

2018

# The Impact of Role Strain on Nontraditional Community College Students

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*Walden University*

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# Walden University

College of Education

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Ruthie McGraw

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Walden University

2018

Abstract

The Impact of Role Strain on Nontraditional Community College Students

by

Ruthie Igwe McGraw

MS, Concordia University, 2010

BA, Saginaw Valley State University, 2008

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

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## Abstract

Nontraditional students have become the majority on community college campuses; however, a national report showed that 46.2% of nontraditional students were no longer enrolled after two years. Nontraditional students have competing life roles that affect their attrition rates as well as their academic performance. The purpose of this quantitative study was to understand the relationship between the number of roles and the academic achievement and persistence of nontraditional community college students. The roles identified were student enrollment status (full-time or part-time), spousal roles, parental roles, and employment status (full-time or part-time). Goode's theory of role strain was used as the theoretical framework to guide this study on nontraditional community college students. Additionally, the existence of statistical significance was determined between the number of different roles and academic achievement, measured by grade point average, and persistence, measured by enrollment through two consecutive terms for 250 participants. Descriptive statistics showed that being employed full-time was the most common role ( $f=171$ ) among nontraditional community college students. Beta regression showed there was no statistical significance ( $p = 0.705$ ) between the number of roles and grade point average. Logistic regression showed that the relationship between the number of roles and persistence was statistically significant ( $p \leq 0.0001$ ). This study can help community college faculty and staff gain knowledge on the needs of nontraditional students. Positive social change can be promoted by creating or extending resources for these students to help them overcome the barriers that may hinder their academic achievement and persistence through school.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

In 2002, the typical community college student was an 18-year-old and a recent high school graduate (Center for Postsecondary and Economic Success, 2015). In recent years, the community college student demographic has shifted as nontraditional students seek higher education at the community college. Nontraditional students are those who are typically 25 years of age or older and have not followed a continuous educational path into college (Newbold, Mehta, & Forbus, 2010). Community college students are therefore now older, more diverse, and many have work and family obligations to balance (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2012). For example, 27% of nontraditional students are employed full-time, 63% are enrolled in school full-time, and 15% are single parents (Center for Postsecondary and Economic Success, 2015).

The NCES (2012) reported that approximately 38% of the 2012 community college enrollment was a nontraditional student. By 2014, 48% of the enrollment of community college students was considered a nontraditional student (American Association of Community Colleges, 2015). The nontraditional student has become the majority on many community college campuses. It is projected that nontraditional student enrollment will continue to increase by 20% between 2010 and 2021, whereas the population of traditional students will increase at a rate of 10% (Hussar & Bailey, 2013).

Nontraditional students are returning to school to develop new skills and earn a degree. According to Ritt (2008), nontraditional students who experience academic success in higher education tend to gain economic and personal benefits, which will

likely provide social, political, and economic benefits for the broader society.

Additionally, according to Belfield & Bailey (2011):

Those who attend higher education institutions compared to those who do not, may receive greater benefits over time. These economic and personal benefits may include greater earnings over a life time, lower welfare reliance, lower involvement in the criminal justice system, and overall higher levels of subjective well-being. (p. 57)

Despite the efforts of nontraditional students to pursue higher education, having multiple roles and the stress of trying to fulfill them can lead them to leave the educational system prematurely (Johnson, Rochkind, Ott, & Dupont, 2009). In fact, a report from the National Student Clearinghouse (2014) on the outcomes of students by age showed that 46.2% of nontraditional students were no longer enrolled in their two-year program compared to 25.4% of traditional students during the same time. Therefore, nontraditional students who carry multiple roles may not be able to fulfill all of them successfully and may have to limit or reduce the number of roles, which can include leaving higher education.

There are multiple roles that can affect nontraditional students' decisions to stay in college. For example, Ross-Gordon (2011) found that nontraditional students consider themselves to be an employee first and are more likely to be married, which gives them at least two additional life roles to fulfill while attending school. The NCES (2012) reported that 23% of enrolled students over the age of 25 years is a parent or has at least one dependent. In addition, the American Association of Community Colleges (2015) found

that 17% of enrolled community college students is a single parent. These students were less likely to complete a degree within 6 years and more likely to drop out of school due to their additional roles and responsibilities (American Association of Community Colleges, 2015).

When adults decide to return to school, the decision can have implications on their finances, family dynamics, and workplace (Orgnero, 2013). These implications can result in what is known as role strain. Feldman (2011) defined role strain as “a condition whereby an individual experiences unease or difficulty in fulfilling role expectations” (p. 793). Role strain for nontraditional students could result from having inadequate academic skills because they have been away from formal study, thereby creating the need for remediation. Other challenges surrounding this reentry to school are the inability to manage being back in the classroom, nonsupportive environments at home and at school, or inadequate study time (Alhassan, 2012; Forbus, Newbold, & Mehta, 2011; Gigliotti & Huff, 1995). In addition, role strain could result from having parental, spousal, and employee roles to fulfill. These factors can affect the academic performance and/or persistence of nontraditional students.

Because community colleges continue to experience an increase in nontraditional student enrollment, the unique needs of these students need to be addressed (University Professional and Continuing Education Association, 2012). Addressing these students’ needs has become a concern that is receiving more attention among community colleges, especially because there are funding sources that hold institutions accountable for demonstrating students’ success and improving degree completion. The nontraditional

student leaves at a higher rate than the traditional student, which affects the measurements of an institution's success (University Professional and Continuing Education Association, 2012).

A report by the American Institutes of Research revealed a large number of taxpayer dollars invested in students who failed to persist to degree completion (Schneider & Klor de Alva, 2013). During a 5-year period of study (2003-2008), the nontraditional students' attrition equated to over 13 billion dollars in federal and state grants to four-year and two-year colleges (Schneider & Klor de Alva, 2013). However, the reasons that caused these nontraditional students to fail to persist to degree completion were not researched. Therefore, it is important to understand nontraditional students' persistence because failure to persist to completion exhausts the already limited personal and institutional resources. Furthermore, noncompletion reduces both economic and social societal achievement goals, which is to produce productive citizens who help to boost the economy (Wolniak, Mayhew, & Engberg, 2012).

The focus of this study, which was to determine the impact role strain has on nontraditional students, is significant because of the increased enrollment of nontraditional students, increased student success accountability measures, increased awareness of negative return on taxpayer dollar investment, and federal and state governments resources (NCES, 2012; Ritt, 2008). Understanding factors associated with nontraditional student persistence is crucial to strengthen nontraditional student achievement and the broad economic and social goals fundamental to American society

(Wolniak et al., 2012). Despite decades of focus on nontraditional student persistence, concerns about their retention in community colleges continue to be unresolved.

Increasing student engagement and helping nontraditional students overcome barriers to completing their degree continues to be a challenge for community college leaders, faculty, and administration (Wyatt, 2011). These stakeholders play an important role as change agents in creating supportive learning environments for nontraditional students both by incorporating theory and research into their classrooms and by advocating for programs and services on their campuses to help these students succeed (Blair, 2010). This study was conducted to provide community colleges with useful research on the impact that role strain has on nontraditional students. This will help institutions to provide the services needed to help these students succeed. The sections that follow will include the background of the study, the research questions, and the theoretical foundation, which will guide this study.

### **Background of the Study**

In contrast to traditional students, nontraditional students have additional responsibilities within their personal life and job that can lead to demand overload and inter-role conflict when combined with school (Fairchild, 2003; Giancola, Grawitch, & Borchert, 2009). There has been research on the roles and stressors that nontraditional students face. It has been found that relationships, lack of resources, and academics cause the most stress or role strain on nontraditional students (Hurst, Baranik, & Daniel, 2012). Wardley, Bélanger, and Leonard (2013) found that there is a significant difference in factors that affect the retention of traditional and nontraditional students. Academic

environment, adaptability to the university, and institutional commitments all affect the retention of nontraditional students (Wardley et al., 2013). However, a review of the literature indicates that researchers have not yet investigated which specific role or roles affect the academic performance and persistence of nontraditional community college students. In this study, I sought to investigate which types of role strains are most common among nontraditional students and which of these role strains may have a significant effect on their persistence and grade point average (GPA) depending on the extent and type of role strain the student exhibits.

### **Problem Statement**

Role strain is perceived as the struggle to perform specific role related duties and the difficulty fulfilling the role obligation (Goode, 1960). These life roles can include work responsibilities and social roles such as parenting, spousal, and familial roles (Rowlands, 2010). Multiple roles are a part of everyday existence for most people and each role has its own demands and obligations. Goode's theory of role strain maintains that role strain occurs when there is difficulty fulfilling the expectations of multiple roles. This causes the depletion of personal resources and negatively affects other roles that a person may be trying to fulfill.

Nontraditional college students usually have more life roles and responsibilities than traditional students due to having family, work, and social duties (Gigliotti & Huff, 1995). Entering or reentering school adds another role. The competing life roles affect nontraditional students' performance and are often a factor in nontraditional student attrition (Alhassen, 2012). Having multiple life roles and responsibilities demands the



time and attention of nontraditional students, which may detract them from their student role if it is not a priority. The needs of nontraditional students stem from taking on several roles at once, and the resulting outcome is role strain.

There is a need to find which role factors affect the academic achievement of nontraditional community college students and if there is any significance between the numbers of role strains a student has and their persistence. Evans, Forney, Gudio, Patton, and Renn (2010) noted that a number of unbalanced social structures often play into the natural privilege of college students. The competing role overload is likely to affect nontraditional students' academic success.

There is a lack of literature on role strain and its effects on the nontraditional community college student. Forbus et al. (2011) found that nontraditional students experience conflict with demands within work, personal life, school, and family. In addition, Idris (2011) found that role strains cause difficulty in completing tasks properly due to task overload. However, there has been little research on the relationship between the number of roles a nontraditional student has and their academic achievement and persistence. Therefore, it is important to investigate the relationship between the number of roles and student GPA and persistence. Research addressing student role strains is particularly important considering the benefits that can occur to the nontraditional student such as earning a degree and enhancing skills, which can lead to a better job (Hurst et al., 2012).

### **Purpose of the Study**

Compared with traditional students, nontraditional students report experiencing more stress related problems because of multiple external roles such as family, student, and work, whereas traditional students experience more stress related problems due to social and academic pressures of school (Garrido, 2000). The purpose of this quantitative, correlational study was to understand the relationship between the number of role strains and the academic achievement and persistence of nontraditional community college students, as measured by GPA and persistence. The dependent variables were student GPA and persistence rate. The independent variables were four most common role strain factors related to nontraditional students: student enrollment status (full-time, part-time, graduate, or not enrolled), marital status, parent status, and employment status (full-time and part-time). This study was conducted using a questionnaire to collect information from a sample of participants at a community college. Their persistence was measured through enrollment in at least two consecutive terms. A beta regression analysis was applied to determine relationship between role strain on the academic achievement. Logistic regression was applied to determine the relationship between role strain on the persistence of nontraditional community college students.

The study was also conducted to determine which of the identified roles are most common among nontraditional community college students and the stressors inherent within each role as they attempt to complete their academic degree. These stressors could include trying to find childcare to attend class or having to work full-time while trying to find time to do classwork. This study added to the existing literature by increasing

community colleges' understanding of the various stressors that influence the success of nontraditional students. Professionals who provide services to nontraditional students would benefit from increasing their understanding of the specific needs of these learners (e.g. dealing with the multiple demands of children and working full-time while attending school; Alhassan, 2012; Martin & Sheckley, 1999). This may help to increase retention and completion rates at all types of colleges.

### **Research Questions**

Research Question 1: What is the most common role strain among nontraditional community college students (spouse, parent, or employee)?

Research Question 2: Is there a statistically significant relationship between the number of different roles a nontraditional community college student identifies with and their grade point average (GPA)?

Research Question 3: Is there a statistically significant relationship between the number of different roles a nontraditional community college student identifies with and their level of persistence?

The dependent variables were GPA and persistence. The independent variables were student enrollment status (full-time, part-time, graduate, or not enrolled), marital status, parent status, and employment status (full-time or part-time). Descriptive statistics, beta regression, and logistic regression were applied as the analysis methods for this study.

### **Theoretical Foundation**

Goode's (1960) theory of role strain guided this study. This theory addresses how the number of roles an individual has may lead to strain on other required roles. Goode's theory of role strain helps explain that role strain occurs when an individual has difficulty in fulfilling the expectations of multiple roles. Goode's theory further details that all individuals take part in many different role relationships where each role involves different duties and obligations. Among these different roles, there will be strain due to attempting to fulfill all obligations. These strains may cause different types of conflicts such as contradictory-required performance or the conflict of allocation (time, place, or resources). In this study, the conflicts were low GPA and dropping out of community college.

