturalistic inquiry (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Qualitative instrumental case study design offered the best approach to explore the experiences and perceptions of undergraduate nontraditional adult students and university administrators in charge of supports for successful retention and persistence towards degree completion. In alignment with the purpose of this proposed study, the research questions that guided this study were as follows:

RQ1: How do undergraduate nontraditional adult students attending a traditional postsecondary 4-year institution describe their perceptions of support towards program completion, retention, and persistence at the study site?

RQ2: What do university administrators describe as supports to successful program completion, retention, and persistence for undergraduate nontraditional adult students?

Role of the Researcher

As a qualitative researcher, I was responsible for several functions and responsibilities in conducting the research for this study. As the researcher, I connected to

all participants due to my previous work as an academic advisor at the university. Aligned with the work of Yin (2018), my focus as the researcher was to serve as the key instrument in the data collection process to understand the phenomenon from a real-life context. According to Merriam (2018), the most important qualitative methods for collecting and analyzing data are done through semistructured or narrative interviews. In the role of the researcher, I gathered data in the form of semistructured interviews and analyzed participant responses to generate codes, categories, and themes.

To ensure my credibility, I examined and noted any potential for bias or conflict regarding the study. In my previous professional position at the target site as an academic advisor, I worked with and had direct contact with traditional and nontraditional adult students. To avoid potential bias and conflict in the role of the researcher, I ensured participant selection was reserved for nontraditional adult students who were not assigned to my caseload for academic advisement. My biases, such as personal values, background, and professional occupation, could have swayed my thought process when interviewing participants. However, I worked to ensure no compromise of the data occurred by complying with the necessary steps and findings at each stage of this study, having all data carefully reviewed and guarded to help stop and mitigate the effects of these potential issues. My professional background was not a barrier to obtaining relevant and pertinent data for this study, but rather served as a unification of university departments and services to close a gap many researchers have missed filling. Any participants who presented a conflict of interest or were familiar to me as a previous advisee were not included or considered for participation in this study.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative instrumental case study design. Stake (2005) noted that instrumental case study design is used to gain insight into how insiders experience a phenomenon. The instrumental case study design was selected as I sought to more deeply comprehend the perceived needs of nontraditional adult students and the supports that facilitated their completion, retention, and persistence at the university study site. This instrumental case study consisted of semistructured interviews, purposefully selected participants, including nontraditional undergraduate students and administrators at the university study site. In this section, I discuss the participant selection logic, instrumentation, procedures for recruitment, participation, data collection, and the data analysis plan in the following subsections.

Participant Selection Logic

I explored the perceptions and experiences of nontraditional undergraduate students and university administrators who manage programs to support student success and retention. To comprehend the perceived needs of nontraditional adult students at the study site, I explored the perceptions of both students and administrators related to the supports that facilitated their program completion, retention, and persistence at the study site. In qualitative research, participants are thoughtfully selected as they are considered and are viewed as the source of their own experience (Ravitch & Carl, 2019). In this instrumental case study, I sampled two populations about the same topic; the participants for this instrumental case study included five student participants and six university administrator participants. Smaller sample sizes are more acceptable for instrumental

case studies (Boddy, 2016; Crowe et al., 2011). In the next section, I describe the sampling strategy, inclusion criteria for each participant population, how the participants were confirmed to meet the criteria, the number of participants, procedures for participant recruitment, and the relationship between saturation and sample size.

I used a nonprobability purposeful sampling method. This method of sampling was chosen because nonprobability purposeful sampling is central to qualitative research and can strengthen the overall credibility of the study (Guest, Namey, & Mitchell, 2013; Klar & Leeper, 2019). Cohen and Crabtree (2006) advocated that researchers continue with data collection until analysis reveals they have reached saturation. In qualitative research, small samples are appropriate and must be adequate not to lower the quality and credibility of the study findings (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Qualitative sampling focuses on exploring a variety of perceptions on a given issue (O'Reilly & Parker, 2012). The appropriateness, in terms of having knowledge of the phenomenon being studied, and adequacy are recognized as the vital factors in qualitative sampling (O'Reilly & Parker, 2012). Adequacy is related to the depth of the responses and, therefore, important to include participants who will provide information about the topic being studied (O'Reilly & Parker, 2012). Saturation is central to sampling adequacy; obtaining thick, rich participant descriptions is essential. Saunders et al. (2017) explained that saturation is reached when no new data are found in the review of information such as transcriptions of interviews.

I established inclusion criteria for both participant populations. Student participant criteria were that they met one or more of the following categories: age 21 years or older

at the time of their enrollment, enrolled at least part-time and met one or more of the characteristics outlined by the NCES for defining a nontraditional student. Participants were provided a link to complete and return the completed demographic questionnaire to confirm they met the inclusion criteria specified.

University administrators were also included as participants in this study. Criteria for administrators included university administrators at the study site who oversee student success programming within the academic colleges. University administrator participants who supported student success and served in leadership roles that managed student success functions were recruited across different academic colleges at the university study site.

In this qualitative instrumental case study, I recruited two participant populations, nontraditional undergraduate adult students and university administrators, to obtain perceptions of the phenomenon that was the focus of this study. A representative sample of both participant populations was obtained, five student participants and six administrator participants; thus, the total sample size for this study was 11 participants.

I used systematic procedures to recruit the participants. Once Walden University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) contingent approval was granted, I completed the university study site IRB process and received IRB approval, and then provided the university study site IRB's approval to Walden's IRB and gained formal Walden IRB approval and was assigned the approval number (08-18-21-0418817) to conduct the study. I recruited prospective participants using my Walden email account after obtaining a list of nontraditional adult students from a university administrator employed at the

university study site, which served as a proxy for data collection. I sent each potential student and administrator participant a letter of invitation to participate in the study to their university email. In the letter of invitation, I described the purpose of the study, the criterion for participants, and my role as a researcher. I referred them to the attached letter of consent if they were interested in learning more about the study and wanted to volunteer to participate. Once the interested participant reviewed the consent letter, completed a demographic screener, and returned both the consent and screener to my Walden email address, I followed up with participants to schedule individual semistructured interviews using a virtual platform. Boddy (2016) noted that the qualitative researcher contemplates the participant sample size in designing the study.

Smaller sample sizes are more appealing in qualitative instrumental case study designs when the study is more exploratory and the focus is more on gathering in-depth information that considers the experiences and perceptions of the selected participants (Boddy, 2016; Crowe et al., 2011). Smaller sample sizes allow for a more rich and more manageable set of data (J. Cho, 2017), which is important when consideration must be made for data saturation.

Data saturation within qualitative studies occurs when no new information or themes can be observed or identified in the data (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). Saturation is a central focus of qualitative research when deciding on adequate sample size (Braun & Clarke, 2019). When using a small sample size to conduct a qualitative study, the sample size must be both adequate and suitable to address the purpose of the study and large enough where replication of responses is evident, and participants of the

study demonstrate a distinct understanding and knowledge base of the phenomenon being studied (Morse, 2015; Saunders et al., 2017). For this instrumental qualitative case study, the sample size was adequate as data saturation was achieved at 11 interviews when no new information or patterns could be observed.

Instrumentation

I conducted 11 semistructured interviews using a video platform, Zoom. Semistructured interviews included the use of open-ended questions and probes. Probes often create a richer understanding of the participants' experiences, thereby clarifying the phenomenon. The exchange between the participant and researcher in the semistructured interview allows for discerning exchanges and communication (Kallio et al., 2016). For this instrumental qualitative case study, I developed an interview protocol aligning the questions to the two research questions. I used key elements of the conceptual framework to support the development of the student and administrator protocols. I obtained feedback from my committee regarding an expert panel consisting of professional colleagues with a doctorate in education. After the interview protocols were drafted, the expert panel reviewed the protocols to ensure alignment and clarity of the protocol. Semistructured interview questions were developed to facilitate the thorough collection of data to explore the experiences and perceptions of nontraditional undergraduate adult students and university administrators towards the retention, persistence, and program completion of undergraduate nontraditional adult students at the university study site. I used probes, when needed, to obtain more information from the participants. Tables 1 and 2 reflect the research questions and corresponding interview questions.

Table 1

Research Questions and Interview Questions for Non-traditional Students

Research Question	Interview Questions
RQ1: How do undergraduate nontraditional adult students attending a traditional postsecondary 4-year institution describe their perceptions of support towards program completion, retention, and persistence at the study site?	1. Describe your experiences with support services here at the study site. What is your perception of the student support services? 2. How do you perceive the availability of advisors or support services personnel in helping you? 3. Describe your connection to the campus community. Probe by asking them to provide examples of activities they are involved with. 4. How do you perceive your connections to student services professional? Probe by asking them to provide examples to illustrate their connection with student success professionals. (positive and negative) 5. Describe your connection to your peers at the study site. How did you meet? 6. Tell me about some of the challenges you've experienced as an adult student? How has the study site been able to help you with those challenges? 7. What supports do you think could be added to assist undergraduate nontraditional adult students? 8. Are there other services you would like to see on campus that could be beneficial to undergraduate nontraditional adult students? 9. What kind of changes would you like to see on campus for undergraduate nontraditional adult students?

Table 2

Research Question and Interview Questions for University Administrators

Research Question	Interview Questions
RQ2: What do university administrators describe as supports to successful program completion, retention, and persistence for undergraduate nontraditional adult students?	1. Tell me about your job role at the study site and how long you have been with the university. 2. Describe your role in supporting nontraditional undergraduate adult students? 3. Describe the student support services the university provides for undergraduate nontraditional adult students. 4. Describe any changes that have been made to the student support services to strengthen the support for nontraditional adult undergraduate students. 5. How would you describe the quality of the support services for this student population? 6. How would you describe the availability of faculty, advisors or support services to support nontraditional adult students regarding their university and program needs? 7. Tell me about the perceived barriers to successful retention and persistence of undergraduate nontraditional adult students at the study site? 8. Do you think any support systems or programs could be improved or added to assist undergraduate nontraditional adult students? 9. Describe any potential plans to develop targeted services or support programs specifically to assist with the needs of undergraduate nontraditional adult students. 10. What other services you would like to see on campus that could be beneficial to undergraduate nontraditional adult students? 11. What kind of changes would you like to see on campus for undergraduate nontraditional adult students? 12. Is there anything else you would like to tell me? –anything else that I did not ask about, or that you would like to add to something we have already discussed?

COVID-19 resulted in shelter in-home from federal and government officials; thus, this research study was conducted through semistructured interviews through Zoom. Access to the Internet and the evolution of communicating through technological avenues

supported the qualitative interview process (see Irani, 2019). Limitations related to a geographic location that could normally present a problem with conducting in-person interviews are reduced with video and phone conferencing (Irani, 2019). I used a secure network to conduct all interviews via Zoom, maintaining security and safety protocols during COVID-19. I used the recording system in Zoom and a backup audio recording device to record the interviews.

I used semistructured interviews and designed an interview protocol using open-ended versus close-ended questions. The design of the interview questions supported the open exchange of viewpoints by participants. Interview questions were specifically designed to address the research question regarding how currently enrolled undergraduate nontraditional adult students describe their perceptions of supports for successful program completion, retention, and persistence towards graduation at the study site. The interview tool was designed with the intention to understand the experiences and perceptions undergraduate nontraditional adult students have towards retention and persistence as they complete their undergraduate degrees more deeply. The interview protocols were sufficient to obtain information from participants to address the research questions.

Equally, for university administrator participants, virtual interviews included open-ended questions, which allowed the participants to speak openly while addressing the proposed interview questions. Interview questions were specifically designed to address the research question regarding how university administrators describe the supports for successful retention and persistence towards graduation for undergraduate

nontraditional adult students. The interview tool was developed to understand the perceptions of university administrators in charge of student success programs towards retention and persistence of undergraduate nontraditional adult students as they complete their degrees.

