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Identifying Barriers to Graduation for Nontraditional Students

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Walden University
2016

Abstract

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MA, National University, 2004

BA, Baker University, 1994

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

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Abstract

Increased enrollments of nontraditional students in U.S. higher education institutions have prompted many college and university administrators to consider student service programs. These programs ensure that support services are available to nontraditional students to cultivate healthy graduation rates among that student population. The purpose of this study was to discover factors that influence nontraditional students to become disengaged or be retained. The study was a qualitative case study with data collected from individual interviews with 10 nontraditional students participating in online and traditional onsite delivery systems at a private, nontraditional higher education institution in the western United States. The theoretical framework that guided this study was Knowles's andragogy theory. The research questions addressed students' perceptions of the role of persistence, barriers, self-direction, intrinsic motivation, delivery systems, learning modality, and academic and support services in their academic success. Data analysis was conducted to identify themes by coding the narrative responses and using member checks to validate data interpretations. Findings derived from the interviews indicated that students believed that they benefitted from a community of support within the university system. A professional development workshop was designed as a project to train university employees on how to create a professional learning community (PLC) to support students. This PLC was designed to promote positive social change by enhancing retention of adult students in academic programs until graduation and create an environment where people work together in a collaborative way within the university to ensure student success.

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Dedication

This body of work is dedicated to Dr. Jerry C. Lee, thank you for believing in me.

Acknowledgements

But those who wait on the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint (Isaiah 40:31). I have only three acknowledgements. First, I acknowledge that I could not have completed this degree without the guidance and direction of my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Secondly, my husband who has not only been a support, but also my sounding board and voice of reason. When I wanted to give up he was always right there encouraging me to keep my eye on the prize, pace myself, and reminding me that I have everything it takes to get it done. Finally, I want to thank my committee members Dr. Richard Braley and Dr. Edward Garten. I was blessed to have both of these men on my team. They guided, supported, and encouraged me throughout my doctoral journey.

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Section 1: The Problem

Introduction

Nontraditional students in the United States drop out of universities at a much higher percentage than tradtional students. Barriers to graduation have been identified in this study and remedies articulated in order to reduce dropout rates. Kasworm (2012) had looked at the national impact of attritrion of nontraditional students. University leaders in the United States have responded to decreasing graduation rates among those students by providing programs to prepare students to be competitive in the 21st-century marketplace (Brock, 2010). It is important to understand who these nontraditional students are, "A nontraditional student is a student who is 25 years of age or older, experienced delayed enrollment into college, attends school part or full time, works part or full time while enrolled, is financially independent, has dependents other than spouse, or is a single parent" (Shillingford & Karlin, 2013, p. 92).

This study was designed to discover the influences that cause the nontraditional college students at this specific university site to either remain in their academic programs until graduation or to disengage from their academic programs prior to completion. The studied barriers to graduation perceived and reported by nontraditional students related directly to the increase in attrition and decrease in graduation rates among that student population at my place of employment. I designed this study to help the study site better understand this problem in order to facilitate its nontraditional students to persevere in their degree programs and enable the institution to better serve this student population.

Definition of the Problem

At ABC University (pseudonym), an institution with which I was strongly familiar, there was a need to discover effective ways to identify, and create a plan to minimize, barriers to graduation faced by nontraditional students. I hypothesized the existence of these barriers to graduation based on significantly higher attrition and lower graduation rates than what ABC University's leadership expected. Dr. XYZ, – chancellor and president of the university – recently stated in the Chronicle of Higher Education that, "Improving graduation rates is a top priority at my university where 65.5 percent of undergraduates and 57.9 percent of graduate students finish within six years" (Thomas, 2013, p.1). Those percentages indicated that 34.5% of undergraduate and 42.1% of graduate students did not finish their academic programs within six years. Because my university has a 40-year history of serving nontraditional students, university administrators were paying special attention to student persistence and attrition to achieve higher graduation rates. As a result, in the 2013 academic year, ABC University recorded a 6-year completion rate for undergraduate students of 67% and the 3-year completion rate for graduate students was 69% in an internal program development assessment report (ABC University, 2013).

This problem exists on a national level in the United States. For example, Kasworm (2012) indicated that other colleges and universities need to explore options to better serve the nontraditional student considering that "national projections to 2019 suggest the rise of 23% in enrollments of students 25 and over, with a smaller increase of 9% in enrollments of students less than 25 years of age" (p.2). Although Kasworm

focused on the national impact, the local university in this study was already engaged in finding ways to retain nontraditional students at the time of the study, due to over 80% of its over 16,000-student population being nontraditional (ABC University, 2012).

Rationale

Evidence of the Problem at the Local Level

Retention, persistence, and graduation rates are areas that colleges and universities continue to examine because of their direct impact on overall student success. Kasworm (as cited in Jones, Mortimr, & Sathre, 2012) identified the student population of 25 years or older as a group disenfranchised by university marketing and student services efforts, even though they make up a higher percentage of enrollment than traditional students across the United States. Every higher education institution with nontraditional student enrollment shares a concern for retention of the identified age group. Therefore, shifting institutional attention toward those adult learners who fall in the age category of 25 years and older was vital in order to explore that discovery of disenfranchisement (Kasworm, 2012).

Retention and graduation rates of the nontraditional student was a critical issue at ABC University because considering nontraditional students have had lower graduation rates than the graduation rates of the traditional students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013). Also, because nontraditional students made up more than 80% of the university's student population, the university chancellor understood the need to prioritize graduation rates based on the comments made in the Chronicle of Higher Education article (Thomas, 2013, p.1). In this competitive higher education environment,

the need to remain relevant to prospective students is crucial to the university's continuing existence. One way to achieve this goal is by increasing graduation rates and advocating for overall student success.

At the time of this study, the university under scrutiny employed an accelerated learning format in which each class was taught sequentially and was 4 weeks in length (ABC University, 2014). More than 70 of the university's degree programs were also available 100% online. Although those various learning formats make access more easily available, based on the graduation rates previously identified, university leaders have to address the barriers to graduation faced by the nontraditional students in this local setting. The goal of this study was to determine what influences caused nontraditional students to disengage from higher education or remain engaged with higher education.

Evidence of the Problem From the Professional Literature

Brock (2010) helped academic leaders understand the significance and implications of declining graduation rates among nontraditional students by stating, "Although access to higher education has increased substantially over the past forty years, student success in college- as measured by persistence and degree attainment- has not improved at all" (Brock, 2010, p.109). Therefore, improved and supplemental academic and student support services, diverse learning modalities, and the use of various delivery systems are just a few of the potential solutions that address this growing problem.

The higher education marketplace is changing rapidly and many nontraditional students are concerned because a growing number of these students need advanced skills

in order to reenter the workforce, obtain promotions, or position themselves for graduate work (Wyatt, 2011). Also, nontraditional students in the United States have been encouraged to learn skills that can be applied to forthcoming employment (Frost, 2009). U.S. students are now competing for careers with students from around the world and in many cases the United States students are not as prepared as their international counterparts to enter those careers (Murray, 2009). For this reason, it is vital that nontraditional students are fully equipped to compete on both a national and global level considering they are more likely to be already in the workforce unlike traditional students. In order for nontraditional students to be competitive both nationally and globally, their academic skills needed to apply in the workforce. They need strong communication and collaboration skills, as well as technological proficiency. If students who are working adults require additional support in order to persist in their degree programs through graduation, there needs to be a concerted effort in higher education to address the needs of this student population. If this population's needs are not addressed, there will be fewer people in the workforce as well as fewer baccalaureates qualified to pursue graduate work.

Definition of Key Terms

The terms below are common terms used throughout this study as well as the higher education industry:

Academic Support Services: This term "may refer to a wide variety of instructional methods, educational services, or school resources provided to students in the effort to help them accelerate their learning progress, catch up with their peers, meet

learning standards, or generally succeed in school" (The Glossary of Education Reform website, 2013).

Accelerated Learning Format: "A course format in which accelerated courses are typically segmented into four to eight weeks sequentially (one at a time) rather than in the traditional parallel fashion in which several classes are taken at once" (Richards, 2008, p.74).

Attrition: In higher education, this term describes students who drop out of a college or university prior to graduation or completion (Lodico et al., 2010).

Delivery System: The method in which course work is delivered, that is, online, onsite, or hybrid (Rawls & Hammons, 2012).

Distance Education. In higher education this term is used to describe a student who is enrolled in a course or program in an e-Learning and/or online format (Kasworm, 2012).

Full Time Status: This term refers to a college student who enrolls in 12 credit hours or equivalent in a school term (Lodico et al., 2010).

*Graduation. "*A conferral or receipt of an academic degree or diploma marking completion of studies" (ABC University, 2014).

Learning Modality. A learning format or mode i.e. traditional or accelerated (Kasworm, 2012).

Nontraditional Student. "A student in higher education who is 25 years of age or older, delayed enrollment into college, attends school part or full time, works part or full time while enrolled, is financially independent, has dependents other than spouse or is a

single parent, or may not have a high school diploma" (Shillingford & Karlin, 2013, p.92).

Online learning. A learning modality that is web based.

Retention. A term used to describe when a student persists in school (Lodico et al., 2010).

Student Support Services. "A category of expenditures for those activities whose primary purpose is to contribute to the student's emotional and physical well being and to his/her intellectual, cultural, and social development outside the context of the formal instruction program. Includes the offices of admissions, registrar, and student life" (Colorado State University website, 2014).

Traditional Student. "A student in higher education who is 24 years of age or younger, earned a high school diploma, enrolls full time immediately after finishing high school, depends on parents for financial support, or either does not work during the school year or works part time" (Shillingford & Karlin, 2013, p.92).

Significance of the Study

Studying why nontraditional students in the United States experience higher attrition and lower graduation rates was important in order to eliminate barriers and provide access to resources and student support programs. The outcome of this study has the potential to help ABC University identify how to broaden its services to nontraditional students and aid higher education administrators in general in how to provide customized support to this growing student population. The information will also be useful in modifying current student support service programs by providing insight

into the challenges faced by nontraditional students. As a result, the university can thereby work on developing an understanding of what the term "barrier" means to the disengaged and the graduates.

Research Questions and Research Objectives

At the time of this study, ABC University faced a significant problem from the graduation rates for their nontraditional student population being significantly lower than what university administrators desired to achieve. Past research on this topic has emphasized the hesitation of colleges and universities to shift their primary dependence on traditional students to becoming more inclusive of nontraditional students (Kasworm, 2012). Increased enrollments among nontraditional students has created pressures and heightened awareness among leaders within higher education that these students may need additional services in order to persist until the end of their degree program. That discovery led the university in this study – with a large percentage of nontraditional students – to pay special attention to attrition and graduation rates among this student population. However despite the efforts of the university, they still experienced graduation rates lower than what the administrators desire to attain.

To address the problem, a qualitative research study was selected with the following three research questions and objectives that guided the study:

Research Question 1 (RQ1): Why do some nontraditional students at the study site stop attending the university and other nontraditional students continue attending until they graduate?

- RQ1 Research Objective 1 (RQ1RO1): Discover the reasons some nontraditional students identify that caused them to stop attending the university.

- RQ1 Research Objective 2 (RQ1RO2): Prioritize the reasons those nontraditional students stated were what caused them to stop attending the university.

- RQ1 Research Objective 3 (RQ1RO3): Discover the reasons some nontraditional students will state as being the direct cause for them to continue their studies until they graduated from the university.

- RQ1 Research Objective 4 (RQ1RO4): Prioritize the influencing entities or persons some nontraditional students identify as reasons they used to persist and graduate from the university.

Research Question 2 (RQ2): Are there specific academic services that nontraditional students at the study site identify as influencing a decision to remain in their academic program through to graduation or as influencing a decision to disengage from their academic program and leave the university?

- RQ2 Research Objective 1 (RQ2RO1): Identify and prioritize existing and non-existing academic services as an influence on nontraditional student decision-making.

- RQ2 Research Objective 2 (RQ2RO2): Place academic services that were identified by the nontraditional students on a level of influence such that I can compare perceptions of influence for nontraditional retained students and nontraditional disengaged students.

Research Question 3 (RQ3): What specific academic and support services would nontraditional students at the study site like to see implemented in order to help support their academic success?

- RQ3 Research Objective 1 (RQ3RO1): Determine the specific academic and support services identified by nontraditional students as supporting their persistence.

These research questions and objectives guided the data collection and data analysis to identify barriers to graduation for nontraditional students so that potential solutions could be developed and provided to university leadership. The results of the study have the potential of helping support enhanced graduation rates as well as explore the potential of modifying the existing student service programs and a consideration for new programs that may potentially increase overall student success.

Review of the Literature

The literature review incorporated prior research, studies and articles, which addressed barriers to graduation for nontraditional students, potential solutions to addressing the barriers, and the overall impact of graduation rates among nontraditional students within the field of higher education. It includes the background information, the theoretical framework, and the national and local graduation rates among nontraditional students. The search terms used to search the databases were: *nontraditional student retention*, *nontraditional student graduation rates*, *barriers to graduation for adult learners*, *nontraditional student engagement*, and *adult learner student success*.

The databases used to search for sources were: ERIC, SAGE, and Education

Research Complete. The Walden University online library, diversified higher education journals, books, and websites were also utilized. After an extensive search resulting in 65 peer-reviewed scholarly articles, saturation was reached when the entries among databases became repetitious.

While many scholars use the terms *nontraditional* student and *adult learner* interchangeably, some scholars have differentiated between the two. For this study the focus was on the definition used previously in the definition of terms for nontraditional student.

The university in this study, ABC University, is a private, nonprofit, nontraditional institution that primarily serves nontraditional students. This exploration was designed to explain the college persistence and completion problem and provide useful information to the university administrators that are directly applicable to their nontraditional student population. In addition, the results will potentially provide those same leaders with ideas to uncover resources that may be used to present supplementary academic and student support services to support nontraditional student persistence. For example, these leaders may now explore more relevant academic support services that will address the predominant skills identified by nontraditional students such as writing, math, and critical thinking (Cleary, 2011). Finally, another example for student support services enhancement was in exploring the significance of academic counseling to meet the unique needs and challenges of nontraditional students (Marine, 2012).

According to Richards (2008), "nontraditional students are very practical and have limited time for study and therefore need more flexibility and convenience than do

traditional students" (p. 74). Diverse learning modalities are being examined throughout

higher education as a possible vehicle for providing accelerated study and flexibility

(Richards, 2008). In addition, nontraditional students encounter obstacles in college that

traditional students who enter college soon after graduating from high school do not. As a

result, there are added challenges that prevent the nontraditional student from persisting

in their programs (Richards, 2008). Some examples of the barriers are: working part- or

full-time, managing family responsibilities, and the need for specialized academic and

student support. Therefore, providing solutions that have the potential of decreasing

attrition, increasing graduation rates, and potentially retaining adult students in academic

programs is important in helping to address this growing concern at the local and national

level.

Theoretical Framework

The problem facing the university in this study was how to decrease attrition and

improve graduation rates among its nontraditional students. No one person or department

had all of the answers, solutions, or experience to solve this problem. Therefore, it was

important to select a theoretical framework with a significant potential for creating a

deeper understanding of nontraditional students in order to help find solutions to this

growing problem. The theoretical theory that framed this study was Knowles's

andragogy theory. Knowles's theory describes how nontraditional students are naturally

more independent learners who are geared toward self-direction; when considering

nontraditional students' various other responsibilities, self-direction is an intrinsic

approach to learning for this student population (Goddu, 2012; Kenner, & Weinerman, 2011).

A major goal of Knowles's theory is to help adults understand their learning experiences and how they directly apply to the real world. Learning takes place when adults are motivated to apply what they learn toward future actions. I used Knowles' Andragogy theoretical framework to support data gathering and analysis by forming research questions and objectives that drew upon self-direction, student motivation, and how the student applied learning.

Nontraditional students typically bring a broad and diverse array of experience into the classroom. This should be considered in preparation of the curriculum as well as paying special attention to the unique academic and student support service needs of this student population. In addition the typical nontraditional student works full-time, is married or has a family; as a result, the wealth of information they contribute to their college academic experience is significantly different from that of a traditional-age student (Millicent, 2013; Marschall & Davis, 2012). The nontraditional students demonstrate a preparedness to learn that will apply directly to the real world. As a result, when the nontraditional student is attending school, it usually is to meet a need, such as career advancement. Korr, Derwin, Greene, and Sokoloff (2012) proposed, "a less obvious dimension to relevancy relates to physical issues and time constraints faced by most nontraditional students" (p.4). Accordingly this speaks directly to the desire to attend school for a purpose. Harper and Ross (2011) pointed out "helping people meet human needs and achieve human goals is the primary purpose for which people take part

in organizations – and when an organization does not serve this purpose for them, they tend to withdraw" (p.161).

Nontraditional students also demonstrate an inclination to use learning to solve problems rather than just learn about a subject. This speaks to the heart of what nontraditional students are because they are attending school to directly apply what they learn to their current job or future career. As a result, it is vital that these students persist in their degree program to achieve success in and out of the workplace. Finally, this student population exhibits a relatively high degree of intrinsic motivation and self-direction. This is important to understand about this group because the various responsibilities of the nontraditional student requires an intrinsic motivation to be disciplined in order to successfully complete their degree, credential, or certificate (Ross-Gordon, 2011). Consequently if there were barriers preventing the nontraditional student from persisting in their degree program, it was crucial that these barriers were detected and effectively overcome to support the overall success of this student population.

What the Nontraditional Student Wants

U.S. universities need to learn what nontraditional students are seeking, how they want to learn, how they plan to use the information, and how to provide the necessary resources to keep them engaged long enough to persist in their programs through graduation. According to Harris and Martin (2012), understanding the needs of nontraditional students is an important element to marketing to this population. Dolenski (2010) described how some universities develop advisory boards, comprised of professionals in the region, to define what academic programs universities should

develop based on what organizations need their employees to know. Also, the faculty that are hired work in the field of study in order to bring fresh, new, current, and relevant information to the nontraditional student (ABC University, 2014). This allows the nontraditional student to apply what they learn in class directly to the workplace. These efforts to understand the needs of nontraditional students, determine relevant programs, and communicate clearly and effectively are key ingredients to not only attracting prospective students but also maintaining a viable nontraditional student population.

Barriers to Graduation for Nontraditional Students

After many years of invisibility, nontraditional students in higher education are finally beginning to be recognized within the higher education system as an essential form of human capital. However there are still many colleges and universities that have not recognized the unique academic and student service needs of this student population. For example, the nontraditional student delayed college because of life responsibilities while their traditional counterparts are able to enter college immediately following high school (Kasworm, 2012). This is just one example of responsibilities that can create barriers to graduation for the nontraditional student. Colvin (2013) described "some of these barriers as situational such as those relating to scheduling problems, home responsibilities, child care, finances, and health" (p.22). Therefore, as a result of the direct effect of these anticipated barriers, students are at risk of dropping out or delaying graduation if they are not given the customized support needed in order to persist in their degree programs.

