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Trends and Barriers Regarding Attrition Among Adult Learners at a Community College

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Myrtle C. Brown

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the review committee have been made.

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2020

Abstract

Trends and Barriers Regarding Attrition Among Adult Learners at a Community College

by

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MA, Webster University, 1997

BS, Coker College, 1993

Project Study Submitted in Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Education

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February 2020

Abstract

The high attrition rates of adult learners at a 2-year, southeastern community college are a continuing concern among college administrators. These high rates have resulted in an increased number of nontraditional adult learners failing to persist and complete a program of study. Poor persistence and noncompletion of a degree create budgetary loss and reduced revenue critical to the support of the college's use of resources and services to students. The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore nontraditional adult learners' perspectives of their college experiences and the influences, challenges, and barriers that prohibited their degree completion. Tinto's student integration model was used as the conceptual framework to guide the inquiry. The research questions focused on the influences, challenges, and barriers experienced by nontraditional noncompleters at the college. Nine adult learners, who matriculated for 1+ semesters between 2012-2014 and did not graduate or reenroll, volunteered to participate in the study. Data were collected using semistructured, face-to-face interviews and were analyzed thematically applying open and axial coding strategies to find emergent themes. Participants perceived that insufficient technology access and student support services featuring orientation, advising, child care, and streamlined degree paths contributed to their nonpersistence. Based on the findings, a policy recommendations paper was developed for college administration detailing the need for a dedicated adult student center for nontraditional students. This endeavor could support positive social change if administration would provide increased advising, college orientation, focused communication, child care, and technology access and support, which could promote adult learner persistence for more successful degree completion and reduce attrition rates.

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Dedication

This study is dedicated to my late Parents, Robert and Alberta Cooper for imparting the wisdom and courage in the passion for education. I would also like to make a special dedication to my husband, Michael, who inspired and encouraged me to stay the course. Thank you for all of the love and support given me throughout this amazing journey. I could have not done it without you.

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Section 1: The Problem

The Local Problem

A large proportion of adult learners who enter a southeastern community college do not persist for longer than a semester, do not complete a program of study, or they make little progress towards attaining a credential. The attrition rate of the adult learners continues to be a concern for internal administrators, faculty, as well as state, local, and government policy makers (Bailey, Jagers, & Jenkins, 2015; Goncalves & Trunk, 2014). The retention rate at the community college is low. According to the community college's public records, many adult learners enroll without adequate academic preparation. These students must complete developmental education courses, which delays enrollment in program curriculum courses, and has a significant impact on college persistence (Bergman, Gross, & Berry, 2014).

The local community college is a 2-year public institution located in a suburban area in the southeastern United States, with an approximate enrollment of 6,000 students for the Fall Term, 2013-2014. The percentage of adult learners who enrolled for the term was 43%. The college's full-time retention rate was 46%, and the part-time retention rate was 33%, with an overall graduation rate of 8%. Entering students who were full-time, first-time undergraduates were 37%. Graduation rates of those requiring remediation in two subjects was about half of the student population, with 4% of these students requiring remediation in three subjects (National Center for Educational Statistics, NCES, 2015, 2016).

Much of the understanding of existing models of student retention and enrollment reporting are based on the institutional retention research statistics using annual data (Juszkiewicz, 2016). Therefore, if a student enrolls in September of 1 year, but not in the next September, that person becomes a nonretention statistic from the institutional point of view (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013a). The gap in practice is the disparity between the adult learner completion rates compared to their traditional counterparts (Bailey et al., 2015; Hoffman & Reind, 2011; Jones, 2015). In fact, according to the National Student Clearinghouse, (NSC, 2015) and the NCES (2015), the total completion rates for students who began at a 2-year, public college over age 24 at first entry is 30% to 40%.

Additional curricular requirements of remedial courses increase time to degree completion and decrease the likelihood of obtaining a credential (American College Testing, [ACT] 2014; Jones, 2015; Wyatt, 2011). Given these realities, it is important to understand what the adult learner experiences to identify the influences that affect student persistence, which may increase persistence efforts towards successful graduation and improve community college completion rates (ACT, 2014; Harbour & Smith, 2015; NCES, 2015).

The Broader Educational Context

The ramifications of poor persistence for students, institutions, and society are significant. On average, people who hold a college degree have better employment and earning potential than those who do not (NCES, 2015; Schuetze, 2014). This type of

extrinsic motivation serves as the reason why many adults engage in higher education today (Osman, O’Leary, & Brimble, 2014; Ruffalo Noel Levitz Report, 2016).

Colleges and universities are interested in retaining students for financial and academic reasons. Recruitment and retention are increasingly important priorities of institutions in today’s competitive student markets. Enrollment managers know that in order for enrollment to grow, not only does the institution need to enroll new students, but it also needs to maintain current students; enrollment techniques have the greatest potential of affecting institutional objectives and environmental elements that may affect enrollment results (Bailey et al., 2015; Belfield, Crosta, & Jenkins, 2013; Jenkins & Belfield, 2014; Kimbark, Peters, & Richardson, 2016). The execution of the appropriate techniques is, at that point, determined by the degree in which the institution creates a strong performing enrollment organization. With these traits an enrollment organization can obtain and sustain a competitive advantage as well as serve and maintain its current students (ACT, 2014; Black, 2008).

Rationale

Evidence of the Problem at the Local Level

Retention of the adults who enter the local community college is low (NCES, 2015). This problem has been exacerbated by the concern from adult learners who attempt to navigate the college environment while having positive experiences in seeking career-related education, and their inability to readily access the assistance needed for advisement and guidance. Faculty advisors are also concerned with the overwhelming responsibilities of providing good quality advisement while maintaining course loads,

and managing student advisees, which does not permit the availability and guidance that adult learners require (Bailey, 2017).

Adult learners who enter the community college lack skills necessary to navigate the unfamiliar academic environment of community college (NCES, 2013a; O'Neill & Thomson, 2013). Many students tested into developmental courses, which can adversely affect their persistence. The lack of aptitude in mathematics and reading are some of the most prevalent barriers to college retention and success (Coleman, Skidmore, & Weller, 2017; Complete College America [CCA], 2014). The adult learners face challenges in the use of technology, and struggle with their responsibilities outside of college, leading to a large percentage of these students needing assistance from tutors and resource services.

Evidence of the Problem from the Broader Educational Level

The adult learner population accounts for 85% of the students in postsecondary education in the United States (Lumina Foundation, 2008, 2016); U.S. Census Bureau, 2016). About 60% of students entering community colleges in the United States test into at least one developmental class, and 45% of that leave within 3 years without earning a credential (Cho & Karp, 2013; Garza & Bowden, 2014; NCES, 2015). Federal and state government leaders are also concerned with student persistence and academic success rates due to the large amount of government and state funding allocated to higher education in the United States each year (ACT, 2013; National Conference of State Legislatures, [NCSL], 2014; Shapiro et al., 2012). The financial pressure on colleges and universities from the government that funds much of the educational enterprise in the United States through financial aid and education funding has increased with the focus on

college affordability, and performance-based funding (ACT, 2013; Katsinos & Tollefson, 2009; McKinney & Hagedorn, 2017; NCES, 2014).

Attrition rates in community colleges tend to be high, with a national average of 30% to 40% (Osman et al., 2014; Yu, 2015). Research in the latter part of the 20th century into adult learning has included a particular focus on attrition rates, and this focus will undoubtedly continue well into the 21st century (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Crisp, Carales, & Nunez, 2016; Jenkins, 2015; Tinto, 1993, 2012). The research emphasis on student attrition has been driven by what has been viewed as high dropout rates for adult learners, particularly for students of distance and open learning programs, and fueled, at least in Western societies, by the reluctance of governmental funding sources, such as financial aid (Palmadessa, 2017). In recent years, higher education leaders have faced increased pressure to raise student persistence and retention rates, including with adult learners, because of the costs associated with managing student dropout and external pressure applied by federal policy makers (Kennamer, Katsinas, Schumacher, 2012; Shapiro et al., 2012; Tinto, 2012; Troester-Trate, 2017).

Efforts to address adult learner needs in higher education are further exacerbated for college administrators, faculty, and staff because this population of students have different needs than traditional students. Adult learners experience various challenges, such as conflicting work and school schedules, commuting distances, and finances, and are typically left to manage their own academic needs once they are enrolled (Community College Research Center, [CCRC], 2017; Fragoco, et al., 2013; Kimbark et al., 2016). Adult learners enroll in community colleges with a diversity of work and life

experiences with the expectation of obtaining a degree. The increased accountability for education leaders to improve the persistence and academic success of students as well as adult learner-focused programs is a subject area that has not received much attention (Harbour, 2016; Kasworm, 2014; NCSL, 2014).

Despite this rapidly growing population, most postsecondary institutions underserve them (Chen, 2014). The adult learners' needs require continued support services that are often unintentionally overlooked (Fragoco et al., 2013; Garza & Bowden, 2014; Zhang, 2016). The population of adult learners constitutes the fastest-growing segment of higher education enrollment, underscoring the need to examine the factors that could aid in their success for program completion (Hossler, Ziskin, & Gross, 2009; NSC, 2015; Wyatt, 2011). It is critical that higher education institutions accommodate the prevailing student demographic that remains central to the recruitment, retention, and academic success of the adult learners. The purpose of this study was to explore the influences, challenges, and barriers to completion of degree requirements by adult learners at a local community college.

Definition of Terms

In this subsection, I provide a list of the terms with their definitions for the reader to gain a clear understanding of the topics.

Acceleration: An option of course offerings condensed into a shorter time period that can be completed at a faster pace than traditional courses (ACT, 2014; Powell, Conway, & Ross, 2011).

Adult learner: An individual 25 years old or older, or a student considered as being nontraditional (NCES, 2013a). This term is used to describe students whose life circumstances have moved beyond that of a traditional student. Adult learners are likely to have one or more of the following characteristics: have a spouse and/or children, are employed, independent from parents, or has delayed entry to college after high school (Kenner & Weinerman, 2014; NCES, 2013a).

Adult learner persistence: The tenacity of the adult learner to endure or to persevere with the intent to complete program requirements (Shuetze, 2014).

Attrition: Involuntary or voluntary departure from school/college (NCES, 2013a).

Community college: A 2-year college that offers an associate degree as the highest degree that can be earned at the institution (NCES, 2013a).

Drop out: Voluntary or involuntary separation from college. Students drop out and leave college for a variety of reasons and are not ready for the academic rigor, while others leave to raise a family, get a job, or join the military (U.S. Department of Education, 2013a).

Hybrid course: An alternative means of a personalized learning concept that combines an e-learning course delivery, along with a traditional instructional format for self-directed learning (American Council of Education, ACE, 2018).

Non-completer: The failure of student to complete and fulfill study requirements when students cease participation (NCES, 2012).

Nontraditional adult learner: This term is used interchangeably with adult learner (NCES, 2013a).

Persistence: The continuation of enrollment at the same institution of higher education without interruption until completion of a program of study (Braxton, 2013).

Stop-out: The interruption of attendance from college for a period of time, with the intent of returning at an undetermined date (ACT, 2014).

Student retention: Defined by the Center for the Study of Student Retention (2013) when a student is continuously enrolled for two, consecutive, regular terms. This is used to determine whether the student has achieved his/her academic goals (NCES, 2013a).

Traditional student: As defined by the U.S. Department of Education, young adults 18-21 years of age who have completed high school, but who may still be dependent for financial aid purposes, work part-time, and attend postsecondary education after high school (Newbold, Mehta, & Forbus, 2010).

Underprepared students: Individuals who enter college without an insufficient level of academic background or academic proficiency to enter college coursework (Santos, 2014).