There is abundant support for Goode's (1960) theory of role strain. For example, Coverman (1989) supported Goode's theory by studying multiple role demands and finding that having multiple roles in which role conflict and strain occur has a psychological effect on the well-being of the person experiencing the role strain. Home (1998) also found that the intensity of the demands on student roles places strain on and negatively affects other roles a student has and is also a predictor of conflict with family and job demands. Deutsch and Schmertz (2011) concluded that nontraditional students are strained from having multiple role obligations, which includes familial, professional or work, and student roles. Thompson (2013) found that for adult learners in community colleges, there are no boundaries between roles, which cause more role strain amongst this population of learners. In contrast, Hoffnung and Williams (2012) concluded that the

multiple demands of work, family, and school did not have negative psychological effects on the student who balances these multiple roles. Chapter 2 will provide a more detailed explanation of Goode's theory as it relates to the present study.

### **Nature of the Study**

The nature of this study was quantitative. The dependent variables were student GPA and persistence rate. The independent variables were four role strain factors related to nontraditional students: student enrollment status (full-time, part-time, graduate, or not enrolled), marital status, parent status, and employment status (full-time or part-time). A questionnaire was collected from nontraditional students from a community college. Data were analyzed using beta regression to determine if any of the independent variables are associated with GPA. Additionally, data were analyzed using logistic regression to determine if any of the independent variables were associated with academic persistence. A quantitative research study is consistent with determining the relationship between role strain and the academic achievement and persistence rates of this population of students.

### **Definition of Terms**

The following terms were operationally defined because they have multiple meanings based on the context:

*Academic achievement:* Having a 2.0 or "C" or better in a course and overall GPA. This is based on a scale of 0-4, where 1 = D; 2 = C; 3 = B; and 4 = A. Successful completion of a course from college/university (York, Gibson, & Rankin, 2015).

*Dropout:* Withdrawal from college/university without successful completion of studies (NCES, 2014a).

*Full-time student:* A student who holds a schedule of 12 or more semester or credit hours (Complete College America, 2014).

*Grade Point Average (GPA):* A number representing the average value of the accumulated final grades earned in courses over time which is calculated by dividing the total amount of grade points earned (1 = D; 2 = C; 3 = B; and 4 = A) by the number of credit hours attempted (Glossary of Education Reform, 2015). For example, a full-time student taking four, 3-credit courses for a total of 12 attempted hours who earns 2 C's, 1 B, and 1 A will have 33 grade points. The value points divided by the number of attempted credits will give the student a GPA of 2.75.

*Nontraditional student:* A student who is 25 years of age or older and identifies with any of the following characteristics: (a) delayed enrollment, (b) attends at least part time for at least part of the academic year, (c) works full time while enrolled, (d) has dependents other than a spouse, (e) is a single parent, or (f) does not have a high school diploma (completed high school with a GED or other completion certificate; NCES, 2014).

*Part-time student:* A student who holds a schedule of less than full-time or less than 12 semester or credit hours (Complete College America, 2014).

*Persistence:* The rate at which students persist from one term to the next term (NCES 2014a).

*Role ambiguity:* A lack of information for a given role, which often leads to decreased performance levels (Cranford, 2013).

*Role conflict:* The simultaneous occurrence of two or more role expectations (Idris, 2011; Katz & Kahn, 1978).

*Role demand:* Expected role-related duties (Goode, 1960).

*Role overload:* A type of stressor that leads to role strain when role expectations are greater than the individual's abilities and motivation to perform a task (Biddle, 1979; Idris, 2011).

*Role strain:* Perceived struggle in performing role-related duties (Goode, 1960).

*Role stressor:* The excessive role pressure experienced by individuals and nontraditional student (Hurst et al., 2012; Kahn, Wolfe, Quinn, & Snoek, 1964).

*Role theory:* Pattern of behavior that refers to normative expectations associated with a position in a social system (Banton, 1965; Goode, 1960).

*Traditional student:* Student between the ages of 18 and 22 years (NCES, 2014a; Soney, 2003).

*Unsuccessful academic achievement:* Having a course or term GPA below 2.0 (Morris, Brooks, & May, 2003; York et al., 2015).

### **Assumptions**

Several assumptions were made in this study conducted at a community college in North Texas. I assumed that the information obtained from each nontraditional student is accurate. It was also assumed that the information obtained is the most up-to-date information on the participants. Because the data were collected from self-reported information from the students, there could be a possibility that students provided answers

that may or may not be truthful. It was assumed that participants in this study answered the questions honestly.

### **Scope and Delimitations**

The study was conducted to find out if there is a statistically significant relationship between role strain and academic achievement and persistence of nontraditional community college students. Finding the role strain factors that impact the achievement and persistence of nontraditional community college students is necessary to help this population of students overcome barriers that may cause them to drop out of college.

The study had several delimitations. First, I chose not to consider socioeconomic status or the variable of first-generation college students. The research site has a history of first-generation college students, so this factor was deemed redundant for additional study. Second, the present study was limited to one institution, so caution is advised for generalizing study conclusions to other institutions.

### **Limitations**

This study was subject to the following limitations. First, this study was not controlled for nontraditional students' motivation levels, individual issues that did or did not affect their academic performance, or services that the students may have accessed during their college experience. Because students only filled out a questionnaire and were not assigned various groups, there were no issues of internal validity such as compensatory treatment in the research design.



Second, for this study, attendance was not considered in the relationship between roles, academic achievement, and persistence. In addition, because this study took place at one community college in Texas, the results cannot be extrapolated beyond the community college being studied.

### **Significance of Study**

There is a shift in the profile of community college students. The traditional student cohort of 18-22-year-old students is no longer the majority demographic at most community colleges (Veney, O'Geen, & Kowalik, 2012). Nontraditional students, also referred to as adult learners, are returning to college at high rates. The purpose of this study was to determine the impact of role strain on the academic achievement and persistence of nontraditional students attending a community college. This was significant because it provides additional insight into the factors that may affect academic achievement and persistence of nontraditional community college students. Four roles that affect nontraditional students were identified: student enrollment status, marital status, parent status, and employment status. There may be a distinct set of stressors in each role that hinders the academic success of nontraditional students. Promoting awareness of the distinct academic needs of nontraditional community college students may ensure their future success.

The goal of this study was to determine the extent to which role strain variables can be used to enhance student success of nontraditional community college students. There is limited research on the effect of role strain on nontraditional community college students. This study provides valuable insight into the effect of role strains on

nontraditional students and its impact on academic achievement and persistence at a community college. It was also expected that the present study has significance for community college leaders, policy makers, instructors, and students. It can help instructors to improve instructional practices for nontraditional students. In addition, it can help these students achieve their educational objectives by providing information on role factors that may influence academic achievement and persistence and how to overcome these barriers.

### **Summary and Overview**

This chapter included an introduction to the research and the overview of the nontraditional community college student population in higher education in the United States today. The purpose of this study was to investigate the impact of role strain on the academic achievement and persistence of nontraditional community college students. Role strain is identified as a problem for nontraditional students and detracts them from balancing their role obligations with their lives as college student. This chapter included an introduction to the study, an explanation of the problem being investigated, and the purpose of the research. The research questions were also stated and the research assumptions and limitations were identified. Pertinent key research terms to be used in this study were operationally identified and defined. A quantitative research approach involving the use of demographic variables was described.

Chapter 2 will include the literature on the impact of role strain on the academic achievement and persistence of nontraditional community college students. The review of literature will also include the description of nontraditional and traditional students,

characteristics of nontraditional students, characteristics of traditional students, background and development of role strain, multiple roles and role stressors, role strain and coping strategies. The theoretical foundation, the role strain theory, will also be further discussed as it relates to this study.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### **Introduction**

Chapter 2 will include literature on the impact of role strains on nontraditional community college students in relationship to their academic achievement and persistence. A nontraditional student is classified as a student who is 25 years old or older, delays enrollment into postsecondary education, is financially independent of parents, works full-time while enrolled, or has dependents other than a spouse (NCES, 2014a). Nontraditional students have several external factors competing for their time and energy and can include: being a student, spouse, parent, and employee. When roles interfere with one another, there are significant consequences to the individual's mental and physical health, attitudes, and performance at work and in the family (Amstad, Meier, Fasel, Elfering, & Semmer, 2011). These competing life roles can also affect nontraditional students' performance in academic settings and are often a factor in their lack of academic success and decision to drop out from the community college (Alhassan, 2012).

Role demands, and often-conflicting roles of nontraditional students, are realities that must be understood to help nontraditional students achieve success in their educational goals. Therefore, it is imperative to understand nontraditional community college students' needs and allocate the necessary resources to help them successfully complete their studies. Institutions must learn how to develop initiatives and strategies that serve to engage nontraditional students and help to alleviate or ease their role strains.

This study can help community college leaders to gain insight into what nontraditional students need, want, and desire from the college experience (see Wyatt, 2011).

Unlike traditional students, nontraditional students have responsibilities related to their work and personal lives that may lead to role strain when merged with being a student (Forbus et al., 2011). The primary purpose of this study was to understand the relationship between the number of role strains and the academic achievement and persistence of nontraditional community college students. There are many role strains affecting nontraditional students' academic achievement and persistence once they make the decision to enroll in the community college. These include student status, relationships with family (including parenting and spousal demands), and employment commitments.

A report from the National Student Clearinghouse (2014) on the outcomes of students by age showed that 46.2% of nontraditional community college students were no longer enrolled compared to 25.4% of traditional students after two years. Greater family and work responsibilities while attending school place nontraditional students at a disadvantage for persisting in college and completing a degree (Ross-Gordon, 2011; Veney et al., 2012). It would appear then from the data that the needs of nontraditional community college students are not being met and some institutions are ill-equipped to take on the diverse needs of nontraditional community college students (Orgnero, 2013).

Being a spouse, student, parent or employee are all roles that nontraditional students may hold. These roles are often in conflict with each other, which may cause the nontraditional student to set aside academic priorities to meet the urgent demands of

these roles (Veney et al., 2012). Role strains can present barriers to the academic success and persistence of nontraditional students when work, family, and school roles interfere (Matthews, Winkel, & Wayne, 2013). Therefore, it is important to understand factors that contribute to the academic achievement and persistence of this population of community college students. A review of the literature on aspects relative to the study guided the review of current literature on the relevance of the problem amongst nontraditional students and roles strains.

This chapter will include the literature comparing and contrasting the characteristics of nontraditional and traditional community college students. In addition, the effects of role strain on nontraditional students will be discussed. Because the primary purpose of this study was to investigate the impact of role strain on the academic achievement and persistence of nontraditional community college students, a review of literature on aspects relative to the study were reviewed. These aspects included the community college profile of nontraditional community college students, comparison of nontraditional and traditional community college students' characteristics, background and development of role strain, multiple roles and role stressors, role strain and coping strategies, and persistence and academic achievement.

### **Literature Search Strategy**

The following databases were used in the literature review of nontraditional and traditional community college students and role strain: EBSCO, Academic database, Academic Search Premier, ERIC, PsycINFO, Education Research Complete, and Google Scholar. The following keywords were used: *attrition*, *community college retention*, *the*

*effect of multiple roles, academic achievement, dropout, role strain, role demands, role strain theory, role stressor, role overload, role ambiguity, multiple roles, nontraditional students, and traditional students.* In addition, the search also included the literature on role strain on the academic achievement of nontraditional community college students. Additionally, the search phrase “role strain and nontraditional students” was used to search the databases listed above to enhance the depth of this review.

### **Community Colleges**

The period between 1901 and 1920 is the first period for the development of community colleges (Nevarez & Wood, 2010). The American community college was structured in the early 20th century. It expanded into a national network in the 1960s comprising 457 community colleges (Nevarez & Wood, 2010). The American Association of Community Colleges (2012) reported that community colleges in America have grown from around 1,200 to 1,600 community colleges for a total enrollment of 13 million students.

### **Purpose of Community Colleges**

The American Association of Community Colleges (2016) reported that community colleges mission are basic commitments to (a) serve all segments of society through an open-access admissions policy that offers equal and fair treatment to all students, (b) a comprehensive educational program, and (c) serve its community as a community-based institution of higher education, teaching, and lifelong learning. The two guiding purposes for the creation of community colleges are (a) that all education should respond to the needs of the of the society to have an educated workforce to

strengthen the general welfare of a capitalist society and (b) that community colleges should educate students in the first two years, so that the senior colleges or universities can focus more on research and the actual professional education (Voorhees, 2001). These guiding purposes are essential because the community college system fills a variety of roles such as transfer programs, vocational and technical education, developmental and remedial programs, continuing education, community services, distance education, and workforce development.

### **Community College and the Nontraditional Student**

Community colleges play a crucial role in American higher education (Ma & Baum, 2016). Their open admission policy, coupled with geographical proximity to home, makes them an important pathway to postsecondary education for many nontraditional. In fall 2014, 42% of all undergraduate students and 25% of all full-time undergraduate students were enrolled in community colleges (Ma & Baum, 2016). In fall 2013 the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System recorded an enrollment of about 2.8 million full-time and 4 million part-time nontraditional students in community colleges (Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System, 2014).

