


2016

Influence of Nontraditional Students on Traditionals in the Community College Classroom

Angela J. Richart-Mayfield
Walden University

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Angela Richart-Mayfield

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Review Committee

Dr. Heather Pederson, Committee Chairperson, Education Faculty

Dr. Paula Dawidowicz, Committee Member, Education Faculty

Dr. Gary Lacy, University Reviewer, Education Faculty

Chief Academic Officer

Eric Riedel, Ph.D.

Walden University

2016

Abstract

Influence of Nontraditional Students on Traditionals in the Community

College Classroom

by

Angela J. Richart-Mayfield

MFA, Spalding University, 2009

MEd, Indiana Wesleyan University, 2001

BS, Indiana University, 1999

Proposal Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

PhD in Education - Learning, Instruction, & Innovation

Walden University

December 2016

Abstract

An increase in nontraditional student enrollment continues in community colleges nationwide. Little is known about the interactions between mixed-age groups of students. This qualitative collective case study explored the academic and social influences of non-traditional students on their traditional peers in the community college classroom at a large, midwestern 2-year college. Tinto's interactionist theory framed the study. Purposeful sampling was used to select 30 participants (13 traditional students, 13 non-traditional students, and 4 instructors) who represented the college population in terms of gender and racial and ethnic diversity. Interview questions were guided by the research questions, and data were also analyzed through inductive analysis. Data were hand-coded and a constant comparative method was used to categorize data into common themes. Findings indicated that non-traditional students play a positive role in community college classrooms. They serve as mentors to their traditional classmates, building relationships and sharing life and work experiences, as well as positive behaviors that contribute to traditional students' overall success. The positive influences the data revealed from interactions between nontraditional and traditional students included improvement in learning, retention, engagement, and confidence. Findings contributed to social change as nontraditional students' influence on traditional students could serve as a catalyst for practices that will benefit all community college students.

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my husband and children, who have been unconditionally supportive of my endeavors and willingly sacrificed our family's financial and emotional health in the present for the hopes of a more prosperous and fulfilling future. My work is also dedicated to my father, who never believed in me but who unknowingly served as an inspiration to overcome obstacles and do my best to make a difference in the world.

Acknowledgments

I want to thank family, friends, students, colleagues, and Walden faculty members who encouraged me and helped me reach this point in my academic and professional career. Special thanks to my Walden dissertation committee, especially my chair Dr. Heather Pederson and methodologist, Paula Dawidowicz, whose assurance kept me from giving up when I began to lose faith.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Background

Community college students are generally more diverse and more challenged academically and socioeconomically, which leads to high failure rates (Goldrick-Rab, Broton, & Gates, 2013; Karp, 2011). Meanwhile, the turbulent economy, the aging Baby Boomer generation, global outsourcing, technological advancement, immigration, and the need to update job skills are all factors contributing to the rising nontraditional student enrollment in higher education, especially community colleges (Bragg, 2013; Jesnek, 2012; Singh, 2014).

Most community college students lack academic preparedness, motivation, and family and financial support (Forbus, Newbold, & Metah, 2011; Garrett, 2011; Huitt, 2011; Schunk, Pintrich, & Meece, 2013), which align with key factors most researchers list to define "at risk" students. Researchers have shown that motivation is a factor in student success (Brophy, 2013; Huitt, 2011; Schunk, et al., 2013), and the learning environment (Froiland, Oros, Smith, & Hirschert, 2012; McClellan & Hyle, 2012), as well as the learners' past and present environmental circumstances (Karp, 2011), and affect motivation and student learning and success. Students' perceptions of a supported classroom environment often predict their motivation, engagement, and achievement (Zumbrunn, McKimm, Buhs, & Hawley, 2014).

Peer relationships are a significant indicator of whether students adjusted well to the college setting and felt a sense of belonging (Lundberg, 2014; Parks, Evans, & Getch, 2013). Fettig and Friesen (2014) interviewed 10 graduates of an education program and

found that peer support was instrumental in student success. The researchers suggested that educators encourage peer relationship building and shared learning in college classrooms. Vygotsky (1978) claimed that cognitive functions, such as thinking and problem-solving, were products of interactions with others (as cited in Wertz, 2013). There is a gap, however, in research of peer interactions among community college students.

Mentoring is also important for undergraduate students, especially women, and has been shown to impact achievement (Crisp, 2015; DuBois & Karcher, 2013). Studies by Parks, et al. (2013) and Dwyer (2013) found that students who felt isolated were more likely to drop a course or out of college altogether. However, when students felt connected to others in the class and discussed their values and goals, that isolation dissolved and they felt a sense of belonging (Parks, et al., 2013). Students with a stronger sense of community are more likely to persevere in their courses than those who feel alone or isolated (Parks, et al., 2013; Tinto, 1994). In turn, those peer relationships and connectedness may increase engagement, achievement, or persistence in college (Lundberg, 2014; Di Tomasso, 2012). However, research was lacking regarding peer interactions and relationships of mixed-age group classrooms of community college undergraduate students.

Kenner and Weinerman (2011) pointed out that adult learners bring learning styles and life experiences to the college experience that may help or hinder learning and provide critical foundations for future success. The authors stated that although nontraditional students present challenges for educators, they also provide opportunities

for life experiences and wisdom to positively affect the college environment (Kenner & Weinerman, 2011). Wyatt (2011) also found that nontraditional students possess more respect for themselves and others than traditional students due to their own experiences as adults, parents, employees and employers, taxpayers, caregivers, and respected members of a community. Whether those skill sets influence their traditional peers in the community college classroom has not been explored.

Problem Statement

A lack of academic preparedness and environmental and socioeconomic factors contribute to high failure rates of community college students (Bragg, 2013). Meanwhile, the increase in nontraditional student enrollment in community colleges continues nationwide due to unemployment, the current economic climate, and employers' demand for a more skilled workforce (Jesnek, 2012). Still, little was known about the interactions between mixed-age groups of students and the influence, if any, of nontraditional students on traditional classmates.

According to Rowan-Kenyon, Swan, Deutsch, and Gansneder (2012), nontraditional students are defined as age 25 and older and/or students with children and work responsibilities, while the US Department of Education (2011) views traditional students as dependent students between the ages of 18 and 23. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), "38% of the enrollment of more than 18 million college students in 2007 were 25 years of age or older" (as cited in Ross-Gordon, 2011). However, Ross-Gordon (2011) argued that the characteristics of traditional and

nontraditional students are difficult to define with more students working, raising children, and delaying college than in previous generations.

Researchers have shown that nontraditional students are a challenge to community colleges, with different expectations and needs than traditional-aged students (Haberler & Levin, 2014; Hagedorn, 2014). Technological inadequacies (Zickhur & Madden, 2012) and conflicting personal commitments and time priorities of nontraditional students also compound their struggles for success (Pontes & Pontes, 2012; Quick, 2012). In addition, Rowan-Kenyon et al. (2012) affirmed Astin's (1993) claim that the more a college student works, the less likely he or she will persist in college. Most nontraditional students work at least part-time (Snyder & Dillow, 2013).

Challenges are countered, however, by the positive traits mature learners bring to the college environment. Nontraditional students are often more achievement-oriented than traditional students, with increased motivation and the desire to link their lives, work, and studies (Ryan, 2013). Nontraditional students are also more likely than traditional learners to view their education as an investment (Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011). However, even though these adult learners are more goal-oriented and participate more in class, they can still feel isolated from their traditional classmates (Parks, et al., 2013). Although community colleges attract a diverse mix of students, most community college environments are designed for traditional learners (Ayers, 2015).

Many researchers agree that student engagement plays an essential role in learning, especially in community colleges (Lester, Brown-Leonard, & Mathias, 2013; Saenz, Hatch, Bukaski, Kim, Lee, & Valdez, 2011). Higher education promotes

explorations and reconsiderations of worldviews (Liu & Chang, 2014), and nontraditional students bring into the classroom a plethora of life and work experiences to contribute to class discussion and peer engagement (Ryan, 2013). Social interaction among learners is linked to increased knowledge (Crisp, 2015), and increased engagement and collaboration results in greater student success (Kurantowicz & Nizinska, 2013; Wyatt, 2011).

Therefore, nontraditional students' experience and maturity might contribute to class discussion, collaboration, and their traditional peers' knowledge and viewpoints. A review of the literature found gaps in research regarding nontraditional students in the community college classroom, and no studies were found regarding their influence on traditional-aged peers. This study was needed to fill those gaps regarding interactions, relationships, and influences of mixed age groups of students in the community college classroom. This study can bring about positive social change in higher education and help bridge the academic and social gap between nontraditional and traditional students (Bragg, 2013; Jesnek, 2012).

Researchers Bishop-Clark and Lynch (1992) found hostility often existed between diverse age groups and cooperative instructional strategies that acknowledged differences and emphasized that commonalities were recommended. However, the number of nontraditional students has increased exponentially since the 1990s, and there was a gap in research in recent decades regarding college students of mixed age groups. This study has the potential to provide insight into mixed-age interactions and relationships in the community college classroom. The research will also provide data on the influence of

mature students on their younger, less-experienced peers, whether positive, negative, or a combination of both.

For example, generation gaps may lead to a decrease in engagement, motivation, and attrition, or present no effects at all. Staley and Trinkle (2011) claimed nontraditional students were less likely to socialize with classmates due to family and job commitments, and Olson and Brescher (2011) found that younger students often stereotyped older students and treated them unkindly.

Tinto's interaction model (1975, 1998) considers that a variety of experiences, skills, values, and family and peer influences affect students' academic and social integration into higher education. However, according to Tinto, students who are connected to their classmates and teachers and who participate in the student culture are more likely to graduate. Whether the increasing number of nontraditional students in the community college classroom influences traditional students' connectedness or academic success, however, had not been researched.

Multi-generations must learn to work together in academic, social, and occupational settings (Olson & Brescher, 2011). Therefore, this study is important to show learners' perceptions of how mixed-age groups interact and impact each other in the classroom. Results could be used to create programs and instructional strategies, to improve relationships and collaboration, and to bridge the academic and social gap between nontraditional and traditional students.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to explore how (or to what extent) nontraditional students influence traditional students at the community college level. Nontraditional learners bring learning styles and life experiences to the college experience that can help or hinder learning and provide critical foundations for future success (Kenner & Weinerman, 2011). This study will help fill the research gap regarding nontraditional students' influence on traditional students.

Research Question

Research Question (RQ): How do nontraditional students influence their traditional peers in the community college classroom?

Subquestion 1 (SQ1): How, if at all, do interactions between nontraditional and traditional students influence traditional students academically (learning, student engagement, retention)?

Subquestion 2 (SQ2): How, if at all, do interactions between nontraditional students and traditional students influence traditional students socially (relationships, confidence, classroom discussion)?

Conceptual Framework

Tinto's interactionist theory (1975, 1987, 1994) framed the study and data analysis. Tinto's theory indicates that engagement and retention are influenced by the type of interaction and integration of the student in the social context of academia. Peer-to-peer interactions increase social integration, and dynamic relationships lead to student persistence (Tinto, 1997). There is an increasing number of nontraditional students in

community colleges (Bragg, 2013; Kelly & Strawn, 2011). The interactions among nontraditional and traditional students in regard to peer to peer relationships and classroom environment were explored. Tinto, Russo, and Kadel (1994), and later Tinto (1997) established that classroom involvement not only "facilitates academic and social integration, but also promotes integration beyond the classroom" (p. 56). Though Karp (2011) points out that students lack opportunities for social interaction and integration at community colleges, Dwyer (2013) found that classroom-based social integration can be created through collaborative activities, class discussions and peer relationships, leading to increased nontraditional students' persistence in higher education. A conceptual framework constructed from past experiences and knowledge to further inform theory allowed me to build on what is already known about the topic or issue in order to explore and explain the natural progression of the experience (Maxwell, 2013). This study explored the experiences of traditional students in mixed-age community college classrooms to explain their perceptions of influence from their nontraditional classmates.

Nature of Study

A qualitative collective case study approach allowed collection of detailed, in-depth data from multiple sources (face-to-face and follow-up interview data from nontraditional students, traditional students, and full-time instructors) in one school or campus. Data were analyzed in order to understand how nontraditional students influence their traditional classmates in the community college classroom. Yin (2014) pointed out that case studies are challenging and sometimes limited, but also the preferred method when asking a "How" or "Why" research question that examines contemporary events.

Case studies provide a platform to investigate the effects of a particular phenomenon on participants' lives (Yin, 2014) and explore the overall meaning and general lessons from the cases (Maxwell, 2013).

Definitions

For the purpose of this study, relevant concepts were defined, including nontraditional students, traditional students, persistence, retention, and socioeconomic status.

Nontraditional student: Defined for the purpose of this study as students age 25 and older and/or students with family and employment responsibilities (Rowan-Kenyon, Swan, Deutsch, & Gansneder, 2012).

Retention: Defined for the purpose of this study as continued enrollment (or degree completion) within the same higher education institution in the fall semesters of a student's first and second year (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2014).

Student engagement: Characterized for the purpose of this study as "participation in educationally effective practices, both inside and outside the classroom, which leads to a range of measurable outcomes" (Quaye & Harper, 2014, p. 2).

Traditional student: For the purpose of this study, the US Department of Education (2011) definition of a traditional student was used, or dependent students between the ages of 18 and 23.

Assumptions

In this study, I assumed that students are unique and their perceptions, regardless of age, ethnicity, values, or socioeconomic background, were diverse and individualized.

In addition, the study assumed there were multiple factors, both external and internal, that influenced each student's perspective. Finally, I assumed that participants would be open, candid about their experiences, and able to answer each interview question.