As busy parents, workers, and community members, nontraditional students are faced with choosing options such as distance learning or accelerated learning formats because of the constraints placed on their busy lives (Coulter & Mandell, 2012). While these are viable options to complete a degree, the distance learning or accelerated formats often time does not incorporate learning pathways to support the unique style of learning concerning the nontraditional student. Because nontraditional students bring a vast amount of information into the classroom from their working background, it is important to incorporate their life and work experience into the learning process. This approach will enable the students to engage but if it is not present can also have the opposite effect. Also, nontraditional students are in class for a purpose, for reasons that include using the information for career advancement or development therefore making the class lessons relevant to real life experience and the workplace is vital to student growth and development. This approach has the potential to encourage the nontraditional student to persist in their degree programs because the information is valuable to the students overall goals.

Learning Modalities and Delivery Systems

Colleges and universities have been utilizing various learning modalities and delivery systems as one way to meet the unique needs of nontraditional students. However it is crucial to place an emphasis on learning outcomes of the various learning modalities and delivery systems and how they impact student attrition, persistence, and graduation. For years, evening classes have become a popular way for nontraditional students to complete their coursework. Hoyt, Howell, and Young (2009) "found that

nearly three-fourths of institutions granting bachelor's degrees offered evening classes"

(p. 83). These evening classes assist nontraditional students in attending class at night

while still maintaining their full or part time job in the day. They also extend access to

degree and certificate programs to students all over the world (Hoyt et al., 2009). Hoyt,

Howell, and Young (2009) conducted a survey of 1,188 evening students to identify their

learning needs and they discovered the following needs: "Need for personal development

and self-improvement, need for academic skill improvement, need for career

development skills, and need for understanding social issues and individual differences"

(p. 84). As a result, colleges and universities need to ensure that students taking evening

classes have the necessary resources available to them such as academic advising,

financial aid advising, career advising, extended business hours for writing and math

support to name a few, in order to persist in their program.

The university in my study employed both distance learning and an accelerated

learning format for the students. An accelerated learning format where each class was

taught in the evening, sequentially and was 4 weeks in length–-and more than 70 of the

university's degree programs were available 100% online (ABC University, 2014).

Therefore, the university utilized a format where their nontraditional students had access

to programs that were convenient however based on the graduation and retention rates the

university was in need of discovering more aggressive ways to support this student

population through graduation. According to one study, Melkun (2012) stated

"nontraditional students seeking bachelor's and associates degrees are less likely to attain

their degree goal within 5 years and are more likely to leave postsecondary education

than traditional students" (p.34). Some scholars attribute higher attrition among nontraditional students to additional obligations, while others suggest that so many nontraditional students taking distance education courses as one of the factors (Melkun, 2012). These arguments are some of the reasons why I chose to explore the barriers to graduation for the nontraditional student because there is gap in research as it relates to reaching a consensus on the primary factors that result in higher attrition among this student group.

Academic and Student Support Services

As noted in many studies, "nontraditional students often face discrimination, alienation, or neglect in higher education settings. For example, many institutions do not provide accessible and relevant resources or support for a student population that is working and married" (Kasworm, 2012, p.14). Also, some nontraditional students have not attended a college or university for 10 or more years and may need help with socialization into the institution (Kasworm, 2012). Finally, because many of these students take courses in the evening or through distance learning they require support such as academic and student support beyond regular business hours.

Although some students enter college understanding what it is they need to do in order to accomplish their degree other students need help in determining their degree plan, scheduling of classes, and how to maneuver through the academic process. Some schools have done a good job in providing the necessary resources to these students while others ignore the need even exist. One reason student support services are so minimal in various colleges and universities are the lack of resources (Brock, 2010). Therefore it

becomes a challenge for these institutions to determine what it takes for their nontraditional students to succeed because they are not investing in overall student success by providing the necessary resources. In a 2007 study conducted by the Lumina Foundation entitled Returning to Learning, it stated "adults' success in college is key to America's future and report analysis indicated, without new efforts to educate the 54 million Americans who do not hold degrees, the United States will continue to fall behind other nations" (Thomas, 2012, p.1). As a result, some colleges and universities have welcomed this untapped market of nontraditional students for tuition revenue especially those institutions that are for-profit (Thomas, 2012). However, there is a gap in research to determine how to improve persistence and graduation rates among the nontraditional student population. Information on improved access to college is abundant, but research regarding learning outcomes and a solution on addressing the barriers to graduation for the nontraditional student is not.

Kinghorn and Smith (2013) stated, "we need to do more than allow nontraditional students access to existing programs that are designed for traditional students; we also need to value nontraditional students as key stakeholders and develop programs that serve their specific needs" (p.16). Some of the research highlights solutions such as developing learning communities or gateway courses for the nontraditional student. While others point out the lack of time that nontraditional students have to devote to anything outside of their studies that is unrelated to family and work responsibilities.

One successful example of addressing barriers to graduation for nontraditional students was found at DePaul University. The institution implemented a solution to

address a common barrier to graduation for nontraditional students by creating a Writing

Workshop class. The course was created to meet the needs of incoming basic writers as

well as students who were struggling with advanced writing task (Cleary, 2011). Also,

Cleary shared, "Writing Workshop students are not just being retained they are

succeeding. Of 129 students who passed Writing Workshop, only 6% withdrew from

classes the next quarter while 81% passed" (p.47). Considering nontraditional students

tend to be more apprehensive about writing than traditional students, providing writing

support early in the learning process is vital to their overall success. Nontraditional

students are critical to the economic welfare of the United States, and as colleges and

universities address the growing educational needs of the nontraditional learner, they

must also provide concrete evidence that learning is occurring (Rawls & Hammons,

2012).

Graduation Rates

The most current graduation rates reported on the National Center for Education

Statistics website (2008) for the university in this study shows "a 4-year rate of 38% for

students who began in 2005-2006 and 15% for those students who began in 2007-2008."

Figure 1 provides the percentages for "bachelor's degree graduation rates that measure

the percentage of entering students beginning their studies full-time status and are

planning to complete a bachelor's degree and who complete their degree program within

a specified amount of time" (NCES website, 2008). More recent graduation rates

reported in the University Assessment Systems report in 2013 displayed undergraduate 6-

year completion rates at 67% and graduate 3-year completion rates at 60% (ABC

University, 2013).
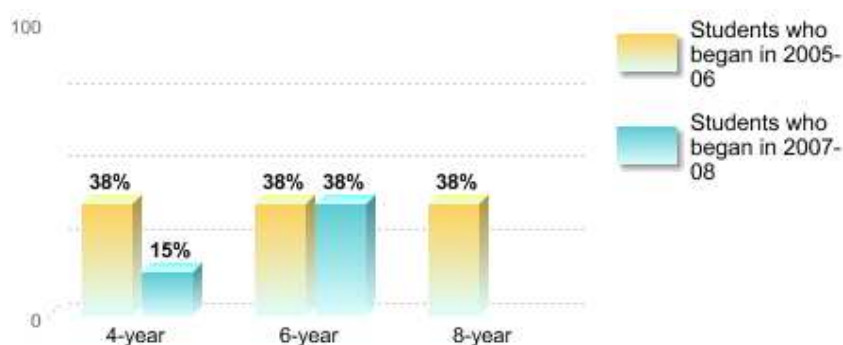
Figure 1. A bar graph showing graduation rates at the study site for students pursuing

Bachelor's degrees from 2005-2008. Adapted from the National Center for Education

Statistics 2008.

As seen in Figure 1 there is a 23% decrease in 4-year graduation rates for those

students who started in 2007-2008 from those who started in 2005-2006. Additionally, in

the 6-year and 8-year graduation rates, they are equal. Although there is an increase in

the rates for both 6-year and 8-year, the graduation rates are still trending low.

As illustrated on the National Center for Education Statistics website (2012) for

the university, Figure 2 provides a comparison of the "retention rates for first time full-

time students pursing bachelor's degrees in 2011-2012 and first time part-time students

pursing bachelor's degrees in 2011-2012." It is important to include retention rates when

looking at graduation rates because retention plays a major role in the overall percentages

of calculating graduation rates.
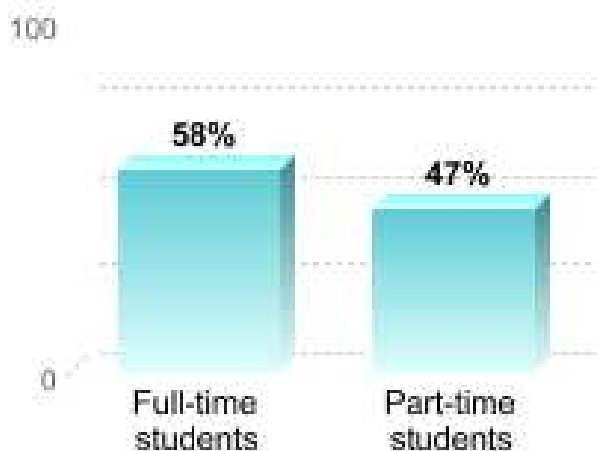
Figure 2. Bar graph showing retention rates at the study site of first-time students pursuing Bachelor's degrees from 2011-2012. Adapted from the National Center for Education Statistics 2012.

As seen in Figure 2, there was an 11% increase in retention rates for those students who attended full-time in 2011-2012 from those who attended part-time in 2011-2012. Although only a slight difference, students attending full-time have higher retention rates than those attending part-time.

In order to consider the broader picture in comparison to the local university in this study, it is important to consider the current graduation rates on a national scale. Figure 3 provides a comparison of U.S. graduation rates for 2012 of four-year private nonprofit 65.5%, four-year private for-profit 31.5%, four-year public 57.2%, two-year public 21.2%, two-year private nonprofit 62.3%, and two-year private for-profit 63%.
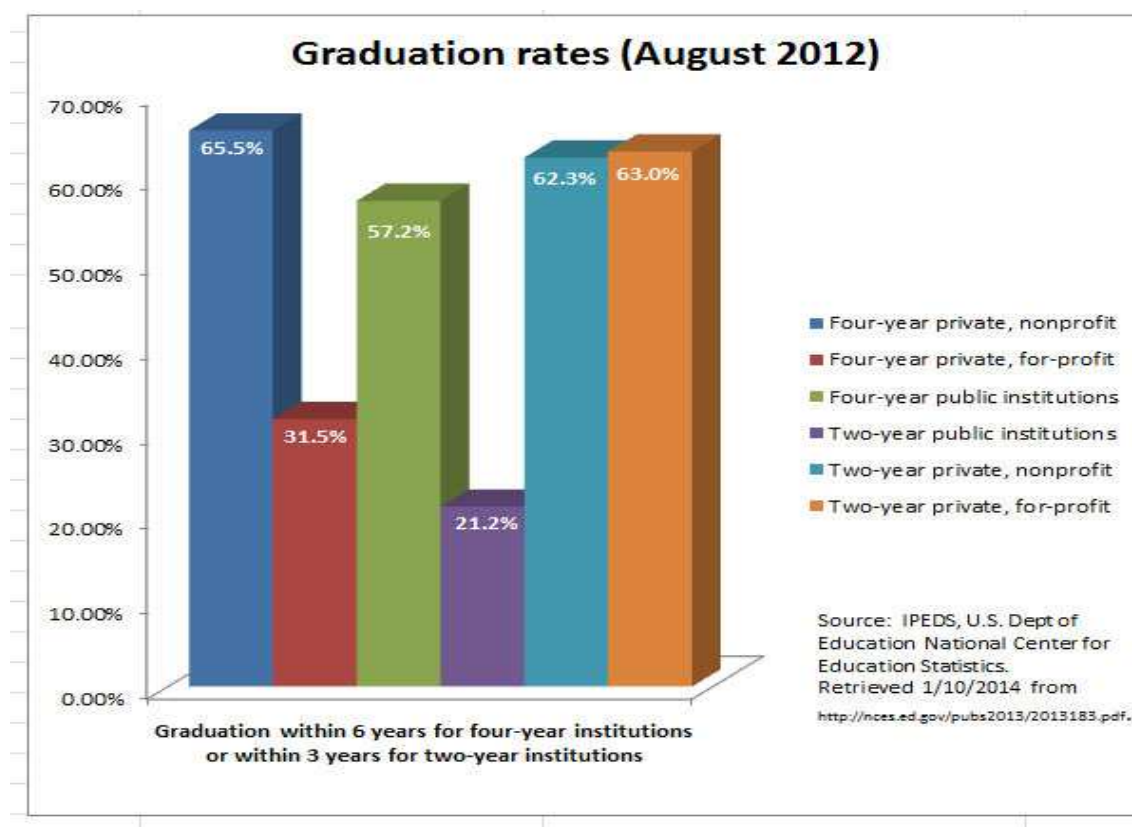
Figure 3. Bar graph showing national graduation rates within 6 years for four-year institutions and within 3 years for two-year institutions. Adapted from IPEDs, U.S. Department of Education National Center for Education Statistics Report 2012.

As seen in Figure 3 graduation rates for 2012 within the four-year private nonprofit and four-year public remained steady. And in both cases there are a higher percentage of traditional students in these institutions. However, for the university in this study and for the four-year private for-profit and two-year public the graduation rates are significantly lower. And in both these cases there are a higher percentage of nontraditional students. Considering the national graduation rates for traditional students are significantly higher than those of nontraditional students it is important to explore

these trends and uncover the reasons why graduation rates are significantly lower within the colleges and universities that have a higher percentage of nontraditional students.

At the time of this study, university administrators at my university were implementing programs to address student attrition. For example, a Pathway to Graduation program was implemented in order to revamp the training that admissions advisors receive to utilize a more proactive approach to addressing student barriers and challenges in order to provide the needed student support (ABC University internal notes, 2012). Also, in 2011 a previous University provost assembled a remediation and retention work group to assess the efforts within the university and the efforts of other institutions concerning best practices in remediation and retention (ABC University Student Remediation and Retention report, November, 2011). As a result, the university continues to create programs or enhance current programs in order to address the growing need to improve retention and graduation rates among their large nontraditional student population.

Ultimately, this research will help to fulfill the core values, vision, and mission of the university in this study by making lifelong learning opportunities accessible to adult learners as well as furnish nontraditional students with the scholarly skills necessary to compete on both a national and global level. These potential solutions, in combination with the support from university administrators at the university may provide the university's nontraditional students with additional support that may have the potential of creating enormous student success within the university student population. For this reason, considering solutions that would challenge the local university in this study and

all colleges and universities to further explore explanations of why graduation rates trend lower among nontraditional students would enable institutions of higher learning to educate more nontraditional students in a shorter amount of time. In addition, these solutions may also contribute to the nontraditional students' overall success. As a result, these solutions could potentially put more nontraditional students on a pathway to graduation and likely position the student to achieve their academic goals in a shorter amount of time in order to take advantage of promotional opportunities as well as preparation for continuing their education.

The literature review reached saturation when the majority of the studies were referenced repeatedly and a comprehensive body of research was created. The current body of research discusses the problem of barriers to graduation for the nontraditional student and analyzes opportunities for further exploration into this growing issue. The study aligns with the current research presented in this literature review and will add value to the previous research conducted by the various authors featured in this study. Findings will also expand upon the body of existing, ongoing research in order to offer practical insights into this widespread challenge.

Implications

This study assessed perceptions of university students regarding perceived barriers to graduation. The goal of the study was to determine what influences caused nontraditional students to disengage from higher education or remain engaged. The findings expounded on participant feedback and were used to discover solutions on how to address these barriers. The information gained from the study could determine

effective ways for the university to address barriers to graduation for the nontraditional student population. The university needed to ensure that it was using human and financial resources in the most effective way possible in order to accommodate the academic needs of its large nontraditional student community. Therefore, it was essential to evaluate degree programs, student service programs, initiatives, and projects to determine what was working and what needed to be improved.

The goal of the study was to pinpoint and address the barriers to graduation for nontraditional students and provide potential solutions to the administration in the local university as they related to improving nontraditional student persistence (Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011) and graduation rates as well as ensuring those students were successful in their academic pursuits. Therefore this study has the potential of supporting one of the universities top priorities by examining the university's current approach to addressing graduation rates, while at the same time exploring methods to enhance those rates.

The data derived from the interviews could support existing student service programs at the university and potentially identify new student service program implementation in order to improve overall graduation rates among the universities' nontraditional students. The university in this study strives to have a culture of service and is willing to use data to make decisions and change to improve the overall student experience. Having concluded the study, I proposed the creation of Professional Learning Communities in order to ensure the universities undergraduate and graduate nontraditional students' transition successfully into the university culture while at the

same time receive the necessary resources. According to Gray et al. (2014) "a

professional learning community (PLC) is a collegial group of faculty and staff who are

united in their commitment to student learning. PLCs maintain the following attributes:

supportive and shared leadership, collective creativity, shared values and vision,

supportive conditions, and shared personal practice" (p. 84).   The proposed project might

result in determining the most effective ways to address barriers to graduation for the

nontraditional student early in the student experience and as a result improve student

retention and graduation rates. Senge (2006) noted that universities could deteriorate,

even with individual excellence and outstanding programs, if they cannot pull their

various functions and capabilities together to achieve a productive whole. By seeing the

influence of Professional Learning Communities the university can continue to learn how

to operate more effectively. The PLCs may also help the local university identify how to

broaden its services to the nontraditional students as well as aid higher education

administrators in general on how to provide customized support to this growing student

population. As a result, the PLCs may have the potential to effect social change through

retention of adult students in academic programs until graduation.

Summary

The increase in nontraditional students entering higher education and the need to

look closer at the high attrition rates and low graduation rates of nontraditional students

had ushered in a concern from the university in this study to find ways to help their large

nontraditional student population persist in their degree programs through graduation.

ABC University, a private, nonprofit, open access institution in the Western U.S. area has

invested in student services, technology, and remediation and retention programs to address the needs of its undergraduate and graduate students. However, the university had limited experience and knowledge about how to decrease attrition, improve persistence, and increase graduation rates among its student population.

Section 1 outlined the problem and the rationale for why researching this problem is significant. The theoretical framework selected for this research is the Andragogy theory because understanding the unique needs of nontraditional students was essential in order to find solutions. The literature review includes information about the theoretical framework, background information, national graduation rates among nontraditional students, the nontraditional student needs and wants, and possible solutions to addressing the barriers to graduation. This section concluded with implications of the research and a possible direction for improving existing programs as well as creating new ones.

Section 2 will describe the methodology for this study. A qualitative case study method was applied to research what are the barriers or challenges faced by nontraditional students that cause them to withdraw from the university prior to graduation. A description of the site and participants, as well as the type of data analysis, are described. In addition, other universities' programs that were relevant to this research will be highlighted.