The community colleges are diverse institutions that serve a wide variety students and their needs such as students who attend to upgrade their skills for a particular job, students who may be pursuing associate degrees to transfer to a 4-year institution, and students who attend to pursue a hobby such as learning a language (Murray, 2014). Students who enroll in community colleges have two major reasons for seeking a 2-year degree beyond high school: (a) to further their education to lead them to a better job or



career path, and (b) to maximize their educational investment, because community colleges cost less than the 4-year institution (Murray, 2014).

Obtaining an education is one of the greatest achievements a person can accomplish. That is the reason why many nontraditional students, after putting their education on hold for whatever reason, decide to return to school to complete their education (Ross-Gordon, 2011; Wyatt, 2011). The Obama administration announced a plan in July 2009 to support community colleges on the national level in graduating 5 million students by 2020 (Nevarez & Wood, 2010). In President Obama's (2011) State of the Union Speech, he remarked, "community colleges are an integral part of the U.S. education system." With the rising tuition rates at public and private 4-year institutions, the president committed \$9 billion dollars in federal grants to community colleges, which would aid them in obtaining the goals of community colleges which included, degree completion, and preparing graduates for the workforce, and career placement (Obama, 2011).

### **Characteristics of Nontraditional Students**

Two characteristics classify students as either traditional or nontraditional: age and enrollment status (Wyatt, 2011). A nontraditional student is 25 or older. According to the NCES (2014b), in addition to age, a nontraditional student is described as one who identifies with any of the following characteristics: (a) delayed enrollment, (b) attends part time for at least part of the academic year, (c) works full time while enrolled, (d) has dependents other than a spouse, (e) is a single parent, or (f) does not have a high school diploma (completed high school with a GED or another completion certificate).

Recently there has been a shift in the profile of higher education students at the community college. Nontraditional students have been a growing presence on community college campuses. They now constitute a significant proportion of the student body, which is indicated by an approximate enrollment in 2013 of 2.8 million full-time students and 4 million full-time students (Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System, 2014). It is projected that this student population will increase by 28% by 2019 (Markle, 2015), whereas the traditional-aged community college student population will increase at a lower rate of 10% (Hussar & Bailey, 2013). The reason for the rapidly-increasing growth of nontraditional students in community colleges vary but are generally attributed to the needs of individuals to sustain employment with salaries that will afford them a decent standard of living for themselves and their families (Hout, 2012). According to Gilardi and Guglielmetti (2011), because nontraditional students meet one of the criteria of delaying enrollment after high school, attending part time, working full time, or being financially independent or having dependents, they have a need to maintain a decent standard of living to provide for their families. Therefore, many people may find themselves attending school (or going back to school) who are classified as a nontraditional student.

Other key characteristics that distinguish nontraditional and traditional students are the multiple roles that nontraditional students fulfill in addition to attending community college (McCormick, 2011). Nontraditional students juggle life roles while attending school including those of being employee, having families, parenting, caregiver, and possible community involvement. Additionally, first-generation college

students or first-time attenders of college may be unfamiliar with the academic demands of college.

Data on nontraditional students shows that 63% of nontraditional students are enrolled in school part-time, 27% are employed full-time, 26% are married with children, and 15% are single parents (Center for Postsecondary and Economic Success, 2015).

These multiple roles present challenges and often compete with nontraditional students' time needed for academic involvement and participation in other activities (Veney et al., 2012). Nontraditional students continually maneuver between clashing priorities.

McCormick (2011) noted that nontraditional students experience situational barriers (multiple roles and lack of time); dispositional barriers (lack of confidence in their learning abilities); and institutional barriers (scheduling conflicts).

### **Barriers to Success**

The many roles that nontraditional students hold may become the barriers to their degree completion. A major concern is the high attrition rates among this group of students (Goncalves & Trunk, 2014). Nontraditional students have significantly lower retention and graduation rates compared to traditional students (NCES, 2012). The NCES (2015) reported that nontraditional student graduation rate in 2014 was 33.7% while traditional student graduation rate was 54.1%. Additionally, only 40.3% of nontraditional students are completing college or holding an associate's degree or higher (College Board Advocacy and Policy Center, 2011).

Consequently, identifying barriers to their college completion is imperative to reverse this trend. As far back as 1985, nontraditional students report that stress resulting

from environmental factors such as lack of emotional support from family, domestic responsibilities, discrimination, alienation, lack of academic and student support services in community college education settings, and employment demands which possess the biggest challenges to nontraditional students' academic achievement and degree completion (Bean & Metzner, 1985). This holds true today as well, as Veney et al. (2012) reported that family, employment, and community responsibilities can limit the academic achievement of nontraditional students and can even impede their degree completion. They may face obstacles within the classroom such as learning new technologies, which may not be prevalent to traditional students (McCormick, 2011). Kasworm (2012) reported that nontraditional students often face discrimination, alienation, or neglect in higher education settings. Additionally, he noted that many institutions do not provide accessible and relevant resources or support for a nontraditional student population that is working and married (Kasworm, 2012). Some nontraditional students have not attended a college for 10 years or more and may need help with socialization into institutions.

### **Needs of Nontraditional Students**

There is a need for community college administrators to establish services to meet the various needs of the nontraditional student population. The services could include advising and registration opportunities, financial aid, and career counseling development designed for nontraditional students. Other services may include electronic methods of communicating with students, such as telephone and/or on-line registration and advising appointments, e-mail application, and website postings of course time schedules.

Furthermore, community college administrators should develop first-year orientation curriculum workshops for nontraditional students that will empower them to manage the culture of community college education and deal with many issues that may cause anxiety about returning to school, learning skills, and academic success strategies. Brock (2010) noted that students need help in determining their degree plan, scheduling of classes, and how to maneuver the academic process to accomplish their degree. This is especially true for nontraditional students who may need additional guidance with maneuvering through the unfamiliar expectations of college.

Nontraditional students have differing perspectives on stress and expectations for their social life than traditional students. They are more likely to invest their time in enhancing their learning experience, whereas traditional students make time for involvement in social activities (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Wyatt, 2011). Because they associate school with a higher quality of life, nontraditional students tend to be more conscientious about the quality of their education. Buglione (2012) found that nontraditional students sought out more faculty support compared to traditional students. They are also more likely to prioritize their time for schoolwork to minimize conflicts with work and home obligations (Washington, 2013).

Although nontraditional students may try to minimize role conflicts and obligations, they continue to have several roles that compete for their time such as: being a student, parent, spouse, and/or employee. These factors may compete for their time and energy while also acting as barriers to their academic achievement and persistence. In fact, the data shows significant differences when comparing the academic achievement

and persistence of nontraditional vs. traditional students. Johnson and Nussbaun (2012) noted that even though nontraditional students are responsible for competing activities, many of them outperform traditional students academically. They utilize coping strategies as well as adaptive goal orientations and obtain a higher GPA than traditional students. A study by McCormick (2011) reported that nontraditional students made significantly higher GPAs (3.34 versus 3.15) than traditional students.

### **College Degree Attainment**

There are large disparities in college attainment between nontraditional and traditional students. Nontraditional students, compared to traditional students, are more likely to drop out of college because of substantial efforts to balance responsibilities between work, family and school (Choy, 2002; Orgnero, 2013). According to the NCES (2014b), 46.2% of nontraditional undergraduate community college students left school in their first year, compared to only 25.4% of traditional students. Nontraditional undergraduate students may face financial stressors and may have to work additional jobs to supplement their incomes while also managing work-family conflict and school (Hurst, et al., 2012). Forbus et al. (2011) reported that stress and apprehension were very common with nontraditional students.

Testa-Buzzee (2014) reported that full-time nontraditional students take longer than five years to complete a degree program in a community college and are more likely to drop out than traditional students. According to New (2014), nontraditional community college students are more likely to leave school in their first year than are traditional student (33.7% versus 27%) due to other life role obligations. Mullin and Phillippe

(2011) noted that for students who persisted to their second year, nontraditional students' rates of attrition are much closer to the rates of traditional students.

Nontraditional students have different classroom experiences compare to traditional students. Snider (2015) noted that many community colleges have a strong foundation in campus culture, missing out can be detrimental to a student's academic and social success. The author further noted that feeling connected and engaged in a college setting can help guide students toward an on-time graduation. Orgnero (2013) also noted that nontraditional students experience a feeling of discomfort in the classroom and they attribute this to a lack of self-confidence about their ability to succeed. The inability to function in a collegiate environment due to other obligations and responsibilities are often blamed for nontraditional students' departure from institutions of higher learning (Wyatt, 2011). The struggling and juggling inherent in these demands are major reasons nontraditional students drop out of school. Samuels, Beach, and Palmer (2011) and Buglione (2012) concurred that nontraditional students' constantly juggling academics with other competing priorities could influence their persistence. However, Samuels, Beach, and Palmer found that despite significant barriers they face, nontraditional students were more strongly motivated than traditional students to achieve their degrees.

With a greater understanding of the specific roles stressors and challenges that affect the nontraditional student, additional support from their institutions may make them more likely to persist. One of these challenges is the use of technology in higher education (McCormick, 2011). For example, nontraditional students may not have as much experience dealing with courses that may require a high technological use which

they may be required to complete. Colvin (2013) noted that because of these anticipated barriers, nontraditional students are at risk of dropping out or delaying graduation if they are not given the customized support by their institutions to persist in their degree program.

Furthermore, because of the direct effect of these barriers, nontraditional students are less likely to attain their degree goal within 5 years and are more likely to drop out of community college education than traditional students (Melkun, 2012). Buglione (2012) found that nontraditional students need specific resources such as workshops on identity development and coping strategies, as well as opportunities for service learning initiatives to help them offset or overcome these challenges. Warren (2012) reported that service learning increased student learning ( $d=0.332$ ). The results from the analysis suggest that service learning has a positive influence on nontraditional students' learning outcomes irrespective of the way learning was measured.

Nontraditional students are a growing student population in higher education, yet the unique factors that predict their success have not increased (NCES, 2014b). The advantages of pedagogy that uses service learning has a positive influence in their learning outcomes (Warren, 2012). Buglione (2012) defined service learning as a type of pedagogy by which nontraditional students are guided toward understanding their potential for leadership in life and community development. Service learning strengthens the impact that universities and community colleges have in communities (Reed et al., 2015). Although service learning can be used with traditional students, Buglione noted, it



has been more widely used with nontraditional students in order to understand this type of learning.

Rosenberg et al. (2012) reported that service learning has positive impact on nontraditional students. Nontraditional community college students who participated in service learning demonstrated more academic content and displayed an increase in critical thinking skills, which leads to better academic performance (Bradley et al., 2015). It promotes active learning and offers powerful opportunities to acquire the habits of critical thinking.

Nontraditional students are more likely than their younger classmates to hold more 'adult-type roles' such as spouse, parent, full-time worker, homeowner, and caregiver to elderly parents (Alhassan, 2012). These students bring with them desires and needs that are different from their traditional counterparts on campus (Forbus et al., 2011). For example, unlike traditional students, nontraditional students need a wide time-range of course offerings to be able to work full-time and attend classes. According to Thompson and Barcinas (2013), nontraditional students believe that a lack of support from their peers, faculty members, and family & friends is a barrier to their academic success. Institutions may opt to provide counseling, academic, and career services with evening and online services (Thompson & Barcinas, 2013). Providing these types of services for nontraditional students will help them to feel that they are supported and also provide them convenient hours that work around the many roles and obligations they may hold.

Nontraditional students have many roles that demand their attention. This may include jobs that involve long, unpredictable, or inflexible hours that demand exclusive devotion, and are intolerant of interference from other roles (Washington, 2013). Since nontraditional students are less likely to complete a degree program, it is vital that institutions know how the balancing of the multiple demands and roles of work, school, and life affects nontraditional students (Forbus et al., 2011). These roles might prevent them from becoming a real thread in the fabric of college life (Buglione, 2012). There are five areas of self and society that influences the nontraditional student as they navigate through higher education and experience college. Research by Kasworm (2002) and Alhassan (2012) indicate that these five areas are: family and significant other responsibilities, work responsibilities, student role responsibilities, financial responsibilities, and community responsibilities. Therefore, for this study, the researcher chose to look at the roles of student, spouse, parent, and employee to determine if there is a statistically significant relationship between these roles and the academic achievement and persistence of nontraditional students.

Nontraditional students have attributes, which are not yet realized by their traditional student counterparts (Forbus et al., 2011; Wyatt, 2011). These attributes include their maturity, learning and life experiences, values and their learning objectives and goals (Wyatt). These attributes set nontraditional students apart from traditional students. Nontraditional students are very concerned with the quality of their education, have a greater desire to learn, and value the educational aspects of their collegiate

experience much more than do traditionally aged students (Alhassan, 2012; Ross-Gordon, 2011; Wyatt).