Scope and Delimitations

The design of this study is a collective case study qualitative inquiry. Participants included 13 full-time traditional students and 13 full-time nontraditional, undergraduate students who had completed at least 30 credit hours of study. Participants also included 4 full-time professors of required, gateway courses. The site of the study was the main campus of an historic 2-year college in the Midwest. One limitation of the study included the possibility of researcher bias since I taught English at a smaller, off-site campus. Therefore, extreme care was taken to minimize the effect in the research design, data collection, and data analysis including using only students from the main campus who were unfamiliar with me and who had already taken the introductory English composition class I taught. Participants were assigned a random letter and number and data were stored in a de-identified state to protect confidentiality. The strategy of member checks was used by emailing summative reports to all participants for review, clarification, and feedback. Follow-up phone interviews were also necessary in some instances.

Transferability of the findings from this study may inform future research in education as well as educational practice and possible mentoring programs at community colleges. The knowledge gleaned from this study will provide insight into how mixed-age groups interact and influence each other socially and academically.

Limitations

One limitation in the study was that the sampling population was small and predominantly Caucasian; therefore, results may not apply to large, urban universities or campuses with a more multicultural population. Purposeful, stratified sampling (Maxwell, 2013) helped ensure representation of nontraditional-age students and gender and racial and ethnic diversity. A manageable number of participants allowed me to concentrate on the depth of data and an exhaustive analysis of the perceptions and experiences of the participants (Yin, 2014).

To avoid fallacies, I considered outside factors and realized that information gathered from a particular socioeconomic or ethnic group may not be consistent with all individuals sampled from the group and all classroom environments/dynamics are different. To avoid individual fallacies, I avoided making generalizations based on contexts or information from another individual or group (Janesick, 2011). As a researcher, one must be aware of biases and understand that life experiences and values could affect the researcher's lens. Therefore, biases were managed before interviewing and recording participants in order to be objective, thorough, and dependable (Laureate Education, Inc., 2011). As a teacher of freshman English courses at a rural, satellite campus of the university where the study was conducted, I chose students with a minimum of 30 credit hours who had only attended the main campus. This purposeful sampling (Maxwell, 2013) ensured students did not know me or feel an obligation to participate.

Another limitation was that participants may not respond truthfully to interview questions because they feel pressured to provide a favorable impression. Participants were informed of the scope of the study and assured their identities and responses would remain confidential. Using students who volunteered without coercion through a mass email, developing personal rapport, and asking students to sign a consent form encouraged students to provide honest responses. Students were assured that there were no right or wrong answers and their opinions and experiences would in no way affect their present or future academics. Finally, the results of this study are not generalizable to other community colleges.

Significance

Almost half of all U.S. undergraduates are enrolled at community colleges (Snyder & Dillow, 2013). Nontraditional student enrollment continues to increase in higher education, especially at community colleges (Haberler & Levin, 2014; Snyder & Dillow, 2013). The NCES projects that the number of community college students over the age of 25 will increase another 23 % by the year 2019 (Snyder & Dillow, 2013). This trend indicates that in order to be more competitive, institutions of higher learning will seek new ways to attract nontraditional students and encourage their success (Kelly & Strewn, 2011). Meanwhile, traditional students' attitudes and behaviors differ from those of previous generations, and their attention spans are shorter (Yamamoto & Kushin, 2014). The influence of these mixed-age groups' interactions and influence in the classroom had not been explored.

Theoretical frameworks have consistently shown the importance of social integration for traditional college student success (Astin, 1993, 2012; Tinto, 1987, 1993, 1997, 2000) at 4-year institutions. However, many studies have addressed the importance of social integration for students in two-year colleges (DuBois & Karcher, 2013; Haberler & Levin, 2014; Hayes, 2013), as well as online education (Boston, Díaz, Gibson, Ice, Richardson, & Swan, 2014). Lundberg (2014) and Barnett (2011) found that faculty relationships and validation affect student retention and learning, while Di Tommaso (2012) and Karp (2011) concluded that peer relationships contribute to persistence and success for community college students.

Nearly 60 % of incoming community college students are unprepared for college and must take at least one remedial precollege course, usually in English or math (Le, Rogers, & Santos, 2011). Di Tommaso (2012) found that due to their past experiences and failures, developmental students, who are often a mix of traditional and nontraditional, find it especially difficult to initiate peer relationships, though they acknowledge their necessity for success.

None of the studies reviewed investigated the influence of peer interaction and/or relationships between nontraditional students and their traditional peers. If peers are the greatest source of influence for college students (Astin, 1993, 2012), then research is needed on the interactions and relationships between traditional and nontraditional learners and how those interactions impact student success, the classroom environment, and the future of education. This research was needed to bring about positive social change in higher education, especially at the community college level, and to help bridge

the academic and social gap between nontraditional and traditional students (Bragg, 2013; Jesnek, 2012).

The goal of this research study was to explore how, if at all, nontraditional students influence traditional students at the community college level. There was a gap in research regarding the advantages and/or disadvantages nontraditional students may bring to the community college environment and their influence on traditional peers. This study showing that a mixture of nontraditional and traditional students at community colleges influences relationships, retention, and learning provides significant positive implications for social and educational reform. This research can be used to improve instructional strategies and cooperative activities to improve engagement and peer relationships in the community college classroom.

Summary

Community colleges attract a diverse group of learners with various risk factors, needs, and motivations (Jesnek, 2012; Lundberg, 2014). Nearly half of all students graduating with a 4-year degree in 2013-14 had attended a community college at some point (Smith, 2015). However, researchers have shown that most students who enter higher education through community colleges fail to earn a postsecondary credential (Goldrick-Rab, et al., 2013; Jenkins & Cho, 2012). Nationally, 67 % of undergraduates are under the age of 25 with varying characteristics (Snyder & Dillow, 2011).

Community college environments have historically been designed around traditional students enrolling the fall semester after high school (Ayers, 2015). However, nontraditional student enrollment continues to increase (Bragg, 2013; Kelly & Strawn,

2011) with college enrollment for 25 to 29-year-olds and 30 to 34-year-olds more than doubling from 1967 to 2009 (Baime & Mullin, 2011).

The literature shows that peers can be a catalyst for student success, with peer relationships and connectedness leading to an increase in engagement, achievement, or persistence in college (Di Tomasso, 2012; Lundberg, 2014). Mentoring is also important for undergraduate students and has been shown to improve achievement, especially for women (Crisp, 2015; DuBois & Karcher, 2013).

However, there was a gap in research regarding the peer relationships of mixed-age group classrooms of community college undergraduate students. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore peer interactions and influences between nontraditional students and their traditional classmates. This research may help educators better understand how mixed-age groups of students interact and impact each other, and the results could be used to influence the design of learning environments, impact the selection of classroom activities, and initiate institutional changes to encourage mentoring and other mixed-group activities. This research was needed to bring about positive social change in higher education, especially at the community college level, and to help bridge the academic and social gap between nontraditional and traditional students (Bragg, 2013; Jesnek, 2012).

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative study was to investigate how, if at all, nontraditional learners influence traditional learners in the community college classroom. In this chapter, I examine literature related to community college students and their unique characteristics and needs, as well as the interactions and relationships between them. Research on the community college environment and its influences on students was also explored. In addition, the theoretical and conceptual frameworks that framed the study and informed the research on this phenomenon were examined, as well as the gaps within them. The review of the literature centers on the concepts that were relevant to this qualitative, collect case study inquiry and is comprised of recent, relevant research explored in a variety of scholarly text and articles, as well as those recommended by instructors.

Literature Search Strategy

The primary method employed for finding scholarly literature for my study included searching the following online EBSCO databases: Academic Search Premier Education Research Complete, Educational Research Information Center (ERIC), and ProQuest. I also conducted searches in the Walden Library database and Google Scholar.

Key words used in the literature search included *community college students*, *community college classrooms*, *community college environment*, *nontraditional students*, *adult learners*, *peer relationships*, *peer interactions*, and *peer mentoring*. In addition, I used texts from my doctoral courses, those listed in bibliographies of other relevant

sources, and those recommended by instructors related to my methodology and dissertation topic.

Conceptual Framework

Tinto's interactionist theory (1975, 1987, 1997) framed the study and data analysis. Tinto's theory indicates that engagement and retention are influenced by the type and amount of interaction and integration of the student in the social context of academia. Peer-to-peer interactions increase social integration, and dynamic relationships lead to student persistence (Tinto, 1997). The role of the increasing number of nontraditional students in community colleges was explored, as well as the interactions among nontraditional and traditional students in student engagement, relationships, and classroom environment. Tinto et al. (1994), and later Tinto (1997) established that classroom involvement not only "facilitates academic and social integration, but also promotes integration beyond the classroom" (p. 56).

In a quantitative study of first-generation, first-time-in-college students, Sheppard (2012) investigated community college students' perceptions of factors related to their success. The conceptual framework used to guide Sheppard's study was Tinto's (1975) interactionist theory, which placed student engagement at the core of student success. Sheppard found that participation in academic advising, enrollment in a student success course, and positive interactions with faculty were primary factors contributing to student success, while a lack of college knowledge and inconsistent expectations were detrimental to student success.

In contrast, two studies confirmed Tinto's (1975, 1987, 1997) assessment that peer interactions were significant factors for student success. Davidson and Wilson (2013) found that peer interactions impact retention and confidence among college students. In Smith's (2015) study, community college students reported that peer and faculty interactions in a learning context contributed positively to their learning and social sensitivity.

Gilardi and Guglielmetti (2011) also investigated the validity of Tinto's (1975, 1987, 1994) interactionist theory regarding the identification of student interaction with peers and the institution as a primary factor affecting retention. In the empirical study of 228 first-year students, the researchers found that engagement, social integration, and the meaningfulness of the college learning experience affected traditional and nontraditional students, and their retention, differently. They claimed the theory applied mainly to traditional students with no evidence that interaction influenced the success of nontraditional students (Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011).

In contrast, a mixed methods study conducted by Barnett (2014) clearly found that nontraditional students possessed a high commitment to degree completion and, therefore, persistence. Barnett explored Tinto's integration theory (Tinto, 1975; Tinto & Cullen, 1973) as it related to nontraditional students, which were not originally researched. My study investigated the relationship of academic and social integration, defined by a sense of belonging and classroom active learning strategies, with persistence. Consistent with Tinto's model, factors analyzed included initial and subsequent institutional commitment, as well as initial goal commitment. The one

common predictor of persistence was nontraditional students' commitment to their initial educational goal. Barnett agreed with Tinto (2012) that for nontraditional students, college is more of a personal choice and "frequently a matter of economic needs than it is a youthful rite of passage" (p. 76).

A conceptual framework constructed from past experiences and knowledge to further inform theory allowed me to build on what is already known about community colleges and nontraditional students to explore and explain the natural progression of the experience (Maxwell, 2013).

Conceptual framework studies of community college success often use persistence, degree attainment, or transfer as metrics of success, but learning is a less commonly studied outcome (Mullin, 2012a). Closely related to Tinto's interactionist theory is Kuh's (2009) engagement model. His framework identifies ways engagement in the college experience predicts learning for a diverse group of community college students who were members of a student organization. Kuh also identified institutional practices that increase student engagement in the college experience, particularly through interaction with peers and faculty around educationally meaningful tasks.

Kuh's model is conceptually grounded in Astin's (1996) involvement theory, which states that students benefit more from the college experience when they are more deeply and meaningfully involved in it. Kuh's engagement model expands on Astin's involvement theory by focusing on the institution's responsibility for creating an engaging college environment. Central to both involvement and engagement is the notion that student investment in the college experience, particularly with peers and faculty,

pays off in terms of student learning. Saenz et al. (2011) cited findings that engagement is related to persistence at the community college level, and they argue that engagement models should be tested more extensively on community college populations. Both Kuh's engagement model and Astin's involvement theory were based on 4-year college students. Tinto (1997), however, did emphasize the importance of peer interaction among commuter and nontraditional students. Saenz et al. cited the greater diversity of students and the open-access policy of the community college as two distinctive features that warrant a further study of the interactionist and involvement model's efficacy at the community college level.

Though Karp (2011) pointed out that students lack opportunities for social interaction and integration at community colleges, Dwyer (2013) found that classroom-based social integration can be created through collaborative activities, class discussions and peer relationships, leading to increased nontraditional students' persistence in higher education. Though collaboration has been shown to improve motivation and learning (Wyatt, 2011), little was known about the interaction between nontraditional and traditional students and the influence, if any, on motivation, retention, and learning.

Most community college students attend college within their home community and retain many of their precollege relationships and responsibilities (Deil-Amen, 2011); therefore, they may not feel a need for social engagement. Though college classroom interactions may be unnecessary for social reasons, Tinto's (1997), Kuh's (2009), and Astin's (1996) models suggest that they are essential for educational reasons.

Literature Review

Population Trends

Community college students are more diverse, more challenged academically and socioeconomically, and more likely to drop out or fail than 4-year university students (Goldrick-Rab, et al., 2013; Karp, 2011). Many are defined as "at risk" students who lack academic skills, motivation, and family and financial support (Forbus, et al., 2011; Garrett, 2011; Schunk, et al., 2013).

Additional characteristics and challenges of today's generation, according to Estes (2011) and Prensky (2012), are that students have been enabled more than students of past generations, and technology has diminished their attention spans and led them to seek immediate gratification.

The enrollment of nontraditional students continues to increase in higher education, especially at the community college level, due to a struggling economy, an aging Baby Boomer population, advancing technology, increased immigration, global outsourcing, and the need for a more skilled workforce (Bragg, 2013; Jesnek, 2012; Singh, 2014). College enrollment for students age 29 to 34 more than doubled from 1967 to 2009 (Baime & Mullin, 2011), with a projected student population growth between 2010 and 2021 of 20 % for students age 25 to 34 and 25 % for students age 35 and up. Meanwhile, the population traditional students age 18 to 24 is only expected to grow by 10 % by 2021 (Hussar & Bailey, 2013).