Significance of the Study

The findings of this study could be significant for leaders of the local community college in understanding attrition among adult learners in higher education by developing a greater insight into the different ways in which the persistence of adult learners can be encouraged. The results of this study provided information to assist educators at the local community college who are responsible for planning, designing, and implementing adult learner-focused programs. The knowledge gained from this study may assist leaders of

the local community college in the development of policy, structure, support systems, and educational approaches related to adult learning programs. These findings may also provide valuable insight for the program planners and administrators responsible for overseeing such programs, and who are concerned with the academic success and retention of adult learners who may affect future postsecondary education opportunities at the local community college. Understanding the elements that contribute to the attrition of this population of students can be beneficial to educators who may wish to channel institutional resources toward initiatives that will positively affect these students' persistence and academic performance.

This study may also provide information for administrators and leaders of the local community college to better serve adult learners by developing services and assistance that may enhance these students' persistence. At the local community college, the results of the study provide insights into the barriers experienced by adult learners who did not persist to acquire degrees. The findings of this study will be significant to leaders of the local community college because the elements that affect the persistence of adult learners identified and may assist educational leaders in developing programs that can facilitate better educational experiences for the students. The results of this study also provide a greater understanding of the determinants of adult learner non-persistence through identifying patterns, trends, and barriers that prohibit successful completion, which can be used to increase the number of adult learners who will be able to achieve a degree.

Increasing the completion rate of nontraditional adult learners can be instrumental in meeting the national agenda for the number of these students who will earn college credentials by the Year 2020, and who receive financial aid funding support from the government (College Completion Agenda, 2013; Lumina Foundation, 2016). Expanding degree attainment of the adult learners at the local community college can produce a higher individual achievement towards positive social change.

Research Questions

The problem under study was the lack of persistence of nontraditional adult learners in a local community college. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the influences that affect the persistence of the adult learners who did not persist in completing degree requirements at a local community college. The conceptual framework was based on the student integration model developed by Tinto (2012), who posited that the commitment, expectations, and integration of students can predict attrition. I developed the following research questions based on the problem and purpose of the study:

RQ1: What are nontraditional non-completers' perspectives of their community college experiences?

RQ2: What were nontraditional non-completers' influences, challenges, and barriers to completion of degree requirements?

Review of the Literature

The problem under study was the lack of persistence of adult learners. The research questions and the conceptual framework guided the literature review. Key areas of research are adult learners, attrition, persistence, retention, drop-out, stop-out, and barriers to completion for adult learners in 2-year colleges, community college trends, and student services. I chose these topics because I was focused on the phenomenon of the changing demographics in the community college population, and the factors and barriers that affect adult learner persistence.

I conducted this literature review through a search of databases accessible through the Walden University Library for professional, peer-reviewed, educational research journals; higher education reports; Integrated Postsecondary Education reporting; the Community College Institutional Research and Retention Reports; Google Scholar; NCES; the U. S. Census Bureau; the U. S. Department of Education; online educational journals; and other comparable research studies. Persistence literature has been studied by many researches from a variety of perspectives in higher educational research to include the topics of *dropout*, *withdrawal*, *retention*, *attrition*, and *persistence* (Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011; Mayfield-Johnson, Mohn, Mitra, Young, & McCullers, 2014; Schneider & Yin, 2012). In this section, I provide an overview of the elements that positively influence or hinder the persistence of students. The discussion will also focus on the experiences of adult learners that can affect retention or lack of persistence to complete their courses.

Conceptual Framework

Tinto's Student Integration Model

Tinto's (1975) Theory of individual departure from institutions of higher learning has been referenced in retention and attrition literature and is a well-known and frequently cited theory that I used as the conceptual framework of this study. This theory is characterized as being the prevailing paradigm in the field of student retention in education, where the main tenet is that students who are not able to integrate into the school system are likely not to persist with their education (Braxton et al., 2014). Based on the model, Tinto theorized that the attrition or departure of students is an expansive process that encompasses the interactions between the student and the educational and social structures of the college.

The student integration model, which is an interactionalist theory of student attrition and persistence, has been widely tested and validated for undergraduate students (Karp, Hughes, & O'Gara, 2012). This approach is a commonly referred to model in the student retention/dropout literature related to the effects of academic and of social integration on institutional goal commitment. Past studies and models of student persistence form the initial point in understanding the experiences of students in higher education, including adult learners (Tinto, 1975). Based on Tinto's theory, students enter college with the aspiration and expectation of acquiring a degree in order to have increased professional success, and their integration into the college environment or lack of integration affects student outcomes, such as degree completion (Stuart, Rios-Aquilar,

& Deil-Amen, 2014). These tenets served as an important guiding principle for the purpose and research questions of this study.

According to Tinto (1975), voluntary withdrawal by students from higher education institutions results from the lack of integration within the school system. Tinto also posited that when students are not successfully integrated into the school system, low commitment is likely to result in increased likelihood for attrition, and that academic and social integration are primary factors to increase student retention (Tinto, 1993). The expanded levels of academic and social integration can also lead to greater commitment to the institution, and the objective of graduation (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Tinto, 1993).

Tinto (1993) purported that college student departure rates are perplexing when given the amount of attention and availability of information that is focused on determining college acceptance. About one half of the student population who entered 2-year colleges leave by the end of their first year (NCES, 2015). Tinto also characterized the process of retention as a progressive relationship between learners and the instructional systems as well as the expressed need for greater accountability from educational institutions to deter student dropout. Theoretical constructs presented by Tinto focus on social and economic improvement, behavioral characteristics, and organizational and interactional elements that explain college attrition. There are critical consequences of attrition that are of great concern to education leaders, particularly in terms of student sustainment and loss of revenue (Schneider & Yin, 2011). Approximately 3 million dollars were lost from the funding of state and local

governments because of students dropping out of community colleges and leaving prior to program completion (NCES, 2013b; Schneider & Yin, 2012).

According to Gonzales (2009), students who enroll part-time may be less engaged in their learning activities than their full-time peers and are least likely to remain in college. This likelihood is especially high given that at least two-thirds of the adult learners attend community college on a part-time basis (Schuetz, 2014). Tinto (1993) argued that when students decide to leave their schools, the behavior is reflective of their social and educational experiences within that institution; and that they specifically tend to reflect the degree to which those encounters assimilate students and foster connections within the institution (O’Keeffe, 2013). Whereas, persistence includes a student’s ability to adjust to college, it is more specifically the ability to meet a number of minimal standards regarding academic performance (CCRC, 2017).

Tinto (2012) further indicated that most institutions of higher learning are comprised of a myriad of academic and social communities and groups that influence the patterns of intellectual and behavioral interaction that often transform into subcultures based on shared characteristics, such as age, race, and gender. Tinto found that the subculture was a viable resemblance to the student’s persistence because incompatible beliefs or backgrounds can affect persistence.

A review of the historical context of adult learning will help develop the foundation for a study involving adult learners (Kasworm, 2012). The field of adult education and learning in the United States is not a new phenomenon. The educational philosophy of adult education was recognized in the early 20th century, with the last half

of the century producing major progress in the field of adult learning (Maehl, 2009; U.S. Department of Education, 2013a).

Houle (2002) represented Dewey (1916) as promoting the philosophy that the sole principles of the learning process were the continuity of experience and the interaction of the learner with the environment. Dewey's idea was viewed by Houle as the distinction between education and miseducation such that the former increased the capacity of the individual for richer experiences in the future, while the latter arrested, diminished, or distorted it. In efforts to synthesize ideas into a unified theory of adult learning, pioneer scholars Dewey and Houle contributed ideas, that have framed the contemporary basis for the practice of adult education (Harbour, 2015).

I used Tinto's student integration model as the framework of this study because of its wide use in student retention literature as well as its utility in forming a foundation of retention factors; it has been used in past studies over 3 decades (Braxton, 2013). This model has influenced how researchers and practitioners view undergraduate retention and has created a base from which many other studies have emerged. The retention of students is critical to the community college and remains a priority (NSC, 2017). Researchers have described many reasons for student departure from college as well as the characteristics of student non-persistence (NCES, 2015).

I used Tinto's integration model as the framework to design the interview questions (see Appendix C). The interview protocol was used to explore and to understand the adult learner higher education experiences that may have affected their persistence. Student persistence was examined as I worked to answer the research

questions. In the model, Tinto, (1993, 1998, 2006, 2012) asserted that student integration occurs along the dimensions of academic and social aspects of their college attendance. To determine the relation of Tinto's theory to adult learners' noncompletion of degree requirements. I used the information gathered through participant interviews to answer the research questions.

According to Tinto (1993) academic reasons influence why 20% to 30% of students leave college nationally, and 70% to 80% of students who are not retained leave for other various reasons. One of the reasons attributed to student departures is the students' inability to adjust to the academic and social changes experienced, leading them to become overwhelmed and leave college (Bergman et al., 2014; Cox, Reason, Nix, & Gilman, 2016). Students may also be indecisive in their goals and unable to sustain the continued costs required to remain in college (Grabowski & Silver-Pacuilla, 2016). Students who are unable to become integrated into the community college often do not persist (Tinto, 1993). I examined the tenets of Tinto's model relative to academic and social integration from the adult learners' perspective as to how their community college experiences may have influenced their decision to leave.

Review of the Broader Problem

The Adult Learner

The United State has achieved recognition as a leader in the completion of formal education, as well as to the availability and access to education (Bailey et al., 2015; Gault, 2016; Maehl, 2009). Education provided through community colleges originated in response to social activism, changes in economics in the United States, and other students not well served by traditional, 4-year colleges (Markle, 2015).

The Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, otherwise known as the GI Bill, helped to finance military veterans who wanted to pursue higher education after returning from World War II, (U. S. Department of Education, U.S.D.E, 2013a). This represented a shift from earlier attitudes, that held to the idea that higher education was only for the elite and privileged, to a new concept that it should be available to anyone who could benefit from it (U.S.D.E., 2017) This resulted in scores of veterans attending institutions across the country, and in some cases, overwhelming institutions that were unprepared for the dramatic increases in enrollment (Brown & Gross, 2011; Kim & Cole, 2013; Kirchner, 2014; Ruffalo Noel Levitz Report, 2016; Whitemar, Barry, & Mroczek, 2013). This historical event helped to establish adult education as a permanent fixture within the higher education community.

Adult education became a social movement in the United States beginning in the early 20th century (U. S. Department of Education, (U.S.D.E, 2013a). Improving the educational achievement of adults living in the United States has become increasingly important, due in part to the globalization of the economy and the technological changes in the workplace requiring more skilled and educated workers (NCES, 2017). The Adult Basic Education program is a type of adult education available throughout the United States that provides opportunities for adults who have low literacy skills to acquire credentials that would help in improving their employment opportunities (U.S. Department of Education, 2013a). The fact that an adult enrolls in one of these programs indicates, at the very least, an intention to complete the education they missed while in high school (Jones, 2012). Yet, many adults who do enroll in an Adult Basic Education

program do not attend long enough or consistently enough to produce measurable gains in literacy skills or to earn a high school diploma (Bremer et al., 2013; Long, 2011).

Maehl (2009) presented progressive education of adult learners as an expansion of the progressive movement politically, socially, and in education. Dewey (1916) was a supporter of pragmatism and progressive thought, especially as it related to education. In the book, *Democracy and Education*, Dewey (1916) described education as having a profound purpose in social reform in the United States at the turn of the 20th century (Schuetze, 2014). Adapting to societal demands, community colleges emerged as growing institutions of higher education as an economical and a low-cost option to degree attainment (U.S.D.E., 2013b). Community colleges have evolved over time, seeking to stimulate the work force by offering job training programs and to provide for a more literate society (U.S.D.E., 2017). Community colleges also afforded opportunities to students of lower socioeconomic status, and other students not well served by traditional, 4-year colleges (Meier, 2013; Stuart, Rios-Aquilar, Deil-Amen, Topper, & Powers, 2013).