Although nontraditional students hold various roles, it is important to determine which of these roles may have an influence on their academic achievement and/or persistence. Role strains can present barriers to their success, causing frustration and discouragement for them, many of whom may already be facing significant barriers of time, money, work commitments, and family responsibilities (Barnett, 2010).

Understanding the characteristics of this population, the challenge is to restructure institutional systems to better address their needs (Alhassan, 2012). Veney et al. (2012) concluded that by working to mitigate nontraditional students' role strain, higher education institutions can increase student persistence while strengthening relationships with the local community by simply modifying or publicizing existing campus resources, policies and practices that support the nontraditional student population.

Nontraditional students have become a substantial proportion of those enrolled in community colleges. They are students with concerns beyond those that are usually distinctive of the traditional students (Berker, Horn & Carroll, 2003; Washington, 2013). The academic success of nontraditional students appears to be correlated with many factors, such as work, parenting, level of community involvement, and financial situations. In addition, supporting this fastest-growing segment of the higher education student population can only increase the success of all institutions.

Nontraditional students usually maintain a serious attitude about their college education and rarely have opportunity to participate in extra-curricular activities (Wyatt,

2011). They have more of a business mindset and tend to be more conscientious about the quality of their education. They expect efficient educational experiences that generate immediate monetary results (Orgnero, 2013). Obtaining an associate's degree helps nontraditional students increase their income over a lifetime. Data shows that after factoring in the costs that graduates incur when earning an associate's degree it is a good investment: with a median net gain during a 40-year work life of more than \$259,000 compared with that of only a high school graduate (Schneider & Klor de Alva, 2013).

The multiple roles that nontraditional students hold may be factors responsible for the low persistence rates and barriers that hinders the academic achievement for this population of students. It is important to determine the needs of nontraditional students and to understand how having multiple roles may affect these students. Nontraditional students are the fastest growing educational demographic (Wyatt, 2011). Role strain can be a factor associated with their problems with overextended workloads and lower persistence (Orgnero, 2013). It is imperative to understand their needs and allocate the necessary resources to help them successfully complete their studies.

### **Characteristics of Traditional Students**

Historically, higher education has dedicated itself to meeting the academic needs of students between the ages of 18 and 22 years (Veney et al., 2012). This population of students, known as traditional students, are also typically financially dependent on others, do not have children, consider their college career to be their primary responsibility, and are employed only on a part-time basis, if at all, during the academic year (Center for Institutional Effectiveness, 2014). The NCES (2014a) defines a traditional student as a

student who earns a high school diploma, enrolls in college full-time immediately after graduation from high school, and depends on parents for financial support.

### **College Experiences of the Traditional Student**

The lifestyles of traditional and nontraditional students are dissimilar (Morris, Brooks, & May, 2003; Forbus et al., 2011; Wardley et al., 2013). Traditional students consider college as a time to develop as a person and prepare for the future, while nontraditional students are more likely to work full-time and attend class part-time (Forbus et al.). Forbus et al. found that compared to nontraditional students, traditional students have less role strain factors and are more likely to be concerned with having a good time at school. Furthermore, the researchers also found that only 27.4% of traditional students depend on their personal income to pay for college while 58.3% of nontraditional students rely on their personal income.

Traditional students mostly experience stress from their main role of being a student, while nontraditional students experience stress from having multiple roles such as parent, spouse, employee, and student. Traditional students receive more pressure from parents because parents are usually paying for their education and the students are not yet fully independent of their family (Dill & Henley, 1998; Forbus et al., 2011). It is recognized that work, school, and family are stressors for nontraditional students, while traditional students experience stress from academic and social concerns (Newbold, Mehta, & Forbus, 2010).

Traditional students experience college differently than nontraditional students. A study by Alhassan (2012) showed that adult undergraduates were focused on the

classroom, as opposed to traditional students who are more focused on peer group or campus involvement, as the main stage for their collegiate experience. The chief difference between the attrition of traditional and nontraditional students is that nontraditional students are more affected by the external environment than by the social integration variables affecting traditional student attrition (Alhassan, 2012; Bean & Metzner, 1985). In other words, the dropout rate of traditional students is more influenced by socialization factors in contrast to the dropout rate of nontraditional students which is influenced by external environmental factors such as having a lack of time to fulfill all their expected roles.

### **Enrollment of Traditional Students**

Historically, students in their first year of study have gained admission to college directly after graduating from high school. This traditional age group has been the focus of most student retention models and promotion efforts of colleges (Wardley et al., 2013). A study conducted by the American Council on Education (2013) found that completion rates at community colleges among traditional students was 54.1% compared to only 33.7% for nontraditional students. Traditional students are viewed in community college campuses as generally residential, enroll full-time immediately following high school graduation, dependent on financial support from parents, and either do not work or may work part-time (Bean & Metzner, 1985). In contrast, nontraditional students are exactly opposite. They are often the first generation of their families to attend college as noted by NCES (2013).

Traditional students often enroll in community colleges simply because the act of attending college is a tradition. Orgnero (2013) reported that some traditional college students' enrollment in community colleges sparks from external reasons, such as parental expectations or social relationships as opposed to nontraditional students who possess internal motivation to improve their education to boost self-confidence or to satisfy their intellectual interest.

There are many distinct differences between the campus involvement of traditional and nontraditional students. Traditional students most frequently have more time and opportunities on community college campuses to partake in campus activities unrelated to their educational objectives; they interact with other students and faculty easier and more often than nontraditional students because of sense of camaraderie on campus (Wardley et al., 2013; Wyatt, 2011). Traditional students interact with peers on a regular basis in and out of class and participate in numerous campus activities that involve even more networking among students (Wyatt, 2011).

In contrast, most nontraditional students are much less enmeshed in campus activities because of their involvement in family and work-related matters. Previous research found that social and peer events have a greater significance for traditional students. These findings concluded that social networks are more important to traditional students than to nontraditional students. A social network for nontraditional students consists of family members, while social networks for traditional students consist of peers or friends (Dill & Henley, 1998; Wyatt, 2011).

The community colleges assist traditional students to get acclimated to the college environment and to develop positive study habit and allow them to attain a well-rounded education at an affordable price (Myers, 2013). Since traditional students have always attended community colleges more than nontraditional students in the past, several studies have addressed the issue of persistence among traditional students and provided community college leadership with the foundation to make informed decisions related to student orientation, campus involvement, first-year programs and other strategies to engage traditional students. Alhassan (2012) noted that some of these strategies are not always effective or appropriate for nontraditional students who are unlikely to participate in out-of-class activities due to competing obligations.

### **Background and Development of Role Strain Theory**

Role strain theory evolved from role theory in which a role is defined as a pattern of behavior that refers to normative expectations associated with a position in a social system (Banton, 1965; Biddle, 1979). A role is an expectation of a specific duty to be filled. Human beings behave in ways that are different and predictable depending on their respective social roles, identities, (Biddle, 1979; Goode, 1973) and situations. It is when an individual has difficulty in fulfilling their role, that these roles are strained.

The role strain theory helps to explain how different areas of stress can interact. Goode (1960) noted that each individual has certain roles in life, each of which encompasses certain responsibilities and obligations. Nontraditional students are faced with many stressors. These include: time pressure, heavy workload, and relationships with family and friends (Alhassan, 2012). The struggle by nontraditional community



college students to juggle these obligations may be very complex and tasking (Matthews, Winkel, & Wayne, 2013).

Eagan (2004) reported two perspectives of multiples roles: role strain and role scarcity. The role scarcity implies multiple roles with different demands and obligations, which lead to role strain (Eagan, 2004). In order to reduce role strain, decisions are made to continue or leave role relationships with other stakeholders to meet role demands (Goode, 1960). According to Goode, barriers to intrusion are common coping mechanism of delegation of passing some role demands to someone else in order to reduce role strain.

The present study on how nontraditional students negotiate their multiple roles in order to achieve academic success was framed by role theory. The concept of role theory which has its roots in the social sciences of anthropology, sociology, and psychology focuses on the various activities and roles that human beings undertake as they interact with others in society (Biddle, 1979; Cranford, 2013). Role theory is instrumental in explaining why and how people respond to different situations because of the various roles that help to define them. Fowlkes (1987) noted that role theory provides a connection between the various roles and functions with which people identify and how they interpret and respond to situations that they may encounter. For example, nontraditional students who identify with multiple roles such as parent, employee, spouse, and caregiver are likely to share a similar view about the value of academic achievement.

In recognition of the importance of the role theory in integrating the social sciences, it is assumed that role theory can also carry over to the field of education particularly with regard to nontraditional students who may be enrolled in continuing education programs with corresponding many role obligations. Role theory is likely to contribute immensely to the field of higher education by informing about different behaviors associated with nontraditional students as they pursue their goal of academic achievement while navigating their many roles. In the context of the present study, role theory will likely help to explain why nontraditional students persist to academic achievement, even as they juggle many roles and obligations. With the explanation of this phenomenon, the present study may be able to shed light on the impact of multiple roles on nontraditional students' academic success.

Biddle (1979) noted that role theory is a focus on context, people, and their behaviors. According to Biddle, "role theory distinguishes individual behaviors, social activities, and the phenomenal process that presumably lie behind them" (p. 12). Role theory is a vehicle that integrates the three social science disciplines: anthropology, sociology, and psychology. Role theory will contribute in informing us about the behaviors associated with nontraditional students and can help overcome obstacles to their educational success.

Biddle stated that role theory includes many underlying propositions, which include:

1. Role theorists purport that some behaviors are characteristics of people within contexts (roles);

2. Roles are usually associated with groups of people who share a common identity (social position);
3. People are usually aware of roles and often these roles are dictated by their awareness (expectations);
4. Roles persist because of their consequences and because they are a part of larger social systems. (p. 8)

In many perspectives, role theory is the study of human and individual behaviors, in which individual behavior is guided by their position in a particular context. For example, when nontraditional students decided to return to school, they are willing to assume the student role because it is likely to help them to meet their expectations. Their behavior is then guided by their new student role (Biddle, 1979; Orgnero, 2013). Furthermore, Biddle reported that people are taught roles through their social positions and they may continue in these roles if they find them satisfying. Nontraditional students who value education as a result of their experiences are more likely to persist toward academic success than those who may not share the same values.

### **Role Strain**

Role strain is the perceived struggle in performing role-related duties and is a felt difficulty in fulfilling role obligations (Goode, 1960). When an individual is lacking the power to obtain, retain, and protect valued resources, strain occurs (Idris, 2011). Role obligations may include business responsibilities, parenting, and spousal & familial roles, as well as social roles (Rowlands, 2010). Role strains stems not from the non-availability of suitable roles, but from problems of choice and adjustment (Banton, 1965).

The student role is one of many role obligations for nontraditional students. Entering or re-entering school adds an additional role demand and obligation (Alhassan, 2012). This is the case for nontraditional community college students who feel that they are not able to fulfill all their roles and can affect their role obligations outside of school and in school such as: their grades and persistence. In a recent study, Alhassan (2012) found that nontraditional students have many different factors that influence their persistence in school. Due to the many roles that nontraditional students hold, these factors are very different from those of traditional students (Alhassan, 2012; Idris, 2011). In order to understand the persistence of a nontraditional student, their interaction with their environment, including family, community, work, and the learning institution, must be understood (Alhassan 2012; Bean & Metzner, 1985; Cohen & Greenberg, 2011; Idris, 2011). The competing life roles affect nontraditional students' performance and are often a factor in student attrition (Alhassan, 2012). Adebayo (2006) noted that students are generally faced with a number of stressors. These may include continuous evaluation, pressure to earn good grades, time pressures, unclear assignments, heavy workload, uncomfortable classrooms, and relationships with family and friends (Forbus et al., 2011). Role strain is a major source of stress for nontraditional students (Forbus et al.; Giancola, Grawitch, & Borchert, 2009). There is a need to find out which role factors affect the academic achievement of nontraditional students and if there is any significance between the number of role strains a student has and their persistence.

Banton (1965) reported that role strains stem from people being anxious about fulfilling all expectations that others hold of them. Each role comprises of an inherent, yet

distinct set of intertwined and competing obligations that can be presented as a stressor (Veney et al., 2012). The struggling and juggling associated with unbalanced social structures may create tension and health related problems for nontraditional students (Cranford, 2013; Ross, Niebling, & Heckert, 1999). Studies have identified two perspectives on multiples of roles and role strain: a) role scarcity, and b) role expansion (Egan, 2004). The study reported that the role scarcity perspective concept implies that multiple roles with different demands and obligations lead to role strain because the person did not have the strength or energy to effectively meet all the demands and therefore will suffer stress and other problems (Egan, 2004). In order to reduce role strain, decisions are made to continue or leave role relationships, or to bargain with other stakeholders in order to meet role demands (Goode, 1960).