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

I collected the data for this study from semistructured interviews with nontraditional undergraduate adult students and university administrators in charge of student success programs. Student participants shared their perceptions and experiences related to successful retention and persistence while attending a traditional university, and university administrators shared their perceptions of undergraduate nontraditional adult student retention and persistence at the local site. I interviewed five undergraduate nontraditional adult student participants and six university administrators involved in student success programming. Student participants were identified and shared by the administrator serving as a university proxy for research at the local study site. University administrators were identified by their roles on campus as coordinators, directors, or managers of student success programs for the local site. All participants in the study were selected using a non-probability purposeful sampling method, contacted via email for participation requests, and provided online informed consent detailing information regarding the proposed study's procedures and processes to maintain confidentiality. The first six participants that responded for each group were selected for the study. Non-probability purposeful samples are considered an acceptable form of participant selection for social scientific research studies where the sample size is smaller, and the researcher

attempts to observe relationships between variables to review and highlight the need for continued research with larger representative samples (Rivera, 2019). Once accepted and notified via email of acceptance, participants were scheduled for interviews.

I contacted the university study site's IRB in advance to determine the process for approval of the study and recruitment of participants. I obtained a letter of preliminary approval to conduct the study from Walden University's IRB. After obtaining the preliminary approval and approval number from Walden IRB, I shared the Walden IRB approval letter and number with the university study site administrator responsible for approval of research studies at the study site. Once I was granted permission from the university study site IRB to conduct the research, I reconnected with Walden IRB to obtain formal approval. Once I obtained formal Walden IRB approval, I obtained the names and e-mail addresses from the university administrator at the study site, serving as the gatekeeper and proxy for research, for potential participants, including both nontraditional, adult students and administrators.

For university administrators and nontraditional adult student participants, I emailed a Letter of Invitation to Participate and Informed Consent, as well as an Online Statement of Consent and Demographic Questionnaire for students to the target participants. I obtained the names and e-mail addresses of potential participants from the university study site administrator who served as the study's proxy. The Invitation to Participate and Statement of Consent Form contained the purpose of the study, the data collection procedures, the voluntary nature of the study, the risks and benefits of participating in the study, and how confidentiality was protected. To ensure potential

participants did not feel participation was a university mandate, I stressed the voluntary nature of the study in the recruitment email. Administrators were directed to review the Invitation Letter to participate and click on a link at the bottom of the letter if they were interested in participating in the study. The link to participants to the online Statement of Consent/demographic questionnaire. The Administrator participants were asked to review the Notice of Consent, and if they were interested in participating in the study, they were asked to respond to the questions on the demographic questionnaire, which pertained to confirming the participant criteria and non-work contact information. The online, electronic Statement of Consent and demographic questionnaire indicated that submitting the online Statement of Consent form and demographic questionnaire confirmed they have read and understood the statement of informed consent, thus securing implied consent per each participant.

I checked the responses of the online demographic questionnaire and consent forms daily, and contacted participants, who met the inclusion criteria specified. Once the informed consent and participant inclusion criteria were confirmed, I sent an email to schedule a date, time, and location to conduct a virtual or audio interview via Zoom. The desired number of study participants was not attained from the first email solicitation, thus I resent letter of invitation for two successive weeks, omitting any participants who had responded. The second email contained the invitation to participate, the online informed consent form and demographic questionnaire, omitting the administrators and nontraditional, adult students who responded. I followed the same protocol described for sending the initial letter of invitation, consent and demographic questionnaire. I did not

obtain the necessary number of participants at the study site after sending the letter of invitation three times; thus I amended my Walden IRB application and as a result, I was permitted by Walden IRB to offer an electronic gift card to participants. The gift card was given to participants as a token of appreciation for their time. The updated study participant recruitment was posted via an online flyer on the college's social media platforms describing the research study. The flyer included a virtual meeting date and time in which I explained the Letter of Invitation, the purpose of the study, participant criteria, and the Informed Consent Form to the potential participants. From this overarching recruitment method, and the consent form, and demographic questionnaire submitted, I was able to ascertain that all administrators and nontraditional adult student participants met the criteria specified for the study. Moreover, I was able to secure the total of 11 total participants.

Interviews for students and administrators were scheduled for no more than 60 minutes per individual and were conducted virtually using an online communication platform, Zoom. An audio recorder was also used along with handwritten notes, which were taken throughout each interview session. Practice interview sessions were conducted in advance to allow for necessary adjustments in timing, question redesign, and technological error. Interviewers should possess the necessary skills, practice, and training to conduct an effective interview (Silverman, 2017). To exit the study, I provided my contact information to all participants in order to contact the me with any follow-up questions or concerns regarding the study. I consistently and systematically followed the

same procedure with each participant interview. I used the same self-developed protocol and probes for each interview.

Upon completion of the interviews, all audio recordings were transcribed verbatim via the NVivo transcription software. Transcriptions from recorded interview sessions allow the researcher to reflect, which is key in understanding and reporting qualitative data (Englander, 2020). I transcribed the interviews, checking each interview for accuracy compared to the audio file and also made certain that there was no identifying information pertaining to the site or individual participant to protect confidentiality.

Member checking was used to ensure the credibility and understanding of information received and compiled from participant interviews (Liao & Hitchcock, 2018). All participants were allowed to review a draft document of the study findings to check for the accuracy of my interpretation of interview responses. I emailed participants a draft document of the study findings. I requested that participants review the draft findings and provide me with any changes so that I accurately represented the information shared during the interview. I also invited participants to ask questions about the study findings' draft document. Participants did not make any requests for changes, nor did they have any questions.

Data Analysis Plan

In a qualitative research design, semistructured interviews allow researchers to draw out the same key information from each participant while also providing the researcher more versatility to probe more deeply into the rich descriptions of experiences

that participants share (Belotto, 2018). Concerning data analysis, I used a starting point of immersing myself in the data by continually reading the transcripts to familiarize myself with the content (Belotto, 2018). According to Creswell and Guetterman (2019), data analysis within qualitative research occurs synchronously through data collection and recording accounts of findings. A plan for data analysis, considering the nature of the study, followed the steps outlined below:

1. When organizing the data, I confirmed all documentation, that included notes and recordings, were stored properly. I reviewed recorded interviews and audiotapes multiple times to ensure transcriptions were complete. I established a method for member checking, allowing participants the opportunity to review interview results and check for accuracy to allow the opportunity to ask questions and make changes to responses if necessary.

2. When organizing ideas and concepts from the data, I conducted a self-review of data, highlighted specific words, phrases, or concepts that reoccurred throughout each interview, and noted any significant differences between responses. Organization of ideas and concepts was used against the results from the data analysis software used for coding and thematic analysis.

3. I used NVivo qualitative data analysis software to transcribe all audio and video files and code each participant's transcription. NVivo works well with many qualitative research designs and has features such as character-based coding, rich text capabilities, and multimedia functions that are significant to managing qualitative data (Zamawe, 2015). I used NVivo to assist with the coding in organizing and categorizing

the data from participant interviews, and all data was saved on a secure, password-protected hard drive. To ensure confirmability of the data collected, I employed an audit trail and verified transcribed interviews were accurate compared to the audio-recorded data.

4. I reflexively examined the data repeatedly, sparking insight and developing the meaning of themes and categories. Iteration in qualitative data analysis is a reflexive process and key to sparking insight (Srivastava & Hopwood, 2009).

Issues of Trustworthiness

The research design for this study followed the guidelines aligned with qualitative methodologies to safeguard against issues that could have altered the trustworthiness of data collection and reporting. The development, execution, and reporting of qualitative research differs greatly from that of quantitative studies. Common quantitative assessments for rigor include a focus on validity, reliability, and objectivity. In this section, I examine the quality of the data collected by addressing credibility, transferability, and dependability (see Anney, 2014).

Credibility

Credibility is a critical component of establishing trustworthiness in qualitative research studies. Santiago-Delefosse et al. (2016) describe the overall credibility of a qualitative study as ensuring logical consistency between the theoretical reference, research question, collection techniques, and data analysis. The credibility of a study can be enhanced through analytical processes that include data triangulation, member checking, and investigator triangulation (Santiago-Delefosse et al., 2016). I thoroughly

explained the data collection and analysis process, provided scholarly citations to support findings, and clarified the processes used to interpret and analyze data, establishing credibility. Data triangulation took place in the form of interviewing different participants for the study, including nontraditional adult students and university administrators. Triangulation of information provides a means for the researcher to compare data gleaned from the collection process to answer the research questions and address the research problem in a study (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019; Frels & Onwuegbuzie, 2012). In this study, I triangulated the responses between and among undergraduate nontraditional adult students and university administrators (Stake, 1995). The member checking process offers novice researchers an opportunity to check the credibility of the data (see McGrath et al., 2018). Member checking supported credibility for this study; all participants were provided the opportunity to review draft findings of the study and verify my interpretation of their responses from the interviews. I allowed participants the opportunity to ask questions and recommend changes to draft findings of the study, however, there were no questions or requests for changes to the draft of the study findings.

Transferability

Transferability is a component of qualitative validity; transferability in qualitative studies refers to a study's findings being able to be applied to other studies (Cope, 2014). Transferability is met when the study results have meaning to individuals not involved in the study and can associate the results with their own experiences (Cope, 2014). To address transferability, rich, thick descriptions of participant experiences were provided

and included adequate details of the participant stories so that readers could vividly depict the study. According to Cope (2014), researchers should provide sufficient information on the participants and context of the research to enable readers to assess if the research findings can be transferable. In addition, providing a clear description of the research, participant experience, and data collection process will help the audience reflect on the results of the study and be able to transfer or apply the findings to their situations.

Dependability

Dependability in qualitative research requires researchers to ensure the research processes are sensible and well documented. Dependability for qualitative studies refers to the constancy of the data being comparable over the circumstances (Cope, 2014). Dependability ensures the process' within a study is described in sufficient detail to facilitate another researcher to repeat the work; this generally requires a researcher to maintain a detailed audit trail (Maher et al., 2018). An audit trail was utilized within this study to establish dependability, wherein accurate records and documentation of all necessary steps followed in data collection, analysis, and interpretation to complete the study were kept and detailed in nature. All data collection was maintained in an online and secure format on the researcher's computer via a password-protected computer and hard drive.

Confirmability

Confirmability assists in the explanation of how decisions will be made throughout the research and reporting process. Confirmability refers to a researcher's ability to demonstrate that the data accurately represents participant responses and

excludes researcher biases or personal views (Cope, 2014). Confirmability for this study was addressed through strategies such as an employing an audit trail process, verifying the transcribed interview accuracy from audio-recorded data, implementing bracketing, and member-checking, and using a researcher's journal. Similar to establishing dependability, the audit trail also ensured confirmability, and the audio recordings' detailed transcriptions provided rich, in-depth perspectives of participants' experiences. Bracketing ensures that the researcher does not influence the participant's understanding of the phenomenon (Sorsa et al., 2015). Reflexive bracketing in the form of maintaining a researcher's diary was employed to minimize the influence of previous knowledge, feelings, and views from past experiences and interviews (Sorsa et al., 2015).

Ethical Procedures

When conducting qualitative research studies, the researcher needs to operate in a moral and ethical frame of mind that will preserve the integrity of the study (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2005). Qualitative research is based on collecting information from individual study participants and ensuring their safety throughout the research process. To ensure the integrity of this study, all steps to obtain IRB approval were taken before beginning any portion of participant solicitation and conducting any required interviews. I obtained consent from each participant and informed them of the confidentiality protocol and their rights as participants in this research study. The personal identifying information of participants was excluded from this study. Participants were notified and reassured of all steps taken regarding confidentiality procedures and security throughout the data collection and reporting process. Lastly, alphanumeric codes were used for all

participants in the study to maintain confidentiality. Participants were informed that they could withdraw from this study without any repercussions. I stored and secured all electronic information collected in my home office on a password-protected computer. Any non-electronic information obtained pertaining to this study was kept in a locked drawer in my home office, which only I could access. Collected information will be stored securely for 5 years, after which I will shred all paper data and permanently delete all data stored electronically, per Walden IRB policy.