Persistence of the Adult Learner

This review of the literature focusing on the varied and complex issues impacting adult learning helped provide the foundation for this study. In preparation for this study, I considered such factors as the common elements of persistence and academic success, as well as characteristics of adult learners, including the history; preparation; motivation; institutional services; program design; and external influences, such as perceived stress and competing responsibilities (see Crosta, 2014). Understanding how these elements

impact adult learner persistence and academic success in adult learner-focused programs helped contribute to the knowledge base about nontraditional learning modalities (Braxton, 2013). To effectively lay the groundwork for the study of persistence in adult learner-focused programs, it is important to understand what is known about the development of adult learning and motivation theory and the theoretical framework for the development and administration of these types of educational approaches (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Martin & Townsend, 2014).

The addition of this new adult-learner audience with its own unique characteristics and needs created a demand for innovation and change during the 1960s and 70s (U.S. D. E., 2013a). This resulted in increased numbers of veterans attending institutions across the country after returning from military service. Institutions became overwhelmed and unprepared for the influx of this adult learner population that required flexibility to prevent obstacles from readily participating in higher education (Li & Lui, 2012; Santos, 2014; Whitemar, 2013).

As a result of this enrollment surge new program designs and delivery systems emerged, and new terminology such as *alternative*, *extended*, and *nontraditional* became common. These changes were instrumental in attracting numbers of adult learners, and this helped institutions avoid an enrollment crisis when the baby boom generation made its way through the traditional enrollment system in the 2000s (Maehl, 2009). Flexibility and the removal of financial, motivational, and situational barriers continue to be the reasons why adult learners enroll in community college (Li & Liu, 2012; Santos, 2014).

Several factors contributed to a demographic shift in higher education enrollment. Due to their changing roles in society, more women sought education to help them enter the workforce, and as a group, they became a student audience served in new ways. Adult women dominate the adult student population, comprising 65% of enrollment for students age 25 and older (Lovell, 2014a, 2014b; NCES, 2012, 2013a). Career transitions resulting from company downsizing, changes in industry and technology, and institutions targeting adult learners resulted in unprecedented growth in adult education in the United States. The demographic shift in the number of citizens who pursue higher education in the United States is striking. In 1940, the year preceding World War II, 24.5% of the populace age 25 or older had a high school diploma or higher (NCES, 2013a). Only 4.6% had four or more years of college. Sixty years later in 2000, the numbers had risen to 84.1% with a high school diploma or higher and 25.6% with 4 or more years of college (NCES, 2013a). The numbers rose even further when considering the age group between 25 and 29 (NCES, 2013a; U. S. Census Bureau, 2016). The numbers for this age range rose to 88.1% with a high school diploma and 29.1% with 4 or more years of college.

It has been established by the NCS (2015) that 31 million students who attended college over the past 20 years departed without completing degree requirements, or receiving a credential of any kind. These statistics indicate the high attrition rate of adult learners despite the increase in enrollment rate, underscoring the problem of persistence. Social relationships are a key component that impact learner retention and incorporate the backing or resistance from connections of peers, personal associations, and instructors. Being regarded by instructors serve as a relevant persistence factor, as well as an

influence on adult learner persistence (Grabowski & Silver-Pacuilla, 2016; Zeigler & Durant, 2011).

Adult learners represent a large student population in higher education, with a projected national growth of almost 2 million students by the year 2020 (NCES, 2015; U. S. Census Bureau, 2016; Yu, 2017). The NCES (2016) projects that there will be a 21% increase in students ages 25 to 34, and a 16% increase in students ages 35 and above (NCES, 2015). According to a recent survey from the NSC (2013, 2015), 60% of all colleges in the United States voiced a commitment to adult students in their mission statements or strategic plans by addressing unique needs of the adult learner population, but low persistence among adult students continues (Bailey, 2017; Davidson & Blankenship, 2017; Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011; U. S. D. E., 2017).

Understanding the factors that affected the persistence of adult learners in adult learner-focused programs may contribute to the identification of factors that explain attrition in community colleges (ACT, 2014; Braxton, 2013; Yu, 2017). Adults who drop out of high school remain marginally literate, and almost by definition may struggle with the demands of everyday life (NCES, 2013a; Osman et al., 2014; Perin, 2013; Quigley, 2011). Without the literacy skills needed to function successfully in the workplace as well as in their personal lives, these adults are more likely to live in poverty, be unemployed or underemployed, and have family difficulties including being unable to financially provide for their family, or help their children with their school homework (NCES, 2012).

Adult educators continue to look for ways to solve the problem of the students' lack of persistence in participating in adult education programs. Education researchers have contributed and continue to contribute insight into what it takes for adult learners to stay in a program long enough to complete their goals (Wyner, 2014). These researchers recognized that participation in an adult education program needs to be long enough for the adult learners' skills in the area of study to increase a measurable amount (Crisp et al., 2016; Jones, 2012; Schnee, 2014; Silver-Pacuilla, Perin, & Miller, 2013). To experience gains in literacy abilities, an adult learner must actively participate in the program.

In most literature pertaining to adult basic education, persistence is generally identified as active participation in a program for enough hours to achieve a measurable gain in the literacy area being studied (Goldrick-Rab, 2010). Qui studied the influence of persistence on literacy outcomes in adult basic education and found that the number of hours of instruction between pretest and posttest was a good predictor of achievement. For many years' education researchers have tried to identify and understand the elements that make persistence challenging for adult learners to complete a course of study that leads to a credential (Bahr, 2013; Braxton, 2009; Goldrick-Rab, 2010; Long, 2011; Park & Choi, 2009; Tinto, 2012; Wyatt, 2011). Demonstrating student success and attracting new students are intertwined with the goals of educational leaders (Complete College America [CCA, 2014]; Lorenzo, 2011; McLendon, Tuchmayer, & Park, 2010; Noel-Levitz, 2011).

The study of persistence among adult learners enrolled in institutions of higher education is gaining more and more attention as this segment of the overall student

population grows. While there have been several studies conducted that have assessed the implication of the expanding participation in higher education, very little exist that examine the critical issues relative to this phenomenon (Broek & Hake, 2012; Moffatt, 2010; [U. S. D. E.], 2013b). Numerous elements must be considered when looking at whether or not an adult learner has persisted in his/her educational goals.

Some adults engage in learning activities to gain a particular understanding about a subject, or to gain a particular skill (Ruffalo Noel Levitz Report, 2016). Once that goal has been reached, they may discontinue attendance, negatively impacting that particular course or program's persistence rate even though the student may feel that he/she has reached the desired educational objective (Chung, Turnbull, & Chur-Hansen, 2014; Crosta, 2014; Kortesoja, 2009).

While persistence (Tinto, 1993) is defined as continued enrollment until completion of educational goals, considering the issue of persistence, institutional definitions of attrition may not match broader definitions. Persistence is exceedingly individualized and includes numerous components that affect the adult learner in their matriculation and in their ability to remain as a caregiver while maintaining other obligations (Grabowski & Silver-Pacuilla, 2016; Lovell, 2014b; Lovell & Munn, 2017). As linked with Tinto's theory students enter college with certain aspirations and expectations. Their integration into the college environment or lack of integration affect student outcomes such as degree completion (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Porchea, Allen, Robbins, & Phelps, 2016).

Influences that Affect Adult Learner Persistence

Adults who had objectives such as to improve employment are more prone to persist with their education compared to individuals who have no specific objective for going to school. Positive attributes, such as having previous professional development experiences and career objectives, according to Baptista (2013), resulted in social reinforcement and the progression towards a goal. However, when environmental conditions are poor, there may be a lack of institutional involvement and students are also likely to leave school (Belzer, 2008; Bergman et al., 2014; Goncalves & Trunk, 2014; Markle, 2015). The reason for this departure is that no matter how good the academic program or the quality they provide, if students are unable to provide child care, modify work schedules, or pay tuition for college, they will leave (Burrus, Elliott, Brenneman, Markel, Carney, Moore, et al., 2013; DiSilvestro, 2013; Donhardt, 2013; Fraquoco, 2013; Kennamer, et al., 2012; Lovell, 2014a, Lovell, 2014b; Windham, Rehfuss, Pugh, Jason, & Tincher-Laden, 2014). Based on Tinto's integration model, (1993, p. 81) academic dismissal accounts for 15% to 25% of all institutional departures, with the remaining 75% to 85% being the result of voluntary withdrawal.

Barriers to Completion for Adult Learners

General barriers in accordance to persistence widely recognized in the literature are: (a) unpreparedness for the challenges of college level coursework; (b) complexity of workplace commitments, family, community, and the flexibility to manage; (c) exclusion and disconnection from traditional aged college peers; (d) financial constraints in the inability to pay tuition; (e) limited student/faculty contact; and (f) failure to maintain

coursework (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Tinto, 1993). Remaining in college with the initial intent to complete successfully can be stifled by the general barriers resulting in adult learners changing their educational goals and priorities.

Adult learners often have different roles from their traditional counterparts, as students, employees, and family providers, which can affect their ability to persist in school (Grabowski & Silver-Pacuilla, 2016; Long, 2011; U. S. D. E, 2011). Their persistence is affected by the need to fulfill responsibilities outside the school while pursuing their education as a parent or a guardian, which can pose an additional stress that can affect persistence in school (Moffatt, 2010).

To address these possible barriers to persistence (Zeigler & Durant, 2011), social relationships within the community college system need to be improved in order to help students experience better integration (Hong, Shull, & Haefner, 2011; Jones & Braxton, 2010; Schuetz, 2014; Ziskin, Hossler, & Kim, 2009). The relationship between instructors and students can have an important implication in both persistence and attrition (Santos, 2014). An arrangement of firmly organized program alternatives sketching out prerequisites for particular results that are unmistakably characterized with instructional supports, may provide the needed resources for adult learners to plan their school responsibilities, given the challenges these learners face in their attempt to obtain a degree (Complete College America [CCA], 2014; Merriam & Daffron, 2013, Ruffalo Noel Levitz Report, 2016; Yang & Lawrence, 2017).

Adult education usually involves an adult student population that is often characterized by individuals who are exposed to circumstances involving balancing

family, work commitments, and other competing responsibilities (Donaldson & Graham, 1999; Goncalves & Trunk, 2014; Markle, 2015). Community colleges are vital in providing learning opportunities and experiences for the adult learner population through open access, education, and training. Education through community colleges gives adult learners the opportunity to balance personal life, work, and education because of the flexibility of the educational institution (Santos, 2014; Schuetze, 2014).

Tinto (2016) linked college retention to past and present academic performance, which influences a student's decision to leave or remain in college.

Tinto (1993) stated that:

When a student departs from an institution, it reflects the character of the individual's social and intellectual experiences within that institution, and that they specifically tend to reflect the degree to which those experiences tend to integrate individuals into the social and intellectual life of the institution. (p. 51)

According to Tinto, precollege education is a direct influence of a student's initial commitment to an institution and to academic goals. The student's level of commitment is believed to illustrate how integrated the student is within the social and academic life of the institution, which directly affects the decision to remain in college or to depart.

Tinto's theory is longitudinal and views decisions of student retention as a consequence of relationships between learners and the instructional system (Tinto, 1975, 1986, 1993, 1997, 1998, 2005, 2006, 2012).

Increased levels of academic and social integration will lead to greater commitment to the institution and to the goal of graduation (Bailey, 2017). In Tinto's (1993) longitudinal model, Tinto recognized that:

Individual departure from institutions can be viewed as the result of a longitudinal process of interactions between individuals, taking into account personal background, financial resources, prior educational experiences, student dispositions, intentions, and commitments, as well as other members of the academic and social systems of the institution. (p. 113)

Positive experiences or interrelated ones reinforce persistence through a degree of heightened intention and commitments, both to the aim of college completion, and to the institution enrolled (Bahr, 2013; Bean & Metzner, 1985; Grabowski & Silver-Pacuilla, 2016; Hong, et al., 2011; Tinto, 1993). Negative experiences lessen the intentions for institutional commitment and increase the probability of departure. Each experience affects the impact, and hence the student's decision to depart from college. Tinto's student integration model serves as the framework in which student attrition is conceptualized. The framework will also be used in the analysis of the data and the discussion of the results (Center for the Study of College Student Retention, 2013).