Mullins (2012b) pointed out that the population of first-generation college students also continues to rise, and their needs and cultures are very unique in

comparison to most college norms. Stephens, Fryberg, Markus, Johnson, and Covarrubias (2012) agreed with Mullins and found the interdependent culture of these students versus the independent college culture is mismatched. The researchers used a combination of longitudinal survey and experimental studies to address the need to recognize cultural obstacles students face and how they contribute to an overwhelming social class achievement gap among college students.

Compared to larger universities, community colleges are known for expanded educational opportunities but diminished retention and degree attainment (Brand, Pfeffer, & Goldrick-Rab, 2012; Burkum, Habley, McClanahan, & Valiga, 2010). Due to open-access admission, low costs, and commuter campuses, community colleges attract students who are more academically, socially, and economically disadvantaged (Pruett & Absher, 2015).

Community colleges are especially attractive for low-income and immigrant populations; however, social and financial support is crucial to access and success (Teranishi, Suárez-Orozco, & Suárez-Orozco, 2011). In addition, more students with cognitive disabilities, such as Autism, and other special needs are now entering community colleges, which means institutions must provide more support services and peers must learn to be more open toward peer differences (Nevill & White, 2011). Finally, the number of military students and veterans has increased in community colleges, most who are nontraditional and bring their own unique characteristics and needs. Whiteman, Barry, Mroczek, and MacDermid-Wadsworth (2013) found that peer emotional support was a factor in success for student service members.

Although community colleges attract a diverse mix of students, most community college environments are designed for traditional learners (Ayers, 2015). This presents implications for researchers and practitioners to cultivate new strategies for transforming community colleges into student-centered settings where all learners can be successful.

Nontraditional Students

There are varying definitions of nontraditional students, with most agreeing these students did not take the traditional route of attending college straight out of high school (Wyatt, 2011). Ross-Gordon (2011) pointed out that the majority of college students could be defined as nontraditional now with a growing diversity of populations, ages, and responsibilities. Though the number of younger students entering college continues to grow, these "traditional" students are no longer homogenous, and more and more students are balancing a multitude of commitments beyond school (Mullin, 2012b; Ross-Gordon, 2011).

However, for the purpose of this study, nontraditional students were defined using Rown-Kenyon, Swan, Deutsch, and Gansneder's (2012) description as students aged 25 and older and/or students with family and work responsibilities. On the other hand, traditional students, as described according to the U.S. Department of Education (2011), were defined as dependent students between the ages of 18 and 23.

Nontraditional students offer challenges to community colleges, with different expectations and needs than traditional-aged students (Haberler & Levin, 2014; Hagedorn, 2014). Their educational barriers and struggles for persistence and success are compounded by technological inadequacies (Jesnek, 2012; Zickhur & Madden, 2012) and

conflicting priorities and commitments (Pontes & Pontes, 2012; Quick, 2012; Ross-Gordon, 2011; Wyatt, 2011). In addition, most nontraditional students work at least part-time (Snyder & Dillow, 2013), and a study by Rowan-Kenyon et al. (2012) confirmed Astin's (1993) claim that the more a college student works, the less likely he or she will persist in college.

Challenges are countered, however, by the positive traits mature learners add to the college environment. Nontraditional learners often differ from traditional students in their goals, commitment, and work ethic (Barnett, 2014; Kenner & Weinerman, 2011; Tinto, 2012). Hagelskamp, Scheifer, and DiStasi (2013) agreed with Tinto (2012) that nontraditional students are more committed because they enter college with one goal in mind - to earn a degree.

Kenner and Weinerman (2011) found that nontraditional student brought learning styles and life experiences to the college setting that can help or hinder learning and provide critical foundations for future success. Although nontraditional students may present challenges for educators, they also create opportunities for life experiences and wisdom to positively affect the college environment (Kenner & Weinerman).

In addition, researchers have shown that nontraditional students are often more achievement-oriented than traditional students, with increased motivation and the desire to link their lives, work, and studies (Ryan, 2013). Nontraditional students are also more likely than traditional learners to view their education as an investment (Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011). Nontraditional students often prove that experience really can be the best teacher (Pike, et al., 2011).

However, even though these adult learners are more goal-oriented and participate more in class, they can still feel isolated from their traditional classmates (Parks, et al., 2013). One problem is that nontraditional students, due to family and employment time constraints, are less likely to socialize with classmates (Staley & Trinkle, 2011). Olson and Brescher (2011) also noted that younger students tend to stereotype older students and treat them unkindly. These generation gaps can affect engagement, motivation, and attrition. Olson and Brescher emphasized the importance of multigenerations working together in social, academic, and occupational environments. Therefore, exploring how mixed-age groups interact and impact each other in the classroom was needed and important. Results of this study could foster student relationships and instructional strategies and help bridge the generational gap.

In a study of social integration at 2-year institutions, Deil-Amen (2011) found that traditional students sought social activities while nontraditional students were more likely to build peer relationships through classroom discussions, in-class activities, and other purposeful academic experiences. Nontraditional students felt that “purely social relationships” were not important and sometimes “unwanted obstacles or distractions” (Deil-Amen, 2011, p. 74). Thompson, Miller, and Franz (2013) disagreed, however, claiming that nontraditional students often fail online courses due to their need for a social presence and instructor and peer support. A study by Price and Baker (2012) provided additional evidence that connections and peer relationships could be created through informal communities and interactions in the classroom. If and how

nontraditional students specifically influence their younger, traditional classmates, however, had not been studied.

In a qualitative case study by Scott and Lewis (2012), the researchers found that college environments can be intimidating and even hostile for nontraditional students. However, students were more likely to acclimate and complete their degree with support from family, faculty, and peers (Scott & Lewis). However, no studies were found that explored whether nontraditional students influence younger peers, either academically or socially.

Higher education promotes explorations and reconsiderations of worldviews (Liu & Chang, 2014), and nontraditional students bring a plethora of life and work experiences with them to the classroom, contributing to class discussion and peer engagement (Ryan, 2013). Social interaction among learners is linked to increased knowledge (Crisp, 2015), and increased engagement and collaboration results in greater student success (Wyatt, 2011). Therefore, nontraditional students' experience and maturity might contribute to class discussion, collaboration, and their traditional peers' knowledge and viewpoints. This research study had the potential to provide evidence of positive influences of nontraditional students on their younger, less-experienced classmates.

Community College Challenges

The value of community colleges is being acknowledged more and more in today's diverse society (Mullin, 2012b). However, scholars agree that community college students are susceptible to high failure rates due to socioeconomic and environmental

factors, as well as a general lack of academic preparedness (Bragg, 2013; Brophy, 2013; Honken & Ralston, 2013).

Community colleges are primarily open access and enroll a greater proportion of students with various risk factors compared to all other forms of higher education.

Therefore, in addition to student achievement, another key challenge in higher education is retaining students, considering approximately 50 % drop out before obtaining a degree (Braxton, et al., 2011).

Tinto (2000a) claimed retention is achieved when a student is committed and integrated. Some researchers argue that pre-entry attributes determine whether a student will persist or drop out of college after the first year (Van Zyl, Gravett, & De Bruin, 2012). The study by Van Zyl et al. was based on Tinto's (1987) longitudinal interactionist theory that postulated student attributes as the most important influence on their ability to integrate into higher education.

In addition, Gilardi and Guglielmetti's (2011) empirical study of first-year students found that engagement, social integration, and the meaningfulness of the college learning experience affected traditional and nontraditional students, and their retention, differently. The researchers claimed Tinto's (1975, 1987, 1994) interactionist theory applied to traditional students only.

Gilardi and Guglielmetti (2011) also concluded that student persistence was not affected by student backgrounds, ages, or classroom experiences. In contrast, Barbatis (2010) concluded racial diversity was a significant factor in persistence, while Gilardi

and Guglielmetti claimed students who were employed and juggled responsibilities outside of college were the most likely to drop out.

In contrast, student experiences inconsistent with initial expectations were found to affect student success in three studies. A study of undergraduate nursing students conducted by McKendry, Wright, and Stevenson (2014) showed that unrealistic expectations influenced retention and student satisfaction, and a study of first-generation undergraduate community college students by Sheppard (2012) found that a lack of college knowledge and unclear expectations were detrimental to student success. Karp and Bork's (2012) qualitative study of community college students also concurred with Sheppard. Even academically prepared students often failed due to a failure of understanding expectations and a lack of knowledge of the skills, attitudes, and behavior necessary for college success.

Student deficiencies, according to Banister et al. (2011) and Sparks (2011), were found to be the main factor causing low completion rates among community college students. Sparks argued that community colleges' lower standards for admission and easy access to financial aid enable "marginal unmotivated students' access to education that were not ready for the college experience" (p. 18). Hence, many community college students enter at the remedial level, fail to complete a degree, and usually drop out after one year (Banister et al., 2011).

Mullin (2012b) and Sparks (2011) also pointed out that federal funding for colleges is now increasingly based on retention and graduation rates, rather than enrollment. Mullin argued that new policies and accountability could jeopardize

educational access for nontraditional and "at risk" students. With more than 10 percent of 19 million student loans in default and more than \$850 billion owed to the federal government, Congress has demanded more accountability from colleges and a "return on the government's investment" (Sparks, 2011, p.15). Therefore, community colleges are increasingly seeking ways to increase not only enrollment, but retention and student success (Barnett, 2014; Sparks, 2011).

Though the literature stressed the importance of retention and graduation as indicators of success, Merrill (2014) challenged the traditional view that dropping out of college is a failure of the student and/or institution. In the collective case study, students identified benefits they had gained during their college experience, including learning, relationships, confidence, and identity and development of self.

Helping community college students succeed is crucial to social change and can be generated by researching their unique characteristics and needs, by fostering support strategies, by promoting democracy, and by eliminating the socioeconomic hierarchy society encourages (Goldrick-Rab, et al., 2013). With an increasingly diverse population, including more and more nontraditional students, the influence of nontraditional students in the community college classroom and on their traditional classmates could prove beneficial to strategies for institutional and student success (Keller, 2012; Wyatt, 2011).

Community College Classroom

Tinto (1997) pointed out that "the classroom is the crossroads where the social and the academic meet" (p. 599) and may be the only place where college students who commute and juggle multiple responsibilities outside of school have the opportunity to

spend time with other students and faculty and experience formal education. Yet, the classroom has not played a central role in theories related to student persistence, retention, or interaction (Tinto).

Required core or general education courses, such as English, college algebra, and psychology, are the most challenging - and the least motivating - courses for college students because they fail to see the value in such classes for their future careers (Bargagliotti et al., 2012). However, the learning environment has been found to significantly affect motivation (Froiland et al., 2012; McClellan & Hyle, 2012). Pace's (1979) theoretical model for measuring college outcomes claimed that classroom experiences and involvement with other students affected learning and personal growth. Gilardi and Guglielmetti (2011) claimed that nontraditional students placed more emphasis on contacts outside the classroom than traditional students. However, Tinto (2012) argued that for nontraditional students who juggle school, family and work, the classroom is their primary integration area and their only connection to the campus and other college students. This is especially true at community colleges where students commute rather than live on campus in dorms.

In a study by Lester et al. (2013), transfer, nontraditional students also viewed the academic arena of the classroom as the place where engagement was most important, due to demands on their time by employers, family, and other outside relationships. The influence of nontraditional students on their traditional classmates in the classroom, however, had not been studied.

Scholars agree that improving opportunities and methods for enriching academic and social experiences in higher education is crucial and that the classroom should be student-centered, engaging, and guided by assessment data and student input (Quaye & Harper, 2014).

Therefore, more research was needed regarding the impact of mixed-age group interactions and relationships on students and the classroom environment. This study may benefit community colleges in helping to improve student motivation, learning, and retention, as well as classroom instructional strategies for challenging gateway courses.

Student Involvement and Interactions

Both Astin's (1984) theory of student involvement and Tinto's (1997, 1987) student persistence and interactionist theories emphasize the importance of the classroom and social integration, suggesting the more students are involved in the college environment, the more likely they will learn, persist, and commit to educational goals. These theories build on earlier theories, as well as Pace's (1979) model for measuring college outcomes, which proposed that classroom experiences and involvement with other students impacts learning and growth. In a study by Smith (2015), community college students reported that peer and faculty interactions in a learning context contributed positively to their learning and social sensitivity.

Furthermore, many scholars have pointed out that peer relationships are key factors affecting students' adjustment and sense of belonging in college (Lundberg, 2014; Parks, et al., 2013). According to Vygotsky (1978), cognitive functions, such as thinking and problem-solving, were products of interactions with others (cited in Wertz, 2013).

Allowing students to share their expectations and concerns within the classroom and with their peers and instructors, as well as reflect on their learning, can also improve confidence and satisfaction (Keller, 2012; Schunk, et al., 2014). However, the influence of interactions between nontraditional and traditional students and possible patterns and relationships had not been researched. Therefore, this study provides valuable insight for community college classrooms and higher education institutions.

Mentoring is also important for undergraduate students, especially women, and has been shown to impact achievement (DuBois & Karcher, 2013). Studies by Parks et al. (2013) and Dwyer (2013) found that students who felt isolated were more likely to withdraw from a course - or from college altogether. However, students with a stronger sense of community or connectedness to others in the classroom were more likely to remain enrolled and succeed (Parks, et al., 2013; Tinto, 1994). Many scholars agreed that peer relationships and sense of belonging, in turn, can increase engagement, achievement, or persistence in college (Lundberg, 2014; Di Tomasso, 2012).