Summary

Chapter 3 included the proposed research methodology and rationale for using a qualitative, instrumental case study design approach. The study's purpose was to explore undergraduate nontraditional adult students' and university administrators' perceptions and experiences of supports needed for success as it relates to retention, persistence and program completion. In this chapter, I reviewed the research questions and detailed information regarding my role as a researcher. Chapter 3 provided the participant selection logic, instrumentation, recruitment, data collection, and the data analysis plan. Lastly, Chapter 3 concluded with a review of how the issues of trustworthiness and ethical procedures for this study were addressed. In Chapter 4, I review the data collection and analysis procedures, discuss the coding, categories and themes, and display of all research findings. Finally, I substantiate the study's trustworthiness.

Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this qualitative instrumental case study was to explore undergraduate nontraditional adult students' and university administrators' perceptions and experiences of supports needed for success as it relates to retention, persistence, and program completion. Using semistructured one-on-one interviews, I collected responses from 11 participants including five undergraduate nontraditional adult student participants attending the university study site and six university administrator participants who worked at the university study site. The conceptual framework for this study was based on Knowles's (1984) andragogy theory of adult learning and Tinto's (1975) theory of student retention. The research focused on the experiences and perceptions of nontraditional adult students attending a 4-year university in the West coast region of the United States. The following research questions guided the data collection and analysis for the study:

RQ1: How do undergraduate nontraditional adult students attending a traditional postsecondary 4-year institution describe their perceptions of support towards program completion, retention, and persistence at the study site?

RQ2: What do university administrators describe as supports to successful program completion, retention, and persistence for undergraduate nontraditional adult students?

In this chapter, I review the setting where the study was conducted, as well as the demographics of the two participant groups the study focused on. I describe the data collection and the data analysis procedures used to determine the study's findings. I

present the results and a description of evidence of trustworthiness related to credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. I conclude with a summary and then proceed to Chapter 5 for discussion, conclusion, and recommendations.

Setting

The setting for this study was a 4-year university located in the West coast region of the United States. University administrators and undergraduate nontraditional adult student participants were selected because they could provide responses that reflected rich, thick descriptions of the interview questions developed for this qualitative instrumental case study. Participant recruitment and selection commenced after approval was received from Walden University IRB. The criteria for participant selection of students were that they were a nontraditional adult student who was age 21 years or older at the time of their enrollment and that they had an association with one or more of the characteristics outlined by NCES (see Choy, 2002; Markle, 2015). Criteria for administrators included university administrators at the study site who were responsible for overseeing student success programming within the academic colleges.

During the data collection process, the COVID-19 pandemic affected opportunities to meet in person; therefore, all interviews were conducted online via Zoom. All interviews were conducted virtually over Zoom using audio conferencing, and no other changes were made to how the study was carried out, as described in Chapter 3.

Demographics

All five student participants self-identified as a nontraditional adult student, 21 years of age or older, and were undergraduate students at the study site. The demographic

questionnaire confirmed that the participants met the inclusion criteria. All five student participants met one or more of the NCES inclusion criteria for a nontraditional adult student. Out of the total student participant pool, four participants were enrolled in college part-time. In addition, four of the participants were employed either full-time or part-time.

All six-administrator participants indicated they have worked at the study site for 7 or more years, with the longest tenure being 20 years. All six administrators specified working in an academic college or student success department. In addition, all six administrator participants indicated they were responsible for some oversight of student success programs at the university study site. Table 3 reflects years of employment, confirmation of employment in a student success department, and confirmation of oversight for student success programs for each Administrator participant. Table 4 reflects student demographics regarding confirmation of students aged 21 years or greater, attendance at the university study site, enrollment status, employment type, Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FASFA) status related to financial independence, and dependent confirmation for each nontraditional adult student participant.

Table 3

University Administrator Participant Demographics

Participant code	Years of Employment	Current department in student success	Oversight of student success programs
Participant 1(A)	20 years	Yes	Yes
Participant 2(A)	12 years	Yes	Yes
Participant 3(A)	15 years	Yes	Yes
Participant 4(A)	15 years	Yes	Yes
Participant 5(A)	7 years	Yes	Yes
Participant 6(A)	17 years	Yes	Yes

Table 4

Student Participant Demographics

Participant code	21 years of age	Attend SCU	Enrolled full-time	Enrolled part-time	Employment	Financially independent	Has dependents
Participant 1(S)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	N/A	Yes	Yes
Participant 2(S)	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Part-time	Yes	No
Participant 3(S)	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Full-time	Yes	No
Participant 4(S)	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Part-time	Yes	No
Participant 5(S)	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Part-time	Yes	Yes

Administrator participants' years working at the university ranged from 7 to 20 years. All administrator participants indicated they work in and are responsible for student success programming at the university. Overall, 54% of participants were administrators compared to 46% of the participants who were students. All students were at least 21 years of age and, for FASFA purposes, were considered financially

independent. Enrollment status varied; most student participants were enrolled at least part-time at the university. Only two out of the five student participants indicated they had dependents for whom they were responsible.

Data Collection

As the researcher for the study, I served as the principal vehicle for collecting data from the participants. collection. Qualitative researchers such as Creswell and Poth (2018) and Yin (2016) proffered that the researcher conducting a qualitative study need to understand their role as the key to the collection of data in a quality manner. For this reason, the interview protocol and practices used for this study were critical to support the quality of the data collected (see Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yin, 2016). I conducted a total of 11 semistructured interviews; there were five student participants and six university administrator participants. The interview questions used were developed, reviewed, and approved by my dissertation committee. Having the interview questions reviewed and confirmed by my dissertation committee helped ensure alignment and content validity for this study (see Ravitch & Carl, 2019).

Interview Process

Prior to conducting interviews for my research study, I reviewed literature on best practices for conducting interviews in qualitative research (Gray et al., 2020). Reviewing the literature on best practices prepared me to understand the potential pitfalls, such as timing and clarity, that could impede participant responses and provided examples of how to probe to help achieve participant responses that were rich in description. I practiced interviewing over a virtual format to create a comfortable and secure

environment where participants would feel safe and comfortable throughout the interview process. I practiced asking the interview questions, which helped me get comfortable with the sequence and flow of the interview questions (Gray et al., 2020). The design of the interview protocol and what occurred during and after the interviews are reviewed in the following paragraphs.

I used a self-designed interview protocol, aligning the interview questions to the research questions. I gathered input from my university committee regarding the interview questions. A best practice is obtaining input from others when developing interview questions (Ravitch & Carl, 2019). I conducted all 11 semistructured interviews with probes virtually from a private office. Before each interview commenced, I reviewed the purpose of the interview, and confidentiality. I confirmed that each participant received their notice of consent reminded them that they could choose not to answer any question and could leave the study at any time. The member-checking process was described to each participant so they would understand that they would receive a draft summary of the results, and that I would be asking for their input related to my analysis of their responses (see Candela, 2019). Before the interview, I asked every participant if they had any further questions before questioning commenced.

I responded to the participant's questions and began the interview process. During the interview, I used the self-designed interview protocol and asked all questions in the order outlined on the protocol. I asked each student participant the same 11 open-ended questions and each university administrator participant the same 12 open-ended questions. Using a uniform process when conducting semistructured interviews is

important in qualitative research (Ravitch & Carl, 2019). Each interview lasted 35-45 minutes and was recorded via the Zoom audio platform. Each participant was interviewed only once, and all audio files of the interviews were saved on a password-protected hard drive. I used probes when needed to obtain more information from the participants. Probing questions often begin with "what" or "how" to invite more detail, and questions that begin with "do you…" or "are you…" invites participants to reflect personally. I used the following probes when needed: "Can you explain in more detail? would you expand on that topic?, what do you mean by?, can you be a little more specific?, tell me about that, how does that affect…" The probes were noted on my interview protocol to serve as a guide for me during the interview process. All participants addressed every question and provided in-depth, rich responses to the questions asked throughout the interview. I allowed each participant to elaborate on their responses and add comments at the end of the interview.

I concluded the interview protocol by using the same process at the end of the interview so that I used a systemic procedure to initiate, conduct and exit each interview. Following the interview, I asked each participant if they had any questions regarding the next steps. I thanked the participant for their time and emailed their gift card as a token of appreciation for their time and participation. The member-checking process was reviewed with each participant. I provided my contact information should they have any questions post-interview. After I completed all interviews, I uploaded all interview audio recordings to the NVivo software for transcription and analysis.

Following the interview, within 24 hours, I transcribed each interview in the NVivo platform and saved each transcription as a separate document on a secure, password-protected hard drive. I contacted each participant and provided my draft findings for review to provide feedback or suggested edits; no participant requested a change or provided feedback. To maintain confidentiality, I used only the participant's alphanumeric code to title each saved transcription on a secure, password-protected hard drive.

There were no specific unusual circumstances that occurred during the data collection process. All IRB procedures were followed as approved. Due to COVID-19 interviews could not be conducted in-person at the study site. As a result, all interviews were conducted virtually via Zoom. All data obtained will remain on a secure, password-protected hard drive in my home for 5 years in compliance with Walden University IRB policy. After 5 years, I will personally shred all paper data and permanently delete all data stored electronically, according to the Walden University IRB policy.

Data Analysis

In this instrumental qualitative study, I explored undergraduate nontraditional adult students' and university administrators' perceptions and experiences of supports for program success, retention, and persistence of nontraditional adult students towards program completion at the undergraduate level. This was done by conducting one-on-one semistructured interviews with two participant groups, undergraduate nontraditional adult students, and university administrators in charge of student success programming. I based the data analysis on the research questions for this study. I began with a thorough review

of each transcript, identifying codes, breaking down codes into categories, and from the categories, identifying emerging themes (Saldana, 2016). Qualitative analysis involves reviewing, coding, recoding, synthesizing, categorizing, identifying emerging themes, and purporting the connotation of data gathered to study human experiences (Saldaña & Omasta, 2018). Saldaña (2016) stated, "Coding is an analytic act that assigns rich symbolic meaning through essence-capturing an/or evocative attributes to data," (Saldaña 2016, p. 36). The coding and analysis process is guided by the qualitative researcher to "generate discovery of the participant's voice, processes, emotions, motivations, values, attitudes, beliefs, judgements, conflicts, microcultures, identities, and life course patterns" (Saldaña 2016, p. 36). Miles et al. (2020) explained that qualitative data analysis involves an inductive process of comparing text excerpts and searching for similarities and differences in the information as one searches for patterns in the selected coded text. Thus, the analysis process is individually designed by the researcher based on the information obtained. A plan for data analysis, considering the nature of the study, followed the steps outlined in Chapter 3 and listed below:

I confirmed all audiotapes, and information were copied and stored appropriately. I reviewed recorded interviews and audiotapes multiple times to ensure transcriptions were complete. I established a method for member checking, allowing participants the opportunity to review interview results and check for accuracy to allow the opportunity to ask questions and make changes to responses if necessary.

When organizing ideas and concepts from the data, I conducted a self-review of data, highlighted specific words, phrases, or concepts that reoccurred throughout each

interview, and noted any significant differences between responses. Organization of ideas and concepts was used against the results from the data analysis software used for coding and thematic analysis.

I used NVivo qualitative data analysis software to transcribe all audio and video files and code each participant's transcription. NVivo works well with many qualitative research designs and has features such as character-based coding, rich text capabilities, and multimedia functions that are significant to managing qualitative data (Zamawe, 2015). I used NVivo to assist with the coding in terms of organizing and categorizing the data from participant interviews, and all data were saved on a secure password-protected hard drive. To ensure confirmability, I employed an audit trail process and verified transcribed interviews from audio-recorded data.