The review of the literature provided the foundation for this study with a detailed history of adult learners and an overview of the influences establishing the background of the study's framework. Understanding this phenomenon of adult learners, their characteristics, particular learning needs, and barriers to successful completion is Tinto's theoretical perspective. It is a dominant sociological perspective in the study of college

student departure and is also one of the most commonly referred to models in student retention/dropout literature. In conclusion educational researchers have contributed insight in understanding the influences that affect adult learner persistence and have addressed barriers to completion. Researchers have further indicated that retention efforts to ensure the integration of adult learners should be supported in meeting the needs of this demographic.

Implications

This study investigated adult learner persistence in a 2-year community college to determine the influences and barriers that prohibited successful degree completion. Findings from the individual interviews were important to determine how the barriers may be addressed for possible solutions to improve adult learners' persistence outcomes at the community college. The results of this study led to a better understanding of the influences and barriers that affected the retention of adult learners who were not able to acquire their degrees, and who had difficulties persisting due to the barriers and challenges they experienced.

At the outcome of this study, based on the study findings, a policy recommendations paper was developed, which will be presented to community college administrators, the community college governing board, and other community college stakeholders such as those in business and industry. This would be done to indicate how possible barriers experienced by the adult learners may be overcome to increase the chance for successful completion of degree requirements within reasonable time limits, and for job readiness. By identifying academic, institutional, and situational barriers

experienced by adult learners, recommendations will be made to support the efforts towards adult learner persistence, and to successful degree completion (Jacob, 2018; Tierney & Langford, 2016).

The results of the study can lead to better insights about the community college experiences of adult learners who do not persist in their programs. The implication of this study for possible institutional changes, or policy development may be expanded to implement significant changes to institutional approaches. Possible reforms with the goals of making broad policy changes may lead to fundamental differences in the services provided by the community college. The policy recommendations paper will support efforts to retain and serve nontraditional adult learners to persist to degree completion. (Endel, Anderson, & Kelley, 2011; Ruffalo Noel Levitz Report, 2016).

Summary

As evidenced in the literature, many challenges were experienced by adult learners while maintaining multiple roles with the responsibilities of family, work, any and other competing obligations. Barriers to completion of degree requirements have been identified to better understand how to increase graduation completions among nontraditional adult learners. Section 1 focused on the outline of the problem and the rationale as to why the study is significant. Tinto's (1975) integration theory, the conceptual framework that guided the inquiry, was addressed, including details about the development of the student retention model (1993). The research questions are appropriately aligned with the problem, the purpose of the study, and the framework. The literature review contains information about the background information, barriers to

completion of adult learners, and the challenges they face, while maintaining a focus on the problem of the study. This section concluded with the implications of the study, and the direction for developing a potential project based on study findings.

Section 2 contains the methodology for study, the selected research design and approach, and the rationale for the design. In this section I describe the population and the sample selection, the justification for the selection of the participants, participant protection and confidentiality, as well as the participant-researcher working relationship. Data collection procedures, the Role of the Researcher, and the Data Analysis Process are included in this section, which is then followed by the conclusion of the section.

Section 3, the Project, will include an Introduction, the Rationale, a Review of the Literature, Project Description, and the Project implications. Section 4 will contain the Reflections and Conclusions of the Project Strengths and Limitations, Recommendations for Alternative Approaches, Project Development, Leadership and Change, and Reflections on Importance of the Work. Implications, Applications, and the Directions for Future Research will also be featured in this section.

Section 2: The Methodology

Research Design and Approach

This section includes a discussion of the methodology for the study based on the problem and research questions, the discussion of the selected research method and design, the participants, the data collection process, role of the researcher, and the data analysis process. The problem this study addressed was the low persistence of adult learners enrolled in a single community college. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the influences that affected the persistence of adult learners at a local community college who did not persist in completing their degree requirements. I developed the following research questions based on the problem and the purpose of the study.

RQ1: What are nontraditional noncompleters' perspectives of their community college experience?

RQ2: What were nontraditional noncompleters' influences, challenges, and barriers to completion of degree requirements.

Qualitative research is an unfolding process that occurs in a natural setting, in this case at the local community college (Meriam & Tisdell, 2015; Yin, 2017). As the researcher, I obtained in-depth perspectives of the adult learners from their actual experiences (see Creswell, 2013). Qualitative studies have gained significant regard for exceptional benefits through personal insight (Saldana, 2014). Inside subjective research there are a few various and conceivable ways to comprehend an individual's point of view. This research approach is flexible, which allows researchers to change a line of

inquiry and move in new directions based on the information collected from the participants (Creswell, 2013).

I deemed a case study approach as the most appropriate to acquire the answers to the research questions, and to obtain true meaning conveyed through interaction and dialogue with the participants (see Creswell, 2013). The information gathered in this study of adult learners reflected the individuals' own personal experiences to obtain an understanding of the influences that affected their persistence as adult learners, and offered more flexibility through the collection of narrative data. A quantitative approach would have involved the reliance on questionnaires, online responses, and surveys for the collection of data to explain the phenomenon of larger populations (see Creswell, 2013). Because I wanted to gather the personal reflections of participants, a quantitative approach would not have been the most suitable method to use (see Polit & Beck, 2010).

Other qualitative approaches, such as ethnography, phenomenology, and grounded theory, were not appropriate for this study. Ethnography was not appropriate for this study because the focus of this research design was not exploring a phenomenon from the perspective of a unique cultural or ethnic group (see Creswell, 2013). Phenomenology was not appropriate to use because this research design is primarily used in studies where the examination involves personal or psychologically complex phenomena (see Moustakas, 1994). Grounded theory was not an appropriate method because this research design is used in studies where the focus is on developing theories about a specific phenomenon (see Corbin & Strauss, 2014). In consideration of other qualitative approaches, the overall design of this study was a case study, which is the

most appropriate to examine a phenomenon in-depth within the context of real life. This approach is appropriate in research where the phenomenon and context are linked, and cannot be easily isolated or removed from each other, allowing researchers to use various tools to gain a deeper understanding of how or why a phenomenon exists (see Patton, 2015; Roulston, 2012).

A case study is a flexible research approach that can provide an in-depth understanding of a phenomenon (see Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). This design can be applied to real-life insights and is useful in investigating trends, groups of people, organizations, or institutions to allow for unique exploration (see Yin, 2017). I utilized a case study approach in this study to gather data through interviews from a small group of adult learners to document their individual perspectives. This approach allowed for the investigation and exploration of student departure prior to degree completion.

Participants

The site of this study is a multicampus community college that is referred to throughout the study as the local community college. The 2-year community college is located in the southeastern United States surrounded by neighboring rural counties in which the majority of the adult learners reside. Nine adult learners, who did not persist to complete degree requirements served as the sample of the study and engaged in individual, face-to-face interviews. I chose this small sample size to allow for open and frank exchanges of information that provided significant data with which to answer the research questions (see Crouch & McKenzie, 2006; Grimshaw, 2010; Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). The sample in qualitative research must be large enough to assure that

the perspectives are captured, and that more data will not lead to additional information (see Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). If the sample is too large it may be repetitive, and can become time intensive and impractical (see Yin, 2017).

Selection of the Participants

I used a purposeful sampling technique to select nine nontraditional adult learner participants who matriculated at the local community college for at least one or more semesters between the years of 2012 and 2014, who did not graduate, and were no longer enrolled at the time of the study. The ages of the participants were 25 years old or over (see Creswell, 2013).

Gaining Access to the Participants

I obtained a list of names and addresses of adult learners who were no longer enrolled from the local community college enrollment report. Permission was obtained to access the student enrollment report information from the community college president through a written request for approval as the community research partner. Potential participants were invited to join the study using contact information obtained from the postal address information. I sent invitations by mail to potential adult learner participants. This correspondence explained the research and the purpose of the research, and inquired if they were willing to participate in the study. After participants agreed to participate, I contacted each participant using the contact information provided to arrange a time to schedule an interview.

Researcher-Participant Working Relationship

I developed an interview script (see Appendix B) to guide the process of establishing a researcher-participant relationship. The script covered important information that was shared with each participant, including an explanation of the details pertaining to the research, the purpose of the research, the expected duration of participation, and a description of the research procedures that were followed. I delivered this face-to-face with the participant prior to the interview. Because of the voluntary nature of the research, an informed consent form was required. An oral, face-to-face presentation was made by me prior to the interview of each participant to alleviate any concerns pertaining to privacy and confidentiality. Participants were also informed that their participation was voluntary, and that they could discontinue at any time during the research without consequences.

Ethical Participant Protection

I presented and explained the informed consent document to each participant at the time of the initial meeting. Informed consent forms were provided for each participant before interviews for the protection of individual rights, and to maintain participant and institutional confidentiality. The informed consent forms included general information about the purpose of the study, the permission to audiotape the participants during data collection, the process for withdrawal, the confidentiality agreement, the assertion for voluntary participation, and my contact information. A copy of the consent form was provided to each participant in addition of a copy maintained by me.

The principal researcher has the primary responsibility for protecting the rights and the welfare of human research subjects (Walden University Institutional Review Board, 2015). The safeguarding of participant rights must take precedence at all times over the research to comply with the requirements of federal research regulations (U. S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2009). As researcher, I obtained written and documented informed consent for each research participant. After informed consent was obtained, an oral presentation was made prior to the signing of the consent form for the protection of individual rights, and institutional confidentiality. Signing of the consent form was witnessed by me, and, at this time, I addressed questions the participants had regarding the study. All risks were minimized for the protection of the participants' rights and welfare.

I protected participants from any physical and mental discomfort and harm that may have arisen from research procedures, and they were not coerced to take part in the study if any risks existed. No negative consequences occurred if participants declined to be a part of the study, or withdrew participation at any time. Potential risks were minimized to protect the rights of the participants using procedures consistent with sound research design in compliance with the principles of the U. S. Department of Health and Human Services (2009) Federal policy on the protection of human subjects, and the principles of conducting ethical research.

I maintained confidentiality throughout the study and identifying information from the data. A number was assigned to each participant, and this was used throughout the study during audiotaping, storing of data, data analysis, and in the results section of

the study. All data collected from the participants will be kept in a locked file cabinet for 5 years after the research is concluded. Audio recordings will be deleted after 5 years and transcript documents will be permanently destroyed by shredding. All electronic files will be permanently deleted from hard drive of my computer, making the retrieval of data impossible after deletion.

Data Collection

Interviews

Individual interviews was the method I used for collecting data in this study. Semistructured interviews were conducted using an interview protocol (see Appendix C) consisting of questions designed by me, which served as a guide and addressed the research questions (see Creswell, 2013). The interview questions aligned with the research questions and the conceptual framework and related literature. Nine adult learners participated in the interviews. The individual interviews were conducted face-to-face to explore the participants' perspectives for in-depth discussions of their personal experiences as adult learners who did not persist to complete degree requirements (see Roulston, 2012).

The interviews took place at the college campus library, a convenient campus location with the least amount of distractions. I read an interview script (see Appendix B) to each participant in preparation for the interview. I also explained the purpose and the format of the interview. Before the interview, I read the informed consent agreement, and the participants the opportunity to read along to review the contents of the agreement with me. Interviews were approximately 45 to 60 minutes in duration, with allowances

made for additional time required, not exceeding 90 minutes. To increase the likelihood of rich and relevant responses from the participants, I asked probing and follow-up questions during the individual interviews (see Creswell, 2013; Glesne & Peshkin, 2011; Latz, 2015).