Nontraditional students have many roles, which they are expected to fill. These roles can include parent, caregiver, spouse, employee, student, or community member (Veney et al., 2012). However, when there is a difficulty in fulfilling these roles, there can be role strain. Idris (2011) found that role strain occurs mainly because of fatigue, which results from pressure to comply with the set of demands required for each role. Idris also found that reducing the level of strain may be beneficial in reducing adverse consequences of strain such as diminished organizational commitment and increased turnover intention (p. 159). However, if nontraditional students are able to reduce the strain placed on them by their required roles, then they may be able to improve their performance and commitment to these roles. Role expansion may be able to help nontraditional students reduce role strain.

Role expansion implies that additional roles could be beneficial and can be a source of greater self-esteem and purpose (Hurst et al., 2012). The role strain theory was viewed from the scarcity theory perspective. For example, Goode (1960) defined role strain as “the felt difficulty in fulfilling role obligations” (p. 483). Goode also noted that because individual’s role obligations are over demanding, there are five different ways to attempt to reduce role strain as follows: compartmentalization; delegation; elimination; extension, and barriers to intrusion. The concept of compartmentalization is the process of setting aside other role demands in order to deal with a different role depending on the location and context of the role, such as being a student while in the classroom (Goode, 1960).

Goode’s (1960) delegation concept reduces role strain by passing some demands to another stakeholder. For example, childcare may be delegated to a spouse, family member, or to a childcare provider. This coping mechanism will be dependent on availability of other stakeholders to take some of the role demands (Settles, 2004). Orgnero (2013) suggests that if demands from a work role were causing role strain, the individual might try to find a different job or student demands might cause the student to quit school. It is pertinent to note that some roles may not be easily eliminated because it might involve loss of status or recognition if terminated (Alhassan, 2012; Blaxter & Tight, 1994).

The obligations of one role may be so great that the person may feel the need to bargain with the commitments of conflicting roles in order to avoid role strain and the role’s demands (Goode, 1960). Goode noted that the expansion of a role could facilitate

other role demands such as joining a club or group to increase networking possibilities, thereby decreasing role strain. Furthermore, Goode noted that barriers to intrusion are common coping mechanisms to reduce role strain. These various role attributes have different effects on nontraditional students who may be willing to accept role demands because of perceived benefits.

Idris (2011) noted that each social role is a set of rights, duties, expectations, norms, and behaviors that each person has to face and fulfill. According to Biddle (1979), the basic idea of role theory focuses on the various activities and roles that human beings assume as people interact with each other in society. Role theory, as noted by Biddle, helps to explain the reason why, and how, individuals respond to certain situations according to the various roles that help to explain them. It provides a connection between the different roles and functions with which people identify and how they interpret and respond to situations that they encounter (Fowlkes, 1987; Matthews, Winkel, & Wayne, 2014). For example, Fowlkes (1987) noted that those nontraditional students who maintain and identify with many roles, that include spousal, parent, employees, and caregivers, may also share similar views about the value of receiving a college degree.

The role strain theory provided the foundation for many studies concerning multiple roles, role conflict, role stress, and role strain. Ward (1986) reported that role strain has become a widely used term since Goode (1960) defined role strain. Goode, a major theorist of role strain, defines role strain as the felt difficulty in fulfilling role obligations (p. 483). Hardy (1978), another theorist in the field, defines a similar concept, role conflict, as a condition in which role obligations are vague irritating, difficult,

conflicting, or impossible to meet (p. 76). It is believed by these authors that role conflict and role strain are very related. For example, Hardy's (1978) role conflict definition is consistent with Goode's (1960) role strain definition.

The role strain theory is a set of concepts and interrelated theories (Cranford, 2013; Nye, 1976). Nye noted that role theory is the foundation of social science in general and the study of family in particular. The concepts formulated in the development of role theory dictates the relationship between an individuals' actions to their society, as well as how empirically testable a particular role theory perspective may be (Hindin, 2007; Idris, 2011). Roles are notable building blocks of social institutions and social structures. Despite many perspectives and terms, which may have developed around the concept of roles, there are two main perspectives of roles: the structuralism and the interactionism (Nye, 1976). The structural roles are the culturally defined norms—rights, duties, expectations, and standards for behavior associated with a given social position (Linton, 1945). Structuralism is a macro-level perspective that looks at the function of roles within society. In contrast, interactionism is a micro-level perspective, which looks at individuals of society and how their roles and actions interact with one another.

A person's social position is seen as influencing their behavior. Lopata (1991) noted that status such as gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and social class shapes roles. For example, as a mother, a woman is expected to place the care of her child above all other concerns. Role behavior may not correspond to the role expectations. According to Lopata, role competence or success in carrying out a role may vary depending on



social contexts and resources. This is where role strain may affect an individual because they may not be able to fulfill the expectations of a specific role in addition to other roles.

Idris (2011) noted that the role stress theory, which is a set of organizational factors that generate role expectations among role senders, who then transmit these as role pressures to the person, is an identified component that causes role strain. The role stress theory is a precursor to the theory of role strain. Role stress leads to role strain because of the fatigue that results from the pressure to comply with the set of demands (Goode, 1973; Idris, 2011). All individuals take part in many different role relationships, each of which has its own obligations; however, there may be contradictory performances required which may cause conflicts of resources, place, or time according to Goode. If an individual conforms fully or adequately in one direction, it will be difficult to fulfill the duties of another (Biddle, 1979; Goode, 1973; Idris, 2011). The strained individuals may then begin to feel that they do not have the necessary resources available to understand, predict, and control the stressors, which are confronting them (Idris, 2011).

However, role strain is a normal experience (Goode, 1960). Individuals normally assume more role obligations than they can handle and consequently, role strain results when confronted with various role demands or role conflicts (Goode, 1960; Lengacher, 1983). According to Goode (1960), role strain is the challenge in meeting a given role demand which may be viewed as normal. The challenge therefore is the ability to manage or reduce role strain to some manageable proportions (Forbus et al., 2011) depending on the type of role strain that an individual may be facing.

### **Multiple Roles and Role Stressors**

In addition to being a student, nontraditional students have many other roles in which they must fulfill. Nontraditional students must devote time and energy to numerous other commitments (Home, 1998; Ross-Gordon, 2011; Veney et al., 2012). These commitments can include parental commitments involving their child's school, work commitments, or even community commitments. Universities are seeing an increase in the numbers of adult learners who must manage concurrent roles in the family, the workplace, and the community (Feldman, 2011; Home, 1998; Veney et al., 2012). Yet these multiple roles present challenges in students' allocation of time for academic study according to Ross-Gordon (2011), and time to fulfill these multiple roles. Because nontraditional students juggle a number of responsibilities, they often set aside academic priorities in order to meet more urgent demands. This conflict is a key source of stress for the nontraditional student (Veney et al., 2012), which may cause role strain.

Multiple roles are associated with role overload, which can trigger role stressors and lead to role strain (Goode, 1960). In a constant battle to fight role strain, individuals and nontraditional students adjust their role demands to adapt with perceived role stressors in order to avoid role strain which may likely occur. Home (1997) and Idris (2011) identified four dimensions of role strain, which are: role stressor, role conflict, role overload, and role ambiguity.

There are various types of role stressors that make up or influence role strain. Role stressors are made up of three separate, but related concepts: role conflict, role overload, and role ambiguity (Idris, 2011). Role overload occurs when role expectations

are greater than the individual's ability to perform the given tasks (Idris). Role conflict occurs when an individual is subjected to two or more contradictory expectations, in which the individual cannot meet the demands of the role (Biddle, 1979; Feldman, 2011; Idris, 2011;). Role ambiguity occurs when an individual does not understand the expectations or has no knowledge about the expectations in order to fulfill the role (Biddle, 1979; Idris, 2011). These role stressors may lead to role strain on an individual when they are faced with a role that is too complex (Biddle, 1979), there is incompatibility with the demands of the roles, or they do not understand what is expected to fill the role. The expectations associated with a role may be mutually incompatible or undesirable, leaving a person with feelings of discomfort as he or she is called upon to fulfill role obligations (Feldman, 2011).

### **Role Stressors**

Role stress is the excessive role pressure experienced by individuals and nontraditional students to fulfill role demands and constraints that have been placed on them (Kahn et al., 1964). Gillespie et al. (2001) noted that role related demands with a lack of sufficient time to keep abreast with overall role demands are frequently the sources of stress among nontraditional student. Experienced and prolonged stress creates ill health (Kahn et al., 1964). Role strain occurs because of stress from role demands from three different constructs: role overload, role ambiguity, and role conflict (Cranford, 2013; Kelloway & Barling, 1990). Role overload occurs when role demands are greater than individual's abilities; role ambiguity occurs when there is less clear authority on how to perform role demands; while role conflict is associated to incompatibility of role

demands (Ashforth & Lee, 1990). In his research, Winefield (2000) reported that increased stress levels in nontraditional students, and in academics in general, were associated with increased workload and reduced rewards.

A key characteristic of nontraditional students is that they are juggling other life roles while attending school, including those of worker, spouse or partner, parent, caregiver, and community member (Ross-Gordon, 2011). These various roles which nontraditional students hold, may cause role conflict, role overload, or role ambiguity. Role-related demands, lack of resources, lack of support, and insufficient time to keep abreast with overall job demands, are frequently reported as the sources of stress among student academic pursuits (Idris, 2011).

There are many potential costs associated with the roles when an individual is not able to perform these roles as expected (Idris, 2011; Veney et al., 2012). Idris noted that whenever individuals do not have clear guidelines regarding their role's authority and responsibility, they will experience stress, become dissatisfied, and perform less effectively. Feelings of stress and the sense that one is unable to fulfill role expectations are problematic for the individual and society (Cranford, 2013; Feldman, 2011). Excessive role strain on nontraditional students may hinder their academic progress. These strains frequently pertain to family, employment, and the community and can limit academic success and even impede degree completion altogether (Guidos & Dooris, 2008; Veney et al., 2012). These roles are in perpetual competition with one another vying for the individual's limited time, energy, and resources (Giancola, Grawitch, & Borchert, 2009).

The needs of nontraditional students stem in large part from their taking on of several roles at once; the resultant tension is role strain (Veney et al., 2012). Many nontraditional students carry roles such as parent, spouse, employee, community member, and of course, student. To understand the persistence of the adult learner, one must understand the interaction of the learner with his or her environment, including family, community, work, and the learning institution (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Home, 1998; Veney et al., 2012).

### **Role Overload**

Biddle (1979) stated that role overload, which is a type of stressor that leads to role strain, occurs when an individual is faced with a role set that is too complex. An individual has limited time and energy; therefore, they will become distressed when too many demands are placed on them (p. 324). Nontraditional students face role overload in many ways. For example, a single parent may be unable to squeeze in time to study between classes, a part-time job, and caring for his or her children and elderly mother (Home, 1998).

With these various roles, the student may not be able to meet the obligations of each role. As the demands and complexity of the roles increase, role strain intensifies (Cranford, 2013). Role overload is described as a feeling of being spread too thinly or always trying to catch-up (Home, 1998). This feeling may be increased when an individual does not understand or have clear knowledge of what is expected in order to fulfill the role. An individual may experience role strain when expectations associated with a role are incompatible, competing, or ambiguous (Feldman, 2011).

Role overload is excessive role demand in a given amount of time, it exists when role demands are cotto greater than the individual's abilities to perform multiple roles (Idris, 2011; Schaubroeck, Cotton, & Jennings, 1989). When role demands are excessive, there is a sense of overburdening which subsequently leads to strain. The author noted that role overload exists when a person, nontraditional students in particular, simultaneously fulfills multiple roles. Role overload and role conflict are used interchangeably (Biddle, 1979; Idris, 2011). Most nontraditional students usually have multiple roles that demand their attention (Home, 1997). Blaxter and Tight (1994) noted that roles that cause contradiction may result in conflict or stress. Role conflicts, which may lead to role overload, affect nontraditional students' academic experience (Biddle).

When nontraditional students assume additional roles, they often experience role conflict and stress associated with their multiple roles. Thus, role overload occurs which likely may lead to both physical and psychological stress (Biddle, 1979; Forbus et al., 2011). Biddle suggested that since multiple roles can lead to stressful situations, nontraditional students may need to develop strategies that will help them to alleviate these stressful situations. Time management, support from significant people in their lives, and development of relationships with other students who may share their context, behavior, and values may help them to navigate the conflicts associated with their various roles.

### **Role Ambiguity**

Role ambiguity is described as a lack of information for a given role, which often leads to dissatisfaction with the role, anxiety, or decreased performance levels (Cranford,

2013; Idris, 2011; Rizzo, House, & Lirtzman, 1970). Role ambiguity occurs when there is a lack of clear and specific information regarding work role requirements (Rizzo, House, & Lirtzman). In addition to role conflict, Kahn et al. (1964) noted that role ambiguity is the degree to which clear information is lacking regarding the following:

1. The expectations associated with a role
2. Methods of fulfilling known role expectations
3. The consequences of role performance

With regard to nontraditional students, role ambiguity may arise when there is role overload due to role conflict and role strain (Rizzo et al., 1970). Rizzo et al. also noted that role ambiguity is a role stressor arising from the imposition of incompatible expectations. These can result in both inter-role conflict and intra-role conflict. The inter-role conflict is associated with nontraditional students' experience of role ambiguity due to multiple roles in their academic endeavors.