I employed an iterative process to review themes and categories. In qualitative analysis, iteration serves as a reflexive process to promote insight and create meaning (see Srivastava & Hopwood, 2009). The data analysis process started with establishing a priori codes and then coding each interview individually in the NVivo platform. In addition to using NVivo software, I read each interview several times to familiarize myself with the text. As I read through each transcript, I composed analytic memos to identify information that pertained to the research questions or that was stated similarly by other participants. Memos are comparable to journal notes and allow researchers to reflect on and record their coding process and choices (R. Rogers, 2018; Saldaña, 2016). After reviewing each transcript multiple times, similarities between administrator and student responses became more apparent. Using a combination of in vivo analysis, open

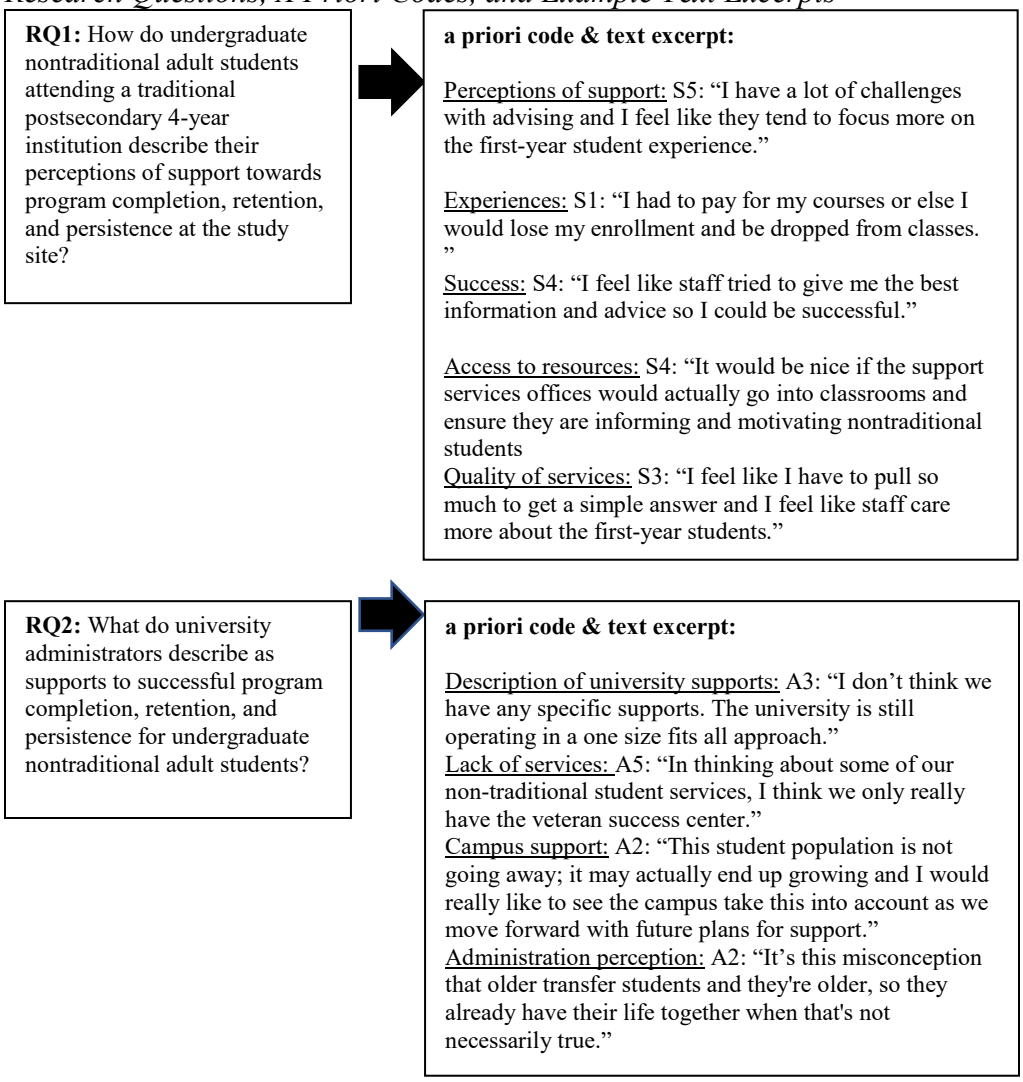
coding, and content analysis, I could ensure data saturation. In vivo coding involves identifying and comparing codes that are observed in the language of each participant's interview transcript (Burkholder et al., 2016). In vivo coding is also called natural, verbatim, or literal coding (Saldaña, 2016). Combining multiple methods of analysis helped me to develop codes, relate codes to create categories, and ultimately use the categories to identify emerging themes.

Data Accuracy

I compared each audio recording to the transcript generated using NVivo software. Each interview transcript was printed and organized based on participant pool, administrator, or student, and then in chronological order by the date, the interview was completed. Each participant was given an alphanumeric code to ensure confidentiality. I established a priori codes concerning each research question, then moved to code each interview individually in the NVivo platform. I listened and re-listened to each interview audio recording and read and re-read each participant's transcript to become more aware of repetition in the responses and data. Initial open codes were developed using the NVivo software and by conducting a line-by-line analysis of participant transcripts and applying in vivo and descriptive coding to support and ensure data saturation. Figure 1 represents the established a priori codes, research question association, and example text excerpts.

Figure 1

Research Questions, A Priori Codes, and Example Text Excerpts



Note. RQ = research question

Generating codes

Following the suggestions of Saldaña (2016), I conducted a line-by-line review to identify codes for my first coding cycle. This reduced the likelihood of attaching personal attributes to participants' responses. Once I completed the line-by-line review, identifying initial codes in relation to established a priori for administrator participants and student participants, I reviewed the transcripts for each participant again, starting with administrator 1, (A1), and student 1, (S1), to identify additional information, resources, or barriers related to the success of program completion, persistence, and retention of undergraduate nontraditional adult students. With each review, I applied in Vivo coding, which involves identifying codes that emerge from the data, using the participants' language (see Saldaña, 2016). In Vivo coding is understood as using codes grounded in the participant's personal vernacular (Burkholder et al., 2016; Saldaña, 2016). If I identified a new concept, I made a code and reviewed all remaining transcripts for examples using the NVivo software coding feature. It was helpful to review each transcript for new codes and then compare it to all other transcripts in the participant group because this process provided a new way to see what was being said in the interviews for each participant group. As I completed each interview, I either added to the codes I identified or created a new code describing the context. I repeated this process several times until I felt all codable information was identified. Tables 5 and 6 represent examples of open codes and interview excerpts from student and administrator participants.

Table 5

Open Codes and Example Student Interview Excerpts

Open code	Interview excerpt
Organization	P1S "Better organization in certain areas to make it easier for students to know things and get information."
Lack of support	P5S "I don't really know who to go for the university for help and I haven't gotten any answers, so they haven't really done anything yet."
Issues of support	P3S "Not having anybody to really guide me like navigating unforeseen territory."
Quality	P1S "People just give you cookie cutter answers and are quick to send you on your way."

Table 6

Open Codes and Example Administrator Interview Excerpts

Open code	Interview excerpt
Barrier	P5A "I think nontraditional student support is something that I think in theory folks are thinking of, but not necessarily acting upon and thinking about a culture."
Administration culture	P2A "I find that students are feeling really frustrated and not necessarily angry, but they're [nontraditional adult students] losing a little bit of hope."
Perception	P2A "Everything is geared mostly towards our traditional freshman in terms of events and getting involved on campus."

The analysis process continued for several weeks as I reviewed all transcripts and interview audio recordings several times for clarity. The analysis concluded when I reached saturation, and no new insights were identified from the data. Saturation is reached when no new data is found, and enough information has been attained (Saunders et al., 2017). All codes, categories, and themes are represented in the tables provided. After 11 interviews, I identified approximately 22 codes for my first coding cycle. Tables

7 and 8 represent the coding process, which began with establishing a priori codes in relation to each specific research question.

Table 7

Research Question 1: Nontraditional Adult Students'- Open Codes

RQ1	a priori code	Open codes
How do undergraduate nontraditional adult students attending a traditional postsecondary 4-year institution describe their perceptions of support towards program completion, retention, and persistence at the study site?	Perceptions of support	Organization Lack of support
	Experiences	Issues of support Quality
	Success	Availability Student experience
	Access to resources	Inaction Resources
	Quality of services	Programming Focus on first year experience

Table 8

Research Question 2: Administrators'-Open Codes

RQ2	a priori code	Open codes
What do university administrators describe as supports to successful program completion, retention, and persistence for undergraduate nontraditional adult students?	Description of university supports	Barrier Administration culture Perception Belonging
	Lack of services	Community Latest changes Available services
	Campus support	Accessibility Hours of service Service by program

Categories and Emergent Themes

After completing and determining the codes that would be used, I began to group codes that were similar into categories. Codes were grouped based on their similarity in meaning and context. Once all codes were grouped, I was able to establish categories. Each category was established by examining the codes and attributing meaning to the clustered codes resulting in identified categories. After coding and grouping, 11 categories were determined. Once categories were established, I reviewed the 11 categories for emerging themes. I identified emerging themes for each group of categories. Four themes were derived from the analysis: (a) nontraditional undergraduate adult students perceive the campus structure and interaction with university support services and professionals to be critical to supporting their success towards program completion, retention, and persistence, (b) nontraditional undergraduate adult students describe their experiences with university resources as beneficial and necessary to aid in their success towards program completion, retention, and persistence, (c) administrators describe university campus culture needs to be communicated and designed to support completion, retention, and persistence of undergraduate nontraditional adult students, and (d) administrators perceive that flexible services specific to the needs of undergraduate nontraditional adult students are needed to support program completion, retention, and persistence. Table 9 provides a visual representation of the progression of developing codes, categories, and themes for each participant group.

Table 9

Codes, Categories, and Themes

Codes	Categories	Undergraduate Nontraditional Adult Student Themes
1. Campus organization 2. Lack of support 3. Quality	Campus Structure Interaction with university support professionals	Theme 1: Nontraditional undergraduate adult students perceive the campus structure and interaction with university support services and professionals to be critical to supporting their success towards program completion, retention, and persistence.
4. Experience 5. Inaction 6. Resources 7. Programming	Student experience University resources	Theme 2: Nontraditional undergraduate adult students describe their experiences with university resources as beneficial and necessary to aid in their success towards program completion, retention, and persistence.
Codes	Categories	University Administrator Themes
1. Barrier administration culture 2. Administration perception of students 3. Belonging Community	University administration culture Student self-perceptions Belonging community	Theme 3: Administrators describe university campus culture needs to be communicated and designed to support completion, retention, and persistence of undergraduate nontraditional adult students.
4. Barrier available services 5. Accessibility service hours 6. Accessibility by program 7. Support available 8. Support needed	Accessibility Flexibility Services non-existent University Supports	Theme 4: Administrators perceive that flexible services specific to the needs of undergraduate nontraditional adult students are needed to support program completion, retention, and persistence.

After I completed the data analysis, I verified that the four themes answered the research questions. No additional analysis were needed as the information collected were coherent and did not present any irregular patterns. The four themes that emerged from the coding informed the findings and supported answering the research questions: RQ 1: How do undergraduate nontraditional adult students attending a traditional postsecondary 4-year institution describe their perceptions of support towards program completion,

retention, and persistence at the study site? RQ2: What do university administrators describe as supports to successful program completion, retention, and persistence for undergraduate nontraditional adult students?

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Qualitative research is anchored in addressing issues related to meaning, understanding, experiences, and perspectives (Rose & Johnson, 2020). When these issues are addressed through qualitative research, the information collected can be highly subjective and require human interpretation and reasoning to make sense of the data (Rose & Johnson, 2020). For that reason, qualitative researchers should be more conscious and proactive in minimizing bias to ensure trustworthiness. To be more conscious and proactive, I employed specific practices to minimize bias and help ensure trustworthiness. Qualitative researchers prioritize trustworthiness in the collection data that are rooted in credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Ravitch & Carl, 2019). Each of these components is addressed in the following sections.

Credibility

Credibility for qualitative research is assessed according to the success with which researchers offer rich. These refined analyses sincerely exemplify the experiences of multiple realities of participants and ensure proper engagement in member checking to ensure the accuracy of the accounts referenced for the study (Humphreys et al., 2021). The credibility of the study followed the plan detailed in chapter 3. All participants for this study volunteered of their own free will and were informed they could withdraw from the study at any time. The informed consent provided to every participant included

this information and all necessary information related to the study procedure. All participants were provided a copy of their interview transcription for review, feedback, and updates. There were no requested changes or feedback provided. This process helped ensure credibility by allowing participants to review and confirm all findings and recording of details accurately representing their perceptions and experiences related to the research questions.