The interviews were audiorecorded, and I transcribed the interviews within 48 hours of completing them. A copy of the interview transcripts with preliminary findings were provided to the participants to confirm the accuracy of the information conveyed in the interview, and to add or clarify any points. This process took approximately 30 to 45 minutes. As suggested by Merriam and Tisdell (2015), member checking was used to verify the accuracy in the interpretation and respondent validation. This technique is used in qualitative research to establish credibility (see Patton, 2015).

I based the semistructured interview questions on the problem, research questions, and the framework of the study. After reading and transcribing the initial interview responses, the clarification of information required a second interview of the nine participants. The follow-up interviews were shorter in duration, and included questions that arose from previous interviews, and allowed the opportunity to review the interview transcripts for accuracy. The timeframe to complete the interviews was 2 to 3 weeks.

Keeping Track of the Data

Once data were collected, I stored to safeguard the research and the privacy of the participants. Notes from the interviews were kept in a research log to maintain the information as a convenient way to keep track of all data and activities of the research, as it was essential to maintain a record of participation. All audio-taped interviews, field

notes, and memoranda were entered into a password-protected computer to establish a cataloging system. This will be kept in a secured, locked storage file in a fireproof record safe with a digital passcode required for entry. When the computer is not in use, it will be maintained in a locked file cabinet accessible by only me.

Transcript documents were coded numerically and will be kept in the storage file for 5 years in this secured location to protect the confidentiality of the participant information. Audio recordings will also be deleted after 5 years and transcript documents will be shredded. A reflective journal has been maintained throughout the research for the purpose of documenting experiences, presuppositions, opinions, and thoughts, and for maintaining self-reflection throughout the research process

Role of the Researcher

As the researcher, I have worked in higher education for more than 25 years and have held several administrative roles as an affiliate member of the selected community college. I have had the experience of working with various student populations, the I currently do not hold any leadership or administrative position at the selected research site. It is also important to note that I do not have current or personal affiliations with any of the participants of the study, and no participants have any personal or professional relationship with me in the past, or in the present. There was no conflict of interest in the collection of data.

Personal biases were set aside by me consciously focusing on the raw data and refusing to make judgments based on personal beliefs and experience. Data analysis and interpretation of the findings adhered to the qualitative approach and used the conceptual

framework in my analysis. These steps were used to address researcher bias. My personal opinion regarding adult learners is that significant barriers were present that affected their ability to succeed and complete their programs. I believe that determination and dedication are needed in order to withstand the difficulties and challenges that were likely to become barriers for adult learners to successfully complete their program requirements.

Data Analysis

The data analysis in this qualitative study is the process for the identification and interpretation of themes and patterns relative to the research questions. Once an interview was completed, it was transcribed by me within 48 hours (2 days) after each interview. All interview data were analyzed thematically using open coding and axial coding strategies. Transcripts were read several times to become familiar with the data to clarify any misunderstanding. Open coding was used to identify the recurring patterns and the emerging themes obtained from the interview data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

The coding process entailed the analysis of the transcripts to assign codes to the responses of the participants (Creswell, 2013). This was done by conducting a rigorous and systematic analysis of the data to begin coding. A listing of recurring words, ideas, concepts, and themes of underlying ideas found in the data were grouped into distinct categories, related to different ideas, and were used to build the themes. I used color coding to distinguish each broad concept in a table created with a category of concept headings, and a category listed as subheadings.

The labels or names were key words or phrases designated that succinctly embodied the meaning of a particular portion of a text based on the literature and conceptual framework (Saldana, 2014). At this stage of the analysis, particular attention was given to patterns and emerging themes obtained from the data to avoid overlap and redundancy of codes (Saldana, 2014). Patterns from the codes were identified as the review and analysis continued. The codes were clustered together with similar topics and grouped in categories to form a preliminary analysis.

I combined the codes into themes so that the interpretation could be further expanded. At this stage axial coding was used to collapse the categories into themes (Creswell, 2013). Data analysis then proceeded with the comprehensive analysis of the themes, and the perspectives that focused on how the findings contributed to the study (Creswell, 2013). I then identified and organized themes that aided in understanding the answer to the research question and the subquestion. The final step of the data analysis was the creation of thick rich descriptions supported by the literature and the framework (Creswell, 2013). Each theme was discussed so that contributions to the understanding of the research became more explicit.

Evidence of Quality

To increase the credibility of findings, follow-up contact with the participants was conducted through member checking. Member checking is a technique used to confirm the accuracy of data and the findings by returning to the source (Merriam, 2009). A copy of individual transcripts obtained from the interviews with preliminary findings was provided to each participant to ensure the accuracy of the interpretation and for correction

if necessary. The participants reviewed the data as well as my interpretation, and were instructed to reply through email for corrections to verify the accuracy of the transcripts and the findings. Rich, thick descriptions were used with reference of detailed descriptions of the phenomenon to include researcher's interpretation (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). A thorough account of the methods and procedures followed during and after data collection was provided.

Outliers, which are findings that significantly differ from the main themes, were included to have an alternate perspective on the phenomenon. Discrepant cases occur when there are two or more conflicting or inconsistent findings (Yin, 2015). The cases that did not align with the themes generated were reassessed by comparing elements of the data that contradicted patterns or explanations that emerged from the data analysis and discrepant cases were included in the findings.

A detailed explanation of the methodology used in this study includes a discussion on the research approach that guided the study, including the steps in the data collection and data analysis processes, and strategies that were used to ensure ethical standards. Data were gathered in the study from the adult learners using semistructured interviews. The results of the study were based on the subjective perspectives of the participants. The open coding and axial methods were used for the data analysis, which involved finding patterns in the data to generate themes that were instrumental in answering the research question and subquestion (Creswell, 2013). Common patterns and themes were identified by data obtained from the interviews, and a report of the findings are provided under the heading of Data Analysis Results.

Data Analysis Results

This qualitative study was designed to explore the influences and the perceived challenges that affect nontraditional adult learner persistence. Permission was granted to conduct the study from the community college administration and the Walden University Institutional Review Board (Approval Number 07-13-18-0145531). The sample consisted of nine adult learner students who were enrolled during Fall Terms 2013/2014, for at least one or more semesters, and who did not complete degree requirements. Initially it was anticipated that eight to 12 students would be included in the sample. Ninety-six invitation letters were mailed to students who attended the community college during the Fall through Spring Semesters of 2013/2014, requesting their participation in the study. Forty-two letters were returned to sender because of addresses that were no longer valid according to the U.S. Postal Service. The letters were no longer eligible to be forwarded after multiple attempts to deliver. Nineteen adult learners declined participation in the study, 26 were nonrespondents to the invitation letter, and nine adult learner respondents expressed an interest in participating in the study. An informed consent was provided to each of the participants to inform them of the research as it pertains to the study participation, and for student confidentiality.

Semistructured interviews using an interview protocol took place at a local community college campus with the exception of one, which took place by phone. That phone interview was scheduled due to their inability to attend a campus interview. The interviews were audio-recorded, and field notes were recorded by me during the

interviews into a Word document. Student confidentiality was maintained by the use of nonidentifying numbers that were assigned for the adult learners' names.

Once all data were collected, I used thematic analysis to analyze the data, which consisted of categorizing key codes to identify meaningful relationships to determine core themes. Labels were assigned, and meaningful themes emerged. Themes were illustrated in a narrative display of the findings. Open coding according to Merriam (2009) entail marking any data as it pertains to the study. Axial coding consists of identifying relationships among the open codes. Open coding generated the initial categories and was assembled into a new category by axial coding.

Table 1

Sample Coding and Emerging Themes

Open Codes	Axial Code	Emergent Theme
Aspiration to obtain degree Academic and financial Lack of campus integration Additional resources needed for academic success Schedule conflicts Inflexible class offerings Advising	Challenge for access to college services and needed resources. Barriers to success Need for Financial Aid resource	Institutional Barriers

My summary of findings were returned to the adult learner participants to check for accuracy of their responses. Student confidentiality was maintained by the use of

nonidentifying numbers that were assigned for the adult learners' names. Demographic data collected included ages, gender, and familial status. Data collection and the analysis of data occurred within a period of approximately 9 weeks. The time allotted was for the collection of data, for coding, and for documenting emerging themes (Creswell, 2013).

Demographics

Age. The age ranges of the nine nontraditional adult learner respondents were: Three adult learner participants ranging in ages 25-35, four participants in the 35-45 age range, and one participant in the age range between 45-55, with one participant between the ages of 55-64.

Gender. Of the nine adult learner participants who were enrolled during 2013, 2014, seven were female and two were males.

Marital/parental status. The familial status of the respondents varied among the age groups. Among the female participants three were married with children and four were single parents with dependent children. There were two male participants, one male with a school-aged dependent child, and the second, a dislocated worker with caregiver responsibilities for an elderly parent.

Enrollment decisions. Reasons for enrollment decisions varied among the adult learner participants. Among the reasons given were upgrades in training for career change expectations. Increased salary potential appeared a motivating factor in the desire to attend college among the adult learners. While salary was an important factor in decision to enroll, to obtain a degree/credential for specific training in a desired curriculum was foremost. The adult learners had various interests in attending the

community college as a nontraditional adult learner. Among them were expanded interests of higher education aspirations to transfer to a 4-year college after completion at the community college. Two adult learners that ranged in ages 35-45 and 45-55 returned with aspirations to complete degree requirements following an early departure; however, they were unable to persist due to family obligations and conflicting work schedules that did not allow for their completion. While the adult learner participants expressed various reasons for their enrollment and their decisions to obtain a degree, they were also seeking a better quality of life. In their efforts to obtain new knowledge and job skills, the community college was seen as the best means to achieve those goals. The themes emerged that were prevalent were institutional and situational barriers, time management, motivational and personal, childcare, and subtheme, technology issues.

This section will address the answers to the research question and subquestion. The information is based on the responses that were specific about the influences that affected nontraditional adult learners' enrollment as it pertained to college, work, attendance, family, and personal issues.

RQ 1

This question was addressed by data collected from the adult learner narratives of barriers relative to their community college experiences. Study findings indicated that nontraditional noncompleters could not readily access academic resources when needed. Academic advisors were not available to nontraditional noncompleters when registering for classes and planning their schedules. Questions pertaining to their curriculums, and for other program enrollment issues went unanswered on many occasions. Overall, the

availability of academic advisors was problematic when nontraditional noncompleters sought assistance to navigate through the academic system while experiencing technology challenges. This service was also seen as lacking when initially enrolling as an adult learner who had not become acclimated to the college campus environment. The needed support was viewed as an important entity, and as a disconnect for nontraditional adult learners in the absence of academic advising, financial aid access, and student services.

Nontraditional adult learners' community college experiences were met with fear and confusion. The uncertainty of navigating through the academic processes while also experiencing feelings of isolation, presented barriers to persistence. Study findings did indicate different levels of involvement with campus activities between nontraditional and traditional aged students. This was largely due to the limited commitment of time spent on campus to attend classes due to family, work, and other external obligations.

The following responses from the participants indicate various challenges and perspectives of their experiences. The first theme that will be discussed will be institutional barriers.

Theme 1: Institutional Barriers.

Participant #1 articulated. As a new nontraditional adult learner to the college, the opportunity to attend a student orientation was not available because one was not offered. Information obtained through an orientation session would have been very helpful to become acclimated to the college campus, class offerings, library hours, available resources, and to have an opportunity to meet other new

nontraditional adult students.

Participant #2. This participant realized that the inability to meet degree completion was due to barriers that existed in the existing program structure. Curriculum requirements could not be met within a reasonable completion time while attending as a nontraditional adult learner. Working full-time and attending college part-time was not a good fit, and conflicted with work and life schedules, and therefore this participant did not persist to complete degree requirements.