In Section 3, the findings of this study will be presented in the form of a proposed project. Finally, in Section 4, I will share my observations on the process used for the project study as well as the reflections of what I learned.

Section 2: The Methodology

Introduction

As described in the first section, the goal of this study was to respond to the need for the university in this study to explore the barriers to graduation that nontraditional students were facing that may have been contributing to lower graduation rates among this student population. The primary research question was: "What are the barriers or challenges faced by nontraditional students that cause them to withdraw from the university prior to graduation?" Three secondary research questions were used to help answer the primary research question:

1. Why do some nontraditional students stop attending the university and other nontraditional students continue attending until they graduate?

2. Are there specific academic services the nontraditional students identify as influencing a decision to remain in their academic program through to graduation or as influencing a decision to disengage from their academic program and leave the university?

3. What specific academic and support services would nontraditional students like to see implemented in order to help support their academic success?

Section 2 includes information on the selected research design and method. In addition, detailed descriptions of the 10 participants and data collection strategies are presented.

Qualitative Research Design and Approach

This study used a qualitative research design. Creswell (2012) stated "a qualitative research design is appropriate for investigating significant occurrences, collecting oral data from a small number of participants, and developing themes that characterize the analyzed data" (p.13). This design "allows the researcher to give voice to the feelings and perceptions of the participants under study" (Lodico et al., 2010, p. 264). The following standards categorizes qualitative research studies: "naturalistic settings, broad research questions, nonrandom participant selection methods, data collection methods that may include observation and interviewing, interactive researcher role, inductive methods of answering research questions, and narrative form data reporting" (Lodico et al., 2010, p. 264). Considering it was my objective to capture the authentic experiences of each nontraditional student I interviewed, it was my belief that a qualitative research design was the most effective approach in capturing the true essence of the nontraditional student experience.

I selected a case study design using qualitative methodology for this study. Lodico et al. (2010) emphasized, "the case study method addresses questions that focus on characterizing, gathering information, or learning about characteristics of a phenomenon" (p.15). For this study, the examined phenomenon consisted of the barriers to graduation and the study was designed to learn how to address them from the perspectives of a sample of nontraditional students at ABC University. Case studies include various sources of data that assist in developing a comprehensive description of the information being studied. A case study design was the best way to meet my study's

purpose by providing information directly from students to address the limited

knowledge on what the potential barriers are to graduation that the nontraditional students

are experiencing that may be contributing to higher attrition and lower graduation rates

among this student population.

The case study method was appropriate because it allowed for insight and

discovery from students about their perception of any barriers that have prevented them

from persisting in their degree programs, as well as the opinions from students who are

excelling and what strategies they implemented that caused them to persist. Originally,

during the proposal phase of this research, I had perceived the possibility of the creation

of a Life Application course as the best probable outcome of the research. However later,

as the findings were being analyzed and I recognized a common theme from the

participant feedback was community support, I realized the best outcome of the research

would be a project that enhanced the nontraditional student's abilities to apply successful

living in the higher education community through the creation of a Professional Learning

Community (PLC).

I selected an exploratory research design for this study. Hancock and Algozzine

(2011) described three research design methods: exploratory, explanatory, and

descriptive. The explanatory method is used to understand how certain activities, such as

study habits, work demands or family responsibilities, can influence particular outcomes

(Hancock & Algozzine, 2011). This design was appropriate because there was a

significant need to comprehend the experiences of nontraditional students, in order to

develop relevant programs, services, as well as provide the necessary resources to support

this growing student population. My goal in this study was to identify barriers to graduation for nontraditional students that may be contributing to higher attrition and lower graduation rates. I did so by interviewing students at ABC University.

I rejected using a mixed-method methodology, which Creswell (2009) described as combining qualitative and quantitative research methods. This methodology would not have been as effective as a strictly qualitative design because the interview questions I asked were created to obtain detailed, personal student experiences. There was a gap in practice in determining what potential barriers were causing some nontraditional students to drop out prior to graduation. Therefore, by using a qualitative method, more specifically, a case study method to conduct one-on-one interviews provided vital information that would enable college administrators to explore solutions to address this growing problem. As a result, discovering the barriers as well as identifying solutions would equip the university in this study with the tools to test and analyze current processes and explore new ones, such as the creation of a professional learning community within the university system.

As in many approaches, there have been critics of the case study process. Flyvberg (2011) pointed out that a primary weakness of the case study method is that it usually includes a small sample, which can result in a lack of diversified data. Also, another criticism was that case studies could be lacking in rigor (Yin, 2009). Even though vulnerabilities may exist because of a small sample or a lack of diversified data, one key benefit of case studies is that they provide an opportunity to understand a situation in-depth. That benefit highlights how this case study method was the most

appropriate design when I was attempting to answer my research questions with certainty.

Creswell (2012) stated that the best way to understand a phenomenon in the context of a real life setting is by using a case study method because this method bounds the activity, event, or process for research purposes. The explanatory design of the case study approach enabled me as the researcher to discover how events materialize and impact outcomes within the particular case, as suggested by Hancock and Algozzine (2011). Studying and interviewing the carefully selected participants yielded information about how their activities influence outcomes. As a result, the explanatory design of the case study method provided the most effective way to examine this problem and answer the questions that drive this study.

Participants

In the case study process, the researcher must pay close attention to the selection of participants in order to render quality results. In addition, Stake (1972) noted, "the challenge to the evaluator when using case studies is to minimize the sampling error and to find ways to authenticate this less scientific way of reporting" (p.1). Therefore utilizing purposeful sampling is an effective way to capture pertinent data that will answer the research questions because purposeful sampling enables researchers to identify participants who are qualified to provide feedback relevant to the study (Creswell, 2012; Lodico et al., 2010). Also, smaller sample sizes generally allow researchers to gather deep and enriching inquiries from their participants (Creswell,

2012). As a result, this process enables the researcher to effectively articulate the participants' feedback.

Creswell (2012) stated that in a qualitative study the goal is to effectively answer the research questions therefore it is important to cultivate an environment where both the researcher and participants develop an in-depth view of the research topic. As a result, a researcher must decide on the criteria of who participates in the study, how many participants are needed, and what procedures are required so that the researcher can gain access to the individuals involved in the study. In addition, it is important that the researcher understands the importance of establishing an effective working relationship with the participants as well as is aware of the ethical procedures that will protect participants.

Selection of Participants

Because the local university where I work has a nontraditional student population of over 80%, it seemed reasonable to gather input from those students. The study was confined to one university, ABC University, however the university has over 30,000 students taking their coursework both onsite and online. Purposeful sampling was used for this study. Lodico et al. (2010) stated that a purposeful sample "lies in selecting information-rich cases for study in depth. Information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research" (p.140). As a result, participants are selected based on specific criteria. In addition, according to Creswell (2012), "purposefully-selected participants help the researcher understand the problem and answer the research questions" (p206). Therefore,

the participant selection approach of interviewing nontraditional students was appropriate

for this study because the individuals had specific insight into the research questions of

this doctoral study.

Justification for Number of Participants

When doing qualitative research, scholars must determine a suitable sample size.

According to Lodico et al. (2010) qualitative researchers select the size of their sample

based on the information needed, available resources, and the questions asked. As a

result, the research review process led to the decision that 10 purposefully selected

participants were needed to receive relevant feedback for the study.   To achieve that

number of participants, I initiated a data use agreement that enabled me to access all

undergraduate and graduate files from Spring 2012 through Spring 2015. Once I

received the list of all of the students contact information from the Research Department

of my school I sent invitations of participation to undergraduate and graduate students

and interviewed those who responded until I reached 10 quality interviews which also

was the correct amount where I reached the saturation of data.

The case for this study included participants from students taking courses onsite,

online, and a combination of the two delivery systems. The study covered a timeframe

from Spring 2012 through Spring 2015. The goal was to select at least two students

taking courses exclusively onsite, two taking courses exclusively online, and two taking

courses both online and onsite. Because the researcher would not be able to determine

which students were persisting at a healthy pace and which ones were not, student files

were reviewed ahead of time to construct a diverse list of participants in order to collect

relevant data. Therefore, as previously mentioned, I initiated a data use agreement with the university in order to access student files.

Procedure for Gaining Access to Participants

In order to acquire access to the university students, I emailed a letter of interest to the provost (see Appendix D). The letter described my intent as well as the goal and benefits of this study. The letter also assured the confidentiality of the participants as well as clarified that the participants were not required to participate. Finally, I clearly outlined in the letter to the participants that neither faculty members nor college administrators would have knowledge of who was involved in this study.

Participants received an email from me seeking their assistance. Included in the email was a description of the study, the data gathering process, my statement of consent, and my phone number and email address. I asked participants to complete the consent form within 10 business days and return it to me by email if they were interested in participating, thus granting consent. If a participant had decided to leave the study before it concluded, and after agreeing to participate, I would have recruited a substitute however I did not run into this issue.

Researcher-Participant Working Relationship

The researcher-participant working relationship needs to be one of trust; therefore, it was vital that I worked to build that trust as early as possible in the process. Hancock and Algozzine (2011) explained that in qualitative research you must understand the phenomenon being studied from the participants' viewpoint. Because these participants were students between Spring 2012 and Spring 2015 they were all

made aware that I worked for the university during the time period they attended and I am currently still working for the university. That professional transparency enabled me to gain the trust of the participants, which Creswell (2012) stated is valuable for qualitative researchers. In addition, my role as a dean who has minimal contact with students [because I do not teach their classes] but are familiar with the student experience may have been less intimidating. Finally, Creswell (2012) mentioned having knowledge of the university setting and the student experience might provide credibility as a researcher with the participants.

Ethical Protection of Participants

The researcher-participant relationship is vital not only when building trust but also in establishing a comfortable dialogue during the interview process. Therefore it was important for me to establish rapport with the participants early in the interview process as well as maintain professionalism at all times (Glesne, 2011). As it relates to establishing trust, my first attempt was with the consent form as well as share that I am certified through the National Institutes of Health (NIH) to protect human research participants (Certification Number 1333554). Discussing the form and my certification up front communicated to the participants that I had their best interest in mind; and Creswell (2009) highlighted that a consent form ensures that the participants' privacy, confidentiality, and opinions would be protected during data collection. As a result, participants needed to sign the document prior to participating in the research (Creswell, 2012). The form illustrated the purpose of my research, the study's methodology and framework, and any potential risks and benefits. In addition, the form explained the

participants' right to privacy. Participants who were willing to be involved with the study needed to sign and return the document to me as an email attachment. As a result, the signed returned form served as written consent of each participant's confirmation to participate in the study. Finally, my phone number and email address was included on the form in order for participants to contact me any time during the study. In addition I included contact information of my committee chair as well as IRB in the case students wanted to communicate with either one. The Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval number for my study is 06-19-15-0323933.

The next approach to acquiring their trust was to provide a verbal confirmation to each participant at the opening of each interview session that I will protect their confidentiality. Also, the methods used for asking questions, seeking information, and gathering data was objective and confidential. Participants understood that their identities were concealed throughout the process and real names would not be disclosed in the transcripts or research reports. I reminded participants that although I appreciate their participation, I made sure they understood that they were not obligated to participate and could leave the process at any phase of the interviews. I also assured them that faculty members and university administrators would not be aware of who participated in the study. I did not persuade, coerce, or pressure participants into giving desired responses during the interview sessions. Moreover I maintained a neutral role during the interviews allowing participants freedom during the process. I treated everyone with respect throughout the study. The individual's participation was voluntary; therefore I

did not offer any cash payments. Finally, there was no physical, psychological, or other obvious risk to subjects in this case study.

Data Collection

Upon approval of the data use agreement from the University in this study for permission to access the student files, data collection preparation followed. Prior to conducting the research and collecting data, the Walden University's (IRB Number 06-19-15-0323933) and ABC University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved the study.   Both IRBs received all required documents. It was very important that I refrained from collecting any data until IRB approval was received for the sake of the protection of the participants and the integrity of the research. Therefore, once IRB approved the research data collection officially began. Finally, data collection procedures were aligned with the problem, research questions, and objectives listed in this study.

The data gathering procedure included one-on-one student interviews, and the goal of the interviews was to answer all of the research questions that I posed in my study. This section outlines the data to be collected as well justification for the selected data. Creswell (2009) noted that in qualitative studies researchers analyze various data points because they spend time in the case study setting gathering information. I developed a data collection process for the information gathered and filed it on my personal home computer which was password protected. Hancock and Algozzine (2011) stressed the importance of creating a system earlier in the research process in order to label and store information properly. I labeled each interview with a unique color and code assigned to each participant and filed it as an interview session. The data collection

materials included the location, time, and date of the interview, the participant's anonymous name, and the length of time for each interview. Creswell (2012) noted a practice of assigning numbers or aliases to interview sessions to protect anonymity, therefore for the sake of my study, I used an alias name for each participant. Finally, I stored any hard copy data in a locked file drawer accessible only to myself for 5 years and then it will be destroyed. The file drawer is located at my home.

Semi-Structured Interviews

Lodico et al. (2010) stated in using "semi-structured interviews researchers usually prepare a list of the questions to be asked but allow themselves the opportunity to probe beyond the protocol" (p.124). In this study, after receiving all signed consent forms as well as obtaining permission from each participant to audiotape the interviews the 30-minute meetings left room for open dialogue. By conducting the interviews within the university setting, outside of my office, at a campus site or location that was convenient for the participant also seemed to have inspired open and honest communication between the participant and me. In addition to the interview questions (see Appendix C), it was easier to ask follow up questions when necessary which allowed the participants to share additional information that they found pertinent because a comfortable environment was created.

The interview protocol used in this study included 7 questions. Each interview was conducted at a location convenient for the participant therefore the various locations included: phone, participants' office, and in a conference room in the building where the participant worked. Contingencies of fieldwork and preference of participants resulted in

a large number of the interviews being conducted by phone, which required an adaptation

by the researcher. The original study design called for in-person interviews however

despite my efforts a significant amount of the interviews were conducted by phone

because of participant availability. After a thorough review of the interview transcripts I

confirmed that there was no significant differences in the in-person and phone interviews

I conducted. Allowing the participant to select the location increased the convenience for

the participants as well as provided them with the freedom to express themselves in a safe

environment. Before each interview began I reassured participants that their privacy

would be protected. A 30-minute block of time was scheduled for each interview, which

was adequate time for most participants while others took closer to 45-minutes. The

interviews ranged from 27-45 minutes for all 10 participants. I asked 7 open-ended

questions. The final question was "What specific academic and support services would

you like to see implemented in order to help support your academic success?" That

question gave participants the opportunity to share final thoughts as well as contribute

suggestions to the university on how to support student success. The audio recording

device was turned off and the participant was informed that a copy of the draft findings

would be delivered to them via email within a week in order to perform member

checking to ensure accuracy and credibility of the study. I also made it very clear that I

was available to discuss the results. They were asked by me to return the member

checking at their convenience with any feedback and if I did not receive a response,

agreement with the transcription would be implied. Upon receiving the drafts back all

participants were satisfied with the results and had no further questions or comments.

After reviewing the member checking process I thanked participants for participating in the process as well as reminded them that their identity would not be disclosed to anyone working for the university. Finally, audio taped interviews along with my notes were transcribed within 3 to 7 days of the conclusion of the interview and as stated in the invitation and consent form, participants understood that there was no incentive for participation.

Table 1

Interview Dates and Locations

Date of Interview	Number Conducted	Location
June 26, 2015	1	Phone
June 29, 2015	1	Phone
June 29, 2015	1	Phone
June 30, 2015	1	Conference room
July 1, 2015	1	Phone
July 2, 2015	1	Participants office
July 2, 2015	1	Phone
July 9, 2015	1	Phone
July 10, 2015	1	Phone
July 15, 2015	1	Phone

Note. The schedule above is a sample of the participant interview dates and locations.

The feedback from the participants in this study should help guide faculty and administrators' decisions as they promote enhanced graduation rates among nontraditional students, and may direct the implementation of my proposed project that addresses the problem of graduation rates among the nontraditional students at the university.

Member Checks

It is important that the researcher refrain from any bias during the entire process to assure the integrity of the data. For this study member checking was an appropriate method to use to ensure the consistency of the data collected from participants as well as confirm accuracy of the information. Creswell (2012) recommended the use of member

checks as an effective way to safeguard against bias. According to Creswell (2012), "Member checking is a process in which the researcher provides each member with a draft of the results to review and confirm the accuracy of their own data" (p.259). To accomplish this step to insure credibility, I forwarded draft results of the audio recorded interviews to each member via email after the interviews in order for participants to review and confirm the accuracy and then provide them with the necessary time and opportunity to discuss their data with me. Out of 10 participants, I received email confirmation that member checking was done and that the findings were accurate and they had nothing else to add.

Managing Collected Data

Upon the completion of each interview, I transcribed the recorded data for analysis. Creswell (2012) identified seven steps to analyzing data and member checking has been included as an additional step for this study:

1. Researcher collects the data.

2. Researcher prepares the data for analysis.

3. Researcher reads through data.

4. Researcher codes data.

5. Researcher codes the text for description to be used in the research report.

6. Researcher codes the text for themes to be used in the research report.

7. Researcher conducts member checking to ensure accuracy with draft findings (p. 237 and 259).

These steps were not always accomplished in sequential order however this process provided me with a systematic approach for effectively managing the data collected. Because I interviewed 10 participants for this study, I coded the data using a color-coding system for identification and organization. I separated the field notes by columns to allow for handwritten notes and transcription of the interviews (Creswell, 2012). As a researcher it is important to give voice to the research; therefore by transcribing the data myself instead of hiring a third-party or using a transcribing program, it is my belief that the recorded thoughts and insight was captured more effectively (Merriam, 2009). Finally, I color-coded, categorized, and organized the data into emerging themes as well as created a table to enter all pertinent participant information. By creating a table and using a color-coding system, I was able to apply the themes to the research questions and acquire a snapshot of the participant interview list, and as a result the information was easier to analyze and interpret. A reflective E-journal was used to record the researchers' thoughts during the data analysis process. However the journal primarily consisted of whom I was going to interview, when, and what I planned to do in order to prepare for the interview. Some of the planning exercises I used were: One, focusing on asking the questions without bias, tow, listening to the participant without interrupting, and three remaining engaged throughout the interview.

Electronic copies were used to review the data within the transcripts. After transcription was completed, paper copies were printed out and filed in a color-coded file folder for each participant. Also included in the folder were interview questions and field notes. The folders were then placed in a locked file cabinet and the electronic copies

were backed up on my computer as well as on an external USB drive that only I have access to. After 5 years all data [hard copy and electronic] will be discarded.

The Role of the Researcher

I am an associate regional dean working for the university in this study. I have held this position for the past 4 years and was in another leadership role for 6 years prior to that within this institution. Currently, I oversee the growth initiatives for three campus locations in the university to include enrollment and retention management. In addition, I provide overall administrative management to include student, faculty, and administrative services. Although I interface with students, I do not have a supervisory role in dealing with students. Before working for this institution, I worked in education for 10 years for multiple school districts, colleges, and universities. I have almost 21 years of combined educational experience and 12 of those years have been in higher education.