Transferability

The extent to which qualitative research findings can be applied to other contexts or settings and conducted among other respondents is referred to as transferability (Tuval-Mashiach, 2021). By providing specific details for this study such as describing the setting, sample, participant inclusion criteria, sampling strategy and demographics, transferability for this study was strengthened. University administrator participants varied in years employed at the institution, but all worked in the area of student success. Undergraduate nontraditional adult student participants met at least one or multiple requirements for the established inclusion criteria. The thick rich descriptions from participant groups, thorough representation of participant viewpoints, participant sample, and setting support understanding and relativeness. The findings from this study could be generalized to help address the challenges some universities face in supporting nontraditional adult students.

Dependability

Dependability in qualitative research refers to the consistency in which the researcher can determine whether the study's findings could be duplicated if replicated

with similar participants (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Dependability for this study included thorough documentation throughout each cycle of data analysis. I kept a field journal employed a practice of reflection throughout the data collection process. Semistructured zoom interviews were used with probes to support the expansion of participants' responses to create detailed, personalized responses to each interview question. Each interview followed a standard procedure, and all participants in each participant group were asked the same sequential interview questions. An excel spreadsheet was used to document and record each cycle in the coding phase, from coding, categories, and ending with themes. All my notes were kept in a reflective journal throughout the interview and data analysis stages.

Confirmability

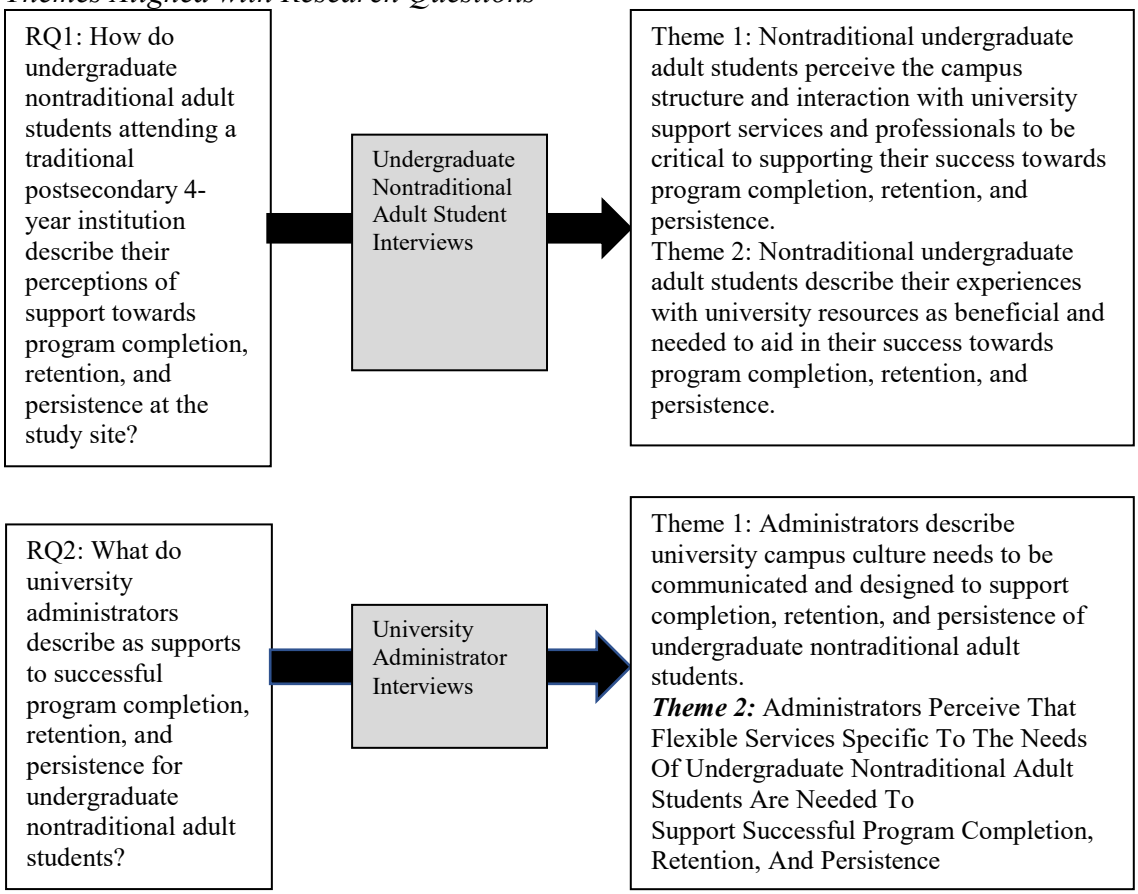
Confirmability concerns the aspect of neutrality, how the researcher ensures the interpretation is not based on personal preferences and viewpoints but instead grounded in the experiences of the participants (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). To help maintain integrity and remove personal biases, motivations, and interests, I kept a reflective journal to detail any self-reflections and practices that occurred throughout the interview and data analysis stages. As previously mentioned, each coding cycle was conducted using an excel spreadsheet. Pivot tables of the coding and text excerpts were maintained on individual workbooks in the spreadsheets. A careful review was conducted with each coding cycle to ensure the development of codes, categories, and themes reflected the participants' perceptions and experiences.

Results

The themes of this study provide insight into the perceptions of university administrators and undergraduate nontraditional adult students regarding supports related to successful program completion, retention, and persistence of nontraditional adult students at the undergraduate level. While each university administrator and undergraduate nontraditional adult student detailed a unique experience, they each conveyed similar views and perceptions related to university supports for program success, retention, and persistence of nontraditional adult students at the undergraduate level. Collectively their perceptions and experiences highlight the need for continued support and enhancement of university support services to better assist undergraduate nontraditional adult students in their program success, retention, and persistence. Figure 2 provides a visual representation of research questions and correlating themes for this research study.

Figure 2

Themes Aligned with Research Questions



Theme 1

Theme 1: Nontraditional Undergraduate Adult Students Perceive The Campus Structure And Interaction With University Support Services And Professionals To Be Critical To Supporting Their Success Towards Program Completion, Retention, And Persistence

The nontraditional adult student study participants highlighted specific experiences with the university campus structure, challenges with university support services, and interactions with student success support professionals during their

interviews. Theme one sheds light on nontraditional adult student participants experiences specifically related to challenges and opportunities they perceived as essential to affecting their program success, retention, and persistence. Nontraditional adult student participants that understood the campus landscape and how to navigate university support services, felt more confident they would succeed and persist towards program completion. Nontraditional adult student participants that experienced negative interactions with student support professionals and were more confused about the campus structure, felt less confident in their ability to be successful and experienced more challenges in completing their degree requirements.

Campus Structure. The study site campus structure consists of six different colleges and several central university support offices, which include the registrar's office, financial aid, career services, and university advising. Each college and university support office has different responsibilities and support professionals that work with students. P1S shared, "I think you can get help, but if you don't know what you need, where to go, or how to ask for it, I think people are inclined to send you somewhere down the road, to another office." It can be challenging for nontraditional adult students to know which university office to go to for specific needs, student 1 also added, "if I weren't on campus because of work, to be honest I wouldn't know where to go." P1S, P2S, and P4S suggest the campus structure makes it hard to know which office helps students with nontraditional needs. P4S stated, "I feel like people (nontraditional adult students) may feel intimidated or they just don't know where to go to find the correct information they need." P1S shared a similar sentiment to P4S sharing, "Until you know

exactly what you need and when you're more specific with people about what you mean then I think you can get help." From student responses, the campus structure presented difficulties for nontraditional adult students who are not on campus regularly and are not able to familiarize themselves with the various university and college support offices and their available services.

Challenges with University Support Services. When discussing university support services, student participants share mixed responses related to challenges of availability, equality of services by major, and it not being clear what resources are available. P2S believes there is a notable difference in available support services stating, "I think some equality in services would be nice especially within the smaller programs, being the ones that aren't that popular or programs that are not impacted." P4S shared she believed there were services available in their program department specifically for students within the major and that services are not the same for other students with departments, "I believe that there were many services available to me in my department, of course it's completely different than all the other departments on campus." P5S mentioned it is very difficult to find availability to meet with someone from the registrar or financial aid, "there's really not that much availability for financial aid or the registrar, and you need a follow up on like every email." P1S shared with university support services it's difficult to know what resources are available, especially when it seems like staff do not take them to really understand their needs. P1S specifically stated to a college receptionist, when they weren't able to get support from the college office, "Could you

just take a minute and talk to me instead of just email or text? And let me be heard and let me explain to you."

Some students mentioned they experienced fewer challenges with orientation and advising support services. P1S and P3S reported better interactions with university advising support services. P1S mentioned specifically, "Ellie, my advisor is always available, and the last time I talked to her she said you just call me even if you don't have a problem." P3S generally referenced advising support services being more available during certain times in the semester, "I believe advising services were very available, but it definitely depends on the season when it gets closer to enrollment its more challenging." P5S had better experiences with support services offered through the orientation office, "The orientation center, is pretty good, that center has helped me a lot." To help address the challenges with university support services, P4S shared, "it would be nice if the support services offices would actually go into classrooms and ensure they are informing and motivating nontraditional students." In conjunction with university services, student participants commented on their interactions and experiences with student support professionals.

Interaction with Student Support Professionals. All student participants shared their interactions with student support professionals employed at the university impacted their university experience and feelings related to their success, retention, and program completion as undergraduate nontraditional adult students. P1S specifically shared that support professionals often sent them to different offices and provided very generic answers to their questions, "people (support professionals) are quick to send you on your

way, and typically just give you cookie cutter answers." P1S also added, "I don't think it's everybody's (support professionals) nature to be helpful, and I think this is a very cold climate of support." P5S described university support professionals as seeming to be more interested in helping traditional students, "I feel like I have to pull so much just to get a simple answer and I feel like they (support professionals) care more about the first-year students." Collected responses from student participants highlight more negative interactions with support professionals, and some describe having to work harder at staying motivated to be successful. P4S felt like it was difficult to make connections with support professionals, "I felt like you couldn't really make a real connection or a real relationship with staff." P3S described her university experience as very challenging due to a lack of guidance, "not having anybody (support staff) to really guide me in navigating the university territory."

Theme 2

Theme 2: Nontraditional Undergraduate Adult Students Describe Their Experiences With University Resources As Beneficial And Necessary To Aid In Their Success Towards Program Completion, Retention, And Persistence

Throughout the interview process, nontraditional undergraduate adult student participants shared their accounts and perspectives regarding university resources. Theme two provides detailed narratives across all student participants stated experiences and addresses university inaction, resources, and programming. Each student participant provided in-depth responses to all interview questions, which allowed for more rich descriptions used in the theme.

Experience. Student participants shared unique aspects of their experiences with university resources. Some commonalities across student participant responses included not having any college experience and finding it difficult to navigate the college landscape. P1S shared, “I’m the first in my family to actually go to a university and try to finish my degree, and it’s definitely hard to know who to talk to for help.” Adding to this statement P5S conveyed, “I had to advocate for myself time and time again, because I'm disabled, I wasn't just working with one department and everything was very confusing.”

More student participants shared that their experiences at the university were challenging due to their work schedules and responsibilities outside of the classroom. P2S stated they are a very anxious person so working and going to school was tough, “I'm a very anxious person. It's something that does affect several parts of my life including school and work.” Equally, P1S shared because of her schedule she missed important deadlines and as a result had to pay out of pocket for her academic expenses, “I don't think I've missed a day of class, but I have missed important deadlines and had to pay for my classes or else I would lose my entire enrollment.” All of the student participants had unique and additional responsibilities outside of the classroom that affect their overall experience at the university and make it challenging to accomplish their program requirements and persist at the university. P5S shared, “I have personally went out of my way to do all that I can because I wanted more for myself and I wanted to get a good education and have a good career.” In line with some of the challenges, shared participants reflected on experiences related to inaction on part of the university that has

influenced their experiences towards successful program completion, retention, and persistence.