Participant #3. This participant recognized that as enrollment continued, tuition kept increasing. The added cost of books and supplies presented a hardship and this participant had to leave college because it became “too expensive.” Working full-time, the nontraditional adult learner was no longer eligible to receive financial aid to assist in paying tuition and the added costs of books required for the curriculum. This participant left due to the excessive cost of attending the community college. However, the student has aspirations to one day return to complete degree requirements.

The lack of institutional support resources presented challenges that caused the participants’ inability to persist. This was largely attributed to occurrences such as the inflexibility in class scheduling conflicts, class cancellations, and other internal programming issues. Institutional practices existed with limitations in the lack of institutional supports that affected nontraditional noncompleters’ persistence. The accessibility to academic advising, financial aid, essential student services, and study hubs were not available beyond traditional school hours.

Funding challenges and limitation of resources also were not conducive to nontraditional adult learner persistence (Kennamer et al., 2012). Access to on-campus study hubs had limited scheduling with little to no weekend or evening access to these resources. Needed supports were not in place to accommodate nontraditional adult learners. Evening access to the Registrar's or Financial Aid Offices after traditional operational hours were also nonexistent.

The perspectives of the nontraditional noncompleters were substantiated in their nonpersistence of degree requirements. Advising is an essential key to retention (Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2018; Ruffalo Noel Levitz Report, 2016). Specialized resources designed for nontraditional adult learners will be important for persistence to degree completion. As the nontraditional adult population continues to grow, more institutional resources must be provided to support degree completion through the implementation of a targeted orientation program.

Developing flexible programming, orientation sessions geared toward nontraditional adult learners, and academic support systems to address the needs for this population will be necessary for their persistence, and for successful degree completion.

RQ 2

The responsibilities of family and working full-time while attending school influenced, challenged, and posed barriers to adult learners' persistence decisions. In addition, limited time existed for homework and other school projects. The inflexibility of course and class offerings, in addition to class cancellations resulted in course withdrawals, which caused the inability for nontraditional noncompleters to persist.

Additional expenses for transportation, childcare, and the added costs of books and supplies also influenced the nontraditional noncompleters' decision in their nonpersistence.

Challenges of institutional factors were programming issues in the duration of programs, academic advising, and internal institutional practices. Other personal challenges experienced by the adult learners were their inability to incorporate the new student status into their family life. Family and work commitments were prevalent, while time management limitations existed due to devoting time to course assignments. College was viewed as not being a good fit when the courses or curriculum sought were not offered. Managing the anxieties of juggling everyday life, fulfilling the roles in the family, and meeting the demands of college posed significant challenges. The multiple roles of the nontraditional adult learners prohibited the development of a strong student identity, which affected student persistence.

Handling the rigors of academic course requirements and being unprepared for the level of college coursework were also barriers experienced by nontraditional adult learners. Entrance and placement tests were also a cause of anxiety expressed by nontraditional adult learners. Frequent placement in developmental education courses was noted as a result of the initial college placement tests, which extended time required for degree completion.

Barriers encountered at the community college influenced persistence of nontraditional noncompleters. The themes that emerged from the data were institutional, situational, and personal barriers. Among the themes were also time management,

motivation, and childcare. The subtheme was technology challenges. The findings were consistent with existing literature that adult learners experience barriers that are both external and internal and that affected the persistence of nontraditional noncompleters at a local community college.

This next section addresses the research subquestion: What were nontraditional noncompleters' influences, challenges, and barriers to completion of degree requirements.

Theme 2: Situational hardships. Situational hardships were indicated by circumstances that conflicted with nontraditional adult noncompleters' ability to persist to complete degree requirements. Data obtained from participants indicated that situational hardships, which were caregiver responsibilities, family commitments, academic struggles in coursework, conflicting work schedules, and other competing obligations were prevalent in their inability to persist.

Participant #5. This participant articulated that “as a caregiver to an elderly parent, and a dislocated worker, there were often missed classes. Additional expenses incurred due to these responsibilities presented a financial burden.” When factoring in seeking work, attending college, and meeting other family commitments, these resulted in Participant 5 inability to persist to complete degree requirements.

Being apprehensive in beginning college, and overcome with fear as an older nontraditional adult learner, concerns existed in the ability to do well when taking developmental courses. After a couple of semesters, the participant dropped all courses and returned to the workforce.

Participant #6. According to this adult learner's experience, the uncertainty of accomplishing coursework, handling excessive course loads, and preparing required class assignments became overwhelming, which led to their nonpersistence. Study laboratories and other campus resources were additional supports needed as a nontraditional adult learner unprepared for college level courses. Inadequate mathematical skills and the need to develop good writing skills posed challenges in the ability to persist to degree completion.

Situational hardships experienced by nontraditional noncompleters were caregiver responsibilities with added expenses, resulting in financial hardships. College costs versus the nonbenefit of remaining in college, family and work commitments, and considerable burnout all caused significant challenges. These challenges led to the inability of nontraditional adult learners to persist in completing degree requirements.

Theme 3: Time management. The overall challenges of nontraditional adult learners were conflicting responsibilities of managing work and family, while juggling priorities to meet class schedules, and other commitments. Limitations of devoting time to studies and course assignments were competing priorities that posed barriers to nontraditional adult learner completion. Family discord, role conflict, and managing anxiety were incompatible demands in relation to time management. The need to find the balance between learning and personal obligations were challenges experienced in the nonpersistence in meeting degree requirements.

Theme 4: Motivational and personal There was a lack of motivation and self-starting when attending classes after fulfilling work, family, and other obligations.

Motivations versus personal struggles prohibited sufficient investment towards persistence and completion, and in the expectancy to apply meaning to what is taught, and determining its usefulness. The nontraditional adult learners' decision to enter higher education while maintaining other obligations complicated their ability to commit fully to their studies and to attend classes on a regular basis. This therefore, prohibited their persistence and the completion of degree requirements.

Theme 5: Childcare.

Participants # 5-8. Single parents expressed that arranging childcare after work while attending evening classes was expensive and challenging. Childcare remained a constant concern while working full-time and being enrolled as part-time college students, which presented a hardship and resulted in nontraditional adult learners leaving college, and contributed to their inability to persist. Childcare was a major challenge when attempting to complete degree requirements.

Childcare issues were prevalent in the nontraditional adult learners' aspirations to attend the community college to complete degree requirements. Provision of childcare would be a positive resource if offered at the community college for adult learners experiencing this challenge. The availability of good, convenient, and reduced cost childcare services may serve as an alternative in providing childcare services, and for the nontraditional adult learner's ability to persist.

Subtheme: Technology Issues

This subtheme was consistent with the lack of skill and technology use by nontraditional adult learners with little to no previous technology experience in

navigating through class assignments using specific applications. Technology was a challenge when preparing class assignments inside and outside of the classroom, and was seen as a barrier in accomplishing assignments. The use of technology by nontraditional adult learners improved over time with instruction and repetition in use.

Before interviews were completed with each nontraditional adult learner, the participant was asked if there was additional information to share. This allowed for discussion and to provide other information. Other perspectives revealed and articulated were a shared concern regarding the inability to obtain needed resources. Nontraditional adult learners felt that much needed resources could have made a difference in a more positive outcome of persistence. Based on all information obtained in the interviews, there were no discrepant cases discovered in the findings.

Evidence of Quality Indicators

Validity and reliability increase transparency, and decrease opportunities of researcher bias in qualitative research (Singh, 2014). According to Creswell (2013), validity has a role in a qualitative study and is used to determine the accuracy or truthfulness of research findings. Reliability is referred to as the stability of findings. These are two of the most important features in the valuation for good measurement in research (Mohajan, 2017). Establishing trustworthiness throughout the study was accomplished by the following for promoting validity and reliability.

Credibility

Credibility is referred to as the believability of research findings from supported sources of data and confirmation of relevant facts (Merriam, 2009). Member checking or

respondent validation was employed to determine the accuracy and credibility of the findings. This occurred by soliciting feedback from interview data back to participants to verify interpretations for accuracy and credibility (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Mohajan, 2017).

Transferability

Another strategy employed was the technique of utilizing thick, rich descriptions to contextualize the study so that readers would be able to determine the extent their situations match the research, and whether the findings could be applicable to other contexts, settings, or with other respondents (Merriam, 2009; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Thick, rich descriptions were apparent during participant interviews and facilitated transferability.

Dependability

Dependability ensures that research findings are consistent and could be replicated to obtain similar results, and has the ability to remain relevant overtime (Creswell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). My research journal, detailed notes, and memos were maintained throughout data collection and data analysis. In addition, data obtained from participants' perspectives were used to corroborate findings to maintain dependability (Creswell, 2013).

Confirmability

Confirmability as an ever-present concern refers to how findings are supported by data collected. It is also dependent upon researcher's neutrality for control of researcher bias. Continuous memoing in my research journal occurred throughout the study for

checking and for rechecking data to circumvent personal bias to eliminate personal perspectives that influence study results to obtain confirmability.

To ensure reliability in qualitative research the examination of trustworthiness is crucial and is one of the most important factors to ensure consistency in the study findings, and how they were derived from the data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). To establish reliability in qualitative research, credibility, conformability, dependability, and transferability are all essential elements required for quality (Creswell, 2013). Confirmability is the last standard of trustworthiness that must be established by a qualitative researcher.

Summary

This research has indicated that nontraditional adult learners specifically those who work full-time and manage families face numerous challenges when returning to college. Some of the challenges that presented barriers to degree completion were consistent with the findings of this study. This study allowed me to explore the influences and perceived challenges that affect nontraditional adult learner persistence at a local community college. Nine nontraditional adult learners, who attended at least two or more semesters, participated in the study. Personal perspectives were given based on their experiences during enrollment at the community college. Findings from the study revealed multiple perspectives of the nontraditional noncompleters who did not persist to complete degree requirements.

The following themes were derived from the study of the nontraditional adult learners, also referred to as nontraditional noncompleters in the study. Institutional

barriers experienced were due to the inability to obtain essential student support services, due to the inflexibility of class scheduling, limited advising options, and internal programming issues. The business office, financial aid, and registrar's office services were not available outside of traditional operational hours. This supported the inability of nontraditional adult learners to access essential services, which affected their ability to persist. Situational barriers affected nontraditional noncompleters with role conflicts in their responsibility of school, family, and other obligations as articulated by study participants. Time management was challenging when juggling multiple responsibilities and committing time to their studies. Motivational and personal issues were experienced as fear and anxiety existed in the attempt to manage life, work, and college, which contributed to nontraditional noncompleters' inability to persist. Affordable childcare was also a major issue in the challenge to obtain when attending classes. A subtheme of technology challenges existed for nontraditional noncompleters when preparing class assignments and while learning the use of technology, all of which were barriers in their noncompletion of degree requirements.

Answers to the research questions were obtained from the collective responses of the nontraditional noncompleters' perspectives that addressed the barriers and challenges which led to their lack of ability to persist. According to Tinto (1993), nontraditional adult learners who do not achieve some degree of academic and social integration are likely to leave school, which leads to their nonpersistence. Social integration cannot always occur when attending school as nontraditional adult learners. Attending college less than on a full-time basis creates a challenge for the students with limited time on

campus. This presents many obstacles when considering the obligations of family, work, childcare, and other responsibilities that can prohibit the ability to socially integrate as a nontraditional adult learner versus the traditional student.

The project is based on the findings of the study and is produced to address the problem of low persistence and degree completion. A policy recommendations paper is designed to include the results of the study and recommendations for strategies in which to address and improve nontraditional adult learners' persistence, degree completion, for more positive retention rates.

Section 3: The Project

Introduction

This section includes a description and goals of the designed project as well as the rationale of the project, a review of literature, and a description of the project implementation. I also provide an explanation of how the project will be evaluated, and the implications for possible social change. Appendix A includes the project documents themselves to provide the reader with a greater understanding of the project design.