Over the years, I have developed many opinions of how to address the barriers to graduation that nontraditional students are experiencing. Therefore, the biggest challenge for me was to remain objective while at the same time utilizing my years of experience and education to propel this study. While collecting and analyzing data, I exercised self-discipline in order to resist the temptation of disagreeing or probing participants regarding the potential reasons why graduation rates are lower among this student population. Because I understood the risk to my research that personal biases could play, I did not allow my past experience [or opinion] impede the process. Employees who report to me and are attending school at the university in this study while working were

not allowed to participate. My goal through this entire process was to remain objective and represent the findings as each participant presented them to me.

Data Analysis

Creswell (2012) recommended a series of steps to use when analyzing data that I mentioned in the previous section entitled managing collected data. I used Creswell's approach for this study. In the first step I reviewed the information numerous times to confirm the responses. During the reviewing process, I notated any themes that surfaced immediately following the interviews. I then divided and labeled the data with codes. The objective of coding was to clearly identify themes as well as keep the data organized. I compared codes for overlap in order to eliminate duplicate or similar codes. Once I identified all of the necessary codes, I collapsed them into themes. Afterwards, I searched for the information that was not compatible with any of the themes such as discrepant or negative cases that would explain atypical responses or reactions from the participants. Fortunately in this study, there were no discrepant cases or discrepant data - - participants who failed to show up for interviews, participants who choose to stop participating, and participants who became incapacitated. Finally, other actions I used to reduce data gathering inconsistencies were contacting my research mentor Chair or Second Member. For example, I was concerned that conducting any phone interviews versus all in-person was unacceptable however after speaking with my Chair, he assured me that it was acceptable to conduct phone interviews along with in-person.

During the process of developing themes, I was very careful not to allow my bias or personal opinion to interfere. As a result, any themes or descriptions were free from

bias or unduly influence. If any information was shared by the participants that

contradicted my professional beliefs, the information was documented and coded

[without bias]. I also kept an accountability journal to record any conflicting feelings that

transpired during the proposed study. I scrutinized the journal notes collected in order to

ensure objectivity was not compromised. Finally, member checking was the data

analysis method that I used to ensure validity, credibility, and trustworthiness. Hancock

and Algozzine (2011) described member checking as the process of taking information

back to the participants so they can validate the accuracy of the notes taken. This process

increased the credibility of the information gathered because the participants confirmed

that the information gathered was complete, accurate, and valid. Member checking also

helped minimize researcher bias; since the process validated that the draft findings

reflected what the participants actually said (Creswell, 2012). Creswell (2012) also stated

that analyzing the data involves drawing conclusions about the information gathered and

explaining the conclusions in a way that answers the research questions. Therefore the

transcription process described by Creswell (2009) was used to convert the audio

recordings to text data for analysis. I did not use a computer software-coding program, I

hand wrote and analyzed each data session. Merriam (2009) noted that qualitative

research is an iterative process that informs the researcher throughout the study.

Therefore, I looked for emerging insights as the interviews were analyzed. I took the

steps described above with all 10 interviews for the purpose of increasing the credibility

of the research, ensuring that no new themes emerged, and confirming that saturation was

achieved.

Ensuring Accuracy and Credibility of Findings

A vital role of the researcher is to make certain that measures are put into place to establish the credibility of the research findings as well as confirm accuracy of the data. Creswell (2012) emphasized that during data collection and analysis the researcher must take steps to ensure the findings are validated. Creswell (2012) described three ways to achieve this: triangulation, member checking, and auditing. As I mentioned previously, I selected member checking as a means to ensure accuracy and credibility. This approach was the best way to verify that the draft findings represented what the interview participants said. After sending the draft results to each participant member checking also included asking participants if the description was complete, the themes were correct, the interpretations were unbiased as well as provided members with an opportunity to discuss their data and findings with me (Creswell, 2012). Also the member checking did not only create a trustworthy exchange between the researcher and the participants; it also enhanced the rigor and transparency of the process. Finally, this approach reduced the risk of researcher bias because the research participants reviewed and verified their own data. Taking the outlined approach in this section served to validate the accuracy and credibility of the findings.

Limitations

This study was no different than any other study and therefore experienced limitations. Although every effort was made by the researcher to conduct in-person interviews, preference of participants resulted in a large number of the interviews being conducted by phone, which required an adaptation by the researcher. The original study

design called for all in-person interviews however because of participant availability I also had to conduct phone interviews. Upon reviewing the findings I confirmed that there were no significant differences between in-person and phone interviews.

The word *barriers* should have been defined before asking the second research question to participants to maintain the momentum of this study because I spent a generous amount of time explaining what I meant by barriers to graduation. Some participants, who were persisting well in their degree programs, initially hesitated when answering the question, what are the barriers faced by nontraditional students that cause them to withdraw from the university prior to graduation? However once I clarified that the word *barriers* can be used interchangeably with the word *challenges* the participants began to list various barriers, such as work, school, and family life balance. When planning for future research, I plan to consider these limitations.

Findings

The goal of the study was to identify what influences caused nontraditional students to disengage from higher education or remain engaged. The research questions were:

1. Why do some nontraditional students stop attending the university and other nontraditional students continue attending until they graduate?

2. Are there specific academic services the nontraditional students identify as influencing a decision to remain in their academic program through to graduation or as influencing a decision to disengage from their academic program and leave the university?

3. What specific academic and support services would nontraditional students like to see implemented in order to help support their academic success?

The data gathering method used was one-on-one interviews. In this study, 10 participants were interviewed. After sending out invitations and receiving consent, the researcher interviewed the first 10 participants who responded. I believe saturation was reached after interviewing all 10 participants because the sample included a wide range of experiences such as undergraduate and graduate female and male students, experience with more than one learning modality, and familiarity with various delivery systems.

One-on-One In-Person and Phone Interviews

Data were retrieved for this study by conducing in-person and phone interviews with 10 participants to efficiently answer the research questions presented. Prior to conducting the interviews, I used archival data to confirm that each participant was eligible based on the following definition used in this study to describe nontraditional student: "a student in higher education who is 25 years of age or older, delayed enrollment into college, attends school part or full time, works part or full time while enrolled, is financially independent, has dependents other than spouse or is a single parent, or may not have a high school diploma" (Shillingford & Karlin, 2013, p.92). That information established that participants were capable of answering all of the questions presented in the research.

Of the 10 participants who were all enrolled and taking courses at the university at some point between Spring 2012 and Spring 2015: one male student completed a bachelor's degree online, one former female student was in a bachelor's degree program

and was taking courses both online and onsite but dropped out, two students — one male and one female — completed master's degrees by taking courses both online and onsite, two students (both female) taking masters courses both hybrid and online, one graduated, while the other completed coursework however did not complete all credential requirements that are a part of the program and the four remaining, whose master's degree coursework was entirely online, 3 of the students, 2 female and one male had graduated and one female student did not complete her degree. As promised by me to the participants, the following numbers were assigned in order to ensure anonymity: NU1, NU2, NU3, NU5, NU 6, NU7, NU8, NU9, NU10, and NU11. The participants answered all 7 research questions with no discrepant cases being identified.

The Themes

During data analysis I identified six major themes: (a) School, work, and life balance, (b) Community of support, (c) Value of the education, (d) Self-direction and intrinsic motivation, (e) Self-discipline and time management, and (f) Customized student support. The interview questions were organized based on potential connectivity: questions one and two – perceived barriers to graduation, question three – self direction and intrinsic motivation, questions four and five – modalities and delivery systems, and questions six and seven - academic and student support services. After the transcripts were coded I was able to identify a total of 161 codes that were divided into 6 major themes. *School, work, life balance* was described as being able to balance school, work and personal responsibilities. All 10 participants included this as a theme. This was the one theme that appeared 100% of the time in the coded responses. *Community of support*

was the second highest ranking at 75% of the responses. Participants explained this as the need to connect with peers and school representatives. They stressed that connections need to be purposeful and relevant in order to meet the unique needs of nontraditional students. Immediately following this theme was *Customized student support*. Feedback in this area accounted for 60% of the responses. Customized was described as the university providing specific support rather than only general. Also, participants wanted their experience with their academic advisor to be more meaningful. Participants expressed that the majority of the time they spoke with their academic advisor was when they were experiencing academic challenges. Participants expressed the need for more consistent contact from their academic advisor for reasons such as providing next steps, encouragement, connection with relevant resources, and updates on progress. *Value of education* weighed in at 50%. Participants mentioned that it is important that the degree provided them with the necessary tools to advance in their careers as well as open the door to other careers options. In addition, participants wanted to ensure that their degree was in demand. *Self-direction and intrinsic motivation* was mentioned by most of the participants but some placed more value on it than others. For example, at least six of the participants explained that if both intrinsic motivation and self-direction were not present then it would be impossible to persist. While, four other participants described intrinsic motivation and self-direction as contributing factors however also mentioned extrinsic motivators such as support of family and friends, potential job promotions, or the desire to make their family proud. Finally, *self-discipline and time management* were both mentioned as important by all participants. However, the five participants who

completed their programs completely online placed more emphasis on the need to be

disciplined and have a set schedule in place in order to support persistence. Below is a

more detailed explanation of how the data supported each theme.

Perceived Barriers to Graduation

As I previously mentioned, the first two questions were designed to determine

perceived barriers to graduation for the nontraditional student: Question (1), Why do you

think some nontraditional students stop attending the university and other nontraditional

students continue attending until they graduate? and Question (2), What are the barriers

or challenges faced by nontraditional students that cause them to withdraw from the

university prior to graduation? Following analysis it was clear that all participants

expressed the challenges of balancing school, work, and their personal life. Many

mentioned naturally placing their family as a priority over school therefore when issues

arose in their personal life it presented a challenge to persist in their degree program.

NU2 who completed her master's degree completely online mentioned, "being

overwhelmed with day-to-day activities such as work demands and family

responsibilities." Another common theme was the need for consistent support and

encouragement from school representatives such as academic advisors and faculty

members. For example, NU1 who is completing her master's degree program completely

online expressed "the constant need to track down professors to receive help" while;

NU10 and NU11 who both completed their masters in a hybrid and online format

described "the lack of support from school representatives as discouraging them from

persisting in their degree program." The barriers described above did cause NU8 who

was enrolled in a bachelor's degree taking both online and onsite courses, to leave the university and transfer to another university. The participant described "the new university as providing a generous amount of support." She explained, "the course schedule was more flexible, locations were more convenient, and there was a wide-range of academic and support services that supported her academic success such as tutoring in all major subjects and a student success center that provided advising and other needed resources." The next question focused on how self-direction and intrinsic motivation impacts persistence.

Self-Direction and Intrinsic Motivation

Question three asked attempted to discover how self-direction and intrinsic motivation impacted a student's decision to disengage or remain engaged in higher education. Question (3), How does self-direction and intrinsic motivation impact the college experience as it relates to the influence it has on the decision to disengage or remain engaged in higher education? All ten participants described this theme as having a huge impact on the desire to persist however described self-direction and intrinsic motivation in a variety of ways. Some examples, as described as common themes that surfaced from this question were: One, "the importance to push yourself and do what needs to be done" (N8). Two, "the drive has to come from you and you need to be fully prepared for what is required to be successful in school" (N7). Three, "education has to be a top priority" (N6) and "students who have self-direction and intrinsic motivation will not see dropping out as an option" (N6, NU2, NU9, and NU3). Four, NU3 and NU5 described this theme as "being one of the most significant factors as it relates to being

able to persist in their degree program." Finally, NU1 "agreed that self-direction and intrinsic motivation were both crucial influences on the decision to disengage or remain engaged however she placed more emphasis on the need for external support from family and school representatives as primary influences. Considering she is taking the entire master's degree online, she also stressed, "how she misses the face-to-face contact from professors and school representatives" (NU1).

Modalities and Delivery Systems

Questions four and five were asked to determine how various delivery systems and modalities influenced a student's decision to disengage or remain engaged in their degree program. Question (4), What is your experience with using various delivery systems and how has using the systems impacted your decision to disengage or remain engaged in your degree program? and Question (5), What is your experience with taking classes in an accelerated study format and how has this experience impacted your decision to disengage or remain engaged in your degree program? All ten of the participants interviewed described in detail how important it was to have access to various delivery systems and modalities. The overarching theme was that as nontraditional students who work, attend school, and have personal responsibilities to family, having options of delivery and modality are crucial because it addresses the need for flexibility in their lives. Although some of the participants characterized their experiences with delivery and modality separately, the majority of the participants described them interchangeably possibly because the university in this study only employs an accelerated study format therefore all ten participants were taking their

course work in an accelerated study format. However, not everyone was using the same

delivery system for their course work therefore this difference diversified the responses

and as a result, I will start with presenting the findings for question five first because it

outlines a clearer presentation. NU8 who was in an undergraduate degree program taking

courses both online and onsite described how "the accelerated 4-week study format

helped her remain engaged because she finished a class in a shorter amount of time and

felt immediate gratification and accomplishment." Other participants described the

accelerated study format "as enabling them to remain focused because of the intensity

and acceleration, it was a great motivator to see progress in such a short amount of time

therefore encouraged persistence, it fit their learning style because in semester courses

they became disengaged, the condensed format provided the student with relevant

information, and it equipped them to complete a degree in a shorter amount of time and

enter the job market sooner" (NU2, NU5, NU6, NU7, NU9, and NU11). On the flip

side, two participants, NU6 and NU9 described some of the disadvantages as "not having

enough time to let the information simmer a bit and process before moving on to the next

course and not having enough time to recover or make necessary corrections if they were

not progressing well in the course because by the time you learn there is a problem you

have already started the next class."

In question number four I grouped together the participants who took their

courses using the same delivery system. Therefore I will present the findings placing

each participant in their assigned group. (a) NU7 [bachelors online only] communicated,

"taking his bachelor's online definitely contributed to his disengagement. He described

how he would have preferred sitting in class instead of online especially during the academically challenging months. He also mentioned that he believes that he would have gotten more out of his degree if he had the experience with taking his coursework both online and onsite because he would have been more engaged in the classroom." (b) NU8 [bachelors online and onsite] mentioned, "because she is technologically challenged she had a hard time persisting in her online coursework and the university did not provide support in this area. She also described that the courses that she took onsite were not in convenient locations therefore in addition to commuting to work she also had to travel long distances to attend class. She explained how this caused a strain at times and put her at risk of dropping out. Eventually, she transferred to another university that was more convenient as far as campus location, learning format, and modality. However, ultimately she said that it is her internal drive that allows her to persist and she plans to graduate in 2015." (c) NU1, NU2, NU6, NU9 (masters online) all four participants described the online format as "encouraging their persistence." They used words such as "exercising discipline, being proactive, the need for accountability and ownership, as well as the need for self-discipline." NU2 specifically mentioned "the need to set aside specific time for study in order to minimize distractions and how important it is to utilize your support system [family and friend] as a motivating factor to keep you engaged." Finally, NU9 described "being able to take his coursework online as a redeeming aspect of completing the program because he appreciated the flexibility it offered as well as the capability to align with his work schedule." (d) NU3 and NU5 [masters online and onsite], both participants described these two delivery systems as "supporting their

school, work, life balance." For example, NU5 was active duty military at the time he

was completing his degree therefore having the option to take courses online when he

was in the states and online when he deployed gave him the opportunity to persist

through his program to graduation. NU3 described how "using both delivery systems

afforded her the capability to take theory courses online and courses that involved more

engagement and interaction onsite. She described having this option as one main

contributing factor of her persistence and completion." Finally, (e) participants NU10

and NU11 [masters online and hybrid] explained how these delivery systems

"contributed to positive learning outcomes." In the case of NU10 her degree program

mandated that the coursework be conducted both online and onsite. She explained that

was a benefit because "the courses that were onsite were very hands-on and she described

her experience as being able to connect with classmates, receive feedback from teachers

and classmates, participate in activities and learn how others strategized." She explained

how all of these things contributed to overall success in completion of the coursework

however she also expressed her frustration that she is still struggling to complete the

credential requirements within the program that will enable her to obtain employment.

NU11 described a very different benefit in utilizing both online and hybrid. She

explained, "how it helped her remain engaged because she was able to foresee that with

the market place being on a global scale, she had to learn various forms of

communication. She said that she knew that she would benefit from learning how to use

many different types of resource tools online as well as communicate more effective and

reach the world."

Academic and Student Support Services

Questions six and seven were the last two questions in this study but in a sense the most relevant because it gave participants an opportunity to explain what academic and support services helped them throughout their program as well as what services they would like to see implemented. Question (6), Are there specific academic services that you would identify as influencing a decision to remain in your academic program through to graduation or as influencing a decision to disengaged from their academic program and leave the university? and Question (7), What specific academic and support services would you like to see implemented in order to help support your academic success? All six of the identified major themes surfaced in these two questions and the responses to these questions also overlapped. However, there was a consensus between all 10 participants that both a community of support from classmates and school representatives and customized student support services were vital in supporting the student's academic success. Some of the suggestions were: (a) Consistent and purposeful contact from school representatives regarding students' progress, reminders, and next steps, (b) A roadmap in their student portal displaying a customized academic timeline from start to finish and the available resources to help students persist, (c), Community created to support and help both online and onsite students stay connected, network, and support one another [to include study groups], (d) Program specific advising to assist with class scheduling, program specific advice, and career options and finally, (e) Creation of a navigation system to help students maneuver through the system as well as receive guidance.

The data derived from the interviews could support the creation of a PLC in order to ensure the universities undergraduate and graduate nontraditional students receive the tools, resources, and academic and student services they need in order for them to persist in their degree programs through to graduation. As noted responses from all 10 participants stressed the need of the creation of a university community that would provide them with a way to connect to the university culture, their classmates and peers, as well as school representatives. The establishment of PLC's would provide a foundation for all students, both online and onsite, to feel connected as well as receive the guidance and the confidence to graduate. Finally, I followed procedures in this study that would assure accuracy of the data by remaining unbiased, exercising trustworthiness, and conducting member checks to ensure accuracy and reliability of the findings. Also, appropriate evidence occurs in the appendixes to confirm that the proper measures, outlined by the Institutional Research Board, were followed [sample letter of invitation and consent, interview protocol, and letter to the university provost].

Conclusion

In Section 2 of this project I described a definitive process of the data collection and analysis approach that assisted me in answering the research questions. I also described the rationale of why a qualitative case study research method was used. Finally, I communicated why conducting one on one interviews were the most effective approach to gathering the relevant data and findings for this study. The six major themes identified were described in detail. They are: (a) School, work, and life balance, (b) Community of support, (c) Value of the education, (d) Self-direction and intrinsic

motivation, (e) Self-discipline and time management, and (f) Customized student support.