Inaction. Student participants described inaction as their personal challenges with finding and getting the necessary help and information to aid their success. P4S stated, “I feel like people may feel intimidated or they just don't know where or who to go to find the correct information.” Adding to P4S comments P2S shared, “I don't know if we really have enough initiative to seek out those opportunities.” Across student responses, it was apparent that student found it increasingly difficult to manage the expectation of getting everything done for themselves and are overwhelmed with the idea of getting help from the university. P2S also shared, “So I think that there are a lot of different services and opportunities for students to have advising or guidance, but as a student I don’t feel that I really take advantage of all that.”

With regard to inaction and getting assistance from the university P1S stated, “Until you know exactly what you need and when you're more specific with people about what you mean, then I think you can get help.” Time with university staff was noted as a difficulty for P 3S who shared, “we never really get like one-on-one contact with staff members or time where they come into our classrooms.” Through their responses, student participants described their responsibility as it relates to inaction and highlight challenges experienced with the university landscape, staff, and resources that have made it more difficult to ask for and receive help towards their program completion, retention, and persistence as nontraditional adult students.

Resources. Student participants described university resources as a necessity in supporting their success as nontraditional adult students. P1S shared, “I know the university has a lot of resources, so I made sure to take lots of notes.” With regard to learning about resources available through the university P3S acknowledged, “Social media was a really big help for me, this is how I found out about services, events, deadlines, and webinars.” Understanding and knowing about university resources was recognized as an essential part of the university experience that student participants valued. P3S also shared that staying on top of her academic responsibilities aided her success as a nontraditional adult student, “So I feel like because I was able to be on top of most things, a lot has worked out for me.”

Unlike the experiences described by P3S, P5S shared they experienced more challenges as a transfer student looking for resources, “I wish the university had more transfer advisors or coordinators to assist and provide resources for transfer students.” P4S believed it would be more beneficial if university support staff met students in their classrooms to share information about available resources, “University support services should actually go into classrooms to ensure they are motivating students and providing information about options and resources.” University resources and programming was highly regarded by student participants, and many of their responses included ideas for future potential programming to better support the needs of nontraditional adult students.

Programming. The university offers different programming for students to aid in the support of successful program completion, retention, and persistence. P1S, P2S, and P5S shared their beliefs that much of the programming is geared towards supporting the

needs of traditional students at the university. P1S stated, “I wish more programs would focus on helping older students”. P2S conveyed, “A lot of programs are only available on campus during normal office times.” P5S shared, “I’m not really sure what programs and resources are for me.” While sharing their opinions and experiences with programs at the university. Student participants also shared ideas for potential future programming.

Ideas shared for specific programming for nontraditional adult students included free resources, groups for older students, follow-up mandatory advising, and orientation sessions for students. P3S believes free textbooks would be helpful for nontraditional adult students, “Maybe just providing all textbooks for free, since older students have more financial responsibilities.” P1S would like to see a sorority for older students, “a sorority or fraternity for older students would be a really great program.” P2S conveyed, “Having a follow up orientation of some kind where students get to come back to the same people that they met the first time or mandatory follow up advising would be helpful.” The detailed student experiences from themes one and two help represent the perceptions of nontraditional adult students have towards the university experience. The following themes three and four provide detailed accounts from the administrator perspective, all descriptions help provide a better understanding of program completion, retention, and persistence of undergraduate nontraditional adult students.

Theme 3

Theme 3: Administrators Describe University Campus Culture Needs To Be Communicated And Designed To Support Completion, Retention, And Persistence Of Undergraduate Nontraditional Adult Students

Theme three relates to the culture of university administration campus wide. All university administrator participants at the time of the study were responsible for student success outcomes and programming at the university. University administrators serve in various roles in different departments across the university landscape. The administrators for this study worked within departments responsible for one or more aspects of student success, such as orientation, enrollment, advising, retention, and graduation. Every administrator participant referenced commonalities they believe affect successful program completion, retention, and persistence for undergraduate nontraditional adult students at the study site. Across administrator participant responses, they described the university administration's culture influences nontraditional undergraduate students' self-perceptions and sense of belonging and community. Administrator views and included responses highlighting specific experiences across university administrators observed and expressed regarding successful program completion, retention, and persistence for undergraduate nontraditional adult students. Administrators emphasized the importance of the university culture and the impact on nontraditional adult student experiences and success towards program completion, retention, and persistence.

University Culture. Administrator participants described that the university campus culture reflected traditional students' needs. The culture in terms of availability of

services, methods of communication, times of orientation, and courses were planned around the needs and availability of the traditional undergraduate student population. Administrators described that the level of communication to nontraditional adult undergraduate students was not effective and inconsistent, as the availability of current services and possible resolutions were not aligned with the needs and availability of undergraduate nontraditional adult students. P5A shared that contemplated changes are being discussed at the university administration level, but action is not necessarily the priority, “I think nontraditional student support is something that I think in theory folks are thinking of, but not necessarily acting upon and thinking about a culture. Administrators noted that communication, traditional office hours were challenges for the non-traditional adult undergraduate student population. P1A shared, “finding a way to make sure that whatever we're doing for like a first-year experience program, [traditional student] we're duplicating that for non-traditional student population.” Additional administrator participants described inconsistent communication related to support programs. P3A explained how university administrators and student services professionals were tasked with contacting students with no clear objectives or expectations of how to help, “we were asked to call them and ease their fears and concerns, but we were not really given any information to really help them at the same time”.

Administrators shared accounts of interactions they have had with undergraduate nontraditional adult students’ that depicted frustration with not knowing or having access to resources that have been communicated to traditional university students. P2A shared,

“our campus is not super receptive to our nontraditional student, a lot of our programming needs and support go to first-time freshmen.” The administrators stated that university administration needed to consider better supports for undergraduate nontraditional adult students. P1A, P2A, P4A, PA, P6A, described limited availability of services outside of traditional hours to assist nontraditional services. P2A commented, “Student services staff and advisors have their office hours and then they go home, and they don't really do any of targeted outreach.” Similarly, P4A shared many students are not able to make appointments with campus support staff during traditional hours due to their work schedule and availability of childcare, “students often say they cannot schedule needed appointments, and their reasons are I can’t find babysitting for my kids or I can’t take off work.”

The majority of administrator participants, P1A, P2A, P3A, P4A, and P6A, shared similar accounts of needed improvements related to services and supports for undergraduate nontraditional adult students. These services should mirror and be prioritized similar to what is already being provided for traditional students. P1A shared, “We need to find a way to make sure that whatever we're doing for a first-year experience program, we're duplicating that for our non-traditional adult student population.” P2A shared a similar account, “The same energy as we’re bringing into the freshmen experience, we need to bring that same energy for nontraditional adult student experiences.”

The administrator participant’s descriptions of support for successful program completion, retention, and persistence of undergraduate nontraditional adult students,

emphasized the consideration for university campus culture to incorporate the needs of undergraduate nontraditional adult students. Specifically, the administrator participants noted that communication and university support services needed to be designed for undergraduate nontraditional adult students during nontraditional times. Along with communication, university administrators commented on their experiences with student self-perceptions related to the university experience.

Self-Perception. Administrators perceived nontraditional undergraduate students' self-perceptions influenced their completion and success at the university. Student self-perceptions are another important aspect of the university experience that should be considered when guiding the development of programs and supports for this particular student population. P3A shared, "Sometimes they [nontraditional students] sound as if they're on their last straw. The last straw, yeah, their last straw. You know, they're saying like I'm trying my best." P2A conveyed, "I find that students are feeling really frustrated and not necessarily angry, but they're [nontraditional adult students] losing a little bit of hope." Administrator participants viewed student self-perceptions as a factor for administrators to consider in guiding decision-making about the needs of this population. Nontraditional adult undergraduate students have been perceived to be students who do not need as much support as traditional students, P2A expressed, "there is no transitional programming for these students to get them ready to come to the comprehensive university to finish their degree." P1A, P2A, P3A, and P5A, recognized the misconception of nontraditional undergraduate students not needing as much support as traditional students; P2A stated, "It's this misconception that older transfer students and

they're older, so they already have their life together when that's not necessarily true." P1A, P3A, and P5A acknowledged a need for the university culture to be more encompassing of the undergraduate nontraditional adult student experience, more specifically in the provision of supports for successful program completion, retention, and persistence for these students.

Belonging and Community. Administrators perceived nontraditional undergraduate students' sense of belonging and not feeling that they were a part of the university community as another barrier to completion and program success. A sense of community and belonging is an essential component of student success (Brooms, 2019), the administrator participants in the study acknowledged that many undergraduate nontraditional adult students at the university lacked an opportunity to strengthen their sense of community and belonging on campus. P2A stated, "I think a lot of our nontraditional students lack a sense of belonging." To that point P3A added, "It takes a lot of effort and determination on the student's part to get where they are at and to graduation." Overall university administrator responses indicate an opportunity to strengthen the university culture by having administrative leadership consider programs and supports tailored to the specific needs of undergraduate nontraditional adult students. P3A shared that a specific place for nontraditional undergraduate students to congregate would be helpful in supporting undergraduate nontraditional adult student belonging. P3A expressed the need to consider the development of a specific center for undergraduate nontraditional adult students, "I think a specific center would be really helpful, a lot of our nontraditional students lack a sense of belonging here in this

institution.” The university has several centers with dedicated services for traditional students, but there is not a specific center at the university that works with or addresses the specific needs of undergraduate nontraditional adult students, as shared by P5A. As we have reviewed university administrators comments on campus culture, theme 4 addresses university administrators perceived view of flexibles services to address the specific needs of nontraditional adult students.

Theme 4

Theme 4: Administrators Perceive That Flexible Services Specific To The Needs Of Undergraduate Nontraditional Adult Students Are Needed To Support Successful Program Completion, Retention, And Persistence

The fourth theme aligns the support and focus needed from university administrators to become more aware of undergraduate nontraditional adult student needs to better support their program completion, retention, and persistence. Responses from university administrators suggest a consensus around recognized barriers to university support services to assist the needs of undergraduate nontraditional adult students. Barriers related to university support services for undergraduate nontraditional adult students that university administrators noted were flexibility, accessibility, services that are nonexistent, and support. University administrator responses highlight specific support services already established at the institution; however, administrator responses also support the need for improvement, enhancement, and addition of new support programs specifically to support the success of undergraduate nontraditional adult students. In line with improved and enhanced support programs, flexibility was also

noted by many administrators as essential to better supporting nontraditional adult students towards successful program completion, retention, and persistence.

Flexibility. Traditional operating hours for university support offices are 8 am-5 pm, these standard operating hours limit the opportunities and availability in which undergraduate nontraditional adult students can interact and seek assistance. University administrators acknowledged flexibility in business operating hours as being a hindrance for many undergraduate nontraditional adult students, P6A stated, “with our nontraditional students, we need to assist them a little bit more because they don't have the time to be on campus to find the resources on their own.” Similarly, P5A shared, “I think that goes back to are we all leading at five o'clock and calling it done.” Most nontraditional adult students work full-time or part-time, which impacts the times in which they can contact and interact with university support services. P2A shared, “there isn't really any support available or given for students who are here after a certain time.” Understanding nontraditional adult students need for flexibility in support outside of traditional business hours could help university administrator’s better support these students program completion, retention, and persistence. P2A recommended collecting responses from undergraduate nontraditional adult students could help in guiding the work of university administrators in providing more flexible support services for this student population, “maybe having a panel of students share their story and experiences to really find out what their needs are, would be really helpful so that we can try to accommodate better.” As administrator participants referenced flexibility, accessibility was also recognized as a hurdle in supporting nontraditional adult students.

Accessibility. Accessibility to university services was referenced by university administrators as a hurdle to supporting successful program completion, retention, and persistence of undergraduate nontraditional adult students. P2A stated, “I don’t think I can give us (student success services) a ten in terms of accessibility for undergraduate nontraditional adult students.” P2A also noted, “Nontraditional adult students don’t really have that many resources available to them.” According to P2A, P3A, P4A, and P6A accessibility to support services is important for nontraditional adult students to aid in their success. P3A believes university administrators and student success staff need to consider the needs of nontraditional adult students and make accommodations when able, “Sometimes we (university administrators and student success staff) need to make that accommodation, helping out the student saying I'll see you during my lunch time so we can help you.” Support services are recognized in the higher education system as essential to successful program completion, retention, and persistence of nontraditional adult students (Remenick, 2019). P3A noted the student to academic advisor ratio as an issue related to accessibility, “There's about three thousand students in the college right now, but there's only two advisors.” University administrators recognized the inconsistency in accessibility to support services as an area for improvement to help undergraduate nontraditional adult students succeed in their program completion, retention, and persistence. In referencing inconsistencies related to accessibility, university administrator participants mention services the university needs to consider establishing in order to support nontraditional adult students in their academic success.