Researchers have shown that student engagement plays an essential role in learning, especially in community colleges (Lester, et al., 2013; Pike, et al., 2011). Vincent Tinto (2000), the most cited scholar regarding college student retention, claimed engagement, or "academic and social integration" was positively linked to retention and was the single greatest predictor of persistence. However, Tinto, as well as Quaye and Harper (2014), argued the importance of "purposeful engagement" (p. 5), claiming students may be involved but not engaged and that students do not engage themselves. The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) identified several engagement

indicators that are evident in high-impact educational practicing institutions, including academic challenge, collaborative learning and discussions with peers, effective teaching practices and faculty interactions, a supportive campus environment, and high-impact practices that positively impact student learning and retention (as cited in Quaye & Harper, 2014, p. 6). Therefore, if peer discussion and collaboration are linked to engagement and retention, then this research study holds merit in providing data regarding the influence of peer interactions and engagement on community college classrooms of mixed-age groups.

In a study by Lundberg (2014), students self-reported that engagement with peers contributed to the most learning outcomes in areas of general education, cognitive skills, science and technology, career preparation, and personal development, but not as strongly as interaction with faculty. A study by Davidson and Wilson (2013) found that campus relationships are also important to student persistence, especially for nontraditional students. Lundberg suggested the need for further research about the benefits of student-faculty and peer interactions at the community college level.

In online education, research continues to show the positive influence of peer interactions and discussions (Ke & Kwack, 2013; Zydney & Seo, 2012) in improving learning and motivation and creating a community. Furthermore, numerous studies focus on improving social interactions in online settings (Borokhovski, Tamin, Bernard, Abrami, & Sokolovskaya, 2012; Kassens-Noor, 2012; Laru, Naykki, & Jarvela, 2012; Rennie & Morrison, 2013; Yang & Chang, 2012).

At the elementary and secondary levels, peer interactions have been found to significantly influence students' academic achievement (Burke & Sass, 2013). Peer influences have also been found to affect adolescents' pro-social behaviors (Brechtwald & Prinstein, 2011; Hoorn, Dijk, Meuwese, Rieffe, & Crone, 2014), as well as susceptibility to sexual behaviors (Choukas-Bradley, Giletta, Widman, Cohen, & Prinstein, 2014), and substance use (Allen, Chango, Szewedo, Schad, & Marston, 2012).

In the traditional higher education arena, one study found that peer interaction in the college classroom positively influenced students' creativity and problem-finding abilities (Han, Hu, Liu, Jia, & Adey, 2013). Collaborative instructional tools and techniques are also popular educational and research topics (Barkley, Cross, & Major, 2014). However, research was lacking regarding peer interactions and social integration within the mixed-age group community college classroom and the impact on students.

There is an increasing demand for internationalized and customized education and models that support interaction, collaboration, and assessment (Johnson, Adams, Cummins, Estad, Freeman, & Ludgate, 2013). College students utilize a range of support mechanisms to maintain motivation and juggle the numerous demands on their time, including fellow students, faculty and staff, friends, family, and co-workers (McKendry, Wright, & Stevenson, 2014). Schools in the 21st century must prepare students to be critical thinkers, problem solvers, wise consumers, confident producers of knowledge, and collaborators. Students need to be more responsive to a growing global culture of learners and classrooms with a broad array of languages, experiences, and interests represented (Tomlinson, 2015).

Summary and Conclusions

The literature suggested that community college students face overwhelming obstacles to success. A lack of social support is the main barrier to success for community college students (David et al., 2013). Student involvement, including collaborative learning and faculty and peer interaction, has been found to promote student learning, growth, and retention. Many scholars confirm the need for collaboration and peer interaction in the classroom to improve motivation, engagement, learning, and persistence and offer tools for creating a collaborative environment. However, there was a significant gap in the research regarding the impact of these interactions on community college students of mixed-age groups and specifically, the influence of nontraditional students on their traditional classmates.

Chapter 3: Research Method

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the influence of nontraditional students on their traditional classmates at the community college level. To accomplish this purpose, the researcher interviewed a selection of 26 full-time undergraduate students, both traditional and nontraditional, as well as 4 instructors of required gateway courses (English, math, science, psychology). Three additional traditional students and three additional nontraditional students (6 total) were added to ensure saturation. The study describes and analyzes their perceptions and experiences in order to better understand how students of mixed-age groups interact and impact each other in the community college setting.

This chapter includes a description of the research method used to study the influence of nontraditional students on traditional students, including the research design and rationale. For transparency and reproducibility purposes the chapter provides sampling method and selection of participants, as well as the data collection procedures and process for analyzing data. In addition, strategies used to improve the trustworthiness of this qualitative research study, as well as other ethical procedures followed, are explained. Also, a chapter summary is provided.

Research Design and Rationale

The research question that guided the study was developed based on my observations as a college English instructor and on the available literature that revealed distinguishing differences between nontraditional and traditional students. There was a

lack of research regarding the influence of the growing influx of nontraditional students on their traditional peers in the community college classroom. Maxwell (2013) described a conceptual framework as existing research and theory related to the subject matter combined with the researcher's knowledge and experiences.

RQ: How do nontraditional students influence their traditional peers in the community college classroom, academically and socially?

SQ1: How, if at all, do interactions between nontraditional and traditional students influence academic success (learning, engagement, retention)?

SQ2: How, if at all, do interactions between nontraditional students and traditional students influence traditional students socially (relationships, confidence, class discussion)?

The research design chosen for the study was a qualitative case study approach. Qualitative research allows a more humanistic approach, describing and interpreting experiences and how they can be applied to situations. Quantitative research tests a hypothesis, validating a study statistically using larger populations. However, quantitative research may miss contextual detail and fails to understand feelings and emotions (Miles, et al., 2014). A qualitative collective case study approach allows researchers to collect detailed, in-depth data from multiple sources to then analyze and describe participants' experiences in order to understand the overall meaning and general lessons learned from the cases (Maxwell, 2013). Researchers use the case study method when they want to investigate a real-life issue in more detail. Though challenging and sometimes limited,

case studies provide a platform to investigate the effects of a particular phenomenon on participants' lives (Yin, 2014).

Several qualitative approaches could have been used for this inquiry, but the selection of Case Study Research was based on the purpose of the research and the research questions. The purpose of my research was to uncover the social and academic influences, if any, nontraditional students have on traditional students in community college classmates. Grounded theory, for example, was my next choice. However, it would have been difficult to coordinate a project that could extract enough extensive data for the purpose of generating a theory. Theory development and prediction were not my focus, but the answers to “how” questions (Yin, 2014) regarding peer interactions and influences in the community college classroom.

Another approach considered was heuristic inquiry, which is characterized by the researcher's firsthand experience where the researcher takes a more intimate role with the participants (Patton, 2002). However, I wanted to be impartial and detached and not use participants I know to help minimize bias and add integrity to the study. I have a background in education, but I did not want my experiences or observations to interfere with my research or my interactions with participants. I felt a true understanding of peer influences in the classroom could not be described without interviewing a group of traditional students, nontraditional students, and instructors that I, as the researcher, had no previous knowledge or familiarity.

Using multiple case studies allowed comparison, thick description, and a study of the participants' lives in their natural context (Houghton, Casey, Shaw, & Murphy

(2013). Yin (2009) posited that case studies make use of multiple sources of data, which has an added benefit of triangulation. A qualitative methodological case study offered a more humanistic approach enabling rich, thick data versus a quantitative survey with close-ended questions that is limited and may miss contextual details (Miles, et al., 2014). Case study research allowed me to interview a sampling of diverse students to explore and describe (Yin) their experiences and influences in the community college classroom in order to impact social change.

Role of Researcher

My role as the researcher was to interview and later ask follow-up questions about the influence of mixed-age groups in the community college classroom. The researcher is the instrument in qualitative research, performing all data collection activities and extracting deeper meaning of lived experiences through participants' personal narration (Seidman, 2012).

The process began by obtaining a Letter of Cooperation to conduct the study from the university. Then, I obtained permission from the university regional IRB as well as Walden IRB prior to approaching participants. After receiving IRB approval, the university registrar agreed to gather a list of emails for the researcher from the pool of students from the Banner system who had completed a minimum of 30 credit hours on the main campus. No names were given or used in the study. The researcher then emailed the pool of students, as well as full-time faculty, asking for volunteers for participation in the study. The scope of the study was included in the email, as well as an information sheet and informed consent form, with a deadline of one week to respond. After the

deadline, a sampling of 10 traditional students plus 3 alternates, 10 nontraditional students and three alternates, and 4 instructors with one alternate, were chosen from volunteers who responded with information forms completed, and emailed to schedule interviews. Consent forms were signed prior to the interview. Purposeful sampling (Maxwell, 2013) helped ensure representation of nontraditional-age students and gender and racial and ethnic diversity and generate participants capable of providing rich, illuminating data.

In order to prevent researcher bias, no participants were used that the researcher knew or that had attended the smaller, satellite campus 60 miles away where I teach. Only students from the main campus who had already taken their freshman English composition course were chosen. In addition, participants were assigned random letters and numbers to protect their identity, and the data was stored in this de-identified state.

After students agreed to participate, the researcher discussed the scope of the study and acquired their informed consent. Then, interviews were arranged at a comfortable location on campus where participants were asked to provide honest answers to the open-ended questions. The terms *traditional students* and *nontraditional students* were defined for participants, and they were informed that the interviews would be audiotaped for accuracy. Personal rapport was developed with participants, and recorded, face-to-face interviews were conducted to collect data and perspectives of each participant. The interviews were informally structured to allow a natural flow and generate time for participants to collect their thoughts.

Interviews were 30-45 minutes, depending on the participant's comfort level and willingness to continue. Follow-up questions were sometimes necessary to clarify or expand vague language or derive examples or further details. When the interview was complete, I thanked the participants for their time and participation and reminded them of their right to withdraw from the study at any point if they desired. Additionally, participants were encouraged to write down or record any further thoughts or feelings that came to mind after the interview that may be relevant to the study. They were also informed they would be receiving an email the following day with a transcript of the interview for clarification, and any additional thoughts could be added during that time.

After the interviews were completed, I transcribed each recorded interview verbatim and hand coded them. Verbatim transcription generates interpretation of the participants' words outside the context of the interview and facilitates the coding process (Maxwell, 2013).

Once the transcriptions were validated by participants as accurate, the raw data was read and re-read, with notes, descriptions, and reflections documented in the researcher's journal. Some phone calls were also made to participants to extract further data or clarification. Then, while re-reading the transcription, chunks of data were open coded to allow themes to emerge, instead of using a precoding structure (Miles, et al., 2014) before moving on to the next case and transcription. Transcription, member checks, and a research journal helped ensure accurate data and unbiased analysis (Maxwell, 2013).

Methodology

Participant Selection

Initially, participants included 20 undergraduate students, 10 traditional and 10 nontraditional, from the main campus of a midwestern community college, as well as 4 full-time instructors of required gateway courses. However, 6 new participants (3 traditional students and 3 nontraditional students) were added to the study, to ensure “the data set and saturation [were] complete, as indicated by data replication or redundancy” (Marshall, Cardon, Poddar, & Fontenot, 2013, p. 11). Participants included an ethnic and gender appropriate representation of the college population; therefore, half were male and half female (50 %) and 6 participants (20 %) were racially and ethnically diverse (2 African-American and 2 Hispanic students; 1 Middle Eastern and 1 African-American instructor). Gathering data from multiple interviews with diverse participants and analyzing perspectives of varying age groups, genders, and ethnicities improved credibility and dependability of the study (Miles, et al., 2014) and generated a diverse exploration of student experiences and influences in mixed-age group community college settings.

Participants were chosen randomly until the quota of students for each age group was filled. Since the student population of the college is 80 % Caucasian, 12 % African-American, 6 % Hispanic/Latino, 1 % Asian, and 1 % Other, then purposeful sampling was used to select 13 (10 participants and 3 alternates) nontraditional students (age 25 and up) and 13 traditional students (age 18 to 23) of proportionate gender (50 % each) and ethnicity (20 %) in order to ensure an accurate representation. Most field researchers

use purposeful sampling when the study is small and oriented toward investigation of a particular group in a fixed setting (Harsh, 2011). Purposeful sampling (Maxwell, 2013) helped ensure representation of mixed-age students and gender and racial and ethnic diversity.

In addition to the undergraduate student participants, full-time faculty of required gateway courses (English, math, psychology) at the college were emailed as well asking for volunteers. Of the faculty potential participants, 5 instructors were chosen (four plus an alternate), ensuring there were at least two males and two females, as well as one ethnically diverse participant. Interviewing a sampling of instructors, in addition to students, enabled the issue to be explored through a variety of lenses (Miles, et al., 2014). However, since saturation can occur very early when the population is homogeneous (Maxwell, 2013; Mason, 2010), 4 faculty participants were considered sufficient. In addition, the main focus of the study was student perspectives, with instructor experiences added for viewpoints from a varying perspective. Interviewing more participants than necessary can lead to labor-intensive, overlapping research (Mason) and “devour limited time and resources” (Marshall, et al., 2013, p. 14).

Informed decisions about sampling and saturation are critical to quality research synthesis and credibility (Harsh, 2011). In a study of 83 qualitative studies in leading journals, Marshall et al. (2013) found that 69 % used 30 or fewer interviews, that data saturation had occurred by 12 interviews in most cases, and that small sample size studies generally allowed more contact time with participants and more rich, descriptive data. In

their findings, they recommended that case studies include 15 to 30 interviews to justify credible research (Marshall et al., 2013).