In this section I also include an explanation for choosing participants, a rationale for how I reached the preferred number of participants, and the procedure on how to acquire access to them. I offer an explanation stressing the importance of the researcher-participant relationships and conscientious measures for protecting the participants' confidentiality. The data collection section included an account of the planned methods and an exploration of my role in the research process. In the final part of this section I describe the approach of how and when I analyzed data, how I validated the findings, and how I ensured quality assurance measures. In Section 3, the findings of this study will be presented in the form of a proposed project.

Section 3: The Project

Introduction

Nontraditional college students in the United States have significantly lower graduation rates than traditional students. As a result, it was important to determine what specific barriers to graduation impact nontraditional students. While some research has been conducted regarding identifying barriers to graduation for nontraditional students, very little research has focused specifically on the nontraditional students' perceptions of what academic and support services would meet their very unique needs. The findings of this doctoral study show that nontraditional student-participants believed that creating a community of support would allow them to connect to the university culture as well as receive the necessary support and resources to persist in their degree program through graduation. The importance of faculty, staff, and administrators working together to create such an environment was stressed.

As a result of these findings, I chose to create a professional development workshop as the project for this study to train the staff, faculty, and administrators at the study site on how to successfully create a professional learning community (PLC) within the local university. The themes that surfaced from my research were that school representatives should provide resources that support the students in six areas:

- school, work, and life balance,

- community of support,

- value of the education,

- self-direction and intrinsic motivation,

- self-discipline and time management, and

- customized student support.

The purpose of this study was to identify barriers to graduation for nontraditional students. It was specifically designed to determine how the participants in this study perceived their graduation barriers and addressed or did not address them. Although some of the participants overcame the barriers, others did not and were unable to persist in their degree program. Because the most common theme was a recommendation that the university in this study create a community of support for students, the logical deliverable of this research is the creation of a Professional Learning Community (PLC) that will establish a coordinated group of employees who are unified in their commitment to overall student success.

Description and Goals of a Professional Learning Community

The goal of a PLC is people working together in a collaborative way within the university to ensure student success (Lunenburg, 2010). The concept of people working together is the whole philosophy behind professional learning communities. Linder et al. (2012) described PLCs as "gaining recognition as an effective strategy for promoting long-term professional development for educators because the PLC involves instructors in site-based, ongoing, collaborative professional development working together with shared vision, beliefs, and values" (p. 13). It is my belief, based on research findings that the creation of a PLC provides a clear solution to the problem presented in this study.

My original proposal to address the problem presented in this study was the creation of a Life Application course. As I mentioned previously, I had perceived that

the creation of this course would be the best probable solution for the outcome of the research. However later, as the findings were being analyzed, I discovered based on participant feedback, the prevalent need for community support and therefore the best outcome of the research would be a project that enhanced the nontraditional student's abilities to apply successful living in the higher education community through the creation of a PLC.

The data that was collected and analyzed came from 10 participants who were students at the study site, hereafter referred to as ABC University (pseudonym) from Spring 2012 through Spring 2015. Some were bachelor's-degree students, some were master's-degree students, and both female and male students were included in the study. In addition, all participants took their course work in an accelerated learning format however the delivery systems varied and included online, onsite, and hybrid. The data derived from this research are intended to be shared with administrators, faculty, and staff at the study site as a means to begin the creation of a successful and sustainable PLC within the university.

Scholarly Rationale of a Professional Learning Community

The amount of information regarding PLCs on the Internet is considerable. There are multiple definitions as well as information regarding PLCs in the K-12 system and higher education. A common theme in the research was how effective PLCs are in creating a culture of collaboration and shared vision and purpose. Holmes (2013) described this collaboration of shared vision and purpose as including three overlapping aspects that are the basis of the student's educational experience: cognitive presence,

social presence, and teaching presence (p. 99). The cognitive presence described the importance of sustained communication within a PLC as "the teaching presence that relates to the design of the educational climate and the students experience during the learning process" (Holmes, 2012, p.99) and "the social presence that emphasizes how students will have the ability to project themselves both socially and emotionally within the community" (Holmes, 2012, p.99). In addition, the concept of collaboration, shared vision, and purpose has laid the foundation for developing PLCs in academic settings that create cohesion within the local university site as well as sustainable reform (Teague & Anfara, 2012). The very essence of PLCs is for administrators, faculty, and staff to collaborate together in order to cultivate a collaborative culture through development of high-performing teams that work together, interdependently, to improve both their individual and collective results.

Linder et al. (2012) described PLCs as "similar to team-based learning communities and both models align closely with principles of Knowles Andragogy Theory that stressed self-directed learning, life experiences that serve as a source of information, a focus on problem-centered learning, and internal motivation to learn" (p. 14). Linder et al. (2012) goes on to describe how Knowles Andragogy Theory, which was also the theoretical framework for this study, "acknowledges the influence of adults' sociocultural contexts, an element absent from earlier theories, but is now present in the structure of PLCs" (p.15). Also PLCs can produce positive effects on staff as well as instructors, which can positively contribute to overall student satisfaction and success. The perspective of the participants in this study is valuable when creating and

implementing PLCs because their feedback provides a foundation of what the students want; as a result, I outline this perspective later in the section on how to create professional learning communities.

Implications of a Professional Learning Community

The origins of PLCs are important in understanding their concept. Teague and Anfara (2012) described that PLCs "can be traced to the work of Judith Little (1982), Peter Senge (1990), Susan Rosenholtz (1989), and Etienne Wenger (1998)" (p.59). Newmann (1996) as cited in Teague and Anfara (2012) characterized the conditions that fostered the development of PLCs as:

- Shared values and vision (focus on student learning, high expectations for teachers and students, shared vision for teaching and learning).

- Shared and supportive leadership (nurturing school administrators, shared power and authority, broad based decision-making).

- Collective learning and application to practice (sharing information, seeking new knowledge and skills, working collaboratively).

- Shared personal practice (peer observations, coaching, and mentoring).

- Supportive conditions that encompass both relationships (trust and respect, risk taking) and structures - resources of time, money, people, materials and communication (p .60).

By convincing administrators, faculty, and staff that the formation of a PLC would address the proposed problem in this study of lagging graduation rates among their nontraditional students this would reveal how solutions can be reached through shared

accountability for the development of all students and corporate ownership for student learning and success.

Review of the Literature Addressing Professional Learning Communities

The goal of this literature review was to explore numerous ways for presenting qualitative research as well as present the creation of a PLC as my method of choice in this doctoral project study. The review of the literature incorporated prior research, studies, and articles, which addressed the history of PLCs, implementation of PLCs, and the overall impact of PLCs within the field of higher education. It includes the background information and definition of a professional learning community and how to successfully establish, implement, and sustain a professional learning community. The search terms used to search the databases were: *professional learning community, establishing professional learning communities, successful professional learning communities, PLC and the nontraditional student, and PLC and the adult-learner.*

The databases used to search for sources were, ERIC, SAGE, and Education Research Complete. The Walden University online library, diversified higher education journals, and websites were also utilized. After an extensive search resulting in 26 peer-reviewed scholarly articles, saturation was reached when the entries among databases became repetitious.

Definition and Purpose of a Professional Learning Community

What exactly is a PLC? Teague and Anfara (2012) stated that the term "PLC has been widely used in education to represent various groups working collectively toward a common goal" (pp. 58-59). Therefore, for the sake of this study I will be using the

following definition: Gray et al. (2014) defined a PLC as a "collegial group of faculty, staff, and administrators who are united in their commitment to student learning" (p. 84). Gray et al. (2014) further emphasize the importance of trust within professional learning communities and defined trust as "an individual's or group's willingness to be vulnerable to another party based on the confidence that the latter party is benevolent, reliable, competent, honest, and open" (p. 85).

In this study of identifying barriers to graduation for the nontraditional student, one common theme that continued to surface among the participants was the need for a community of support. Some of the characteristics of this community should include customized student services, mentoring, networking, collaboration, program specific advising, a place to connect with peers, a place to connect with school representatives, and a place to receive necessary resources (Lujan & Day, 2010; Willis & Thomas, 2012; Wells & Feun, 2012). The purpose of a professional learning community is for the university to pinpoint, address, and meet the needs of its students to ensure student success by creating a community of support. This community of support should include faculty, staff, and administrators who operate within an environment of shared vision, shared purpose, shared responsibility, and shared goal.

How to Create a Professional Learning Community

Creating a PLC is not an easy task because it does not only require a community of people working together toward a common goal but it also requires resources, time, and energy. Furthermore, it is vital to understand that creating a PLC will not solve all of the schools problems however it will help cultivate an environment where solving

problems are more collaborative. As a result, instead of schools operating in silos, staff, faculty and administrators work interdependently. Lunenburg (2010) pointed out, "when you walk into a school that is functioning as a PLC, you have a sense that people understand what is important, what the priorities are, and they are working together in a collaborative way to ensure student success" (p.1). The university leadership plays an essential role in the creation of a PLC, especially as it relates to building trust and establishing organizational learning within the PLC (Cranston, 2011; Van Lare & Brazer, 2013). Therefore, in order to engage faculty and staff, the administrators should be the ones who bring together both groups in order to begin the process. Lunenburg (2010) described a four-step process in the creation of a PLC and they are:

- Create a mission statement that identifies the school's purpose.

- Develop a vision that includes an attempt to describe what faculty, staff, and administration would like the professional learning community to accomplish.

- Develop value statements that include shared values – the attitudes, behaviors, and commitments – all members would pledge to demonstrate so as to move closer to the shared vision.

- Establish goals based on the adapted value statements (p. 2-4).

In addition to the four-step process, key elements will also need to be identified in the genesis phase when creating a professional learning community. I identified five elements as a result of my one-on-one interviews with the 10 participants: student engagement and collaboration, professional community, student confidence, shared accountability, and sustainability and persistence.

Student Engagement and Collaboration – "collaborative act of sharing resources that individuals bring to and receive from other PLC participants can result in learning. Together they continue to be key elements and can be viewed as the product of the human and social capital" (Richmond & Manokore, 2010, p.555).

Professional Community – "participants who share a common vision and learn from each other" (Richmond & Manokore, 2010, p. 559).

Student confidence – By connecting students to a community of support, participants will feel more confident in their ability to persist through to graduation because they are receiving customized support and resources as well as being motivated.

Shared accountability – Participants in the PLC are accountable to the university community as a whole and university representatives are accountable for cultivating the PLC environment to ensure students feel like they are receiving the help and support they need.

Sustainability and Persistence – "Sustainability is the outcome of both physical and social capital. Not only is it dependent upon a certain level of student engagement, but also it is dependent upon the dynamics within the PLC – not only acutely but over time. For example, the success of the PLC depends in part upon how participants view themselves as active members of a learning community" (Richmond & Manokore, 2010, p.565).

Because the main limitation of creating a professional learning community is getting all parties actively involved to ensure success, establishing a strong foundation up front is important.

Evaluating the Effectiveness of a Professional Learning Community

A PLC will only be effective if collaboration and shared responsibility is at the core of its creation. Holmlund et al. (2010) described the following key characteristics as essential elements of a PLC and they are:

1. Time, resources, and intellectual support for staff and faculty to come together as learners to engage in collaborative inquiry processes.

2. Collaborative environments that foster interdependence, build trust, and support risk-taking amongst group members.

3. Conversations that are focused, reflective, inquiry-based and action-oriented.

4. Conversations that support the development of shared values and shared vision for all students' learning.

5. Collaborative processes centered around closely examining evidence about student learning and makes links across teaching, learning goals, and student thinking.

6. Strong leadership that is distributed across instructors, staff, and administrators. (p.39)

All six characteristics align directly with the feedback I received from participants during the interview process. Although they expressed that their instructor was helpful or they received the needed support from their academic advisor, there was an overwhelming consensus from the participants regarding the lack of consistent, purposeful support from all university representatives to meet their specific needs. For example, one participant mentioned inconsistencies in the information they received from

their instructor and academic advisor. These inconsistencies led to a delay in the participants' graduation. Another example stated by a participant was the frustration that the information on the syllabus was inconsistent with what the instructor delivered in class. The participant stated, "I felt the syllabus was misaligned with the instruction and the instructor seemed to be out of sorts and unable to correct the inconsistencies and as a result, the course was one of the worse courses in the program and injected a lack of desire on my part to persist in the program." These are two of many examples provided by participants that confirm the importance of collaboration, shared responsibility, and strong leadership. Therefore, if the university in this study wants to ensure student engagement, positive learning outcomes, and overall student success – creating a professional learning community that cultivates an environment of collaboration, consistent communication, interdependence, and shared responsibility would ensure student needs are assessed, addressed, and met in a timely, effective manner.

Project Description

The purpose of a professional learning community is to equip faculty, staff, and administrators to support the needs of their student population by creating a community of support that encourages collaboration, consistent communication, and shared responsibility within the university system. The project genre that will enable the university in this study to create a PLC is the establishment of a professional development workshop. Because this study will be shared with university administrators where the research took place it is my hope that administrators, faculty and staff would then engage in dialogue about the significant and insignificant aspects of participant

feedback as well as the recent peer-reviewed research used in this study. By utilizing the information gathered in this study, a professional development workshop can be created in order to effectively train administrators, faculty, and staff on how to implement a professional learning community into the university system. Williams (2013) pointed out the significance of professional development and stated, "according to Malcolm Knowles the rapidly changing technology and communal or shared situations caused a person's skill level to depreciate unless he or she engaged in a lifelong program of professional development" (p.32). As a result, "implementing a professional learning community through the formation of a professional development workshop, can lead to organizational improvements and student satisfaction" (Williams, 2013, p.32). Because having a community of support that institutes a lifelong program of professional development within the university system is a fundamental element for student success.

Potential Resources and Existing Supports

The people within the university are the most valuable resources required for this project study. Faculty, staff, and administrators are the core of the human resources needed followed by students. Another department needed to support this project is the Information Technology department considering the professional learning community will be established as an online community to support both online and onsite students. The roles of each community member will be presented later in this section. In addition, although there will be financial resources required, they will be minimal because the majority of the resources already exist within the university system and this information will also be presented in more detail in this section.

Because I will only be travelling locally to the administrative headquarters to conduct the 3-day workshop, regular travel allotments will cover the cost of my travel. Therefore the only out of pocket cost for me would be the cost of refreshments. In addition, I will email training information to participants in advance to minimize the cost to reproduce materials as well as communicate in the email that participants need to bring their own writing utensils and paper for notes; this will also enable them to be more prepared for the training. Finally, there will be no cost to utilize the facility because the training will be conducted at the universities administrative headquarters therefore the technology needed such as computer, projector, and access to the Internet will all be readily available.

Fortunately, existing support is evident throughout the university community. Collectively throughout the university – faculty, staff, and administrators would like to improve overall graduation rates among their student population therefore this study was approved by the university provost to conduct and identify barriers to graduation for the nontraditional student. In addition, participants were university students who attended the university from Spring 2012 through Spring 2015 therefore they have an interest in implementing a solution to the problem presented in this study based on the feedback they provided to me as the researcher.   Finally, my colleagues [to include faculty, staff, and other administrators] who were not directly involved in this study may also appreciate and support the potential of the professional development workshop to provide a community of support not only to the students but also to the faculty and staff.

Potential Barriers and Solutions

Despite the fact that there are numerous benefits of this project, I also identified potential barriers. One obvious barrier would be a lack of employee participation. Although research shows as indicated by Botha (2012) that "effective professional learning communities promote a collaborative culture, shared responsibility, and focus on learning to improve individual and collective results for learners" (p.399), I anticipate there will be some employees who hesitate investing their time in exploring the possibility of how professional learning communities can positively impact the institution. As a result, considering the professional development workshop is not mandatory, some employees may select not to participate. To combat this concern, I will educate employees on the benefits for both students and the university community as a whole. In addition I will emphasis how these ongoing professional development workshops will benefit the employees professional growth as well as provide cross-departmental support throughout the departments.

Another perceived barrier is how each employee interprets what their understanding is of a community of support and how they fit into that community. For example, an adjunct instructor that only teaches at the university once or twice a year may feel isolated from the community. Therefore, it is vital that there are clear goals, values, and expectations that effectively communicate a culture of shared responsibility, accountability, and support for faculty. Establishing clear goals, values and expectations can result in a communal approach to teaching that would ensure all instructors actively feel a part of the professional learning community.

Finally, a third barrier might be the technological logistics behind running a successful workshop. Although technical problems cannot be predicted they can be anticipated. Therefore, I would communicate clear instructions in my initial email to participants explaining what needs to be done prior to training in order to ensure participants are ready. Also, I would work very closely with the Information Technology department to ensure all of the logistics are worked out and there is plenty of time to test the equipment. In addition, I will bring extra workshop packets for those participants who did not print the materials out in advance.   Finally, I will send email communication prior to the workshop to administrators that include my goals for the workshop, benefits, expectations, and learning outcomes of participants in order to solidify their support.

Proposal for Implementation and Timetables

This proposed project of professional development includes Lunenburgs (2010) four-step process in the creation of a PLC that I previously mentioned and they are: "Create a Mission Statement, develop a vision, develop value statements that include shared values, and establish goals based on the adapted value statements" (p. 2-4). The workshop will consist of three full days. Each workshop has workshop materials specific to the day that participants will receive two weeks prior to attending the workshop. Before the three day workshop, I will present my research findings as well as workshop materials to school administrators.   Once I receive approval to move forward with the workshop I will then work with the IT department to ensure all aspects of technology is available and ready to go. I will then schedule a meeting with the manager of professional development [in the Human Resources department] in order to request my

professional development workshop be included in the offerings within the university system in order for participants to register ahead of time for the workshop. This will also enable me to have an idea how many participants to expect in order to have adequate seating and the correct amount of materials.

In order to ensure all employees [to include staff, faculty, and administrators] are aware of the upcoming workshop, I will ask the communications department to create a PDF promotional flyer that I can email to employees. I will then reach out to the department of institutional research to identify an evaluation form I can use for the final day of the workshop.

As I mentioned previously, the workshop will be a 3-day professional development workshop to teach employees how to effectively create and implement a professional learning community. The workshop will initially run for four consecutive weeks and then every quarter [4 times a year] or as recommended by university administrators until the PLC is officially up and running. Each day of the 3-day workshop is a full 8-hour workday from 8:00am to 5:00pm. Therefore employees will need to devote 3 consecutive full workdays to the training. This is important because establishing a sense of community early in the formation is vital to the very survival of PLCs. Glazer and Breslin (2013) stated, "a sense of community supports student retention and success therefore when the faculty, staff, and learners come together with an identical goal, the environment that is created will affect the students view of the university's academic community" (p.123). As a result, weak or no connection to the university community has a negative impact on student retention and graduation rates

(Glazer & Breslin, 2013). Therefore, the idea of connectedness should be at the forefront

of the universities mission because this inspires students to feel connected to the

university community as a whole. Also, Leclerc et al. (2012) expressed that "having a

shared vision form which flows clear expectations and clearly identified priorities, is

certainly a crucial factor for student success" (p.11). Building those relationships through

the creation of a professional learning community is an effective way to accomplish this

goal. As a result, below is a schedule of workshop activities for all three days of the

training. The timetable includes a detail of specific timeframes for each day of the

workshop as well as what will be covered for the day. Once the 3-day workshop is

completed by employees – the staff, faculty, and administrators will be equipped to

effectively implement and sustain a professional learning community within the

university system.