Description and Goals

The findings in this study were used to inform a policy recommendations paper as the study project. Based on these results, I designed a policy recommendations paper that identified the central concept or commonality in the themes that emerged and, addressed problems, as detailed in Section 1, to improve nontraditional adult learners' persistence and degree completion for more positive retention rates. The goal of the project will be to provide a policy recommendation to the community college that will highlight innovative and recommended best practices, which have been implemented by other colleges experiencing similar problems and resulting in positive outcomes. The policy recommendations paper will be presented to the community college administration and shared with the governing board and other stakeholders involved in the college's decision-making process to better understand the complex issues that relate to nonpersistence for nontraditional noncompleters.

In the following section, I present a description of the rationale and goals for the chosen genre of the project. A literature review is provided consisting of extant research

supplying proven and best practices to address the problems and the recommendations to resolve them. In the policy recommendations paper, I address potential barriers, propose the implementation of a time table, and explain the roles and responsibilities of myself and others involved. The recommendations to effect change to the current policy that negatively impacts adult learner persistence are then presented.

Rationale

Nonpersistence of nontraditional adult noncompleters is a primary area of concern for a local community college. To address the problem described in Section I, I chose to develop a policy recommendations paper because it was suitable to providing multiple strategies to address the problem. The findings from Section 2 explained the influences and perceived challenges from shared experiences of the nontraditional adult learners.

In the project, I made policy recommendations to alleviate barriers that prevent nontraditional adult learners' persistence and for improved educational experiences for successful degree completion. These policy recommendations to the community college will be essential for an increased quality of educational services, and the creation of a nontraditional adult student community college culture that will encourage adult learner persistence and increase nontraditional adult learner degree completion.

Review of the Literature

I conducted a review of literature relative to the genre of the project, which is a policy recommendations paper. Evidence-based best practices were reflected in the literature as they pertain to the study problem. My focus was on potential resolutions to low nontraditional adult learner persistence to reduce community college attrition rates.

In the literature review, I also highlight interventions that have demonstrated an increase in nontraditional adult learners' persistence to degree completion.

In developing the review of literature, I used several strategies to locate appropriate, credible, and relevant sources for the review. Key search terms for this review of literature were *attrition, adult learners, adult learner perceptions, barriers to persistence, community college noncompletion, stop outs, institutional barriers to persistence, nontraditional adult learners, nontraditional noncompleters, nontraditional retention, and adult learner persistence*. I selected peer-reviewed, primary journal articles and educational journals and evaluated them for credibility and relevancy to the research problem. Electronic databases used to locate sources for this literature review were ERIC, Google Scholar, Proquest, SAGE, and the U.S. Department of Education website. Online journals used in this review included the *Adult Educational Quarterly, American Journal of Educational Research, Community College Review, Educational Research and Review, Journal of College Student Retention, Journal of Continuing Higher Education, New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*. I also examined many websites seeking valuable sources to achieve saturation to further and extend my literature review.

The Policy Recommendations Paper

Based on the study findings, I chose a policy recommendations paper as the project genre because this genre is an appropriate and informative document that is built on detailed research (see Complete College America Whitepaper (CCAW), 2017). The policy recommendations paper was used to identify specific needs to determine solutions and communicate a possible course of action. Therefore, a policy recommendations paper

best addressed the study findings as opposed to a white paper (Complete College America Whitepaper [CCA], 2017). Case study research is in-depth, and offers greater detail, is based on experimentation, summarizes a specific scenario, and focuses more on examination to provide benefits and rationale for implementation of a proposed solution (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). White papers are used to present or propose policy, such as government policy, have a singular focus, and do not provide evidence; however, the paper is presented as a report or guide that provides information on a complex issue, and advocates a position to help the reader understand certain solutions for a particular problem (CCA, 2017).

The policy recommendations paper will be presented to eliminate barriers that affect nontraditional adult learners' persistence. Providing a more supportive environment to promote student engagement, strengthen academic advising, and streamline degree completion pathways will establish student support services geared to the adult learners. Accommodating adult learners in their persistence efforts will require appropriate resources specifically for these students. Providing convenient, on-campus childcare, and full access to technology 24/7, will be essential to support nontraditional adult persistence efforts for increased degree completion.

Institutional Barriers and Directions for Change

Institutional barriers, in the nature of their structure, hinder nontraditional adult learners' progression towards degree completion (Holzer & Baum, 2017). As a result, low completion rates remain a problem for the community college (Holzer & Baum, 2017). In addition, as a result of these low rates, employers who rely on having a trained

workforce to hire may experience a shortage in workforce demand, which also affects local and state policymakers who are responsible for bringing in business and industry, that drives the economy. Nontraditional adult learners face many obstacles in achieving their goals and may not see the value of achieving them, and, therefore, do not persist in community college. Because of this, community college completion rates must be improved by addressing the institutional structures, and the barriers they present to allow for more successful degree completion for adult learners. To help more adults enroll, persist, and succeed, changes must be made to improve the process through providing clearer pathways to student success (Kerby, 2015).

In this review of recent literature, I found that academic programs and support services have been redesigned at a number of colleges, which have led to guided pathways to meet student goals (Finkel, 2016; Kezar & Holcombe, 2018; National Orientation Directors Association, 2017). While student retention has been modeled by multiple theories, institutions of higher learning can better serve nontraditional adult learners in their persistence, rather than retaining them as an objective (Tinto, 2016). According to recent research, in an effort to increase adult learner persistence, an institution must provide more comprehensive support systems and structured pathways to degree attainment (Finkel, 2016). The barriers experienced by nontraditional adult learners, require the provision of innovative solutions to help this population of students persist increase the number of them who successfully complete degree requirements.

Funding Challenges

In their multiple roles, nontraditional adult learners experience competing pressures of financial obligations and school responsibilities. With these responsibilities nontraditional adult learners face challenges of family obligations, childcare, finances, and managing time, in addition to attending college, all which present barriers that affect their persistence (Kruvelis, Cruse & Gault, 2017; Lin, 2016). Collaborations between advisors and financial aid could be established in a retention effort, and as a potential attainment benefit. Taking into account previous course credits, and previous work experience could provide a means for the reduction of tuition for this population.

Funding is challenging for nontraditional adult learners, who are ineligible for state aid and grants if they are employed full-time and exceed income guidelines for a Pell Grant (Free Application for Student Financial Aid [FAFSA], 2015-2016). These adult learners are not able to leave full-time employment, and some cannot afford to pay tuition and fees, which calls into question their ability to attend school. Because of the issues that prevents their full-time enrollment, which includes paying the costs of tuition and fees to attend school as a part-time student, a number of states have considered the Promise Programs Grant to encourage the enrollment of nontraditional adult learners (Billings, 2018; Lumina, 2017). As a part of this grant, funded by Lumina Foundation (2016) with the commitment of funding adult students, barriers to adult learners' persistence and supportive services not typically offered on community college campuses to serve the adult learner needs were considered in the State Higher Education Executive Officers (SHEEO) Adult Promise Pilot Program Design (2016).

The availability of financial resources is one of the major issues that nontraditional adult learners face in addition to other competing family financial obligations. The lack of these financial resources causes many of these students to leave college (Grabowski & Silver-Pacuilla, 2016). Multiple and flexible financing options could be provided to offset the cost of adult learners' tuition, fees, and other costs that supports their enrollment (Advancing Retention in College [ARC], 2018; Palmadessa, 2017).

To assist students, colleges are implementing strategies to inform and encourage students to complete a Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). In addition, many colleges' financial aid offices send out frequent emails to remind students of filing deadlines (FAFSA, 2015-2016; YU, 2017). Financial aid counselors at some institutions are assigned to students at acceptance in completing their FAFSA (Vianden, 2016). E-mail alerts and messaging decreased the response time and the ability to receive funding (ARC, 2018). Colleges are also seeking other ways to secure funding through college foundations and student support grants available to nontraditional adult learners.

According to the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators in Higher Education (NASPA, 2018), emergency aid programs are being managed on college campuses to provide assistance grants. This resource can be used to cover unexpected expenses that may cause a student to drop from school (NASPA, 2018). Adult learners may obtain emergency assistance to cover the cost of car repairs that would prevent them from attending classes. While the institutions offer emergency aid to assist students with unexpected expenses, they are oftentimes not aware that these

programs exist (Billings, 2018). Therefore institutions will need to provide information to students on their availability to promote them campus wide (Kruger, Parnell, & Wesaw, 2016).

Increasing Student Engagement

Student engagement as a critical indicator of success, and students' effort and involvement are important determinants of persistence and success (Burt, 2015; Gallimore, 2017). Higher education literature in previous persistence studies have indicated that greater persistence is associated with higher levels of engagement (Jacobs, 2017). Strategies, through academics, advising, and interpersonal offerings, can encourage student engagement and persistence (Tinto, 2016). While numerous internal and external factors affect nontraditional adult learner persistence, researchers have indicated that orientation is a critical factor in students' decisions to actively engage in their college experience, and is a first-year predictor of future student success (Mertes & Hoover, 2014; Taylor, Dunn, & Winn, 2015). Through the implementation of college orientation, students continue enrollment until goal attainment as a result of the interaction of individual, institutional, and external factors (Rios-Aguilar & Deil-Amen, 2015).

Student orientation has shown to improve student outcomes, including retention (Robichaud, 2016). According to a study by (Taylor, Dunn, & Winn, 2015) changes in the format of new student orientation would improve the retention and success of developmental education students. New student orientation focuses on familiarizing adult students with the institution, enrollment procedures, and community college support

services which aim to acclimate new students to the college campus and encourage student engagement. Providing a mandatory orientation may limit the availability of the adult learners to attend. In view of this barrier, and as an additional strategy, a separate orientation session can be offered at multiple locations at various times.

New retention strategies have emerged as best practices. Assigning new students to peer mentors at orientation provides support to nontraditional adult learners in becoming acclimated to the college environment, and can promote positive student outcomes (Abdelrahman, Gonzalez, & Miller, 2015; Collier, 2015). Inviting families to provide emotional support during orientation is also recommended. In addition, access to an online orientation will require students to complete and pass a quiz available to those students who may have conflicts in attending an orientation session. Engaging students in the community college environment in identifying and discovering campus services will provide the ability to navigate various campus locations to promote student engagement and identify opportunities to become a part of the campus community, integrating into the academic and social activities. Essentially, the institution will be able to utilize effective policies and practices to persuade students to actively engage in their college experience and achieve their educational goals. Supporting nontraditional adult learners in their persistence requires an increase in student engagement.

Academic Advising

Academic advising is considered among one of the most significant interventions for alleviating early departure from the community college, and assures interaction in an advisor-student relationship (Hatch & Garcia, 2017; Strayhorn, 2015). A redesigned

student intake process to academic advising serves as an instructional support and a key component that is crucial to persistence and student success (Bailey et al., 2015; Hatch & Garcia, 2017; Fosnacht, McCormick, Nailos, & Ribera, 2017; Vianden, 2016; Waiwaiole, 2018). A new academic advising model has been developed by an academic advising task force, the National Academic Advising Association (NACADA, 2017) which consists of academic and faculty advisors assuming the role as one-on-one student supports from initial matriculation to degree completion. In these roles, all students during their first year of attendance will be assigned an academic advisor. Students will not immediately declare a major, however they will be considered as a pre-major. Students will continue with the designated advisor for a year. During the second term of their enrollment, the intended major is declared, and the students are then assigned a permanent faculty mentor. All undeclared major students will continue with the initially assigned academic advisors until such time as a major is declared. The student will work closely with a career counselor and an academic advisor to determine their major (NACADA, 2017). These measures will be taken to assist the students with the intent to prepare them to navigate the college experience to degree completion.

Academic advising is an essential pathway as an institutional effort to educate and retain students (Fosnacht, McCormick, Nailos, & Ribera, 2017). Advising can provide an increased knowledge of the college and the needed connections that are central to institutional and retention efforts. Advising centers have been expanded on college campuses in recent years in their retention efforts as a provision of available advising

staff, which is an essential need to improve adult learners' student persistence, and for more positive student outcomes (Bettinger & Baker, 2014).