In a study that explored 560 qualitative PhD studies using interview methods, Mason (2010) found that for case studies, multiples of 10 for sample size are common, with 20 or 30 diverse participants used most often. Thomson (2011) and Harsh (2011) recommend using a sampling size of twelve for case studies, and Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006) claimed six interviews were often sufficient to develop "meaningful themes and useful interpretations" (p. 78). In a study of nontraditional students by Scott and Lewis (2012), the researchers used a case study of only five students to reveal that even though the college environment can be intimidating and even hostile for nontraditional students, support from family, faculty, and peers can help students succeed.

Most qualitative researchers agree that "there are no set rules for sample size in qualitative inquiry" (Patton, 2002, p. 242) and no published guidelines on the number of participants or interviews needed to reach saturation (Marshall et al., 2013). In the study by Marshall et al., they found "extreme variations in all research designs" (p. 20). However, many qualitative researchers agreed that little new information emerges after interviewing 20 or so diverse participants (Yin, 2014; Thomson, 2011; Mason, 2010) and in as few as 6 when populations are homogeneous (Yin, 2014; Mason, 2010). Even among the top Google performers, research studies' average number of interviews fell between 15 and 30 (Marshall et al.). Therefore, a sampling size of 20 students seemed sufficient in this study to saturate the topic to see patterns and develop interpretations

regarding the influence of nontraditional students on traditional students in the community college classroom. However, 6 additional students were added to complete the data set and saturation. As different participants possess diverse opinions (Yin, 2014; Maxwell, 2013), adding the perspectives of four instructors, two males and two females, who have taught for 5 years or more in required gateway courses (English, math, psychology, etc.), further enlightened the research by sharing their observations of peer interactions and influences in the community college classroom.

Instrumentation

Recorded, face-to-face interviews were the primary source of data collection, and the open-ended questions (Appendix A, B, & C) were structured and informed by the research question. Following one design suggested by Maxwell (2013), an informal, semi-structured interview protocol was used with the instruments aligned to research questions. Then, follow-up questions were asked related to each participant's answers.

The researcher used Yin's (2014) case study protocol to construct "how" and "why" exploratory and explanatory questions framed by the research questions in order to develop a more in-depth understanding (pp. 9-11) of the influence of nontraditional students on their traditional classmates. The researcher constructed interview questions meant to extract deeper meaning of participants' lived experiences through personal narration.

The primary research question was "How do nontraditional students influence their traditional peers in the community college classroom?" Therefore, interview questions were focused on the question, exploring participants' experiences and

perceptions in order to make causal and valid inferences (Yin, 2014). Then, subquestions were constructed to target more specific academic and social areas of influence:

SQ1: How, if at all, do interactions between nontraditional and traditional students influence traditional students academically (learning, student engagement, retention)?

SQ2: How, if at all, do interactions between nontraditional students and traditional students influence traditional students socially (confidence, relationships, participation, sense of belonging)?

The nature of the interview questions leads to an explanatory-exploratory case study, as described by Yin (2014), to extract in-depth, rich data. However, the researcher was careful to explore but not probe.

The weaknesses of face-to-face interviews lie mainly in the interviewer, questions, and format but can be lessened with consistency and practice (Seidman, 2013). As an experienced journalist, the researcher's expertise alleviated some of those weaknesses; however, bias and interpretations are always possible obstacles and were carefully managed. Developing a positive, respectful rapport with participants and striving to reduce stress and hierarchy, therefore creating balance and building equity, also improved the honesty and depth of responses (Seidman). When a researcher is unable to directly observe a phenomenon, interviews allow the researcher access innermost thoughts and feelings (Maxwell, 2013). Subjective experiences are key tools for creating understanding and meaning (Yin, 2014).

Semi-structured interview questions that focused on the research question aided in consistency in the data collection process. During the interview process, the questions were sometimes altered and the order shifted as needed to adapt to participant responses. Open-ended questions related to the research question can help clear up misunderstandings and encourage rapport (Seidman, 2013). Engaging participants and asking them to elaborate was an important strategy the researcher employed to collect quality data and reduce bias. Participants were informed of the anonymity of their identities and confidentiality of responses and were assured that there were no right or wrong answers and their opinions would in no way affect their present or future academics.

Additional questions were sometimes necessary, and some follow-up emails and phone calls were made to clarify responses. The intent of each question was to initiate detailed responses from each participant about their classroom experiences with mixed-age groups and their perceptions of the influence, if any, that classmates of different ages and experiences may have had on students' retention, motivation, learning, or overall social and/or academic success. All participants were asked to provide honest feedback. Student participants were asked to describe their personal experiences and perceptions regarding peer interactions, relationships, and influences, socially and academically, in the community college classroom (Appendixes A & B). Instructors were asked to describe their observations and perceptions of student influence based on their experiences in and out of the classroom (Appendix C). Follow-up questions and

interviews were needed in a few cases to clarify and deepen understanding and interpretation, depending on the participants' answers.

Interviewing is a valuable tool that allows researchers to hear others' stories, to learn, to understand connections and relevance of those experiences, and then to share the meaning with others to make a difference in the field and society (Seidman, 2013).

"Every word that people use in telling their stories is a microcosm of their consciousness"

(Vygotsky, 1987, pp. 236-237). Ferrarotti (1981) argued that "social abstractions like

'education' are best understood through the experiences of the individuals whose work

and lives are the stuff upon which the abstractions are built" (as cited in Seidman, 2012,

p. 9). However, "qualitative interviewing is a dynamic and iterative process" and the

researcher must be aware that it is "a flexible and adaptive process that changes based on

the circumstances that arise during the interview session" (Rubin & Rubin, 2011, p. 57).

Through in-depth interviews, this study illuminated the experiences of students in mixed-

age community college classrooms, make meaning of learners' perceptions and

experiences, and sharing the collective results with the academic world in order to

improve knowledge and understanding of how nontraditional students influence

traditional students in the community college classroom.

Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

The data was collected from the main campus of a midwestern 2-year college

with an approximate enrollment of 22,753 undergraduates total, but only 15,200 at the

Vincennes campus. After permission was obtained from Walden's IRB and the

university's regional Institutional Review Board, the university Registrar gathered a list

of email addresses of juniors and seniors at the main campus. I then emailed students, explaining the purpose of the study and asking for volunteers. The email included a demographic form asking for their age, gender, ethnicity, major, email address, and phone number. Interested undergraduate students were asked to reply within one week with their completed form. Then, the researcher used the demographic form data to select 10 nontraditional students (age 25 and up) and 10 traditional students (age 18 to 24) of proportionate gender (50 % each) and ethnicity (20 % Hispanic/Latino, African American, Native American, Asian, or Middle Eastern), in order to ensure an accurate representation of the student population. In addition, three (3) alternate students were chosen from each age group in the case of a withdrawal of a participant from the study or the need for further data. To prevent bias, purposeful sampling was used to choose participants from the main campus the researcher did not know, rather than students at the smaller satellite campus 60 miles away where the researcher teaches. By using juniors and seniors, students had already taken the freshman English composition course the researcher teaches. Participants were identified only by an assigned letter and number, and data was stored in this de-identified state throughout the study to protect the identity and maintain the privacy of participants.

Chosen volunteer participants were then contacted via email to set up face-to-face interviews on campus. Participants were reassured that their identities and their responses would remain confidential and asked to sign a consent form to participate in the study. The consent form also disclosed the intent for the interview to be recorded.

The interviews were held at a time and location on the main campus convenient for the participant. All interviews were completed during a two-week time frame, with 2-3 interviews performed daily during weekdays only. The interviews were held in a conference room on the main campus, where participants' privacy could be ensured. The researcher sought to provide a comfortable, safe atmosphere to improve rapport (Maxwell, 2013). The informal interviews were 30 minutes to 1 hour, depending on the participant. The researcher listened more than talked, taking some notes, but audiotaping the entire interview to ensure reliable data. The scope of the study was explained and relevant terms defined. Each participant was asked the same open-ended set of questions, though in some cases, additional questions were added for elaboration and clarification of the responses. After the interview, students were thanked for their participation, informed of their rights, and reassured again that their identity would be protected. Some follow-up questions were needed and presented via email or phone to ask students to elaborate and/or explain a response from the earlier interview. No interview was scheduled for more than 45 minutes unless the participant wished to continue further than the allotted time. The researcher made every effort to promote participant comfort, openness about the process and study, and sufficient depth of their reflections in order to generate in-depth discussion and comprehension of their experiences. Each interview, whether face-to-face or by phone, was recorded using a digital handheld device and later transcribed verbatim. Contact information for the researcher, the dissertation chair, and the head of the Walden and ISU Institutional Review Boards was shared with each participant in case they had any questions or concerns regarding the study.

As soon as possible after each interview, the researcher listened to the recorded interview in its entirety for comprehension, taking notes in her research journal. Then, line by line, the researcher listened again, transcribing the interview verbatim into Microsoft Word. Verbatim transcription allowed the researcher to interpret the participants' words outside the context of the interview and facilitate the coding process (Maxwell, 2013). A transcript of each interview was then sent to the participant via email to verify the researcher's transcription and language, and to allow participants the opportunity to clarify any misunderstandings or vague responses before analysis begins. Participants were asked to respond to the email with agreement of the transcription or any changes, additions, or deletions they recommended. Some participants thought of additional comments, examples, and details that further illuminated their initial responses. Member checking helped ensure an ethical and efficient research process (Miles, et al., 2014).

Once the transcriptions were validated by participants as accurate, the raw data was read and re-read, with notes, descriptions, and reflections documented in the researcher's journal. Then, while re-reading the transcription, chunks of data were open coded to allow themes to emerge, instead of using a pre-coding structure (Miles, et al., 2014) before moving on to the next case and transcription. Transcription, member checks, and a research journal helped ensure accurate data and unbiased analysis (Maxwell, 2013). Maintaining a reflective journal throughout the research process facilitated the researcher's reflexivity through self-awareness, cultural consciousness, and ownership of perspective. Reflexivity allows a researcher to converse about the

experiences and continuously “examine what [she] knows and how [she] knows it” (Patton, 2002, p. 65).

All data and identities of participants will remain confidential and be stored in a de-identified state. Each interview is in the possession of the researcher only, stored on a flash drive and on my personal laptop under the participant’s assigned letter and number, and kept in a secure, locked location at the researcher’s home. The data will be destroyed after 5 years.

Data Analysis Plan

Data analysis for this collective case study occurred at various levels. First, each participant was assigned a random identifier of a letter and number, and data was stored in a de-identified state to protect participants’ identity. The recorded interviews were transcribed into Microsoft Word by the researcher, organized by participant letter and number, as well as by the interview question number. However, the identities of participants remained confidential.

Transcripts were emailed to participants for verification, using the email given on the participant-completed demographic form (Appendix E). Follow-up questions that added data clarification and elaboration were also asked, depending on participants’ responses. Member checking helped ensure an ethical and efficient research process (Miles, et al., 2014). Then, through inductive analysis, the data were hand-coded and a constant comparative method (Merriam, 2014) was used to categorize data. First, through open coding, the researcher analyzed and interpreted the transcripts, creating tentative labels for chunks of data summarizing participant’s responses. Then, by examining those

open codes and applying a constant comparative method to categorize the data (Merriam), axial coding was used to examine the open codes for patterns and themes, relate them to the research question, and further identify relationships and connections (Maxwell, 2013). I also maintained a journal, recording descriptions and reflections using bracketing to mitigate preconceptions and bias in order to maintain objectivity (Tufford, 2012). A qualitative researcher is holistic, analyzing and describing while seeking to understand subjective relationships and the social setting (Janesick, 2011).

Finally, as themes emerged and commonalities were identified, data that appeared to be qualitatively different from other participants' responses were used to contrast and broaden discourse regarding peer interactions and influences. Discrepant cases were identified, explored, and discussed with the participants in order to create an in-depth understanding of experiences and influences, to check any possible bias, and to enhance the confirmability of the study (Maxwell, 2013). These discrepancies will be reported in Chapter 4 of the study because such disagreements could challenge the results of the study. Finally, the alternate 6 student participants were contacted and interviewed to ensure saturation and a complete data set. The same confidential, careful data collection and analysis methods were used for additional participants that were used for the initial 24 participants.

Issues of Trustworthiness

Protecting the validity of one's study is reliant upon coordinating the different aspects of the research process to create a project which can withstand industry and academic scrutiny (Miles, et al., 2014). The organization of this section includes how the

researcher ensured the trustworthiness and credibility of the study. Each subsection addresses specific strategies employed and elements appropriate for qualitative research, concluding with ethical procedures for maintaining the rights of participants. Every step possible was taken to create a rigorous study that could be used to increase knowledge in the field, be considered credible research, and impact social change.

Credibility

Data from each participant were exhaustively explored in order to create in-depth explanation and description of their experiences and perspectives regarding peer influences in the community college classroom. Open-ended questions related to the research question helped clear up misunderstandings and allow for more in-depth data (Seidman, 2012). Through rich description and exploration of the full interview, not just key points, internal validity was increased (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). After transcribing the initial interviews verbatim, member checking, also known as “respondent validation” (Maxwell, 2013) added validity to the researcher’s interpretations of the data. Allowing participants to check and edit their words also assured them of the researcher’s integrity and made them feel more valued with an active role in the research process.

In addition, triangulation of data occurred by using multiple sources of data. Initial face-to-face interviews, as well as follow-up email and phone interviews, were used. Also, varying perspectives by diverse groups of participants were explored, including traditional students, nontraditional students, and full-time instructors of gateway courses.

Transferability

To promote transferability, the researcher provided detailed description of not only the research process, but also the participants' experiences and perspectives. In addition, after in-depth analysis, discrepant cases were explored to further understand the data.