Table 2

Timetable for Workshop Activities Day 1

Allotted Time	Action
8:00am – 8:15am	Welcome, roll call and introduction to workshop.
8:15am – 8:35am	Review pre-workshop materials received by email.
8:35am – 8:45am	Answer questions concerning workshop materials.
8:45am – 9:45am	Present power point on workshop content.
9:45am – 10:00am	BREAK
10:00am – 12:30pm	Interactive group activity one to focus on creating a Mission Statement that identifies the University's purpose.
12:30pm – 1:30pm	LUNCH
1:30pm – 3:45pm	Interactive group activity two to focus developing a vision that includes an attempt to describe what faculty, staff, and administration would like the professional learning community to accomplish.
3:45pm – 4:00pm	BREAK
4:00pm – 4:30pm	Bring the entire group back together to report out on progress of first two activities.
4:30pm – 5:00pm	Workshop first day wrap up, Q&A, and next steps.

Note. The schedule above is a timetable of workshop activities for day one of the training.

Table 3

Timetable for Workshop Activities Day 2

Allotted Time	Action
8:00am – 8:15am	Roll call and welcome back.
8:15am – 8:35am	Review previous day activities and plan for the day.
8:35am – 9:45am	Answer workshop related questions.
9:45am – 10:00am	BREAK
10:00am – 12:30pm	Interactive group activity three to focus on developing value statements that include "shared values – the attitudes, behaviors, and commitments – all members would pledge to demonstrate so as to move closer to the shared vision" (Lunenburg, 2010, p.2).
12:30pm – 1:30pm	LUNCH
1:30pm – 3:45pm	Interactive group activity four to focus on establishing goals based on the adapted value statements.
3:45pm – 4:00pm	BREAK
4:00pm – 4:30pm	Bring the entire group back together to report out on progress of final two activities.
4:30pm – 5:00pm	Workshop wrap up, Q&A, and next steps.

Note. The schedule above is a timetable of workshop activities for day two of the training.

Table 4

Timetable for Workshop Activities Day 3

Allotted Time	Action
8:00am – 8:10am	Roll call
8:10am – 8:35am	Review previous day activities and plan for final day.
8:35am – 8:45am	Answer workshop related.
8:45am – 9:45am	Present results from all four group activities.
9:45am – 10:00am	BREAK
10:00am – 12:30pm	Interactive group activity to focus on a Professional Learning Community (PLC) Implementation plan [to include resources, action items, creation of quarterly meeting schedule, and ongoing professional development].
12:30pm – 1:30pm	LUNCH
1:30pm – 4:00pm	Interactive group activity to focus on a PLC Sustainability plan [to included ongoing needed resources, action items, fulfillment of quarterly meeting schedule, and ongoing professional development].
4:00pm – 4:15pm	BREAK
4:15pm – 5:00pm	Workshop wrap up, Q&A, next steps, and evaluations.

Note. The schedule above is a timetable of workshop activities for day three of the training.

Roles and Responsibilities of the Student and Others

My role during this doctoral project study has been that of the researcher. My responsibilities included collecting and analyzing data, and reporting the findings that captured the voices of my participants. The role of the student [participant] was to provide me with the necessary feedback that would help me discover a solution to the problem of identifying barriers to graduation for the nontraditional student. Fortunately, the two roles working together helped me as the researcher derive at a solution that could

potentially help the university in this study meet the needs of its nontraditional students by decreasing attrition rates and overcoming some of the barriers to graduation by creating a professional learning community. Because as I mentioned previously, the top two needs that were highlighted by the participants in this study were the desire for customized student services and the formation of a community of support. Subsequently, the creation of a professional learning community would enable staff, faculty and administrators to work together in order to "establish meaningful relationships within the school community" (Riveros et al., 2012, p.207), "make a positive impact on student learning" (Hardman, 2012, p.17), create a culture of collaboration, and provide a community of support for students. As a result, the final responsibility for me as the researcher was to create a professional development plan in order to train employees on how to create a professional learning community within the university system.

Project Evaluation Plan

The evaluation of this project focuses on understanding the elements of a professional learning community and how to create and sustain a PLC within the university system. The rationale for creating a PLC centers on the responses from the student participants in this study that emphasized the need for a community of support and customized student service to help them persist in their degree program. My goal in this project was to bring together through a professional development workshop staff, faculty and administrators in order to train them on how to effectively create and maintain a PLC. In addition, share the benefits and effectiveness of professional learning communities throughout the educational system.

The overall learning outcomes for the workshop centers around Lunenburg's (2010) four-step process in the creation of a PLC therefore at the end of the workshop employees would have:

1. Created a Mission Statement that encompasses the school's purpose.

2. Developed a vision that includes what faculty, staff, and administration would like the professional learning community to accomplish.

3. Developed value statements that included shared values – the attitudes, behaviors, and commitments – that all members identified in their interactive groups and agreed upon in order to create and implement a shared vision for the PLC.

4. Established goals based on the adapted value statement that will be implemented and revisited in quarterly meetings to ensure congruency between the shared values, responsibility and overall goals within the PLC (p. 2-4).

I used the four-step process because this is the method that will be utilized by employees in the training. Therefore in order to measure effectiveness of the workshop, employee preparedness to create and implement this process in the creation of a PLC will be the deliverable employed to determine outcomes

Finally, employees will receive summative, evaluation forms before and after the proposed 3-day workshop. Each question on the forms will measure an objective. The evaluation forms utilize a five point, Likert scale rating – Five represents strongly agree while one represents strongly disagree. Therefore, I will use the employee feedback from the evaluations to enhance components of the training in order to improve future workshops and share the results with necessary stakeholders [i.e. school administrators].

Only by using a summative evaluation will I be able to determine both program success and deficiencies and as a result create the best course of action to reinforce transfer of learning.

Project Implications Including Social Change

Project implications is for the university in this study to recognize how the direct feedback from their students did not only identify barriers to graduation for nontraditional students but also resulted in discovering a solution to the most common barriers mentioned by the 10 participants interviewed. Because the participant feedback centered on the need for customized student services and university community support, I determined that a professional development workshop to teach employees how to create a PLC should be developed. This workshop would train employees on how to create and maintain a PLC. By implementing this proposed professional development workshop, administrators may discover a decrease in attrition and an increase in graduation rates among their student population and this result would in fact effect social change. Every student that successfully graduates does not only impact the university but the society as a whole both on a national and global level.

Local Community

The successful implementation of a PLC at the university in this study could also impact social change in the local community. The local community college students will become aware of the customized support within the university system that supports their persistence. Also, nontraditional students who are transferring from other universities will experience the support of the university community to ensure overall student

success. Finally, staff and faculty who become aware of the professional development they will receive as well as the ongoing support that PLCs provide in the form of shared responsibility for every student throughout the university, may improve overall employee retention and satisfaction.

Far-Reaching

Universities that also have a high percentage of nontraditional students may be interested in forming partnerships with the university in this study in order to adopt their professional development workshop plan. These partnerships could help disseminate this training program nationwide in order to benefit the higher education industry as a whole by graduating more students. Providing other universities with information that could potentially improve graduation rates among their nontraditional students as well as promote overall student satisfaction is the far-reaching aim of this project study.

Conclusion

This section provided a detailed 3-day professional development workshop proposal to be considered by the university administrators at ABC University. The design of the workshop derived from data retrieved from 10 research participants who attended the university in this study from Spring 2012 through Spring 2015. I presented the goals as well as implications of a PLC. This section also contained an extensive literature review that featured various peer-reviewed articles that discussed the benefits of PLCs. Additionally, the research highlighted how to effectively implement and maintain a PLC. I supplied a list of resources needed to accomplish this goal as well as a timeline to ensure that this task was reachable and attainable. The evaluation plan followed the

timeline and finally, I communicated potential implications for social change in the local and far-reaching communities. In the final section, I will share my reflections of the overall process as well as lessons learned through the development of this doctoral project study.

Section 4: Reflections and Conclusions

Introduction

This doctoral journey has been a lengthy process. The goal of this research was to identify barriers to graduation for the nontraditional students at the university site in this study. I selected this area of research because multiple articles pointed to the increase of nontraditional students entering into U.S. higher education. Although this growth has occurred even at a higher percentage than traditional students, the graduation rates among the nontraditional student population has remained much lower than their traditional counterparts. Because I work at a university with more than an 80% nontraditional student population, I wanted to explore the challenges this student group faced as it related to persistence and graduation in order to provide solutions that have the potential of impacting social change.

I learned a lot during this process. First, I learned to be patient and understand that writing and rewriting is a rigorous process that takes time, effort, focus, and attention to detail. Second, it was challenging for me at first to write in a scholarly tone while at the same time communicating my thoughts. However, over time it became less arduous because of the constructive feedback I received from faculty. Overall, I am very grateful for this collegiate doctoral experience because it enhanced my writing, reading, critical thinking, as well as my ability to conduct scholarly research.

Project Strengths

A professional learning community focuses "not only on individual instructors' learning but also on collective professional learning within the context of a cohesive

group that works together to ensure student success" (Brodie, 2013, p. 6). In describing

the strength of the project, I would like to focus on three characteristics. The first is the

need to learn collaboratively in a community by highlighting three characteristics and

these are the domains of inquiry, in which a central focus on a particular topic is shared in

the community (Schuck et al., 2013). The second is practice; communities engage in

activities that develop a shared practice. Third is the community dimension, in which

members participate together in meaningful learning (p.4). All three characteristics speak

to the benefit of employees improving communication and collaboration between

departments. In addition, according to this plan, employees will acquire the necessary

skills to not only provide customized student service, but also utilize the human resources

within the university more effectively. Finally, in this plan, lifelong learning will become

a part of the university culture because once the PLC is established there will be ongoing

quarterly meetings among employees in order to sustain and develop all aspect of the

learning community.

The plan for this project was designed to create a support community within ABC

University (pseudonym) that faculty, staff, and students will come together to

communicate and collaborate as well as address student needs. I compiled and analyzed

the results from my research to determine the major themes that surfaced during the one-

on-one interviews with participants. As a result, there was a common theme among the

participants for the need to create a community of support for students in order to help

them receive the relevant support and resources to help them persist in their degree

program. Because the university used in this study has both onsite and online learning

formats, creating a virtual professional learning community is an obvious and effective solution for providing access to the entire student population.

Upon the completion of the first professional development workshop, if the institution concludes there are no improvements needed and the training was well received by staff, faculty, and administrators, this research will serve as a foundation to create a virtual professional learning community in order to address the problem of persistence and underperforming graduation rates with the universities nontraditional student population.

Recommendation for Remediation of Limitations

The main limitation for a professional learning community is getting stakeholders to support the idea as well as be involved once the PLC is developed. Other potential limitations include: difficulty articulating the purpose and benefits of a PLC to employees in order to achieve buy-in, struggle gaining employee engagement for the PLC, and challenge obtaining necessary resources without burdening the current budget. If employees do not support the concept of establishing a PLC, it will be difficult to receive the necessary resources to create and sustain the PLC. Therefore gaining support from all employees but especially those who may already feel overwhelmed with work responsibility is vital. As a result, I plan to obtain an early endorsement of the project from university administrators in order to use this as leverage to gain the support of both staff and faculty.

Recommendations for Alternative Approaches

Graduation rates remain a focus for ABC University and the challenge to meet the needs of nontraditional students has prompted university leadership to seek changes to address these issues (Huffman, 2011, p. 321). Also, University officials must embrace shared responsibility within the university, implement clear goals and objectives, and collectively take ownership for maintaining student success. The creation of a PLC in the form of a professional development workshop is the approach selected as a result of my research. However there are other methods to consider when addressing the initial problem presented in this study:

1. A higher education consultant group could be hired to look at ways to address lagging graduation rates. The group might focus on assisting the university in this study to cultivate an environment of collegial interchange versus isolation and silos (McConnell et al., 2012, 268).

2. ABC University might consider working with another university who has successfully implemented a PLC in order to model their plan. This has the potential of enabling the university to implement an effective model that emphasizes learning, collaboration, and results (McConnell et al., 2012, 269).

Either one of these methods would require additional resources as well as cooperation from those outside of the university community. The first alternative would also require a generous amount of effort to acquire someone who is familiar with the unique conditions at the university in this study while at the same time making progress toward improving graduation rates.

In many cases, employees need "to recognize that ongoing inquiry and learning with their colleagues are critical to building and strengthening their own capacities to respond to barriers to graduation and to develop quality learning experiences for their nontraditional student population" (Hughes-Hassell et al., 2012, p.35). As a result, an environment of exchange needs to be created that will "establish relationships of trust and comfort, making members feel free to share information across departments, to talk honestly about student needs, and to offer critical suggestions for better practice that will support all students" (Hughes-Hassell et al., 2012, p. 35). These alternative options could provide a solution for both the student and university community as a whole. There are various ways to address the problem in this study and any of these other options would be worth exploring in future research.

What Was Learned About the Process?

When I reflect on what I learned during this process the following quote by Tony Dungy comes to mind: "It's about the journey--mine and yours--and the lives we can touch, the legacy we can leave, and the world we can change for the better" (Dungy, 2008, p.1). I began this journey by attempting to discover ways to support nontraditional student persistence. This is a topic near to my heart because as an educator of over 20 years, I have watched nontraditional students work part or full time, while attending school and managing a household. For some of these students attending college is a second chance for them while others simply want to progress in their careers or set an example for their children. Whatever the reason, I wanted to have some sort of positive impact on the lives of these students that I see on a daily basis. As a result, I learned to

remain focused, organized, and diligent throughout this doctoral journey because I wanted to ensure that I made it to the finish line in order to present the findings of my study in the form of a proposed project to the university in this study. In the upcoming sections I will describe in more detail my personal reflections.

Scholarship

Scholarship for me began in the very first class in this doctoral program. Through research, study, critical thinking, and reading I have grown as a scholar. Interfacing with classmates and faculty has helped me enhance both my writing and communication skills as well as challenged me to think beyond my scope of knowledge. In addition my research skills have improved considerably with the help of the Walden Library, Researcher Center and other resources. Finally, the amount of support that I received from my committee members has undoubtedly had the greatest impact on my ability to persist throughout this program. I have grown to respect and appreciate the amount of time it takes the committee to read through my research and provide me with relevant and helpful feedback that has equipped me to be molded into a polished scholar.

Project Development and Evaluation

When I first began writing my doctoral proposal I had many ideas for potential projects. Originally, I proposed to create a Life Application course for nontraditional students. This course would have served as a foundation for students before entering into their degree program. However after speaking to participants I quickly discovered that one single course does not address the unique barriers to graduation that this student group faces. Also, after spending several hours searching for sources that related to

student preparation courses, I noticed that there were too many variations and I could not narrow down enough sources that addressed the problem I was attempting to resolve.

After interviewing the participants I confirmed the uniqueness of this student population. Therefore, a project had to be created that would address their unique needs. Fortunately a common theme surfaced and I discovered that the creation of a community of support that included faculty, staff, and administrators would be the most effective way to support the universities nontraditional students. As a project planner I needed to ensure that the goals and objectives were clear and measurable, I had the support of university administrators, and a professional development plan was created to ensure the workshop was relevant, purposeful, and engaging.

I also learned the importance of conducting evaluations during the process in order to ensure the training was effective. As a project planner, evaluations should be a part of the planning process because allowing the participants to evaluate the information presented is as equally important as the information itself. Learning early on in the process that the information is not well received, understood, or applied, will save me a generous amount of time because corrections can me made during the process. Also, if I allow participants to be involved early in the process by providing feedback, buy-in can be achieved.

Leadership and Change

When I first began this program I had just been appointed to a new administrative assignment that increased my responsibility and influence. Therefore while I was learning my new job I was also embarking on this new doctoral journey. The timing for

me was perfect because this program enabled me to directly apply what I was learning in class to the workplace. In addition, it helped me discover the area of research I was passionate about and also equipped me to explore the topic of graduation rates in greater detail. Finally, it helped me recognize leadership traits that had been untapped for years such as persistence, resourcefulness, adaptability, focus, and decisiveness. These characteristics uncovered within me a sense of determination to persist in this program to the end no matter what I faced.

Overall, this program has provided me with short and long-term gains that will benefit me both personally and professionally. Additionally, the research skills I acquired will not only enable me to pursue implementing the project that was developed in this study but I am also interested in conducting future research that could impact social change within the university and beyond.

Analysis of Self as Scholar

Early on in the program I discovered that I was a bit too eager and impatient. Considering I have very high expectations for myself both in my personal and professional life I applied the same formula to get the work done in this program and that is work hard, stay focused, be organized, and do it now rather than later. I quickly realized that being a scholar in a doctoral program requires patience, attention to detail, and flexibility therefore I could not get it done quickly, I had to pace myself.

Being a scholar also means that patience is a requirement not an option. As a scholar, I quickly recognized that I do not work alone – there are many people involved in the process such as committee members, faculty, URR, and IRB. Therefore it was

important that I took into consideration the time it takes to review and revise my work when establishing a timeline of program completion. Once I accepted that this process is a collective one, it became a smoother journey.

Analysis of Self as Practitioner

I have been in education for over 20 years, with most of those years being in higher education. In my current administrative role I do not interface directly with students as much as I did in my previous positions therefore as a practitioner it was important that I utilized my time wisely. As a result, this role was one I looked forward to because I would have an opportunity to talk directly to the students about their experiences. Preparing myself by reading an array of articles on the topic as well as books on how to effectively conduct qualitative research prepared me as a practitioner to ask questions objectively which I believe cultivated an environment with my participants of trust, openness, and transparency.

Talking to the participants was enlightening. One, I was relieved at how open they were during their interviews. They shared their feelings with ease, which enabled me to capture their voices in my study. Two, their responses to my questions were solution-focused. The majority of the 10 participants were happy with the experience at the university however shared a variety of ways to optimize the student experience in order to support persistence. Finally, the participants were grateful that I selected this topic to address because they expressed feeling like although they felt supported by their advisors they did not feel that their concerns were being taking seriously by anyone of influence [i.e. administration]. Therefore they were relieved to discover that I would be

presenting a project to the administration based on their feedback to identify barriers to graduation for the nontraditional student. Overall, as a practitioner I am now more confident in my ability to think critically and objectively.