Services Not Established. Support services at the university are regarded as limited by university administrators, and a need for additional new services was acknowledged as a priority. P3A shared, "How can we really address nontraditional adult students proactively, especially before situations actually arise to help them rather than, letting them fall through the cracks." New support services that work was noted as important consideration for P6A, "it would make me happy to see additional services provided to our nontraditional adult students, so long as they work." Many university administrators provided recommendations for new support services that could help assist undergraduate nontraditional adult students with successful program completion, retention, and persistence.

P1A, P2A, P3A, P4A, and P5A mentioned new supports services for consideration they believe would be helpful for nontraditional adult students. P2A stated, "The nontraditional adult student population is not going to go away all of a sudden, it actually may end up growing and I would really like to see the campus take that into account as we move forward with planning and developing new support services." P1A mentioned wanting to see the university's individual colleges integrate an adult reentry program for nontraditional adult students, "Maybe integrate an adult reentry program or type of services or clubs or organizations that could be established within the major or within the college." Other ideas shared by administrators included "offering more online services" P2A, "more collaboration with the children center for daycare" P5A, and "employing a coordinator specifically to work with nontraditional adult student" P6A. University administrators recognize the need for new and additional support services, but

they also recognize there are current support services that could be enhanced to better support undergraduate nontraditional adult students. Current university supports were also highlighted by university administrator participants, and these support services were noted as being more in line with the needs of traditional students.

Support. Current university support services are designed to focus more on the needs of traditional undergraduate students. P3A shared when changes to services occur or are announced they are done for all students the majority being traditional undergraduate students, “when changes are made or announced, it's for all students not specifically with the needs of nontraditional adult students in mind.” Current support services for nontraditional adult students that were recognized by P1A, P2A, and P5A were the veteran success center and transfer student success center. P6A conveyed, “There’s a lot of changes happening right now at the university, but I'm not sure that they're the most positive changes for our nontraditional students.” P6A also mentioned, “Having additional support to enhance current services during nontraditional times would be a great way to start supporting nontraditional adult students.” University support services are essential to meeting the needs of nontraditional adult students and facilitating successful program completion, retention, and persistence.

The themes for this study showcase the importance of perspectives presented by university administrators and nontraditional adult students as it relates to successful program completion, retention, and persistence at the university. The student experience reflected the values and needs of the represented student population, emphasizing the importance of interaction with university support services staff and access to quality

university resources. From the university administrators' perspective, the other two themes highlight the recognition that university culture and flexible services impact the nontraditional adult student experience towards program completion, retention, and persistence. In the coming section, evidence of trustworthiness, credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability will be discussed.

Summary

The purpose of this qualitative instrumental case study was to explore undergraduate nontraditional adult students' and university administrators' perceptions and experiences of supports needed for success as it relates to retention, persistence and program completion. The purposeful sampling of undergraduate nontraditional adult student participants provided their thoughts, feelings, and perceptions regarding their experiences towards program completion, retention, and persistence as undergraduate nontraditional adult students. The purposeful sampling of university administrator participants also provided their thoughts, feelings, and perceptions regarding program completion, retention, and persistence of undergraduate nontraditional adult students. From each participant group's responses, a better understanding of program completion, retention, and persistence of undergraduate nontraditional adult students emerged.

Completing the data analysis offered insights into addressing the research questions: RQ1: How do undergraduate nontraditional adult students attending a traditional postsecondary 4-year institution describe their perceptions of support towards program completion, retention, and persistence at the study site? RQ2: What do university administrators describe as supports to successful program completion,

retention, and persistence for undergraduate nontraditional adult students? Two themes emerged from RQ1, and two themes emerged from RQ2. Four themes emerged in total following the coding process: (a) administrators describe university campus culture as needs to be communicated and designed to support completion, retention, and persistence of undergraduate nontraditional adult students, (b) administrators perceive that flexible services specific to the needs of undergraduate nontraditional adult students are needed to support program completion, retention, and persistence, (c) nontraditional undergraduate adult students perceive the campus structure and interaction with university support services and professionals to be critical to supporting their success towards program completion, retention, and persistence, (d) nontraditional undergraduate adult students describe their experiences with university resources as beneficial and necessary to aid in their success towards program completion, retention, and persistence. Collectively the responses from university administrator participants and undergraduate nontraditional adult student participants emphasized the need for continued support and enhancement of university support services to better assist undergraduate nontraditional adult students in their program success, retention, and persistence at the university.

In Chapter 5, I provide an interpretation of the findings of this study and discuss the limitations of the study. Additionally, recommendations for application and future research are included. Chapter 5 will conclude with implications for positive social change that may arise from the findings of this study, as well as present an overall conclusion of the study.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The purpose of this study was to explore undergraduate nontraditional adult students' and university administrators' perceptions and experiences of supports needed for success as it relates to retention, persistence, and program completion. To achieve this, I conducted a qualitative instrumental case study approach using semistructured interviews of five nontraditional adult students and six university administrators in charge of student success programming at the university study site. Knowles's (1984) andragogy theory of adult learning and Tinto's (1975) theory of student retention were used as the frameworks and lens to explore the views and perceptions and experiences of nontraditional adult students and university administrators related to successful program completion, retention, and persistence. Student participants provided several examples and reasons of what they believe contributes to their success as nontraditional adult students towards program completion, retention, and persistence. Equally, university administrators shared many examples of what they perceive contributes to nontraditional adult student success and what could be improved at the institutional level to better support the success of undergraduate nontraditional adult students. I used inductive and deductive analysis to investigate administrators' and students' perceptions and experiences (see Onwuegbuzie & Weinbaum 2016). I also examined the students' perceptions and experiences and administrators' perceptions and experiences as individual participant groups and as a combined participant group by conducting within and across-case analysis (see Miles & Huberman, 1994).

I developed a deep understanding of the perceptions of students and administrators related to university supports of successful program completion, retention, and persistence. Four themes emerged from this study: (a) nontraditional undergraduate adult students perceive the campus structure and interaction with university support services and professionals to be critical to supporting their success towards program completion, retention, and persistence; (b) nontraditional undergraduate adult students describe their experiences with university resources as beneficial and necessary to aid in their success towards program completion, retention, and persistence; (c) administrators describe university campus culture needs to be communicated and designed to support completion, retention, and persistence of undergraduate nontraditional adult students; and (d) administrators perceive that flexible services specific to the needs of undergraduate nontraditional adult students are needed to support program completion, retention, and persistence. This study was conducted to fill a gap in the research literature examining undergraduate nontraditional adult students and university administrators' perceptions and experiences of university supports related to successful program completion, retention, and persistence of nontraditional adult students at the undergraduate level.

In Chapter 5, I discuss the interpretation of the study's findings in relation to each theme and its relationship to the conceptual framework. I also include a comparison of the study's findings to the current literature, review the study's limitations, and provide detailed recommendations based on the study. I conclude Chapter 5 by discussing the implications of the study and providing a comprehensive summary of the results overall.

Interpretation of the Findings

The analysis and findings of this study were based on the responses of semistructured interviews, the conceptual framework, and the literature review. This study addressed two research questions:

RQ1: How do undergraduate nontraditional adult students attending a traditional postsecondary 4-year institution describe their perceptions of support towards program completion, retention, and persistence at the study site?

RQ2: What do university administrators describe as supports to successful program completion, retention, and persistence for undergraduate nontraditional adult students?

The findings of this study correlated with the research provided in the literature review regarding the challenges undergraduate nontraditional adult students experience at the institutional level regarding program completion, retention, and persistence. As previously stated, nontraditional adult students are a population that does not succeed at earning their degree at much higher rates, in terms of persistence and attrition, than their traditional counterparts (Ellis, 2019). I used Knowles's (1984) andragogy theory of adult learning and Tinto's (1975) theory of student retention as a lens to explore the views and perceptions of nontraditional adult students and university administrators related to successful program completion, retention, and persistence.

I analyzed the data collected from five semistructured interviews for RQ1. The student participants' perceptions of their experiences with university support included statements like: "So I think there are a lot of different services and opportunities for

students to have advising or guidance, but as a student I don't feel that I really take advantage of that," "The university has a lot limitations, I had two advisors retire in the middle of my case before school started,", and "I don't really know who to go to at the university for help." Student participants shared that many of their interactions with university support were not ideal, but they were hopeful the university would do more to educate students about resources and supports and offer more services geared towards the specific needs of nontraditional adult students at the university.

I also used semistructured interviews to collect data to answer RQ2. University administrator participants' perceptions of university support of nontraditional adult students towards program completion, retention, and persistence included: "Our campus is not super receptive to our nontraditional student, a lot of our programming and support go to first-time freshmen," "I think nontraditional student support is something I think in theory folks are thinking of, but not necessarily acting upon and thinking about as a culture," and "I would say there is nothing that directly speaks to our nontraditional community." University administrators confirmed the campus culture does not provide the type of services necessitated to support the success of undergraduate nontraditional adult students. In the following sections, I discuss the study's findings.

Theme 1: Campus Structure and Interaction With University Support Services

While students have the agency and ability to be successful independent of the institution, universities can choose to create conditions that either foster or hinder their success (Pitcher et al., 2018). Tinto's (1993) theory of student retention emphasized the importance of students being able to connect to the university academically and socially,

and campus structure plays a critical role in that connectedness. Student participants described the university campus structure, support services, and professionals as essential to their success in completing their program requirements, being retained, and their ability to persist. P3S conveyed, “We like and need services as students, but the university does not always offer the best.” Student participants highlighted many interactions with university support professionals as not ideal. They noted the campus structure as challenging in understanding where and who to go to for assistance. P2S noted, “Better organization in certain areas would make it easier for students to know things and get information.” Student participants suggest they can persist in spite of the university and take on many additional responsibilities to attain their goal of reaching graduation. P4S shared, “I believe the faculty and university administration can be very helpful, but I am also one of those students who will go and look for information on my own.” The ability to know and find information on campus is critical to the success in supporting undergraduate nontraditional adult students towards program success, retention, and persistence.

The findings of this study indicated the campus structure and interaction with university support professionals influenced the experiences of nontraditional adult students. Student participants shared their perspectives on how the campus structure and current supports made it more challenging for them as undergraduate nontraditional adult students to get information and support to aid their success. The evidence of this theme was observed in the literature review when it noted the diversity of the nontraditional adult learner student population is shaping a new form of demand relating to student

services for postsecondary education institutions in the 21st century (Soares et al., 2017). In Theme 2, student participants describe their experiences with university resources.

Theme 2: Experiences With University Resources

University resources are essential to student success (Thomas & McFarlane, 2018) and were noted by student participants in this study as beneficial and necessary to aid their success as nontraditional adult undergraduate students. Student participants remarked university inaction, resources, and programming as components of their experience with university resources to be considered. P1S, P5S, and P4S shared specific details about their experiences and perceptions of university resources. SP1S shared, "Until you know exactly what you need and when you're more specific with people about what you mean, then I think you can get help," and P5S conveyed, "I had to advocate for myself time and time again, because I'm disabled, I wasn't just working with one department, and everything was very confusing." From the literature review this theme is made evident by Remenick (2019) statement, that the lack of dedicated support services for nontraditional adult students, such as designated support offices and services, are a significant barrier to their academic success.