Dependability

In addition to member checking and triangulation of data to add dependability (Miles, et al., 2014), all interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Detailed records of when and how the data were collected were maintained to allow transparency and possible duplication of the study. Also, the researcher stored data in a de-identified state on a secure database for storing and managing data to ensure the integrity and confidentiality of the data and participants.

Confirmability

In order to establish confirmability, the researcher connected data to a conceptual framework and related it to theory, objectively analyzing the data, and remaining aware of potential biases and actively working to overcome them (Maxwell, 2013). Member checking also added confirmability since the results were informed by the interpretations of individual participants. Furthermore, Merriam (2014) pointed out that the confirmability and objectivity of a study could be achieved by reflecting on oneself critically as a researcher. The researcher maintained a research journal, bracketing any thoughts or feelings that emerged during the interview or analysis process. Bracketing helped the researcher reflect on the research process and mitigate any preconceptions

(Tufford, 2012). As connections and themes emerged, the researcher reviewed her notes and journal to ensure objectivity and comprehensive analysis.

Ethical Procedures

Protecting participants and the environment where the study takes place, as well as analyzing data objectively and thoroughly, are crucial in qualitative research (Merriam, 2014). To be a “steward of the discipline (Golde, 2012), the researcher must maintain the confidentiality of participants and follow all university guidelines to ensure ethical practices are used. A Letter of Cooperation was obtained from the university where the data were collected.

Before collecting data, the researcher filed an application with the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Walden University and the regional university IRB at Indiana State University (ISU) and submitted all appropriate forms. After obtaining IRB approval (# 05-19-16-0270191) to collect data, a sampling of students was extracted from a search of admissions data on the Banner system of the university where the study was to be conducted. Students were selected based on the criteria of completing a minimum of 30 credits on the main campus. My position as an English instructor could have been misinterpreted as a position of authority. Therefore, only students who had never attended the satellite campus where I teach 60 miles away were chosen. In addition, only students who had already taken the freshman English course I teach were chosen for the study. This helped eliminate bias and assure students I held no power over their academic standing. My role as a researcher was clearly communicated to participants.

Participants were informed of their rights and provided with a consent form. The consent form also included the scope of the study and contact information for the researcher, the dissertation chair, and the chair of the IRB. Participants retained a copy, and the researcher kept a copy. After the initial interview, and again in the email asking participants to verify the accuracy of the data transcribed, participants were encouraged to voice any questions or concerns and reminded of their right to withdraw from the study at any time.

All data was stored electronically in a de-identified state in a protected file on an external drive and can only be accessed through a secure laptop computer. Consent forms are kept in a locked cabinet at the researcher's home, along with the data file. All other paper records from data collection and analysis, however, will be shredded. No one but the researcher will have access to data, and all data, including the storage device, will be destroyed after 5 years.

Summary

Qualitative research credibility is established through rigorous, detailed processes throughout the study. Several precautions and strategies were identified in this chapter that were performed in the study to ensure its credibility and confirmability. The researcher remained aware of biases in order to remain thorough and dependable (Laureate Education, Inc., 2011). Disclosing the assumptions and biases of the researcher is one way to validate case study research (Merriam, 2014), as well as complete, thorough, and accurate documentation (Laureate Education). Maxwell (2013) and Miles,

et al. (2014) agreed and pointed out that sampling, ethical procedures, objectivity, and meticulous data collection and analysis methods are also necessary for a valid study.

Qualitative research allows exploration of a deeper meaning and involves "peeling back the layers" and "making sense" (Creswell, 2009, p. 183) of participants' experiences. Good research is not only about methodologies and procedures, but also about beneficial results and improving people's lives (Hostetler, 2015). Researchers have an ethical obligation to others, but also to ourselves to understand what we are doing and why and to stand for something that we feel proud of personally and professionally. As an educator for more than 13 years, the researcher is invested in students and the field and wants to research student experiences in order to understand them more and use that knowledge to improve the community college environment, curriculum, and classroom instruction in order to improve their experiences, lives, and academic success. Lessons learned and shared potholes, strategies, and successes are crucial to effective education reform (Hall & Hord, 2011; Golde, 2012).

In the next chapter, a comprehensive analysis of each participant's reflections and the findings from the study are organized around the research question regarding the influence of community college nontraditional students on their traditional classmates.

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore the influence of nontraditional students on traditional students in the community college classroom. Participants were asked to describe their interactions with mixed-aged groups of students and reflect on their experiences and perceptions of academic and social influences. Below are the research questions that guided the study.

RQ: How do nontraditional students influence their traditional peers in the community college classroom?

SQ1: How, if at all, do interactions between nontraditional and traditional students influence traditional students academically (learning, student engagement, retention)?

SQ2: How, if at all, do interactions between nontraditional students and traditional students influence traditional students socially (relationships, confidence, classroom discussion)?

In this chapter, the researcher describes the setting of the study and participant demographics relevant to the study. In addition, data collection methods are discussed, as outlined in Chapter 3. Data analysis is also described. Evidence of trustworthiness is addressed. Then, the findings, qualitative and descriptive data, are presented, as well as a discussion of the discrepant data.

Setting

The setting of the study was the main campus of a 2-year college in southern Indiana with four campuses in the Midwest, as well as several coastal military campuses. The college offers a diverse range of programs and associate degrees, as well as seven baccalaureate degrees, including education and nursing. Undergraduate enrollment is approximately 22,753 with 44 % female and 56 % male. The college is “open access” and approximately 80 % of students identify as Caucasian; 12 % are Black; 6 % are Hispanic/Latino, 1% are Asian; and the remaining 1 % are Middle Eastern, American Indian, and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander. Volunteers were chosen from the main campus only, which is their only residential campus, and contacted via email to schedule face-to-face interviews.

Participant Demographics and Characteristics

To help prevent bias, I used purposeful sampling to choose participants from the main residential campus only, and not students the smaller satellite campus 60 miles away where I teach. By using juniors and seniors that had never attended the satellite campus, I was able to ensure students had already taken the freshman English composition course I teach and would see my role as researcher only and not feel I held any power over their academics.

Participant recruitment spanned two weeks, beginning with email invitations to students from the main campus with at least 30 credit hours. The email described the study and participants’ rights, and a consent form and demographic information form were attached to the email. From the 82 responding students, 13 nontraditional students

were chosen and 13 traditional-aged students were chosen (10 participants and 3 alternates each). Accessing the demographic information provided, the researcher used purposeful sampling to help ensure representation of mixed-age students, as well as gender and racial and ethnic diversity (Maxwell, 2013; Harsh, 2011). The researcher chose four (4) African-American students and two (2) Hispanic/Latino students to provide racial and ethnic diversity to the participant pool and data. No other ethnicities volunteered. Data from all 26 student participants was used in the study.

Full-time faculty from the main campus were also emailed with invitations to participate in the study. Faculty members the researcher knew were excluded in order to reduce bias. The researcher had planned to use faculty from required gateway courses only, such as English, math, science, and psychology. However, due to limited response and to ensure racial and ethnic representation, one faculty member from Technology and one from Engineering were also recruited. From 17 responses to the invitation, the researcher chose 5 full-time instructors (4 participants and 1 alternate), including 3 males and 2 females. Of those chosen, three (3) were Caucasian (Humanities, Science, Psychology), one (1) African-American (Technology), and one (1) Middle Eastern (Engineering). However, the alternate instructor participant (Caucasian/Psychology) was not used in the study.

In all, 30 participants were interviewed for the study, with 50 % male, 50 % female, and 20 % racially and ethnically diverse. Demographic data for participants is provided in Tables 1, 2, and 3:

Table 1

Traditional Student Participant Demographics

Age	Gender	Race/Ethnicity
18-19 (9 students)	7 males	9 Caucasian
20-21 (4 students)	6 females	2 African-American 1 Hispanic/Latino

Table 2

Nontraditional Student Participant Demographics

Age	Gender	Race/Ethnicity
25-29 (8 students)	8 females	11 Caucasian
30-39 (2 students)	5 males	1 African-American
40 and up (3 students)		1 Hispanic/Latino

Table 3

Instructor Participant Demographics/Characteristics

Field/Discipline	Gender	Race/Ethnicity
1 Humanities	3 males	2 Caucasian
1 Science	1 female	1 African-American
1 Technology		1 Middle Eastern
1 Engineering		

Data Collection

To protect the study from researcher bias, only students from the main campus who had already taken the English composition course I teach were chosen to participate. In addition, only instructors from the main campus and who the researcher did not know were chosen for the study. A research journal and bracketing were also used to recognize

and reflect on preconceived notions and ensure my perceptions did not influence documentation or interpretation of data (Maxwell, 2013; Tufford, 2012).

First, participants completed an information sheet providing demographic data. Participants were then emailed of their acceptance and/or alternate status and given choices of times and locations for scheduling face-to-face interviews at the main campus. Then, after reviewing and signing the consent form, participants and alternates were interviewed over a 2-week period with no unusual circumstances encountered. Because most students were making plans for summer vacation, student alternates were interviewed as well but told their data would only be used if needed. Two participants were forced to reschedule but did show up the following week. Interviews were scheduled to take 30 minutes to 1 hour. However, participant responses ranged from 15 minutes to 70 minutes depending on the extent of their responses, experiences, and willingness to expand on the interview questions (Appendixes B, C, & D). Faculty interviews tended to last longer than students. All 30 interviews were audiotaped then transcribed verbatim into Microsoft Word. Transcripts were then emailed to the participants for feedback. Participants were asked to review and verify their responses and add any additional information, experiences, or insight they had not previously mentioned but thought might be relevant. Nine participants (6 students and 3 instructors) made clarifications, revisions, and expansions to their earlier responses. Follow-up phone interviews were made to 4 participants (3 students and 1 instructor) and were recorded with Tape-A-Call and then transcribed verbatim into Microsoft Word as well.

Data collection in all spanned approximately 4 weeks. Information forms were used to find demographic data and contact information. However, names were not identified except when a first name was provided voluntarily by the participant during introductions prior to the interview. Participants were identified as NT for Nontraditional, T for traditional students, or I for instructors, along with the chronological number of their interview and a random letter. For example, the first interview was I1D because he was my first instructor interview, and he introduced himself as Dan. For those who did not provide a first name, I chose a pseudonym to help choose a letter, organize data, and refer to a person more informally when providing specific quotes and findings in the results. Identities remained confidential throughout the study, and data was securely stored in a de-identified state.

Data Analysis

I audiotaped each interview and phone call, took notes during each interview, and asked open-ended, follow-up questions in order to ensure participants were providing detailed, descriptive perceptions and experiences. I then sent transcripts of each interview to participants via email for verification. Microsoft Word was used to transcribe interviews, create columns for codes and categorizing data, and to hand code and highlight specific quotes and comparisons. I also used a spreadsheet to track participant recruitment, contact dates, and dates of follow-up emails and phone calls.

Interview questions were guided by the research questions, and data were also analyzed around the research questions. Through inductive analysis, the data were hand-coded and a constant comparative method (Merriam, 2014) used to categorize data. First,

through open coding, the researcher analyzed and interpreted the transcripts, creating tentative labels for chunks of data summarizing participant's responses. Then, by examining those open codes and applying a constant comparative method to categorize the data (Merriam), axial coding was used to examine the open codes for patterns and themes, relate them to the research question, and further identify relationships and connections (Maxwell, 2013). The researcher also maintained a journal throughout the data collection and analysis process, recording descriptions and reflections and using bracketing to mitigate preconceptions and bias in order to maintain objectivity (Maxwell, 2013; Tufford, 2012).

As themes emerged and commonalities were identified, data that appeared to be qualitatively different from other participants' responses were used to contrast and broaden discourse regarding peer interactions and influences. Discrepant cases were identified, explored, and discussed with the participants in order to create an in-depth understanding of experiences and influences, to check any possible bias, and to enhance the confirmability of the study (Maxwell, 2013). A few students had varying viewpoints or limited responses; therefore, the interview data from the 6 student alternates was added and analyzed to complete the data set and saturation. The final sample size was 30, exploring 26 students and 4 instructors' perspectives on the influence of nontraditional students on their traditional peers in the community college classroom.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

This study used member checking in an effort to establish trustworthiness. After audiotaping and transcribing the initial interviews verbatim, member checking, also

known as “respondent validation” (Maxwell, 2013) added validity to the researcher’s interpretations of the data. Allowing participants to check and edit their words also assured them of the researcher’s integrity and made them feel more valued in the research process. Also, data were stored in a de-identified state on a secure database to ensure the integrity and confidentiality of the data and participants.

Transferability was promoted with description of how data were collected, analyzed, and interpreted. Detailed records of when and how the data were collected were maintained to allow transparency and possible duplication of the study.

Dependability was addressed through consistency of the findings. The researcher provided detailed description of not only the research process, but also the participants’ experiences and perspectives. In addition, after in-depth analysis, discrepant cases were explored to further understand the data.

Confirmability was ensured with the help of the dissertation committee and by remaining aware of potential biases and working to overcome them. The researcher also maintained a research journal, bracketing any thoughts or feelings that emerged during the interview or analysis process. As connections and themes emerged, the researcher reviewed her notes and journal to ensure objectivity and comprehensive analysis.