Analysis of Self as Project Developer

Fortunately the findings in this study clearly presented an obvious solution to identifying the barriers to graduation for the nontraditional student. Participants communicated the need for establishing a university community that would support students at every stage of their program. This community would make available a virtual community where students would receive the necessary resources and academic support from faculty, staff, and administrators. In addition, this community would enable students to network and share their experiences. Participants stressed the need to connect to a community whether they were onsite or online students.

The natural response to participant feedback is the creation of a virtual PLC. Gray and Smyth (2012) stated, "Learning communities are attributed with making learning more efficient and effective. Due to their distributed online nature and asynchronous communication features, online networking tools have become central to supporting activity of formal and informal learning communities" (p.60). Data from my findings ultimately lead me to the decision of creating a professional development workshop in order to train employees on how to effectively implement and maintain a PLC. It was important that I created a workshop that was engaging, meaningful, and presented the needs of the students in a way that gained support from faculty, staff, and

administration. It was also vital that I received buy in from all stakeholders in order for the workshop to be successful.

Reflections on the Importance of the Work

My reflection on the significance of the work came through self-exploration and discovery. What I mean by that is originally I thought obtaining a doctorate was just for me. However I soon discovered that it is two-fold. The first does place emphasis on me as the student to develop and grow both personally and professionally because the knowledge I obtained during this process did build my confidence and ability to achieve my career and personal goals.

The second discovery however was that the work I put into this project and research that not only had the potential to impact the university in this study but also the capability to impact social change. Siguroardottir (2010) mentioned, "PLCs include a constant creation of new knowledge within the organization by using collaborative inquiry and reflection. Therefore, an effective PLC has the capacity to promote and sustain the learning of all professionals in and outside of the community" (p. 397). If the university is successful in implementing and maintaining a virtual PLC, it has the potential of impacting other universities, especially those who have a higher percentage of nontraditional students. Because as I previously mentioned, this student group requires customized student support in order to enhance program persistence and graduation.

Implications, Applications, and Direction for Future Research

By delving deep into the research, I was able to appreciate the level of detail it required to present a project that addressed the problem in this study. This appreciation helped me realize the overall impact this project could have within the higher education system. Introducing the information in great detail along with data of successful PLCs will provide stakeholders with the necessary tools to make an informed decision. If approved, stakeholders will have increased access to knowledge needed to impact social change.

The research concluded that implementing a professional learning community has the potential of addressing student needs in order to support persistence and graduation. This community will provide a "network of people interested in sharing ideas and supporting each other in professional areas (and beyond). The community implies belonging and requires intimacy and trust. It also requires mutual obligation and sharing good and not so good times" (Nixon & Brown, 2013, p. 358). This statement affirms the sentiments of all 10 participants in this study and should help solidify the needed support for PLCs from administration within the university system.

Future research on this topic should include a mixed-method approach. This method would allow fur surveying a larger sample size as well as a student mix of various degree programs, both undergraduate and graduate. Although this study acquired rich data, it is my belief that surveying a larger population would render results that have the potential to impact social change on a broader scale.

Conclusion

The data collected from this doctoral project study was presented in the form of a professional development workshop in order to train employees on how to create and maintain a virtual professional learning community. The project presented an outline and timetable that included the goal and objective of the project as well as the characteristics of an effective PLC. Finally the project presented the learning outcomes of the workshop as well as an opportunity for workshop participants to provide feedback that may potentially improve future workshops.

The overall goal of this research was to identify barriers to graduation for the nontraditional student. After conducting interviews with 10 participants themes surfaced that enabled me as the researcher to determine the best solution to address this problem. I am confident that the findings from this study as well as the project plan presented will equip the university in this study to better serve their large nontraditional student population. By addressing these needs through the creation of a virtual PLC decision makers have the influence to improve the overall college experience for both their current and future students.

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Appendix A: Project Workshop Materials

	Workshop Details: Professional Learning Communities
Learning Objectives	**By the end of this workshop, participants will be able to:** • Design a Mission Statement that encompasses the University's objective. • Develop a vision that includes what faculty, staff, and administration would like the professional learning community to accomplish. • Develop value statements that include shared goals – the perspectives, behaviors, and commitments – that all members identified in their interactive groups and agreed upon in order to create and implement a shared vision for the PLC. • Establish goals based on the adapted value statement that will be implemented and revisited in quarterly meetings to ensure congruency between the shared values, responsibility and overall goals within the PLC.
Resources and Materials	• Access to classroom and/or meeting room for workshop [to include a projector] • A live Internet connections • Power Point presentation • Workshop materials [extra for those who did not print out a copy] • Writing utensils for those who did not bring one • Note paper to take notes with for those who did not bring any
Procedures	• Opening and introduction of workshop content

	• Review of workshop materials
	• Break-out interactive work-groups
	• Closing for the day and next steps
	• Q&A
	• Recap of previous day
	• Implementation and Future Activities [to include quarterly meetings]
	• Evaluation
Facilitator's Responsibilities	• Present workshop information
	• Facilitate workshop activities
	• Inspire and excite interaction, feedback, and questions during workshop
	• Respond to questions during and after day's activities
Participants Responsibilities	• Review workshop material prior to attending workshop
	• Inquire, ask questions and collaborate during the training
	• Aid in their own learning
	• Complete end of workshop summative assessment
	• Complete follow up workshop and transfer-of-learning assessments

Workshop Agenda

Timetable for Workshop Activities Day 1

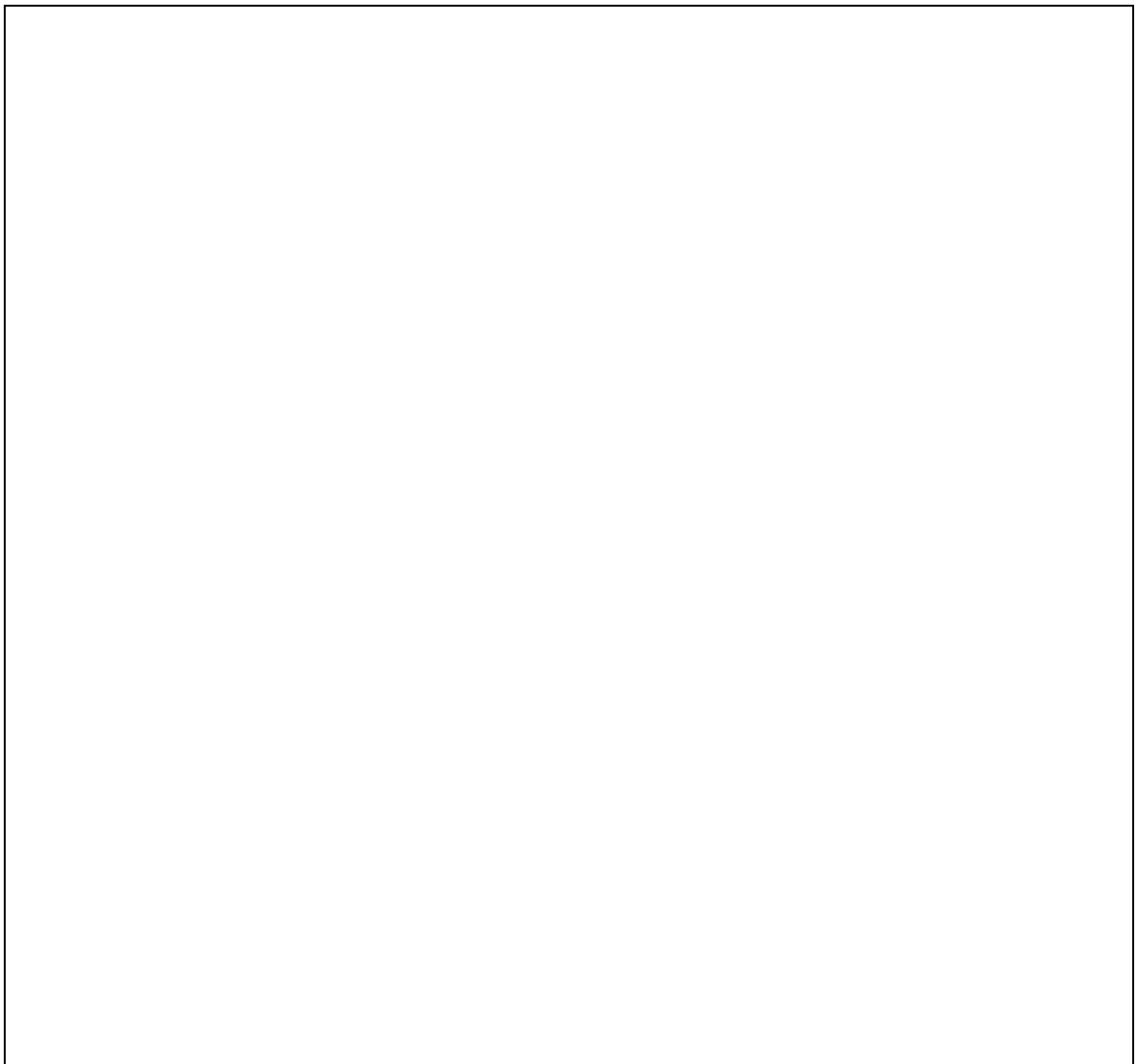| (Workshop Date Here)	Action
Allotted Time	
8:00am – 8:15am	Welcome, roll call and introduction to workshop.
8:15am – 8:35am	Review pre-workshop materials received by email.
8:35am – 8:45am	Answer questions concerning workshop materials.
8:45am – 9:45am	Present power point on workshop content.
9:45am – 10:00am	BREAK
10:00am – 12:30pm	Interactive group activity one to focus on creating a Mission Statement that identifies the University's purpose. (Lunenburg, 2010, p.2-4)
12:30pm – 1:30pm	LUNCH
1:30pm – 3:45pm	Interactive group activity two to focus developing a vision that includes an attempt to describe what faculty, staff, and administration would like the professional learning community to accomplish.
3:45pm – 4:00pm	BREAK
4:00pm – 4:30pm	Bring the entire group back together to report out on progress of first two activities.
4:30pm – 5:00pm	Workshop first day wrap up, Q&A, and next steps.

Note. The schedule above is a timetable of workshop activities for day one of the training.

Pre-Workshop Assignment

WORKSHOP SUMMATIVE EVALUATION ASSESSMENT
PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES (PLC)
Before Workshop Rank your level of understanding
1=Strongly Disagree; 2=Disagree; 3=Neutral; 4=Agree; 5=Strongly Agree
1SD 2D 3N 4A 5SA
1. A PLC will improve communication within the university.   **1SD 2D 3N 4A 5SA**
2. A PLC will improve collaboration within the university.   **1SD 2D 3N 4A 5SA**
3. A PLC will improve the student experience within the university.   **1SD 2D 3N 4A 5SA**
4. The university has the necessary resources to create a PLC.   **1SD 2D 3N 4A 5SA**
5. The university has employee support to create a PLC.   **1SD 2D 3N 4A 5SA**
6. Administration will see the benefit of creating a PLC.   **1SD 2D 3N 4A 5SA**
7. Employees will see the benefit of creating a PLC.   **1SD 2D 3N 4A 5SA**
List suggestions that will make the professional development workshop effective for you:
Describe how you will use the skills learned in the professional development workshop in the week preceding the training:

Workshop Day One: First Activity

After watching the Workshop PowerPoint presentation and before breaking up into

groups – In the box below: I want you all to take about 5 minutes to write your own

definition of what you think a professional learning community is and what you would

like to get out of this workshop. Share your thoughts in your assigned groups before

working on the first group activity.

Group Interaction

When you break into your groups, before you start your activities, I want you to first take about 30 seconds each to state your name, work title, and department you work for. Then go around the group and share what you put in the box for your first activity. Finally after everyone has shared begin with group activity #1.

Name:

Work Title:

Department:

Share with the group what you wrote in the box in the first activity prior to breaking out into your groups. (What is your definition of a PLC? and what you expect to get out of this training?)

Workshop Group Activity

Day 1	Workshop Activity Handout Sheet	Group Activity #1	Group #1 (Member Names)
Create a Mission Statement that identifies the University's purpose. (Lunenburg, 2010, p.2-4)	What should be included in the mission statement?		
	What common themes did the group have within each statement? What Mission Statement did the group agree on?		
Compile ideas and create one statement to report on	Draft of Groups Mission Statement to present in report out		

Day 1	Workshop Activity Handout Sheet	Group Activity #2	Group #1 (Member Names)
Focus on developing a vision that includes an attempt to describe what faculty, staff, and administration would like the professional learning community to accomplish. (Lunenburg, 2010, p.2-4)	What would employees like the PLC to accomplish?		
	What common themes did the group have as ideas were shared?		
Compile ideas and create one statement to report on	Collective group ideas - Compile ideas to present in report out.		

Timetable for Workshop Activities Day 2

Allotted Time	Action
8:00am – 8:15am	Roll call and welcome back.
8:15am – 8:35am	Review previous day activities and plan for the day.
8:35am – 9:45am	Answer workshop related questions.
9:45am – 10:00am	BREAK
10:00am – 12:30pm	Interactive group activity three to focus on developing value statements that include "shared values – the attitudes, behaviors, and commitments – all members would pledge to demonstrate so as to move closer to the shared vision" (Lunenburg, 2010, p.2).
12:30pm – 1:30pm	LUNCH
1:30pm – 3:45pm	Interactive group activity four to focus on establishing goals based on the adapted value statements.
3:45pm – 4:00pm	BREAK
4:00pm – 4:30pm	Bring the entire group back together to report out on progress of final two activities.
4:30pm – 5:00pm	Workshop wrap up, Q&A, and next steps.

Note. The schedule above is a timetable of workshop activities for day two of the training.

Day 2	Workshop Activity Handout Sheet	Group Activity #1	Group #1 (Member Names)
Focus on developing value statements that include shared values – the attitudes, behaviors, and commitments – all members would pledge to demonstrate so as to move closer to the shared vision. (Lunenburg, 2010, p.2-4)	**Value Statements**		
	What common value statements did the group have? Which ones did the group settle on?		
Focus on establishing goals based on the adapted value statements.	**Collective agreed upon value statements to present to in report out.**		

Day 2	Workshop Activity Handout Sheet	Group Activity #2	Group #1(Member Names)
Focus on developing a vision that includes an attempt to describe what faculty, staff, and administration would like the professional learning community to accomplish. (Lunenburg, 2010, p.2-4)	Vision? What would employees like the PLC to accomplish?		
	What common themes did the group have as ideas were shared?		
Compile ideas and create one statement to report out to entire all groups	Collective group ideas - Compile ideas to present in report out.		

Workshop Agenda

Timetable for Workshop Activities Day 3

Allotted Time	Action
8:00am – 8:10am	Roll call
8:10am – 8:35am	Review previous day activities and plan for final day.
8:35am – 8:45am	Answer workshop related.
8:45am – 9:45am	Present results from all four group activities.
9:45am – 10:00am	BREAK
10:00am – 12:30pm	Interactive group activity to focus on a Professional Learning Community (PLC) Implementation plan [to include resources, action items, creation of quarterly meeting schedule, and ongoing professional development].
12:30pm – 1:30pm	LUNCH
1:30pm – 4:00pm	Interactive group activity to focus on a PLC Sustainability plan [to included ongoing needed resources, action items, fulfillment of quarterly meeting schedule, and ongoing professional development].
4:00pm – 4:15pm	BREAK
4:15pm – 5:00pm	Workshop wrap up, Q&A, next steps, and evaluations.

Note. The schedule above is a timetable of workshop activities for day three of the

training.

Day 3	Workshop Activity Handout Sheet	Group Activity #1	Group #1 (Member Names)
Focus on a Professional Learning Community (PLC) Implementation plan [to include resources, action items, creation of quarterly meeting schedule, and ongoing professional development].	**Implementation Plan?**		
	What common themes did the group agree on to include in the implementation plan?		
Compile ideas and create one statement to report on	**Collective group ideas - Compile ideas to present and report out.**		

Day 3	Workshop Activity Handout Sheet	Group Activity #2	Group #1(Member Names)
Focus on a PLC Sustainability plan [to include ongoing needed resources, action items, fulfillment of quarterly meeting schedule, and ongoing professional development].	Sustainability Plan?		
	What common themes did the group agree on to include in the Sustainability plan?		
Compile ideas and create one statement to report out to entire all groups	Collective group ideas - Compile ideas to present and report out.		

Post-Workshop Assignment

WORKSHOP SUMMATIVE EVALUATION ASSESSMENT
PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES (PLC)
After Workshop Rank your level of understanding
1=Strongly Disagree; 2=Disagree; 3=Neutral; 4=Agree; 5=Strongly Agree
1SD 2D 3N 4A 5SA
1. A PLC will improve communication within the university. **1SD 2D 3N 4A 5SA**
2. A PLC will improve collaboration within the university. **1SD 2D 3N 4A 5SA**
3. A PLC will improve the student experience within the university. **1SD 2D 3N 4A 5SA**
4. The university has the necessary resources to create a PLC. **1SD 2D 3N 4A 5SA**
5. The university has employee support to create a PLC. **1SD 2D 3N 4A 5SA**
6. Administration will see the benefit of creating a PLC. **1SD 2D 3N 4A 5SA**
7. Employees will see the benefit of creating a PLC. **1SD 2D 3N 4A 5SA**
List suggestions that will make the professional development workshop effective for future participants:
Describe how you will use the skills learned in the professional development workshop in the next week:

Promotional Flyer Template [Emailed to Employees]

Professional Development Workshop: How to Create a PLC

Please join me in an important workshop

The purpose of a professional learning community is to equip faculty, staff, and administrators to support the needs of their student population by creating a community of support that encourages collaboration, consistent communication, and shared responsibility within the university system.

[Date and Time]

[Street Address]

Organization   (xxx)yyy-yyyy

Professional Development
Workshop:
Creation of Professional
Learning Communities (PLC)

By Abena Salvant

Walden University

Some ice-breaker questions I will ask to the room:
 1) What do you think a PLC is?
2) How do you think a learning community will benefit the employees and students?

Professional Learning Communities

There are lower graduation rates among nontraditional students than with traditional students. As a result, the need to determine what specific barriers to graduation are impacting nontraditional students is important. While some research has been conducted regarding identifying barriers to graduation for nontraditional students, very little research has focused specifically on the nontraditional students perceptions of what academic and support services would meet their very unique needs. The findings from my research shows that nontraditional students found the need to create a community of support that would allow them to connect to the university culture as well as receive the necessary support and resources to persist in their degree program through graduation. The importance of faculty, staff, and administrators working together to create such an environment was stressed by students in the study and that is why this workshop has been created.

I will present to the workshop this second slide to provide employees with a definition of what a Professional Learning Community is. I want to start off with this to set the foundation for all of the subsequent information but before that I will start off with some ice-breaker questions (see below and previous slide).