The degree to which nontraditional students have multiple role demands may affect their persistence. Tinto (1987) noted that if external commitments prevent student's academic and social integration within the college, then students may choose to depart. Fundamentally, role ambiguity is due to nontraditional students' unclear plan to address role overload arising from role strain. Rizzo et al. (1970) noted that cognitively, a certain level of ambiguity fosters creative decision ability for possible solutions to resolve ambiguities. For nontraditional students, role ambiguity may arise when they do not know how to start to resolve role conflict among multiple demands.

## **Role Conflict**

Role conflict is the simultaneous occurrence of two or more role expectations (Kahn et al., 1964), it is the third role stressor in the role strain model. Biddle (1979) noted that role conflict occurs due to role overload, while role overload occurs due to multiple demands. Home's (1997) study reported that role conflict was most pronounced between student and parenting roles, it has the greatest influence on the development of student identity in nontraditional students and requires an either/or choice in deciding which role demand to fulfill. Multiple roles are likely to cause strain in nontraditional students. Role conflict and role overload can impact nontraditional students negatively and can affect their persistence and achievement (Biddle).

Individuals normally assume more role obligations than they can handle which results in role strain when they are confronted with various role demands or role conflicts (Legacher, 1983). For example, role conflict may occur with the role of being a parent, student, and an employee. In trying to be a good parent, a person may be torn between spending time with their children and earning a living to support their children; both are expectations of a good parent and both may be impossible to uphold (Feldman, 2011). Mothers of school-aged children may have difficulty attending late afternoon or evening classes (Home, 1998) due to working full-time and having children to care for after work.

Role conflict is associated with role overload and stress due to multiple roles. These role stressors may lead to both physical and psychological stress. Biddle (1979) suggested that since multiple roles can lead to stressful situation, nontraditional students should develop strategies to help them to alleviate these stressful situations. As



nontraditional students progress toward academic achievement, their persistence is likely to be impacted by various multiple roles and how they manage these conflicting roles. The success of nontraditional students' academic achievement may be determined by how they view and manage their conflicting roles.

### **Role Strain and Coping Strategies**

There is no known coping strategy that works for every individual problem (Tein, Sandler, & Zautra, 2000). For nontraditional students' academic success, factors such as, family support, program flexibility, and the role of faculty may be beneficial for them to achieve the most positive outcome in their academic success (Ross-Gordon, 2011; Tein, Sandler, & Zautra). Family members and faculty of nontraditional students can definitely play an important role as change agents in creating supportive learning environments for these students (Ross-Gordon). The role of faculty is an important factor in role strain coping strategies (Blair, 2010). The design and delivery of academic programs are key factors to successful undergraduate experiences for nontraditional students (Blair). Faculty should incorporate theory and research on adult learners into their own classrooms by advocating for adult-orientated programs and services on their college campuses such as transitional programs or student support and mentor programs. The incorporation of this broader context will more likely match the needs of nontraditional students coping strategies (Chao & Glenn, 2004).

Flexibility of academic programs may significantly increase the retention of nontraditional student population in community colleges (Ross-Gordon, 2011). Because of multiple roles and commitments, nontraditional students will likely look for academic

programs that provide them flexibility in time and locations for course completion (Ross-Gordon). Thirty-two percent of all two-year and four-year institutions reported offering college-degree and/or certificate programs through different formats such as online courses, blended/hybrid courses and accelerated courses. Research suggests that significant retention of this population can be achieved through flexible class schedules and specialized support services. The easiest ways for an institution to increase flexibility of class schedules would be to offer more online, night, and weekend classes. Seventy-eight percent of nontraditional students who drop out of college said that different class times would make college graduation feasible (Johnson et al., 2009).

Nontraditional students should also be able to rely on family support and significant others in their lives to provide support in order for them to meet their academic goals. For example, if the spouse of a nontraditional student assumes a more active role in their child-rearing obligations, the student role as parent will change since the student may no longer do all the child-rearing responsibilities before going to school. However, if the spouse is unable to meet the expectations of family support, then conflict may result among the student's role, as student and parent (Thoits, 1987). Epstein (1987) noted that emotional support of significant others is important to the success of multiple life roles. Family support is necessary in order for the relationship to be successful (Thoits).

### **Summary**

This chapter provides an overview of nontraditional students and the obstacles that impede or improve their success as college students in community colleges.

Academic and student support services would be an ideal creation for community colleges settings that have seen and will continue to see an increase in number the nontraditional student population. The traditional students are no longer the majority on community college campuses. It is imperative that the administrations of community colleges identify the differences between these two groups of students in order to promote nontraditional student success.

The literature review further revealed that nontraditional students experience a major transition change that impedes their success as college students in community colleges. The literature review provides sound evidence that nontraditional students experience many obstacles such as: work, family obligations, and other off campus responsibilities and obligations as students (Ryan, 2003). The literature review also revealed that stress, arising from role strain from competing demands, impedes the academic achievement and persistence of nontraditional community college students. Community college educators, administrators, support professionals and staff who are better informed on the nontraditional student's daily life should be able to help them as they pursue their degree.

This chapter further provides a background for understanding the dropout factors, stress issues, and support needs of nontraditional students. The nontraditional student, as defined by NCES (2014a), is a student over the age of 25 who enters a higher education institution. Their learning is based on their life experiences and they often want to pursue professional credentials. The literature about nontraditional students is necessary in order to provide a frame of reference for the participants of the present study.

Noted in the role theory literature, role theory provides a commentary on human behavior and it is the nontraditional student's behavior that this study will investigate. The theory will help to explain this phenomenon. As noted by Biddle (1979), rolls are dictated by a person's expectations and roles persist because they are a part of larger social systems. For example, when nontraditional students decide to further their education, they are willing to assume the role of student because the student role allows them to meet their expectation. The motivation that nontraditional students develop overtime usually allows them to succeed academically despite the conflicting roles. Goode (1960) noted that barriers to intrusion were a common mechanism to reduce role strain. As nontraditional students progress towards achieving academic success, their persistence may be impacted by their various roles, and their success is often determined by the way they view their conflicting roles and their ability to manage their conflicting roles.

The highlights of role strain and the mechanisms of role overload, along with the factor that may be involved in nontraditional students' attrition, provided a rich theoretical backdrop for this study. The insight gained from the review of literature was used in answering the research questions and the new insights that emerged were helpful in informing and making contributions to the current literature. The central element of this study was to determine the extent to which role strain variables can be utilized to enhance academic success of nontraditional community college students.

The literature has revealed that there are many areas related to nontraditional students, which should be further researched, such as the relationship of stress to

persistence of nontraditional students and the effect of role strain on nontraditional community college students' academic success. Since this study focused on the impact of role strain on the academic achievement of nontraditional community college students, persistence is also an important concept and an ultimate goal of nontraditional students. This study considered how nontraditional students are able to navigate their many, and often conflicting roles, through the lenses of the role conflict theory, role strain, role stressors, role overload, role conflict and role ambiguity in order to achieve academic success through persistence.

This study provides valuable insights that may help nontraditional students achieve their educational goal objectives by providing information on role factors that may influence academic achievements and persistence; and how to overcome these barriers. Chapter 3 will provide a description of the methodology and procedures that were used in the investigation. The major areas to be discussed will include, research design and approach, setting, sample, data collection, data analysis, and research questions.

## Chapter 3: Research Method

### **Introduction**

Many nontraditional community college students face competing responsibilities such as work, parenting, spousal roles, and familial roles (Rowlands, 2010).

Nontraditional community college students are not only nontraditional in age (25 years or older) from traditional students, but in circumstance, situation, and predicament (Macari, Maples, & D'Andrea, 2006). Many nontraditional students pursue college while attempting to balance multiple roles of being a student, parent, spouse, and employee. Multiple roles are a part of everyday existence for most people and each role has its own demands and obligations. Goode's (1960) theory of role strain helps explain that role strain occurs when there is difficulty in fulfilling the expectations of multiple roles. This causes the depletion of resources and negatively affects other roles that a person may be trying to fulfill. In the present study, I hypothesized that employee responsibilities, parenting, student enrollment status, student identity, and familial roles are significant variables in role strain.

The purpose of this study was to quantitatively investigate the impact of role strain on the academic achievement and persistence of nontraditional community college students. I attempted to reveal the relationship between role strain and GPA and persistence, which are related to multiple roles that affect nontraditional students. With a balance, nontraditional students can overcome the conflict of multiple roles in order to persist in school.

This chapter details the research design for this quantitative study. Each section includes a thorough description and discussion of the rationale for the research design and the methodology, including the population and data collection procedures. The plan for data analysis will also be discussed in this chapter.

### **Research Design and Rationale**

The present study was conducted using a quantitative, correlation design. The correlational methods of inquiries are studies in which the purpose is to discover the relationship between variables through correlational statistics (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007).

The variables for the present study were defined and measured, and descriptive statistics were completed for each measure and numerical data were collected to explain or predict phenomena of interest. The goal was to gain a clearer understanding of the relationship between role strain on the academic achievement and persistence of nontraditional community college students over each term. The roles identified as the independent variables were student enrollment status (full-time, part-time, graduate, or not enrolled), marital status, parent status, and employment status (full-time or part-time). A questionnaire was used to collect data from participants to predict academic achievement and academic persistence. Academic achievement was measured via GPA and defined as a student who receives a semester GPA of 2.0 or higher. Unsuccessful academic achievement was defined as a student who receives a semester GPA below 2.0. The student continuing from one term to the next term, for at least two consecutive terms, indicated academic persistence.

The independent variables for this study were examined to determine what effect they may have on academic achievement and persistence of nontraditional community college students. Responses from community college students at a North Texas institution provided demographic and educational information. The academic persistence rate (the rate at which they returned the following term) was measured by if the student returns the following term. Logistic regression analysis was performed to determine if any of the independent variables are associated with academic persistence. Beta regression was used for GPA. Beta regression can be used for bounded dependent variables (Smithson & Verkuillen, 2006). The usual beta regression is for variables bounded by 0 and 1; GPA is bounded by 0 and 4, but this can be remedied by dividing GPA by 4. Persistence was analyzed using logistic regression because the response variable has only two outcomes (persist or did not persist).

After developing the theoretical understanding as the basis for the present study, the following research questions were developed to measure the impact of role strain on the academic achievement and persistence of nontraditional community college students:

Research Question 1: What is the most common role strain among nontraditional community college students (spouse, parent, or employee)?

Research Question 2: Is there a statistically significant relationship between the number of different roles a nontraditional community college student identifies with and their grade point average (GPA)?



Research Question 3: Is there a statistically significant relationship between the number of different roles a nontraditional community college student identifies with and their level of persistence?

## **Methodology**

### **Population**

This study was conducted using a questionnaire data collection method from nontraditional students at a community college in north Texas. This institution provides affordable and open-access to quality teaching and learning. This community college offers associate degrees in the Arts, Sciences, and Applied Sciences. In addition to degreed programs, this community college offers a wide range of other affordable and flexible continuing education programs including: career, corporate services, college & career readiness classes (guided studies), and community & personal development programs. It has an average enrollment of 7,000 students with approximately 1,600 students attending full-time and 5,400 attending part-time. There are approximately 3,000 nontraditional students and 4,000 traditional students. The average age of students attending is 27 years of age. The student gender percentages are 60.6% female and 39.4% male (DSC, 2017). The population of nontraditional students that met the criteria for this study was 2,766.

### **Sampling and Sampling Procedures**

The participants for this current study were nontraditional community college students who met the following criteria:

1. 25 years of age or older

2. Enrolled in 2013 in at least 6 credits
3. Working toward the completion of an associate's degree (or were working on an associate's degree at the time of enrollment)

The school's office of data reporting & analytics provided the researcher with potential participants who met the criteria. Because research that involves human subjects may be associated with ethical issues, the data collected for the study was collected with extreme care, recorded, and maintained in a way that anonymity of student information was preserved. The investigator selected this college for the present study because of the large population of nontraditional students (2,766) that make up the student population. The questionnaire was sent to all nontraditional students at the community college who met the criteria for the study in order to potentially reach the intended sample size of 250 participants. This number was determined by conducting a power analysis to determine an effective sample size in order to make reasonable conclusions for this research study. To ensure that this sample was representative of the population, random sampling was utilized. Participants who wished to participate responded randomly to the request to participate in the study. With randomization, a representative sample from a population provides the ability to generalize to a population (Creswell, 2009).