Results

Results from this study are qualitative and were derived from inductive analysis of participant responses using hand-coding and constant comparative method (Merriam, 2014) to categorize data into themes, patterns, and relationships. This qualitative data represents the perspectives of learners and instructors with experience in mixed-age

group community college classrooms. The researcher's findings regarding influences of nontraditional students on traditional students were organized by the research questions. Tables 4, 5, and 6 show the coding categories for the research question and subquestions:

Table 4

Coding Categories for Research Question

RQ1: How do nontraditional students influence their traditional peers in the community college classroom?	Model positive behaviors Improve learning Improve motivation Improve classroom management Share life and work experiences Serve as mentors
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Table 5

Coding Categories for Research Sub-question 1

SQ1: How, if at all, do interactions between nontraditional and traditional students influence traditional students academically (learning, student engagement, retention)?	Improve classroom engagement Improve motivation/retention Teach good habits Improve learning by sharing knowledge/skills/experiences Serve as role models
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Table 6

Coding Categories for Research Sub-question 2

SQ2: How, if at all, do interactions between nontraditional students and traditional students influence traditional students socially (relationships, confidence, classroom discussion).	Improve class discussion Instill confidence Encourage participation Build friendships Serve as mentors/role models
--	--

Research Question 1

RQ1: How do nontraditional students influence their traditional peers in the community college classroom?

Student and faculty participants described various influences they perceived nontraditional students to have on traditional students in the community college classroom, including sharing life and work experiences and values to influence learning, motivation, and work ethic; serving as role models in and out of the classroom; motivating and encouraging younger students; teaching good habits; improving confidence; serving as classroom leaders, task managers, surrogate parents, and assistant teachers; teaching respect, tolerance, manners, and classroom etiquette; and improving communication skills, classroom dynamics, and class discussion.

Dan (I1D), a science faculty member, best described the viewpoints given by all instructors and most student participants in his words that nontraditional students are often “more mature” and “value education” more than their younger peers. Therefore, Dan pointed out they are “leaders in the classroom who model positive behaviors, help with classroom management, and even sometimes act as a substitute parent for traditional students, teaching them manners and communication skills.”

Alexandria (T6A), a traditional student, described how nontraditional students had helped her cope with juggling her homework and young son while taking a full load of classes:

The older women really helped me and gave me tips on how to manage it all and stay focused. They had full-time jobs and a full class load, and it

made me realize if they could do it then so could I because I was younger and had parents at home to help me.

All of these responses could be categorized into one main theme: Nontraditional students serve as mentors to traditional students.

Only two of twenty-six students interviewed felt that nontraditional students did not influence traditional students in any significant way. Jerome (T10J) said, “I really don’t think older students affect me or my classes at all.” Shelby (T2S) pointed out that she “never noticed any difference in the students and if there was any, she didn’t feel it made much of a difference.”

Subquestion 1

SQ1: How, if at all, do interactions between nontraditional and traditional students influence traditional students academically (learning, student engagement, retention)?

Again, all but two participants felt nontraditional students influence traditional students academically. These were the same two traditional students who claimed there was no influence from older students in any area. Most of the traditional students and instructors claimed that seeing the older students come back to college to better themselves was a positive influence, motivating younger students and helping them appreciate the importance of education. In addition, almost all participants pointed out that nontraditional students are more likely to share their life and work experiences in the classroom, along with their values, which increases learning in and out of the classroom. Rob (I3R), a technology professor, claimed that nontraditional students aid in teaching and learning:

Nontraditional students act as co-teachers in my courses, helping the less experienced students and providing additional insights and examples to reinforce the lessons and skills I'm teaching. Sometimes students need to hear they're not doing it right from someone besides me. It sinks in more, and they're more likely to step back and try it again. I appreciate the mixture and would like to have more nontraditional students – especially from the workplace. I pair them (nontraditional and traditional students) in teams and they draw from each other.

Alejandra (NT9) also felt nontraditional students not only help traditional students learn, but also improve retention and engagement:

I often help younger students with homework when they're too afraid to ask the teacher. I've had them tell me that my pep talks have kept them from giving up. They seek my help, tutoring, and general guidance. Older students help the younger ones build confidence, organization skills, and most of all communication skills. Nontraditional students participate more and aren't afraid to share our ideas and experiences, so we often lead the discussions. Then, when a young student observes the mature student and their ability to speak in class without fear, it helps them become more confident and willing to share as well.

Cristina (T7C), a traditional-aged Hispanic student said that several nontraditional students were instrumental in her decision to stay in college and pursue nursing:

They made me more determined to hang in there and told me the sacrifice would be worth it in the end when I had my degree and a good job. My family was not supportive and thought I should stay home with my baby full-time and forget about my own dreams. My mom made me feel like a bad mother for going to school, but some of the older students who had stayed home earlier in life told me my daughter and I would both be better off if I got an education now. They even let me join their study group and let me bring my baby along. They didn't judge me like some of the younger students. I felt like I had a new family and had a chance to get off welfare someday.

Like Cristina's comments, many of the responses throughout this study overlapped between academic and social influences. However, in relation to Subquestion 1, participant responses overwhelmingly agreed (27 of 30 participants) that interactions between nontraditional students and traditional students influence traditional students academically in terms of learning, retention, and student engagement in the community college classroom.

Subquestion 2

SQ2: How, if at all, do interactions between nontraditional students and traditional students influence traditional students socially (relationships, confidence, classroom discussion).

Socially, all but two participants pointed out that nontraditional students participate more in class discussion than traditional students and that can influence not only improve learning, but also improve confidence and build relationships.

Mary (I4M), a Humanities professor, felt that nontraditional students are a positive influence on the classroom setting and their younger classmates:

The dynamics of classes with nontraditional students are very different than those without them. Discussion is much more rich and engaging; whereas, I tend to be the sole facilitator of knowledge and discussion in classes without older or experienced students. They'll stare at me blankly and getting them to respond to questions is like pulling teeth.

Nontraditional students are usually eager to share their experiences. They tend to have more invested in the class, financially and occupationally, and they put more into it. In the mixed-age classes, the younger ones wait for the older students to speak up first, then they follow in. After they see they won't be judged, they gain confidence. Then often, when they find they have common interests and experiences, they become friends – in and out of the classroom.

Brett (T8B), a 19-year-old former homeschooled student, reinforced Mary's points. He gained friendships and a sense of social acceptance through his relationships with nontraditional students:

Older students were a godsend to me socially. I was so homesick, so scared, and so lost my first semester I was on the verge of tears or running

all the time. A girl who had went to school with my older sister took me under her wing and gave me someone to talk to and ask questions when I was afraid to ask the professors. Then this other student, who was 7 years older than me but as big of a nerd as me, talked me into joining a gaming club on campus, and we really hit it off. He knew what it was like to feel like an outsider and helped me get through it. I didn't rush off to go home and hide in my room anymore. I felt like I fit in and had a real college buddy.

Participants had differing points of view regarding relationships between nontraditional and traditional students. Twenty-one of thirty participants felt mixed-age groups of students do build friendships in and out of the classroom. Five felt that only mentoring relationships existed and did not extend beyond the classroom. One nontraditional student said that relationships between mixed-aged students only develop “between very serious, like-minded students.” Three participants, all traditional, felt that relationships do not develop between nontraditional and traditional students.

However, in response to Subquestion 2 of the study regarding social influence, 25 of 30 participants pointed out that nontraditional students are more likely to participate in class discussion and share life experiences. Of those 25 participants, 24 felt that those interactions and discussions improved traditional student learning and helped build mentoring relationships.

Discrepant Cases

Two traditional student participants were very apathetic about their college experiences and answered “no” or “not really” to every question and did not care to elaborate or expand their answers. This was one reason I decided to use data from the alternate participants as well to ensure a complete data set and saturation.

Another disagreement was the definition of the terms *traditional* and *nontraditional*. One traditional student argued he is a nontraditional student due to his work experience and maturity. Joey (T4J) pointed out that “even though [he is] only twenty-one, [he] has worked full-time and attended college full-time since high school, paid [his] own tuition, and is very different than the typical college student.” Therefore, I allowed him to describe his experiences in terms of *experienced student* versus *inexperienced student*. His responses did, however, corroborate that experienced students are a positive influence on those with less experience, both academically and socially.

Two traditional students, two nontraditional students, and two instructors also provided some insight to a reciprocal relationship between nontraditional students and traditional students, where both fill needs or skills the other lacks (Mary; I4M). Flo (NT6F) admitted that many nontraditional students lack technology skills, and that she “helps younger students with their homework and answer questions they’re afraid to ask and in return they help [her] format papers and figure out computer programs [she’s] not familiar with.”

Rob (I3R), an African-American technology professor, also made some additional comments regarding adult students that disagreed with the majority of responses. He does not feel nontraditional students influence traditional students socially outside the

classroom. Rob also said he receives several nontraditional students who are in his classes because of the court system or conditions of probation. “They are almost never successful, and even when they do get good grades, they find it almost impossible to find a job. I don’t know what the solution is, but the current system is not working.”

Both Rob (I3R) and Farshad (I2F), a Middle Eastern engineering instructor, felt there are two different groups of nontraditional students: the “apprehensive” group that asks lots of questions and needs additional help and care versus the leaders and “go-getters” who are “driven” and see coming back to college as an exciting challenge. Both pointed out that the driven group has a more positive influence on traditional students. These are valid but distinguishable points that suggest a need for further research.

Summary

Most participants agreed that nontraditional students influence traditional students positively both academically and socially. Damian (T5D), a traditional student in the welding program, summarized the study’s findings most effectively:

The nontraditional students in my classes are like the dad and brothers I never had growing up. I learn so much from them, and they build me up, teaching me how to talk to others, how to ask questions, and even helped me get the job I have now. My best friends are all from school and all 5-10 years older than me, and I think I’m a better welder and person because of all the great guys I’ve met in college. They tell me I’m the lucky one because I started early and got a head start, but I couldn’t have made it

without them yelling at me when I needed it and patting me on the back when I needed it.

Various categories, patterns, and themes emerged from participants' rich description of their observations, experiences, and perceptions. However, the theme that consistently surfaced from participants was nontraditional students' role as mentors and role models for traditional students in the community college classroom.

In Chapter 5, the interpretation of the findings, recommendations for future research, and the implications of the research are discussed. In addition, the importance of this study in future research and mentoring program development is presented.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative collective case study was to explore the influence of nontraditional students on traditional students in the community college classroom. A review of scholarly literature in Chapter 2 demonstrated that almost half of undergraduate students in the United States are enrolled in community colleges, with nontraditional student enrollment steadily on the rise (Haberler & Levin, 2014; Snyder & Dillow, 2013). However, neither the influence of nontraditional students on their traditional classmates nor the interactions between them had been investigated.

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore and describe the experiences of nontraditional and traditional community college students, as well as observations and perceptions of full-time faculty members. Interviews with 30 diverse participants allowed students and faculty to share their observations and perspectives regarding mixed-age groups of students in the community college classroom. Through inductive analysis, the data were hand-coded and a constant comparative method (Merriam, 2014) used to categorize data and find relationships. The data revealed several common categories and one overarching theme to support the findings that nontraditional students serve as mentors, positively influencing their traditional classmates.

This chapter contains a discussion of the findings of this study, along with implications for social change, recommendations for further study and action, and a conclusion.

Interpretation of Findings

The findings of this study are interpreted in three distinct ways: as answers to the study's research questions, in relationship to current scholarship on community college students, and through the lens of the conceptual frameworks applied to this research study.

The Findings and the Research Questions

The findings of this study clearly answer the research questions that frame the study. After interviewing, analyzing, and interpreting the data from 30 participants (13 traditional students, 13 nontraditional students, and four full-time instructors), several common themes emerged to answer the main research question of how nontraditional students influence traditional students in the community college classroom. The common influences that the majority of student and instructor participants agreed on were improvements in learning, engagement, retention, and confidence. The overarching theme that permeated throughout the data was that nontraditional students serve as mentors to traditional students, sharing life experiences and modeling positive behaviors that help traditional students achieve success in and out of the community college classroom.

More specifically, Subquestion 1 of the research study asked how, if at all, do interactions between nontraditional and traditional students influence traditional students academically (learning, student engagement, retention)? Academically, the data revealed that nontraditional students improve learning, engagement, and retention. By sharing their life and work experiences, their skills, knowledge, maturity, work ethic, and

appreciation for education, nontraditional students serve as assistant teachers, adding those additional experiences, perspectives, and anecdotes to help their younger, less-experienced peers improve learning and overall academic success.

Researchers agree that student engagement plays an essential role in learning, especially in community colleges (Lester et al., 2013; Saenz, Hatch, Bukaski, Kim, Lee, & Valdez, 2011). The findings from my research study coincide with Ryan's (2013) conclusions that nontraditional students contribute to class discussion and peer engagement by sharing their knowledge and experiences. The data showed that nontraditional students not only improve class dynamics, but also encourage their younger classmates to participate more and be more involved in their academics.

In addition, in regards to sub-question 1 and academics, the study found that nontraditional students improve traditional students' retention. Their work ethic and dedication to their education motivates younger students to persist and work toward a degree. Kelly (T3K), an 18-year-old General Studies major, said, "I didn't realize how important an education was to my future until I heard older students talking about their difficult lives. They motivated me to work harder."

Finally, Subquestion 2 asked how, if at all, do interactions between nontraditional students and traditional students influence traditional students socially (relationships, confidence, classroom discussion)? Socially, the data revealed that nontraditional students influence traditional students by building relationships, improving confidence, and increasing classroom discussion.

Peer relationships are also positive indicators for success for college students, academically and socially. Di Tommaso (2012) and Karp (2011) found that peer relationships contributed to engagement and persistence for community college students, while Lundberg (2014) also found peer relationships give students a sense of belonging that improves overall achievement. My study revealed that nontraditional students serve as mentors, friends, and even surrogate parents to traditional students, building relationships in and out of the classroom that positively influence their academic and social integration. They model positive behaviors that positively influence their younger, less-experienced classmates.

My study also revealed that nontraditional students participate more than traditional students, and their willingness to ask questions and participate in class discussion encourages traditional students to follow suit and ask questions and share their perspectives as well. These interactions are then directly tied to an improvement in traditional students' confidence as they become more comfortable in participating and sharing life experiences. Nontraditionals serve as role models, leading the way in classroom discussion. Their "lack of fear motivates traditional students and helps build their confidence that [they] also have knowledge and perspectives worthy of sharing" (Sharon; T12S).