Some ice-breaker questions I will ask to room:
1) What do you think a PLC is?
2) How do you think a learning community will benefit the employees and students?

Description and Goals of a PLC

The goal of a professional learning community is people working together in a collaborative way within the university to ensure student success (Lunenburg, 2010). The concept of people working together is the whole philosophy behind professional learning communities. Linder et.al (2012) mentioned that the professional learning community is "gaining recognition as an effective strategy for promoting long-term professional development for educators because the PLC involves instructors in site-based, ongoing, collaborative professional development working together with shared vision, beliefs, and values" (p.13).

In this slide, I will share with all employees the goal of a PLC in order to prepare them for their first activity before breaking out into groups. This will also enable employees to see the benefits of a PLC. I will share information from articles that provide information on successful PLCs and how the university community as a whole will improve both communication and collaboration through the implementation of a PLC.

Conditions that Foster a Successful PLC

Newmann as cited in Teague and Anfara (2012) characterized the conditions that foster the development of professional learning communities as:

➢Shared values and vision (focus on student learning, high expectations for teachers and students, shared vision for teaching and learning).

➢ Shared and supportive leadership (nurturing school administrators, shared power and authority, broad based decision-making).

➢Collective learning and application to practice (sharing information, seeking new knowledge and skills, working collaboratively).

➢Shared personal practice (peer observations, coaching, and mentoring).

➢Supportive conditions that encompass both relationships (trust and respect, risk taking) and structures - resources of time, money, people, materials and communication (p.60).

It is important to highlight to the group how to cultivate an environment that will foster a successful PLC. Therefore I will discuss the importance of coming up with shared values and vision. One of the group activities will allow employees to provide input of their values and vision and at the end of the workshop the goal is to create a list of shared values and vision that all employees can agree on. These shared values will be a part of the foundation for creating a successful PLC within the university community.

What is a PLC?

What is a Professional Learning Community?

The term professional learning community has been widely used in K-12 as well as higher education to represent various groups working together toward a common goal. Therefore, for the sake of this training I will be using the following definition: Gray et. al (2014) defined a professional learning community as a "collegial group of faculty, staff, and administrators who are united in their commitment to student learning" (p.84). Gray et. al (2014) went on to emphasize the importance of trust within professional learning communities and defined trust as "an individual's or group's willingness to be vulnerable to another party based on the confidence that the latter party is benevolent, reliable, competent, honest, and open" (p.85).

In this slide I revisit what a PLC is so that all employees are clear on the definition and goals of a PLC. Because this will be the only PowerPoint presentation with the entire group I want to make sure the foundation is set and solid. This will enable them to have productive conversations in their groups and make a generous amount of progress toward creating a successful PLC that includes their goals, values, mission, and objectives.

How to Create a PLC:
4-Step Process

Lunenburg (2010) described a four-step process in the creation of a professional learning community and they are:

1. Create a Mission Statement that identifies the school's purpose.

2. Develop a vision that includes an attempt to describe what faculty, staff, and administration would like the professional learning community to accomplish.

3. Develop value statements that include shared values – the attitudes, behaviors, and commitments – all members would pledge to demonstrate so as to move closer to the shared vision.

4. Establish goals based on the adapted value statements.

Each group will use this 4-step process to begin the creation of a PLC. Therefore all 6 group activities are centered around addressing the items in this 4-step process. Each day they break out into groups and will then work on 2 activities a day that will address all aspects of the 4-step process. After the end of each day, the groups will report out to the entire workshop and I as the facilitator will write notes as feedback from the groups come in, in order to establish common-themes. As a result, on the final day we will have a model to implement that came from collective group feedback in order to establish the PLC.


Key Characteristics of a PLC

Nelson et. al (2010) described the following key characteristics as essential elements of a professional learning community and they are:

1) Time, resources, and intellectual support for staff and faculty to come together as learners to engage in collaborative inquiry processes.

2) Collaborative environments that foster interdependence, build trust, and support risk-taking amongst group members.

3) Conversations that are focused, reflective, inquiry-based and action-oriented.

4) Conversations that support the development of shared values and shared vision for all students' learning.

5) Collaborative processes centered around closely examining evidence about student learning and makes links across teaching, learning goals, and student thinking.

6) Strong leadership that is distributed across instructors, staff, and administrators.

In addition to the 4-step process, the groups will also reference these key characteristics to help guide their thinking and collective decision making. Also, they will use these characteristics to ensure every thing that is needed in the creation of the PLC is included (i.e. resources, time etc.).
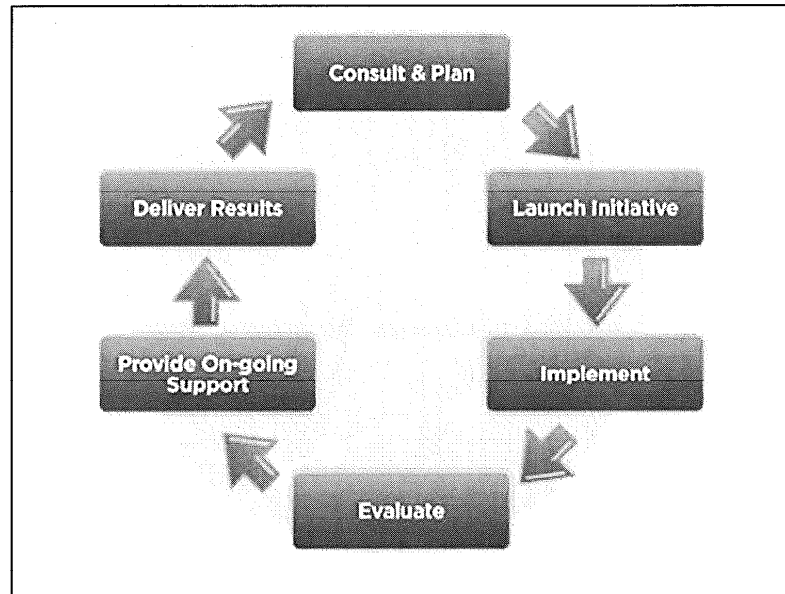
This diagram will be referenced in order to keep the group on task and focused on making progress toward creating the mission, goals, vision and objectives. Also, in the discussion activities about implementation and sustainability discussions will focus on ways to provide ongoing support as well as the introduction of a plan that includes quarterly group meetings to discuss the maintenance of the PLC.
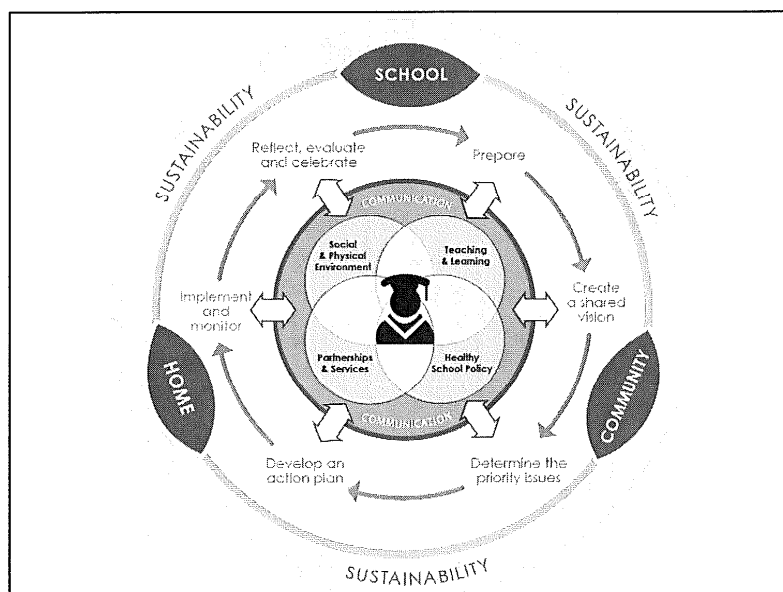
This diagram will be used to reference what a successful PLC should look like. Also, this will be used to discuss a foundation for what the group wants to cover in their quarterly meetings going forward to ensure the PLC remains successful.

Interactive Group Activity

- Explain interactive group activity
- Explain focus of activity for each day [Revisit this for the next two days as a reminder]
- Select 4 Groups [This will make it easier considering they will be using the 4-step process]
- Break-out into groups
- Walk around to ensure group members are interacting. Also, check for any questions, clarification, or comments

At this point in the presentation it is now time to provide them with group instructions before they break into groups. They will be given group activity sheets that include the questions related to the 4-step process. Also, they will receive extra paper if they need more space to jot down their ideas. In addition, I will be walking around the room each day to ensure the groups are on task, focused and receiving the necessary support from me. Finally, the groups will be completing two activities a day therefore I will only supply them with the activity sheets for the specific day, not all 6 at once. This will allow them to stay focused on the task at hand. This will also enable me to compile the data and discover what common themes surfaced for each area in the 4-step process in order to begin putting a draft of the final PLC plan together.

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- Lunenberg, F.C. (2011). Creating a professional learning community. *National Forum of Educational Administration and Supervision Journal. 27*(4), 1-7.

- Nelson, T.H., LeBard, L., and Walters, C. (2010). How to create a professional learning community. *Science and Children. 47*(9), 36-40.

- Teague, G.M., and Anfara, V.A. (2012). Professional learning communities create sustainable change through collaboration. *Middle School Journal. 44*(2), 58-64.

Professional Learning Communities
Professional Development Workshop Evaluation/Survey

You are receiving this survey because you recently completed the professional development workshop entitled *Professional Learning Communities*. Therefore please take some time to complete the survey in order for me to gage your overall experience as well as determine ways to improve future workshops.

1. I am satisfied with my opportunities for professional growth at ABC University.

- o   Strongly Disagree

- o   Disagree

- o   Neutral/Neither agree nor disagree

- o   Agree

- o   Strongly Agree

2. I am inspired by the concept of creating a professional learning community within the university.

- o   Strongly Disagree

- o   Disagree

- o   Neutral/Neither agree nor disagree

- o   Agree

- o   Strongly Agree

3. Communication between senior leaders and employees is good in my organization.

o Strongly Disagree

o Disagree

o Neutral/Neither agree nor disagree

o Agree

o Strongly Agree

4. I feel excited about getting involved in the creation of a professional learning community at the university.

o Strongly Disagree

o Disagree

o Neutral/Neither agree nor disagree

o Agree

o Strongly Agree

5. Creating a professional learning community will improve communication and collaboration within the university system.

o Strongly Disagree

o Disagree

o Neutral/Neither agree nor disagree

o Agree

o Strongly Agree

6. Creating a professional learning community will improve the student experience.
- o Strongly Disagree

- o Disagree

- o Neutral/Neither agree nor disagree

- o Agree

- o Strongly Agree

7. After the completion of this workshop I feel equipped to help create and maintain a professional learning community.
- o Strongly Disagree

- o Disagree

- o Neutral/Neither agree nor disagree

- o Agree

- o Strongly Agree

Or, let us know in the comment section if more training is required before the implementation of the PLC.

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8. Now that I have completed the training, I feel more

confident in my ability to help create and maintain a professional learning community.
- o Strongly Disagree

- o Disagree

- o Neutral/Neither agree nor disagree

- o Agree

- o Strongly Agree

Or, let us know in the comment section if more training is required before the implementation of the PLC.

9. The mission statement, goals, and objectives we created in our groups will help us successfully create and maintain a professional learning community.
- o Strongly Disagree

- o Disagree

- o Neutral/Neither agree nor disagree

- o Agree

- o Strongly Agree

Or, let us know in the comment section if more training is required before the implementation of the PLC.

Additional feedback can be shared below or on a separate sheet of paper:

Sample Transfer of Learning, Follow-Up E-mail

Hello Colleagues:

By now, you should be aggressively using the skills learned during the workshop *Professional Learning Communities* within the university system. The purpose of this e-mail is to gather feedback regarding ways you are using or have used this knowledge. Please take a few minutes to share how you have used the skills learned or how you will use them in the near future. You can share your feedback by simply completing the Transfer-of-Learning Survey Assessment. In the next few months, you will receive another e-mail as a follow-up and reminder to use what you have learned.

The knowledge gained during the 3-day professional development workshop can only be beneficial if you put it into action. I hope to hear from each of you soon. Also, please feel free to contact me if you need additional help in applying your knowledge in the university setting.

Sincerely
Abena Salvant

Transfer-of-Learning Survey Assessment

Thank you again for your participation in the professional development workshop entitled *Professional Learning Communities:*

By now, you may be already using the knowledge gained from these sessions within the university setting. Please provide feedback to the following questions regarding how you have used or are planning to use the skills learned.

Return your completed survey via email to the training facilitator within the next two weeks.

1. How have you used skills learned during the professional development workshop in the professional learning community?

2. How has the workshop content on professional learning communities increased your understanding of how to support students in educational programs?

3. How has the workshop content on professional learning communities increased your understanding of collaboration within the university community?

4. How have you used the resources within the professional learning community to support students?

5. In addition to the workplace, how have you used learned skills in other areas of your professional life?

Appendix B: Invitation and Consent Form

You are invited to take part in a project study of identifying barriers to graduation for nontraditional students at ███████ University. Participation is voluntary. However, I hope that you will consider participating.

This document is part of the informed consent process to ensure that you understand the process prior to deciding if you would like to take part in this study. The researcher, Abena Salvant, is a doctoral student at Walden University and an associate regional dean at ███████ University. You were chosen for this study because of your experience as a nontraditional student. Please sign the consent form only if you agree to the statements and are freely consenting to participate in the study.

Background information
The purpose of the study is to discover what influences cause nontraditional students to disengage from higher education or remain engaged with higher education. A qualitative case study method is being used for this research. There are three activities in this process and the participants will be informed of each activity and the time it will take for each one. In the first activity the researcher will interview participants for 30 minutes. For the second activity, after the initial interview, participants will be asked to member check the researcher's interview notes by reviewing them to ensure accuracy. In the final activity, participants may require an additional meeting with the researcher to discuss member checking. This study may help to develop a course or identify student support services that address the unique needs of the nontraditional student and support overall student success.

Procedures
If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to participate in an interview at a time that is convenient for you. I will take notes and will audio tape the session for future transcription. The expected time commitment is one to two hours for the entire process that I described in the background information.

Risks and Benefits of the Study
The risks associated with this study are minimal. Every effort will be made to keep individual responses confidential. Your privacy will be protected. There are no direct benefits to you for your participation in this study. However, I hope that the information gained from this study will help ███████ University determine ways to identify barriers to graduation for the nontraditional student.

Compensation
No compensation will be provided to any study participant.

Contacts and questions

If you have any questions about this research, please contact Abena Salvant at abena.salvant@waldenu.edu or ▉▉▉▉▉▉▉. The researcher's chair is Dr. Richard Braley who can be reached at richard.braley@waldenu.edu. Finally, the ▉▉▉ University Institutional Review Board contact information is ▉▉▉▉▉▉ Email: ▉▉▉▉▉ or Telephone: ▉▉▉▉▉

Consent:

By signing this consent form, I confirm that I have read and understand the information. I have had the opportunity to ask questions. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to refuse or withdraw at any time, without giving a reason and discontinuing participation involves no penalty. I voluntarily agree to take part in this study.

Signature_____ Date_____

Appendix C: Interval Protocol

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL
Identifying Barriers to Graduation for the Nontraditional Student at a University in the
Western United States

Interviewee's Code:
Date and time of Interview:
Interview Location:

State Purpose of Study and Interview: This project study will assess perceptions of
current university students regarding their perceived perceptions of barriers to graduation.
This interview will expound on participant feedback. You were chosen as an interviewee
because you are a degree seeking nontraditional student attending the university in this
study. **Rights to confidentiality:** The risks associated with this study are minimal.
Every effort will be made to keep individual responses confidential. Your privacy will be
protected.

This interview will take approximately 30 minutes. Can I have your permission to audio
tape this session? **Turn on audio recorder only after permission has been granted.**

Interview Questions:

1. Why do think some nontraditional students stop attending the university and other
nontraditional students continue attending until they graduate?

2. From your perspective, what are the barriers or challenges faced by nontraditional
students that cause them to withdraw from the university prior to graduation?

3. From your perspective, how does self-direction and intrinsic motivation impact the
college experience as it relates to the influence it has on the decision to disengage or
remain engaged in higher education?

4. What is your experience with using various delivery systems? (i.e. online, onsite,
hybrid). How has using the systems impacted your decision to disengage or remain
engaged in your degree program?

5. What is your experience with taking classes in an accelerated study format? How has
this experience impacted your decision to disengage or remain engaged in your
degree program?

6. Are there specific academic services that you would identify as influencing a decision to remain in your academic program through to graduation or as influencing a decision to disengage from their academic program and leave the university?

7. What specific academic and support services would you like to see implemented in order to help support your academic success?

Thank you for participating in this process. Please remember that your identity will not be disclosed to anyone working for the university.

Appendix D: Permission Request Letter

Letter Requesting Permission to Access of Participants and Student Files from
██████████████

Dear Provost ████:

My name is Abena Salvant, a doctoral student enrolled in the Richard W. Riley College of Education and Leadership at Walden University and a ██████ University employee (Associate Regional Dean in ██████). I am interested in conducting a qualitative case study entitled ***Identifying Barriers to Graduation for Nontraditional Students*** with ██████ University students. Although I am an employee of the university my employment is separate from this research. The study will assess perceptions regarding potential barriers to graduation for nontraditional students that may be attributing to attrition and graduation rates.

The purpose of this study is to discover and address the barriers to graduation for nontraditional students and provide potential solutions in the form of a project to the administration at ██████ University as they relate to improving persistence and graduation rates as well as ensuring these students are successful in their academic pursuits. After close review of student files, 10 students who are at least 25 years of age or older will be asked a series of questions that relate to the topic in this study. The interviews will be semi-structured interviews with a minimum of two participants who are taking onsite classes, two who are taking online, and two who are taking both onsite and online classes. The interviews will be conducted after work hours and will last approximately 30 minutes each. The identities of all participants and the organization will be kept confidential in educational materials submitted to Walden University. **The results of this study will be used to complete educational requirements at Walden University and will also be shared with you, other administrators, and employees (with your permission).**

This study poses little to no risks to participants. The findings from this study could be helpful in increasing overall graduation rates at the university. Upon your approval, I will attach this email to my IRB application for both ██████ University and Walden University and once I receive IRB approval through both institutions letters will be sent to selected participants notifying them of such approval and inviting them to be a part of this study. As responses come in, I will also be informing them that we will soon move forward with the interviews upon their acceptance of my invitation.

If you agree to allow me to conduct the proposed research, please send written acknowledgement to abena.salvant@waldenu.edu or ██████████████ because this will

enable me to attach your email approval to my IRB application. You can also send written acknowledgement to the address in the email signature. Thank you for your cooperation, consideration, and support in advance.

Sincerely,
Abena Salvant