Student participants in this study found university resources at the study site to have a singular focus on the traditional student experience. They were forthcoming with recommendations for university support staff to consider how to best reach and connect with all students, including nontraditional adult students. P4S recommended, "University support services should actually go into classrooms to ensure they are motivating students and providing information about options and resources." P5S shared, "I wish the

university had more transfer advisors or coordinators to assist and provide resources for transfer students." The student participant experiences were helpful in defining their views of success. The findings of this study indicate that student participants value university resources and believe they are beneficial to supporting their success towards program completion, retention, and persistence. In Theme 3, I review details shared by university administrators, as it relates to undergraduate nontraditional adult success towards program completion, retention, and persistence.

Theme 3: University Campus Culture

Successful university student success models are spread across the higher education landscape and rarely implemented or integrated successfully on any single campus (Mehaffy, 2018). The responsibility of student success pertaining to retention and persistence has shifted from a student responsibility to that an institutional responsibility (Tight, 2020). Administrator participants for this study addressed the need for the campus culture to be communicated and designed to support better the completion, retention, and persistence of undergraduate nontraditional adult students. Administrator participants noted the campus culture at the university study site to be focused on and catered to the needs of traditional students. P2A shared, "Everything is geared mostly towards our traditional students in terms of events and getting involved on campus." Administrator participants also conveyed that they believe many students are just not aware of available services. P5A also stated, "I think part of it is that is the connection to resources or that they don't know about them." Student perceptions of themselves as undergraduate

scholars was also noted by administrator participants as a critical to their understanding of this student populations needs.

Students shared perceptions of themselves was mentioned throughout administrator interviews and regarded as an important aspect for consideration when discussing supports to aid successful program completion, retention, and persistence of nontraditional adult undergraduate students. P3A shared, “I find that students are feeling really frustrated and not necessarily angry, but they're losing a little bit of hope.” And P3A conveyed, “it takes a lot of effort and determination on the student's part to get where they are at and graduation.” Supported by the literature review, undergraduate nontraditional adult students are more likely to drop out of their degree programs than their traditional counterparts and current institutional models of student success and retention should consider the experiences of nontraditional adult students (Kasworm, 2018). Campus culture plays a significant role in supporting nontraditional adult undergraduate students.

University campus culture is important to building communities of support and belonging that can aid undergraduate nontraditional adult students' completion, retention, and persistence. University campus culture can support excellence through an inclusive lens accounting for the needs of all students (McNair, Bensimon, & Malcom-Piqueux, 2020). The evidence of this theme was observed in the literature review when it noted that nontraditional students often feel “out of place” as they are often older than the traditional student and do not feel part of the mainstream campus culture that caters to the traditional student (Kasworm, 2018). In Theme 4, administrator participants describe

their perceptions of university services and discuss the benefit and need for more flexible services to support the needs of undergraduate nontraditional adult students.

Theme 4: Flexible Services

As noted in the literature review, lack of support or inadequacy in the support services offered by institutions is an important barrier to acknowledge when discussing the success as it relates to retention, persistence, and program completion for nontraditional adult students. A generic approach to student services specifically models developed to support traditional college students, is not sufficient to meet the needs of nontraditional adult learners (Chen, 2017; Iloh, 2018; Kamer & Ishitani, 2021). In Theme 4, university administrator participants found flexibility, accessibility, services not offered, and support to be significant areas for consideration in supporting program completion, retention, and persistence of undergraduate nontraditional adult students.

University administrator participants shared that support services were limited and lacked flexibility to support nontraditional adult students. P2A detailed, “I’d like to kind of see that campus shift recognizing these students too, and they need the support just like any of our other students.” P3A stated, “Our center closes at five, and so for those who come after work or have to take care of people during the day, there are no services available.” Administrator participants shared collective thoughts around the understanding that the university needs to do more to support undergraduate nontraditional adult students. P2A believed, “Our university has been behind, at least in my opinion, in terms of taking care of our nontraditional transfer students,” and P6A shared, “it would make me happy to see additional services provided to our students so

long as they work." The evidence of this theme was observed in the literature review when it noted that decisions about how to expand services for nontraditional adult students could not happen without the influence of the student experience, new approaches and improvements should be considered in the context of how current programs within the local university site measure up against adult students' genuine needs and expectations (Glancey, 2018). Findings related to the conceptual framework will be reviewed in the following section and highlight the importance of understanding the undergraduate nontraditional adult student experience towards program completion, retention, and persistence.

Findings Related to the Conceptual Framework

This study highlights the importance of understanding the undergraduate nontraditional adult student experience towards program completion, retention, and persistence in a university setting. The student participants in this study shared their experiences and perceptions of success towards program completion, retention, and persistence at the undergraduate level. Student participants felt the campus structure and interaction with university support services were critical to supporting their success and their experiences with university resources. Each student participant provided examples and specific details of what they believed the university could do to help them succeed as nontraditional adult students at the undergraduate level.

This study's conceptual framework is based on Tinto's (1975) theory of student retention. Tinto stated that voluntary student departure is a process that occurs over time as a result of the meanings students ascribe to their interactions with the social and

academic dimensions of the institution. Tinto's theory of retention relates to the student experience and supports the need for investigation and understanding. According to Kamer and Ishitani (2021), the nontraditional adult student population is very diverse and presents challenges related to enrollment, engagement, and retention, which requires a deeper understanding of their characteristics, experiences, and needs. The student participants in this study shared rich descriptions and details of their experiences and provided insight into their challenges, background, needs, and recommendations to aid their success. Themes 1 and 2 of this study correlates to Tinto's theory of retention, as student participants identified components of their university experience, they believed to be essential to their success towards program completion, retention, and persistence as undergraduate nontraditional adult students. University administrators serve as key resource to lead change in the campus environment for students and bring awareness to student populations in need of support (Mendoze et al., 2019).

University administrator participants for this study recognized the need for the campus culture to be communicated and designed to support program completion, retention, and persistence of undergraduate nontraditional adult students. University administrators also highlighted that flexible services specific to the needs of undergraduate nontraditional adult students are needed to support successful program completion, retention, and persistence. Each university administrator participant shared insight and clarification and identified areas of improvement for the university to support undergraduate nontraditional adult students better. University administrator participants indicated no specific services that address undergraduate nontraditional adult students'

unique needs. As stated previously in the literature review, institutional administrators within higher education are not adequately addressing the needs of nontraditional adult students (Tumuheki et al., 2018). Educational institutions and their staff need to be active and supportive of student needs and retention efforts, as student retention is vital to the well-being of students, institutional programming, and the advancement of society (Sorensen & Donovan, 2017). Administrator participants recognized more needs to be done to help ensure the support for undergraduate nontraditional adult students.

The framework for this study was also grounded in the work of Knowles's theory of andragogy (1984). University administrator responses from this study aligned with Knowles's (1984) recommended implications for practice:

1. The climate for adult learning should be cooperative.
2. The specific needs and interests of the adult learner should be assessed.
3. Learning objectives should be developed based on the learner's needs, skill level, and interests.
4. Adult students need to be involved in the planning and evaluating their instruction.
5. The quality of the adult learning experience should be evaluated frequently, and adjustments made as needed.

Administrator participants addressed the university culture, they recognized the need to involve and engage nontraditional adult students and understand that support programs in the future need to be developed based on the needs and interests of these students to aid their success towards program completion, retention, and persistence. Limitations of

the study will be reviewed in the following section and will include limitations related to the findings of this study.

Limitations of the Study

The limitations of this study hold to those detailed in chapter one. The 11 participants are representative of one 4-year university located in the west coast region of the United States. The findings of this study may relate to other universities or be considered unique to the university setting. Possible limitations in this study included university administrators' and undergraduate nontraditional adult students' availability due to COVID-19 restrictions. To address these limitations, I focused on fewer participants and virtual interview options to allow more time to schedule and collect detailed data.

My experience in higher education and role as a university administrator working with student advising and programs to support student success was another possible limitation of this study. I overcame this limitation by using reflexive bracketing, an audit trail, a researcher's diary, a consistent process before, during, and after the interview, and by employing member-checking. (Candela, 2019; Maher et al., 2018; Sorsa et al., 2015). By following these practices, I ensured my interpretation of the findings remained unbiased.

Recommendations

I explored the experiences and perceptions of nontraditional undergraduate adult students and university administrators in regard to support for program completion, retention, and persistence at the undergraduate level. Undergraduate nontraditional, adult

student participants in this study identified campus structure and interaction with university support services as critical to supporting their success towards program completion, retention, and persistence. Student participants also described their experiences with university resources as beneficial and needed to aid their success towards program completion, retention, and persistence. Administrator participants included in this study described university campus culture needs to be communicated and designed to support the completion, retention, and persistence of undergraduate nontraditional adult students. Administrator participants in this study also perceived that flexible services specific to the needs of undergraduate nontraditional adult students are needed to support successful program completion, retention, and persistence.

While the findings of this study provide insight into the experiences and perceptions of nontraditional undergraduate adult students and university administrators in regard to support for successful program completion, retention, and persistence at the undergraduate level, additional research is recommended. As previously stated, the study was limited, considering only the experiences and perceptions of undergraduate nontraditional adult students and university administrators at one 4-year University located in the west coast region of the United States. It may be beneficial to replicate this study with undergraduate nontraditional adult students and university administrators from different universities. More participation from different universities could reveal more findings that could help improve the understanding and needs of undergraduate nontraditional adult students.

Implications

This study may contribute to positive social change by providing a rich description and understanding of the experiences of undergraduate nontraditional adult students and university administrators of what supports contribute to successful program completion, retention, and persistence for nontraditional adult students at the undergraduate level. This understanding may lead to improved success through higher graduation rates for undergraduate nontraditional adult students and play a vital role in their advancement personally and professionally, resulting in positive social change within their households, community, and society. This study may also prompt university leaders to investigate and share strategies for supporting undergraduate nontraditional adult students.

A higher education degree is essential to many individuals' professional growth and success (Gault et al., 2018). Completing a degree may lead to higher socioeconomic status and ability to contribute to society in various career paths. Degree earners are also more likely to continue their education and obtain certificates that may lead to promotions or advancements in their professional fields, which can change their economic landscape and create more pathways to success for their families (Gault et al., 2018). While this study focused on the experiences of undergraduate nontraditional adult students from one university in the west coast region of the United States, identifying more ways to help nontraditional adult students towards successful program completion, retention, and persistence at the undergraduate level may result in positive social change for more families and communities across the United States.

Conclusion

The purpose of this qualitative instrumental case study was to explore undergraduate nontraditional adult students' and university administrators' perceptions of support for program success, retention, and persistence of nontraditional adult students towards program completion. Limited research exists on the perceptions and experiences of undergraduate nontraditional adult students. I interviewed 11 participants, including six university administrators and five undergraduate nontraditional adult students. I explored their experiences and perceptions to enhance the understanding of the needs of undergraduate nontraditional adult students to aid their success towards program completion, retention, and persistence. University administrator participants shared their views and perceptions of undergraduate nontraditional adult student success, and undergraduate nontraditional adult student participants shared their experiences and perceptions of university support while working towards successful program completion, retention, and persistence as undergraduate students.

Four themes emerged from the data, including (a) nontraditional undergraduate adult students perceive the campus structure and interaction with university support services and professionals to be critical to supporting their success towards program completion, retention, and persistence, (b) nontraditional undergraduate adult students describe their experiences with university resources as beneficial and necessary to aid in their success towards program completion, retention, and persistence, (c) administrators describe university campus culture needs to be communicated and designed to support completion, retention, and persistence of undergraduate nontraditional adult students, and

(d) administrators perceive that flexible services specific to the needs of undergraduate nontraditional adult students are needed to support program completion, retention, and persistence. The findings of this study focused on the gap in practice by contributing to a deeper understanding of undergraduate nontraditional adult students' and university administrators' experiences and perceptions of support for program success, retention, and persistence of nontraditional adult students towards program completion.

Universities offer many services and support to aid students in program success, retention, and persistence towards program completion. However, many university services and supports do not consider the needs of undergraduate nontraditional adult students. This study provided perspectives from two different participant groups, university administrators and undergraduate nontraditional adult students, which offered new information and a deeper understanding of the unique experiences of undergraduate nontraditional adult students. The data and results of this study may provide university administrators with a better understanding of the nontraditional adult student experience and help identify ways to improve services and increase undergraduate program completion, retention, and persistence rates for this growing student population.

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