### **Data Collection Procedures**

Prior to data collection, the investigator sought approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Walden University and the Institutional Research department of the community college. The researcher contacted the community college's Institutional Research department regarding information about the present study and requested

permission to collect data from its students for this study. With permission, the investigator requested the following information from the institution's students in the form of a questionnaire: age of students, enrollment status, GPA, marital status, dependents, and employment status. With this enrollment information from the institution's students, the researcher was able to determine the number of roles for each participant. The data was gathered by recruiting students through email to participate in the research study. Potential participants were given a full disclosure statement of the study. Those who met all inclusion criteria at the community college and decided to participate in the study clicked on the link to take the data collection questionnaire. Since research involving human subjects may have ethical issues associated, the data collected from students was anonymous as participants did not give any identifying information.

**Dependent Variable.** The two dependent variables were: GPA and continuing to the next term through at least two consecutive terms (persistence). Persistence is the rate at which students persist in higher education, often as measured by the percentage of students who continue in higher education from one year to the succeeding year (NCES, 2014a). GPA is continuous, but bounded, meaning the GPA may fall between 0 and 4.

**Independent Variable.** Role strain is the independent variable. The four types of role strains that have been hypothesized as having an influence on the success of nontraditional students are: student enrollment status, spouse, parent, and employment status.

### **Instrumentation**

Mushaquash and Bova (2007) noted that accurate assessment measures are most important and are obligated to be both valid and reliable. It is important to evaluate each measure's reliability and validity standards within research and practice settings in order to achieve positive outcome results (Blacker & Endicott, 2008). Aiken (2003) and Rosenthal and Rosnow (2008) recommend reliability estimates of .95 or higher when scores are for making clinical decisions. With regard to the present study, the researcher used a self-made questionnaire in order to collect information from participants. In the present study, all students who met all inclusion criteria at this community college were compared for the impact of role strain on the academic achievement and persistence of nontraditional community college students. To ensure validity of the questionnaire created by the researcher, a panel of experts in higher education determined if the questionnaire items measured the content that it was intended to measure.

### **Data Analysis Plan**

Beta regression was applied as the analysis method for Research Question 2 and logistics regression for Research Question 3. Finally, descriptive statistics was constructed to address Research Question 1. According to Howell (2008), the mainstay of statistical analysis in education research is regression. There are different forms of regression because dependent variables can be measured at various levels of measurement. This method of analysis was appropriate because it allowed for the analysis of a dichotomous outcome variable (Peng & Ingersoll, 2002). The present study focused on the effect size (the quantitative measure of the difference between two

groups). Research Question 1 was determined by looking at the frequency of each of the roles. Analyses for Research Question 2 and Research Question 3 was conducted using the Statistical Analysis System (SAS) version 9.4. All analyses were conducted based on a significance level of .05.

### **Threats to Validity**

#### **Ethical Procedures**

The director of reporting and data analytics for the university granted permission for the researcher to receive email addresses from the data reporting department of potential participants who met the criteria for the study. Only email addresses were received, no other information was given to the researcher. Participants were sent an email invitation to participant and an informed consent. Participants voluntarily completed the questionnaire if they wished to participate. All responses were anonymous. The questionnaire did not ask participants for any identifying information.

There are no ethical concerns about data collection as all data collected was anonymous. All data collected (email addresses and questionnaire responses) is electronically stored and is password protected with no shared access. All data will be deleted after the five-year minimum requirement of Walden University. The Walden IRB approval number for this study is 02-15-18-0246294.

### **Summary**

The present study assessed the impact of role strain on the academic achievement and persistence of nontraditional community college students. The study considered evidence regarding the impact of student, spousal, parenting, and employee

responsibilities as predicting factors to role strain on the academic achievement and persistence of nontraditional community college students. Additionally, the effects of student, spousal, parenting, and employee roles was also examined. This chapter described the methodology used in the present study. The research design for this study consisted of a quantitative analysis of selected variables and their influence on the academic achievement and persistence of nontraditional community college students. The study used data collected from participants at a community college in north Texas, with permission from the school's authority. The investigator made every effort to ensure strict confidentiality of all student information. The investigator utilized descriptive statistics, a beta regression model and a logistics regression model in answering the research questions. Chapter 4 will determine the most common role strain amongst nontraditional community college students and determine if there is a statistically significant relationship between the number of roles and academic achievement and persistence.

## Chapter 4: Results

### **Introduction**

This chapter will provide an overview of the study followed by an explanation of the data collection process for the study. Descriptive statistics of the participants are provided and used to answer Research Question 1. Next, the data analysis model used to answer each of the remaining research questions is discussed, and the results are explained. The chapter will conclude with a summary of the results.

In this quantitative, correlational study, I investigated the impact of role strains on the academic achievement and persistence of nontraditional community college students. The purpose of this study was to determine if there is a relationship between the number of role strains a student holds and the effect on their academic achievement, measured by GPA, and their persistence, which was measured by continued enrollment through at least two consecutive terms. This study was also conducted to determine which role strains (spouse, parent, or employee) were most common among nontraditional community college students in addition to their role of being a student. For Research Question 1, descriptive statistics were used to determine the frequency of roles among the sample of nontraditional students. Regression was then used for Research Questions 2 and 3 to determine if a statistically significant relationship exists between the number of roles a student has and their GPA and between the number of roles and their persistence. Analysis for Research Questions 2 and 3 were each adjusted for age due to the unequal age distribution amongst each group.

## **Data Collection**

Participants for this study were nontraditional students who met the following criteria: 25 years of age or older, enrolled in 2013 in at least 6 credits, and were working toward the completion of an associate's degree at the time of enrollment. At the community college district campus used for this research study, there were 2,766 nontraditional students enrolled in 2013 who met the criteria. The researcher was given the e-mail addresses of students who met the criteria from the research site's institution. No identifying information was given, nor was any identifying information requested from participants on the follow-up questionnaire.

A total of 2,766 potential participants were e-mailed. The questionnaire was sent using the Survey Monkey website and data collection lasted for a total of 4 weeks. A total of 519 e-mails were returned as undeliverable. Out of the 2,247 nontraditional students who were sent the questionnaire, 262 students responded, which was a return rate of 11.7%. Of the 262 student respondents, six students stated that they were completing noncredit courses and were excluded from the data analysis. Two-hundred-and-fifty were chosen, which was the approved target number of participants for this study. All analyses were conducted based on a significance level of .05.

## **Results**

### **Descriptive Statistics**

The age criterion for this study was participants who were nontraditional students at least 25 years of age or older. The age group frequencies for this study were 185 for those 25-44 years old, 53 for those 45-64 years old, and 12 for those 65 or older. Out of



the sample, 74% of nontraditional students were 25-44 years old, 21.2% were 45-64 years old, and 4.8% were 65 years of age or older.

Research Question 1 was designed to find the most common role strain amongst nontraditional community college students (spouse, parent, or employee). Table 1 shows that being employed full-time is the most common role amongst nontraditional community college students. The frequency of roles for this study showed that more students are full-time employees with 68.4% of nontraditional students working full-time while attending school, compared to only 12% of nontraditional students being employed part-time, 53.2% with dependents, and 48% being married.

Table 1

*Frequency of Role Strains*

Independent Variable	Frequency	Percent
Employment		
Full-time	171	68.4
Part-time	30	12
Not Employed	49	19.6
Dependents/Parent		
Yes	133	53.2
No	117	46.8
Married/Spouse		
Yes	120	48
No	130	52

The number of role strains each participant has was also analyzed. The frequency of the number of role strains was 53 for one role, 88 for two roles, 78 for three roles, and 31 for four roles. The descriptive statistics for the number of roles shows that more

students have two roles. Nontraditional students who have two role strains was 35.4%, followed closely by three being the second most number of role strains with 31.4% of students holding three roles. The percentage of nontraditional students that held all four role strains was 12.2% (includes being a student, spouse, parent, and employee). There were 21% of nontraditional students who only held one role strain, which is student, because all the participants are students.

The descriptive statistics for student enrollment include: Students enrolled full-time and part-time each had a percentage of 23.6%. Students who graduated were 19.6% of the sample. Students not currently enrolled had the highest percent of 33.2%. The frequencies were full-time = 59, part-time = 59, not currently enrolled = 83, and graduate = 49.

### **Regression Analysis**

Research Question 2 sought to determine if there is a statistically significant relationship between the number of different roles a nontraditional community college student identifies with and their grade point average (GPA). Beta regression was used since GPA is bounded. However, beta regression requires that the dependent variable be between 0 and 1 so each participant's GPA was divided by 4. There was one GPA of 0.0 which was set to 0.01 and one GPA of 4.0 which was set to 0.99.

The number of roles was set as the total of: being in school (full-time, part-time, graduate, or not enrolled), being employed (full-time or part-time), being married, and having any dependents. Thus, the number of roles could range from 1 to 4. Table 2 shows the results for Research Question 2. The response variable, or dependent variable was the

GPA proportion. First, Research Question 2 was tested with all groups, adjusted for age, due to the unequal age distribution of the groups. There was no significance between the number of different roles and GPA for the whole sample,  $p = 0.705$ . The parameter estimate for the number of roles was  $-0.024$ , then multiplied by 4. Therefore, for each additional role that a student has, their predicted GPA goes down by 0.096 grade points.

Table 2

*Relationship Between Number of Role Strains and GPA*

Effect	Age Category	Estimate	Standard Error	DF	t Value	Pr >  t
Intercept		1.903	0.305	238	6.25	<.0001
Number of Roles		0.096	0.06	238	-0.38	0.705
Age	25-44 years old	-0.35	0.302	238	-1.15	0.252
Age	45-64 years old	-0.21	0.323	238	-0.65	0.517
Age	65 years old or	0				
Scale		3.955	0.364			

Each student group (full-time students, part-time students, graduates, and those not currently enrolled) was also tested separately in order to see if the number of roles affected GPA differently within each student group. For full-time students ( $p = 0.163$ ), part-time students ( $p = 0.207$ ), and students not currently enrolled ( $p = 0.972$ ), there was no significant difference. For graduates, the number of roles was also not significant,  $p =$

0.057. For each additional role a full-time nontraditional student has, their predicted GPA went down by 0.641 grade points; for part-time students, 0.722; for non-enrolled students, 0.020; and for graduate students 1.02.

To find out what effect specific individual roles and the interactions of these roles may have on the GPAs of currently enrolled students, the beta regression model was also tested for full-time and part-time student groups. Individual roles for the two student groups, full-time students and part-time students, were tested to determine if specific roles related to GPA differ or if they could interact (for example, the effect of being a full-time student, with three roles may have a significance on GPA). The part-time enrolled student group had the most amount of significant effects on GPA. Table 3 shows the results of individual roles for part-time students, the interactions of the roles, and their effect on GPA. All individual roles and all interactions of roles, except being employed; and the interaction between being employed and married, showed a statistically significant relationship to GPA.

Table 3

*Interaction of Individual Role Strains and GPA for Part-time Students*

Effect	Num DF	DenDF	F Value	Pr > F
Having Dependents	1	45	6.01	0.018
Employed	2	45	1.32	0.276
Married	1	45	4.70	0.035
Having Dependents and Employed	2	45	4.46	0.017
Having Dependents and Married	1	45	5.65	0.021
Employed and Married	2	45	0.92	0.405
Having Dependents and Employed and Married	2	45	3.53	0.037

Table 4 shows the results of individual roles for full-time students, the interactions of the roles, and their effect on GPA. For full-time students, having dependents was statistically significant,  $p = 0.025$ , as were interactions between having dependents and marital status,  $p = 0.011$ , and the interaction of having dependents, being employed (full-time or part-time), and being married,  $p = 0.027$ . However, there was no statistically significant difference for the students whose only other role is being employed,  $p = 0.291$  or being married,  $p = 0.902$ . There was also no statistically significant difference between the interactions of having dependents and being married,  $p = 0.115$ , or being employed and married,  $p = 0.713$ .

Table 4

*Interaction of Individual Role Strains and GPA for Full-Time Students*

Effect	Num DF	Den DF	F Value	Pr > F
Having Dependents	1	44	5.35	0.025
Employed	2	44	1.27	0.291
Married	1	44	0.02	0.902
Having Dependents and Employed	2	44	2.27	0.115
Having Dependents and Married	1	44	6.99	0.011
Employed and Married	2	44	0.34	0.713
Having Dependents and Employed and Married	2	44	3.89	0.027

Research Question 3 sought to find out if there is a statistically significant relationship between the number of different roles a nontraditional community college

student identifies with and their level of persistence. A binary logistic regression model with a 95% confidence interval was used to determine the relationship between number of roles and level of persistence, with persistence as the response variable. The relationship between the number of roles a nontraditional community college student identifies with and their level of persistence was statistically significant,  $p \leq 0.0001$ .

Table 5 shows the relationship between the number of role strains a student has and their persistence.