Data saturation occurred very early in analysis, and the data continued to reveal common themes. Overwhelmingly, the research question and sub-questions concluded the same results: nontraditional students positively influence traditional students academically and socially by serving as mentors who share experiences and model

positive behaviors to improve traditional students' learning, retention, engagement, and confidence.

The Findings and the Literature

At the time of this research study, there was no research on the influence of nontraditional students on traditional students in the community college classroom. Davidson and Wilson (2013) and Gilardi and Guglielmetti (2011) found that peer interactions impact retention and confidence among 4-year college students. However, there was a gap regarding peer interactions at community colleges, and no studies were found on the interactions or influences between nontraditional students and traditional students.

Researchers have shown that student engagement plays an essential role in learning, especially in the community college environment (Lester et al., 2013; Pike, et al., 2011). Therefore, if peer discussion and collaboration are linked to engagement and retention, then this research study holds merit in providing data that nontraditional students participate more, sharing their life and work experiences, which was shown to improve class discussion and dynamics, instill confidence in their traditional peers, increase learning, and motivate their less-experienced classmates to participate and be more engaged.

My research also identified positive influences stemming from relationships between nontraditional and traditional students in and out of the classroom. These findings coincide with Di Tommaso (2012) and Karp's (2011) conclusions that peer relationships contribute to success for community college students.

Many scholars agreed that community college students face overwhelming obstacles to success, with a lack of social support as their main barrier (David et al., 2013). My research study shows that nontraditional students aid traditional students in that social support, serving as peer mentors and helping them succeed academically and socially. Participants described nontraditional students as classroom leaders, task managers, role models, surrogate parents, assistant teachers, mentors, and friends.

The Findings and the Conceptual Framework

Tinto's interactionist theory (1975, 1987, 1997) framed the study and data analysis, and the findings support Tinto's belief that engagement and retention are influenced by the interactions and integration of the student in the social context of academia. Tinto (1997) argued that peer-to-peer interactions increase social integration, and dynamic relationships lead to student persistence. Saenz et al. (2011) pointed out the diversity of students and open access policy of community colleges called for further study of Tinto's interactionist theory at the community college level. The findings of my study support his theory that peer interactions and relationships do positively impact engagement and retention.

Kuh's (2009) research is closely linked to Tinto and also found that student engagement leads to increased learning. My study found that interactions between nontraditional students and traditional students improve engagement and increased learning through sharing of knowledge and life experiences. Participants in my study revealed that peer mentoring by nontraditional students motivated traditional students not

only to become more engaged in the classroom, but also to value education more and persist in their degree attainment.

A conceptual framework constructed from past knowledge allowed me to build on what was already known about community colleges and nontraditional students to further support Tinto's (1975, 1987, 1997) theory and add to the field of knowledge on community college students.

Limitations of the Study

Limitations of the study include the population sample, which was limited to undergraduate students and faculty at one midwestern community college. Therefore, the sample may not have been representative of other institutions or broader student populations and could limit the generalizability and external validity of the findings. In addition, the results are based on the opinions and experiences of participants who may have a limited or biased point of view.

Recommendations

While this research was needed to fill the gap of the influence of nontraditional students on their traditional peers, continued research efforts on the interactions between diverse students in higher education can inform community college research and practices. I found that nontraditional students aid in improving learning, engagement, confidence, and retention in traditional students, serving as mentors and role models. However, each of these influences needs to be researched specifically and more in-depth.

Additional research could also lead to more comprehensive support services that are not typically offered at underfunded community colleges, such as peer mentoring and tutoring programs and collaborative pairing of nontraditional and traditional students in the classroom. In turn, those services and instructional strategies may improve learning, retention, and overall student success.

Implications for Social Change

Community college students are generally more diverse, more challenged academically and socioeconomically, and more likely to drop out or fail than 4-year university students (Goldrick-Rab, et al., 2013; Karp, 2011). They often lack academic preparedness, motivation, and family and financial support (Forbus, et al., 2011; Garret, 2011; Schunk, et al., 2013). With the increasing enrollment of nontraditional students, the need for a more skilled workforce (Bragg, 2013; Jesnek, 2012; Singh, 2014) and the increasing demand for student success (Johnson, 2015; Paulson, 2012), this research study was needed to explore the influence of nontraditional students on their traditional peers in the community college classroom.

My research adds to the research regarding nontraditional students, providing evidence of positive characteristics of nontraditional students and their influences on traditional classmates. Most scholarly literature described nontraditional students as a challenge to community colleges, with more barriers and different expectations, needs, and skills than traditional-aged students (Haberler & Levin, 2014). However, participants in my study agreed that most nontraditional students are often leaders in the classroom, who participate more than younger students, work harder, and are more mature and

driven. My findings correlated with Kenner and Weinerman (2011) that nontraditional students bring life experiences and wisdom to the classroom that positively affect the environment. However, to extend that, I found that nontraditional students' life experiences, wisdom, and positive behaviors influence traditional students academically and socially by increasing their learning, confidence, motivation, and retention.

The literature shows that both academic and nonacademic factors influence retention in community college students. Their diminished retention and low graduation rates (Brand et al., 2012) not only adversely affect community college funding, but also the U.S. economy and socioeconomic inequity (Phelan, 2014; Paulson, 2012), which raises concerns as to whether open access is sustainable (Johnson, 2015). Therefore, institutions must provide more support services and students must learn to be more open toward peer differences and build supportive relationships (Nevill & White, 2011).

The findings from this study show that those positive peer relationships do exist and recommends collaborative strategies and peer mentoring program development between nontraditional and traditional students to improve learning, motivation, retention, and support services. Peer mentoring has been shown to increase student retention and overall success at 4-year institutions (Colvin, 2015; Crisp, 2015; Ross, Bruderle, & Meakim, 2015), especially for women (DuBois & Karcher, 2013). Findings from my study show that peer mentoring also improves student success at the community college level, increasing learning, student confidence, motivation, and retention. Data revealed that nontraditional students serve as peer mentors toward their traditional classmates in many capacities. These findings add to the field of research and could

significantly impact instructional methods and institutional practices. However, it is the responsibility of faculty and higher education leaders to implement collaborative instructional strategies and peer mentoring programs to increase interactions and relationships between nontraditional and traditional students.

Helping community college students succeed is instrumental to social change (Keller, 2012; Wyatt, 2011), and the findings from this study add to the field of knowledge regarding nontraditional students, peer interactions and influence, and strategies for community college institutional and student success. The results of this study could help bridge the academic and social gap between nontraditional and traditional students (Bragg, 2013; Jesnek, 2012) at community colleges.

If peers are the greatest source of influence for college students (Astin, 1993, 2012), then the findings of this research study showing the positive influence of interactions between traditional and nontraditional learners and how those interactions impact the classroom environment and student success are necessary to bring about positive social change in higher education.

Conclusion

This research has identified that nontraditional students play a positive role in community college classrooms. They serve as mentors to their traditional classmates, building relationships and sharing life and work experiences, as well as positive behaviors that contribute to traditional students' overall success. The positive influences the data revealed from interactions between nontraditional and traditional students included improvement in learning, retention, engagement, and confidence.

This study may provide the background for community colleges to gain a better understanding of the positive influences nontraditional learners contribute to the academic and social environment and serve as a catalyst for practices that will benefit all students.

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Appendix A: Letter of Cooperation

March 10, 2016

Dear Angela Richart-Mayfield:

Based on my review of your research proposal, I give permission for you to conduct the study entitled “The Influence of Non-Traditional Students on their Traditional Peers in the Community College Classroom” within the Vincennes University campus. As part of this study, I authorize you to recruit undergraduate juniors and seniors, as well as full-time faculty members for your study, interview volunteer participants, collect data from these Vincennes University participants, verify data with the participants, and publish your results in your dissertation. I understand that individuals’ participation will be voluntary and at their own discretion.


We understand that our organization’s responsibilities include sharing email addresses for prospective volunteers and providing a conference room or other area for the interviews to be held. We reserve the right to withdraw from the study at any time if our circumstances change.

The student researcher will be responsible for complying with our site’s research policies and requirements, including seeking approval from our regional Indiana State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) to ensure ethical conduct of research.

I confirm that I am authorized to approve research in this setting and that this plan complies with the organization’s policies.

I understand that the data collected will remain entirely confidential and may not be provided to anyone outside of the student’s supervising faculty/staff without permission from the Walden University IRB.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Laurel A. Smith", is written over a vertical yellow line.

Laurel A. Smith, Interim Provost
Vincennes University
1002 N. First Street
Vincennes, IN 47591
812-888-4262 (Office)
provost@vinu.edu

Appendix B: Interview Questions for Traditional Students

1. Why did you choose to attend a community college and what are your goals socially and academically? (RQ)
2. How, if at all, do you feel mixed-age groups of students in the community college classroom influence the classroom environment, including the academic climate and/or student engagement? (RQ)
3. In what ways, if any, has interacting with non-traditional students in the classroom influenced your learning or academic success? (SQ1)
4. In what ways, if any, has interacting with non-traditional students influenced your motivation and/or retention? (SQ1)
5. How, if at all, do you feel the presence of non-traditional students in the community college classroom affects students socially? (SQ2)
6. In what ways, if any, do you feel mixed age groups of students in the community college classroom influence student confidence, participation, and/or sense of belonging? (SQ2)
7. What kinds of relationships, if any, have you developed with non-traditional classmates? If you have developed relationships with older students, what have you gained from the relationship(s)? (SQ2)
8. Is there anything you would like to add about your experience in the community college classroom or possible influences you feel non-traditional students may have on traditional classmates? (RQ)
9. Do you have any questions or comments for me?

Appendix C: Interview Questions for Non-traditional Students

1. Why did you choose to attend a community college and what are your goals socially and academically? (RQ)
2. How, if at all, do you feel mixed-age groups of students in the community college classroom influence the classroom environment, including the academic climate and/or student engagement? (RQ)
3. In what ways, if any, do you feel interactions between mixed-age group students influence learning or academic success? (SQ1)
4. In what ways, if any, do you feel interactions between mixed-age group students influence motivation and/or retention? (SQ1)
5. How, if at all, do you feel the presence of non-traditional students in the community college classroom influences younger students socially? (SQ2)
6. In what ways, if any, do you feel mixed age groups of students in the community college classroom influence student confidence, participation, and/or sense of belonging? (SQ2)
7. What kinds of relationships, if any, have you developed with traditional classmates? If you have developed relationships with traditional peers, what, if anything, do you think the younger student(s) gained from the relationship? (SQ2)
8. Is there anything you would like to add about your experience in the community college classroom or possible influences you feel non-traditional students may have on traditional classmates? (RQ)
9. Do you have any questions or comments for me?

Appendix D: Interview Questions for Instructors

1. What differences (whether characteristics or behaviors), if any, have you observed between nontraditional and traditional students in the community college classroom? (RQ)
2. In what ways, if any, do you feel non-traditional students influence the community college classroom environment, including academic climate and/or student engagement? (RQ)
3. In what ways, if any, do interactions between non-traditional students and traditional students in the classroom influence learning and academic success? (SQ1)
4. In what ways, if any, do non-traditional students influence traditional students' motivation and/or retention? (SQ1)
5. In what ways, if any, do you feel the presence of non-traditional students in the community college classroom influences their younger classmates socially? (SQ2)
6. What kinds of relationships, if any, have you observed non-traditional and traditional students develop through interactions in the classroom? If so, what do you feel they gain from the relationship(s), if anything? (SQ2)
7. Is there anything else you would like to add about your experience teaching in the community college classroom or observations of possible influences non-traditional students may have on their traditional classmates? (RQ)
8. Do you have any questions or comments for me?

Appendix E: Student Participant Information Form

1. Please provide an email address where the researcher can contact you with further questions and to provide a copy of the interview transcript for clarification.

2. Please provide a phone number where you can be contacted in case the researcher cannot reach you via email.

3. Please provide your race/ethnicity for the purpose of the study's participant demographic information only.

4. Please provide your age for the purpose of the study's participant demographic information only.

Thank you for your participation in this research study.

Appendix F: Instructor Participant Information Form

1. Please provide an email address where the researcher can contact you with further questions and to provide a copy of the interview transcript for clarification.

2. Please provide a phone number where you can be contacted in case the researcher cannot reach you via email.

3. Please provide your race/ethnicity for the purpose of the study's participant demographic information only.

4. Please provide the area/field you teach.

Thank you for your participation in this research study.

Appendix G: Member Checking E-mail

Dear Research Participant:

Attached is the typed transcript of our recent interview regarding the influence of non-traditional students on their traditional peers in the community college classroom. I would appreciate it if you could take the time to read the transcript to check for accuracy and verify it is an accurate account of your answers to the interview questions.

If you would like to make any revisions or additions to the transcript, please type them in red, save the transcript with a new file name, then email it to me as an attachment. Also, please copy and paste the following statement in your email.

I have read the interview transcript and changed anything I felt was not an accurate representation of my answers to the interview questions and/or added additional information for clarification or examples.

If you feel the transcript is accurate and you do not wish to make any changes, please respond to this email and copy and paste the following statement in the email.

I have read the interview transcript and feel it is an accurate account of my answers to the interview questions. Therefore, I have no changes or clarifications to add to the transcript.

I appreciate your time and willingness to respond to this email, and I thank you once again for participating in my research study. If you have any further questions or comments or need assistance with the above request, don't hesitate to contact me.

Thank you,

Angie J. Richart-Mayfield
Angela.richart-mayfield@waldenu.edu