Table 5

*Relationship Between Number of Role Strains and Persistence*

Parameter	DF	Estimate	Standard Error	Wald Chi-Square	Pr > ChiSq
Intercept	1	-1.305	0.396	10.878	0.0010
Age 25-44 years old	1	0.200	0.261	0.589	0.443
Age 45-64 years old	1	0.119	0.300	0.156	0.693
Number of Roles	1	0.825	0.165	25.141	<.0001

### Summary

The goal of this study was to determine which role strains were most common among nontraditional community college students (spouse, parent, or employee) and if there is a statistically significant relationship between the number of roles a student identifies with and their academic achievement, which was measured by their GPA; as well as if there is a statistically significant relationship between the number of roles and

their level of persistence. Research Question 1 asked what the most common role strain was and used descriptive statistics to determine the frequency of each of the roles. It was found that the most common role amongst nontraditional community college students was being employed full-time.

Research Question 2 asked if there is a statistically significant relationship between the number of roles a student identifies with and their academic achievement, which was measured by their GPA. This study found that there was no statistically significant relationship between the number of roles a student has and their GPA,  $p = 0.705$ . Although there was no statistically significant difference, results showed that the more roles that a nontraditional student holds, there is a drop in GPA. The parameter estimate for the relationship between the number of roles and GPA shows that for each additional role that a student identifies with, their predicted GPA goes down by 0.096 grade points.

Research Question 3 asked if there is a statistically significant relationship between the number of roles and their level of persistence. The study also found that there is a statistically significant relationship between the number of roles a student has and their level of persistence,  $p \leq 0.0001$ . Parameter estimates showed that an increase in roles, meaning for each additional role that a student has, a nontraditional student's chance of persisting to the next term only increases by 0.825. An overview of the study, further discussion on the findings, and recommendations for future research will be provided in Chapter 5.

## Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

### **Introduction**

This chapter includes a discussion of the results, conclusion, and recommendations of the study as reported in Chapter 4. The purpose of this study was to understand the impact of role strains (spouse, parent, or employee) on the academic achievement and persistence of nontraditional community college students. More specifically, I examined the relationship between the number of role strains a nontraditional student holds and its effect on their academic achievement, measured by GPA, and persistence, measured by continued enrollment through two consecutive terms. The study further helped determine which role strain (spouse, parent, or employee) was most common among nontraditional community college students in addition to their role of being a student. This study was conducted because there is a need to determine if there is a significant relationship between GPA and the academic achievement and persistence of nontraditional community college students. Additionally, determining these factors would help to make community college faculty and staff aware of which role strains create barriers to success for nontraditional students, which would allow them to develop programs and services to help nontraditional students overcome these barriers and succeed. Evans et al. (2010) found that there were many unbalanced social structures for nontraditional students, meaning there roles that receive more or less attention than other roles; these competing roles are likely to have an effect on nontraditional students'



success. However, more research was necessary to find out which specific roles affect nontraditional students, which was one of the goals of this study.

The results indicated that the most common role strain among nontraditional community college students was being employed full time, followed by being a parent, a spouse, and then working part time. There was no statistically significant relationship at  $p = 0.705$  between the number of different roles a community college student identified with and their GPA. However, a statistically significant relationship exists at  $p \leq 0.0001$  between the number of roles a community college student identified with and their persistence. For each role that the nontraditional community college student holds, their chance of persisting to the next term increases by 0.825%. Greater family and work responsibilities that nontraditional students hold while attending school places them at a disadvantage for being able to persist in college and completing a degree (Veney et al., 2012).

### **Interpretation of the Findings**

The role strains identified for nontraditional community college students for this study other than student were employee, parent, and spouse roles. Being employed full time was the most common role strain among nontraditional community college students, followed by being a parent, being married, and then working part time. In addition, the results of this study also indicate that regardless of the number of roles (employee, parent, or spouse) a student held, it did not affect their GPA. There was no statistically significant relationship between the number of roles a nontraditional community college student has and their GPA. However, a statistically significant relationship exists between

the number of roles a nontraditional student has and their persistence. Students persistence with one role increases by 0.825%, two roles by 1.65%, three roles by 2.48%, and all four roles by 3.3%.

In this study, 23.6% of students were enrolled full time, 23.6% were enrolled part time, 19.6% graduated, and 33.2% were currently not enrolled since their initial enrollment in 2013. Forbus et al. (2011) investigated stress factors of nontraditional students and their methods for coping with stress. They found that work stress was a major stress factor of nontraditional students (Forbus et al., 2011). In addition, they found that nontraditional students are more likely to work full time and attend class part time (Forbus et al., 2011). The findings from this present study confirms these findings.

Hurst et al. (2012) also examined stressors of college students to understand which stressors students face most. Hurst et al. found that more nontraditional students work while trying to manage family and school, which is supported by the current study, as the results showed that the most common role among nontraditional community college students was being employed full time. Furthermore, the frequency of roles for this study showed that more students are full-time employees with 68.4% of nontraditional students working full time while attending school, compared to only 12% of students who work part time, 53.2% with dependents, and 48% being married.

This present study also involved examining the interaction of different roles and their effect on GPA. Goode's (1960) theory of role strain can be used to explain individual behaviors, social activities, and the phenomenal behind these behaviors and interactions. The interaction of different roles and stressors causes role strain. Ross-

Gordon (2011) found that for nontraditional students, these stressors lead to role strain when students are faced with juggling multiple roles while trying to attend school. This present study supports the findings of Ross-Gordon in that this present study found that there is a statistically significant relationship between the interaction of all roles (employee, parent, and spouse) except for being employed and the interaction between being employed and being married. The interaction of these roles causes role strain and was found to affect the academic achievement and persistence of nontraditional students.

In this study, it was determined that there is no statistically significant relationship between the number of different roles a nontraditional community college student identified with and their academic achievement, measured by GPA. However, it was found that for each additional role that a nontraditional community college student holds, their predicted GPA is reduced by 0.096 grade points. Veney et al. (2012) reported that family, employment, and community responsibilities can limit the academic achievement of nontraditional community college students. This present study extends the knowledge of their study through quantitative data determining how additional roles affect GPA. Full-time nontraditional students who held four roles had an average GPA of 3.19, while students who held three roles average GPA was 3.23, students with two roles had an average GPA of 3.31, and student with only one role (being only a student) had an average GPA of 3.45.

The effect of role strains on the persistence of nontraditional students was shown to be statistically significant. The binary logistics conducted to determine the relationship between the number of roles and level of persistence revealed a significance of  $p \leq$

0.0001. For this study 33.2% of nontraditional students were currently not enrolled. This is consistent with the findings reported by New (2014) that 33.7% of nontraditional community college students left school within their first year due to other life obligations. A report by the National Student Clearinghouse (2014) showed that 46.2% of nontraditional students were no longer enrolled in their two-year college program compared to 25.4% of traditional students during the same time period. Nontraditional community college students are more likely than traditional students to leave school within their first year due to other life role obligations (New). Nontraditional students who were currently not enrolled had the highest percent amongst the other student enrollment groups (full-time, part-time, & graduate).

### **Limitations of the Study**

There were limitations associated with this study. First, only one community college district was examined in the state of Texas. Also, only one campus out of the seven total campuses in the district was studied, therefore the results may not be generalized to all campuses within the district. The generalization of the findings was limited to the sample gathered at the research campus and not all campuses. Secondly, the test measures relied on the students' adherence to the specific instructions. Despite the researcher taking precautionary measures to ensure compliance, there is likely to be respondents who deviated from the instructions.

The third possible limitation of this study was the use of a survey design. While the survey design allowed the researcher to gather a large amount of data on many topics, gathering data using a survey has some risks, especially with regard to respondents

misunderstanding questions, providing deceptive or inaccurate information, and the inability for the researcher to follow-up with participants on answered questions. A fourth limitation was the bias that may occur because of response bias. Respondents may have answered in the way that they think is expected or give an answer that gives a positive reflection of themselves. Additionally, those who chose not to participate in the survey may have a pattern of characteristics that are different than those who participated. Lastly, because this study only examined persistence for two terms, the findings cannot be generalized for more than two terms.

### **Recommendations**

In this study, three research questions were answered, which were: (a) What is the most common role strain among nontraditional community college students (spouse, parent, or employee)?; (b) Is there a statistically significant relationship between the number of different roles a nontraditional community college student identifies with and their grade point average (GPA)?; and (c) Is there a statistically significant relationship between the number of different roles a nontraditional community college student identifies with and their level of persistence?

Recommendations for future research emerged from the results and conclusion of this study. This study specifically focused on the effect that role strains have on the academic achievement and persistence of nontraditional community college students. Further research on how role strains affect other areas of nontraditional students' educational journey and/or personal life should be conducted. Future research should include other areas such as, their relationships (with family, friends, or peers), their

mental and physical well-being, and their attendance. Also, future research should be conducted to find out specifically why the nontraditional students who are not currently enrolled decided to leave school.

Additionally, future research may include a qualitative approach in order to observe and understand the culture, feelings, and thoughts of nontraditional students as they attend school while holding multiple roles. Future study should take into account different nontraditional student characteristics, such as their reasons for working (financial or dependent responsibilities), or for attending school only part-time. Future research could be conducted to determine how long, on average, it takes nontraditional community college students to finish their associates degree. This study should also be extended to four terms to determine if an extended amount of time makes a difference with nontraditional student persistence. Since community college is considered a two-year school, further research could help to determine necessary resources needed in order to help nontraditional students complete their degrees within an adequate amount of time. In addition, this study should be conducted at different community colleges, with larger samples, to determine if there is a statistically significant relationship between roles and academic achievement and persistence at other community colleges.

### **Implications**

Nontraditional students continue to enroll in community colleges in steadily increasing rates. It is projected that by the end of 2018, there will be a 20% increase of nontraditional student community college enrollment (NCES, 2012). Therefore, research addressing nontraditional student stressors is particularly important (Hurst et al., 2012).

Many nontraditional community college students feel a lack of support from their peers, family, and school faculty members and feel that it is a barrier to their academic success (Thompson & Barcinas, 2013). The implication for social change is the potential for community college faculty and staff to gain additional knowledge on the needs of nontraditional students and how to help them overcome these barriers to their academic success. The creation or extension of current resources available to nontraditional students on community college campuses would be beneficial to the academic achievement of this population of students and the determining factor to their persistence term after term until degree completion. This study has shed light on the significant role strains, working full-time or part-time, being a parent, and/or a spouse, which hinders the success of nontraditional students. With the high percentage of students who were currently not enrolled at the community college studied, the assumption is that institutions will reevaluate their retention efforts and restructure their retention strategies in order to help with the persistence of nontraditional community college students.

### **Conclusion**

Nontraditional students have more life roles and responsibilities than traditional students due to having family, work, and other social duties. In addition, entering school adds yet other role which causes all of these roles to compete and affect the nontraditional community college student's performance leading to decrease in the retention rates for the student group (Alhassan, 2012; Gigliotti & Huff, 1995). However, it was necessary to determine which specific roles strains have an effect on nontraditional

community college students and the relationship between those roles and academic achievement and persistence.

Role strain is the perceived struggle to perform specific role related duties and difficulty meeting the roles' obligations. Goode's (1960) theory of role strain guided this research study as this theory maintains that role strain occurs when there is a difficulty fulfilling the expectations of multiple roles. Goode determined that role strain causes the depletion of personal resources and negatively affects other roles that a person may be trying to satisfy. In this study, the role of student was examined to determine the effect of nontraditional community college students juggling multiple roles (parent, spouse, and employee) on academic achievement and persistence.

This study explored the impact of role strains on the academic achievement and persistence of nontraditional community college students. It examined the relationship between the number of role strains a nontraditional student holds and its effect on their academic achievement, measured by GPA, and their persistence, measured by their continued enrollment through two consecutive terms. The present study further explored role strain through an educational lens specifically targeting nontraditional community college students who often manage multiple roles, including student, work, parental, and marital responsibilities.

Consequently, this study supported the continued focus on juggling work and school from a quantitative perspective. Nontraditional students' completion of their degree is important in order to help increase economic and society achievement goals as the non-completion of student degrees reduces these societal goals. In addition, this study



revealed that stress from these roles impedes the academic achievement and persistence of nontraditional community college students as it was found that for each additional role a nontraditional community college student holds, their GPA drops by 0.096 grade points and their chance of persisting to the next term only increases by 0.825 percent.

While being employed full-time was found to be the most common role strain amongst nontraditional community college students, it would be beneficial to nontraditional students if faculty and staff at higher education institutions could be trained on how to best help these students balance school, work, and family. Previous research showed that nontraditional students place a greater value on faculty interaction than traditional students and that interacting with faculty and staff helps to reduce the stress from their multiple roles (Newbold, Mehta, & Forbus, 2010). Therefore, with the findings from this study, faculty and staff will better understand how to help nontraditional students which would positively contribute to the institution's retention rates while also helping this population of students to be successful and persist through college. Higher education institutions can further help nontraditional students by providing resources for these students and modifying current campus policies and procedures to specifically include the support of nontraditional students. This would not only strengthen higher learning institutions, but also the communities in which nontraditional students live and work.

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