Flexible Scheduling and Expanded Hours for Adult Student Services

As the adult learners proceed to persist, additional challenges may become potential barriers to their success. The flexibility of scheduling was nonexistent for adult learners when course offerings conflicted with their work schedule. The lack of information provided to adult students regarding costs to attend college, the complexity of scheduling, and the commitment of time required to attend college, all posed challenges that precluded their persistence (Billings, 2018).

Adult learners may benefit from scheduling that would allow them to balance classes with their work hours, which can also eliminate the amount of time in commuting to and from campus. Course scheduling offered during evenings or weekend hours could expand opportunities for adult learners to attend classes. Providing this type of block scheduling includes access to campus support services and other administrative offices that are normally offered during traditional school hours.

Programs for Adult Learner Success

Components of the Adult Promise Program Pilot exist in individual states who adopt this initiative through higher educational institutions (SHEEO Adult Promise Pilot Program Design, 2016). This program is designed to increase the numbers of nontraditional adults (25 years or older) with postsecondary credentials, which also provides a free tuition component for the participants. At the institutional level, funding is appropriated for enrolling the students and for program completions. Representatives

assist students to apply for admission and financial aid. Students are then connected to a campus advisor, who provides additional outreach, and college support is provided for the students' academic success.

Emergency aid funding for adult learners, on-campus childcare services, and vouchers were available to the adult learners for off-campus childcare. Supportive services and mentoring to adult learners continued throughout their enrollment in college retention and completion efforts (SHEEO, 2016). Through this type of initiative, higher education institutions can improve degree completion, which is tailored to improve the overall educational and economic quality of life for families and communities.

College Credit for Work and Life Experiences

While most nontraditional adult learners work while attending college, skills and knowledge gained through work and life experiences, and other means of formal education or previous job training received can be evaluated for academic credit (Finkel, 2016; Hutchens, 2016). Prior learning assessments in obtaining learning credits can reduce the cost and time that it takes to complete degree requirements, which can increase persistence and completion rates. Reduced tuition costs for this population, taking into account previous course credits, and previous work experience, could provide tuition incentives.

According to the Council for Adults and Experiential Learning (CAEL, 2015), a number of colleges and universities adhere to the policy of rewarding credit for work and life experiences for demonstrated practical and theoretical knowledge. The inability to do so may also present a barrier for students seeking to apply these experiences and skills

towards college credits. Costs for this population taking into account applicable credits could provide a means for the reduction of tuition. At intake students are assisted in choosing a specific program of study. Goals are then determined by an academic plan, and are guided by pre-sequenced course scheduling with the objective of on-time completion. Before modifications are made to the customized plan they must be approved by an advisor or faculty member, which would allow for more flexibility and predictability in the scheduling of family and work obligations (Jenkins, Lahr, & Fink, 2017; Rodicio, Mayer, & Jenkins, 2014; Yeado, Haycock, Johnstone, & Chaplot, 2014).

Guided Pathways

Guided Pathway Designs were adopted in 2017 by more than 250 colleges in 10 states across America. The Pathway Project will be implemented in those colleges over several years under the coordination of the American Association of Community Colleges (Jenkins, Lahr, & Fink, 2017). Guided Pathways reforms require the involvement of every division of the college and include transformational changes of academic departments such as developmental education, and student advising. Coordination will be required among college administration, advisors, faculty, financial aid, technical support specialists, and other college personnel to fully implement the Pathway Project Model (Bailey, Jagers, & Jenkins, 2015; Jenkins, Brown, Fink, Lahr, & Yanagiura, 2018).

The four main components of the guided pathways include:

- Mapping pathways to student end goals, indicates courses necessary to complete their program, courses that qualify for transfer, a projection of time to completion, and suggested employment opportunities at degree completion.
- Assisting students to choose and enter a program pathway by exploring programs to consider possible careers and to develop academic plans.
- Keeping students on a guided path, advisors and students can access and view students' plans and track students' progress. Intervention for institutional barriers are monitored to remove them such as inconvenient scheduling or cancelled classes.
- Ensuring progress in student learning so that program outcomes are aligned with program requirements for success. Learning outcomes are also tracked to improve teaching (CCRC, 2017; Noy, Trimble, Jenkins, Barnett, & Wachen, 2016).

This model is designed to involve each step in the student college experience from the point of initial entry to choosing their program of study, beginning remedial or college-level courses and throughout degree completion (Perna & Jones, 2013). Advising becomes one of the most challenging segments of this design and requires a buy-in to these reform efforts (Bok, 2017). It must include the involvement of faculty and advisors from the beginning (CCRC, 2017).

Persistence in Community College and Supports in Academic and Social Integration

Academic and social integration is critical for persistence and for college success (Tinto, 2016). Supporting nontraditional adult learners in their persistence requires making connections with peers for academic and social integration, that also promotes campus engagement (Kezar & Holcombe, 2018; Quaye & Harper, 2013). A designated area located on the community college campus specifically dedicated to nontraditional adult learners can aid to prevent adult student isolation and encourage more engagement (Jacobs, 2017). According to Tinto (2016), the persistence of students is affected by the level of on-campus interactions with peers, faculty, and staff.

Learning communities is a persistence strategy that encourages retention by forging academic and social relationships among a group of students, faculty, and the college. The communities are comprised of a group of students taking two or more connected classes together, with coordination of course work and linked reviews of student progress (Patterson, Perkins, Butler-Barnes, & Walker, 2017). According to Tinto (2017), learning communities improve retention, and social and institutional integration.

Persistence to continue in formal education programs is dependent on more than the institutional program and is also based on personal motivation to continue one's education. Petty and Thomas (2014) emphasized this personal nature of motivation that leads to persistence. When adults can see that what they are learning makes sense and is important according to their values and perspective, their motivation emerges (Tinto, 2016). Among nontraditional adult students are those who have had incomplete or

nonexistent formal education. They are similar to what Shaughnessy (2007) described as the strangers in academia, the unacquainted with the rules and rituals of college life, unprepared for the kinds of tasks their teachers assign them. Community colleges received the bulk of these students, because the spectra of programs have included many developmental, vocational, and degree courses designed to meet the underprepared students' needs.

Most of the existing models of nontraditional adult learners were based on the institutional retention research statistics using annual survey data. If a student enrolled in September of, one year, but not in the next September, that person becomes a nonretention statistic from the institutional point of view. Researchers have not always made clear the distinctions between students' decisions to reenroll and the institutional statistics. It is in the student's interest to persist to meet his or her goals; it is in the institution's interest to retain the student until he or she graduates. The disaggregated data include a variety of demographic distinctions such as gender, age, and other self-reported attributes for both traditional and nontraditional students. If the student did not become incorporated into the culture of the institution, this provoked an assumption that the learner chose to remain outside the social and academic environment.

There is a growing consensus on several factors that are important to explain the persistence of nontraditional adult learners. There is no simple formula that ensures nontraditional adult learner persistence, which is further complicated due to the different characteristics of nontraditional adult learners, resulting in different enrollment patterns (NCES, 2017). Nontraditional adult learner persistence is often influenced by

institutional, personal, academic, financial, and social factors. These adult learners view their education as a product to be consumed, and the product influences their persistence, whereas numerous internal and external factors affect nontraditional persistence.

Childcare

One of the greater challenges of attending the community college while working full-time, attending college part-time, and caring for family is having the availability and the convenience of affordable childcare. A number of community colleges recognize the need for child care. Childcare facilities on college campuses operate as combined childcare centers and schools that include training centers for early childhood development centers. Nontraditional adult learners need childcare services, which is critical to their persistence. According to the research from the Institute for Women's Policy Research (Institution for Women's Policy Research, 2016), 26% of adult students have children, however the number of campuses offering childcare services has declined. College campus childcare with affordable options can benefit nontraditional adult learners when these services are available during the hours they are attending classes. Financial assistance for childcare can be made through the availability of internal student support childcare grants, and in reduction in price for student-parents (Kruvelis, 2017). Scholarships or other college funded opportunities could also exist for nontraditional adult learners seeking assistance in covering the cost of childcare expenses (Institute for Women's Policy Research [IWPR], 2016). Further research from the IWPR provides examples of community college campuses that give assistance through an on-campus resource center that assists in locating childcare at other locations.

Technology Access

Technology access can be a challenge to adult learners when there is limited experience using new technology and their assignments require its use (Reiger, 2014). Technology support plays a vital role in adult learners' persistence efforts towards degree completion. Strategies for providing the needed supports to improve and expand access can serve as an initiative for technology implementation and ease in its use. While implementing and supporting new technology can be difficult and expensive, assessing how best to provide the needed supports to the adult learners will be required to guide them through effective use, and as a portal of lifelong learning (Karp & Fletcher, 2014; Shark, 2015).

Colleges use technology to monitor students' progress towards their goals, and as a means to communicate through message boards and class assignments. The use of electronic messaging for routing students to college services, reminders of important and upcoming dates related to college activities, exam dates, and scheduling of appointments with advisors can be disseminated by this mode of technology. Information can be disseminated in areas that are provided for nontraditional adult learners. Using technology portals as the communication method in college classrooms can provide a primary point of contact between students and teachers. The ability to integrate these central points of communications through various learning management systems have the ability to customize and personalize their portals. However, nontraditional adult learner access to these portals may be limited due to their ability to use them, but they are

essential for online use that is available at almost any time, and as an important benefit for class communication.

The ability to access technology for the unique needs of nontraditional adult learners is essential to their achievement, persistence, and academic success. Technology is necessary in all facets of the adult learners' college career. The importance of navigating classes, to access financial aid, obtain student email, and for advisement and registration, all rely on the availability of this resource. While technology is continuously evolving, it also serves as a means of unifying college campus communications.

Accelerated Course Format

There have been several educational interventions in recent years that are linked to improved nontraditional adult learner persistence. According to research by Almquist (2015), community colleges' accelerated programs identified results that were positive and found that students fared better with higher levels of success and higher grades. In comparison to longer termed traditional courses in another study, students withdrew less in shorter term courses. A later study by Green and Almquist (2015) reviewed the same community college that modified 95% of their course offerings to a time-compressed schedule, which changed courses to a 7-week format.

Higher education, however, must carefully arrange the accelerated course format to meet the needs of the nontraditional adult learners, in consideration that these students must balance their lives as employee, parent, and spouse (Hutchens, 2016). A number of studies have inferred that the achievement of accelerated classes within the time-compressed classes of five weeks rather than in a 16-week class format did not sacrifice

learning. However, the option of shorter-term courses was positively reviewed by current students and alumni alike (Smith, 2015; Wlodkowski & Ginsberg, 2017).

Summary

The community college as a vital institution provides learning opportunities and experiences for the nontraditional adult population. The community college cannot be truly successful in meeting the needs of nontraditional adult learners without fully understanding the barriers that the nontraditional adult learners experience and address them. Increasing nontraditional adult learner degree attainment by minimizing the barriers they face in persistence and degree completion will produce significant, individual, institutional, and societal returns in meeting the educational agenda set forth in the nation (Lumina Foundation, 2017).

Project Description

I generated a policy recommendations paper based on the findings that are detailed in Section 2. This choice was determined by the data obtained from the nontraditional noncompleters' perspectives pertaining to their community college experiences, and unmet needs of the adult learners who did not persist to degree completion. Existing potential barriers to degree completion include "real-life" concerns, such as jobs, the need to care for family, overall lack of time to devote to a college career, and a lack of knowledge of existing resources.

The policy recommendations paper was designed to address factors that compound the problems of institutional, situational, motivational, and personal barriers that affected the persistence of nontraditional adult learners. There were barriers

determined in the study that prevented their persistence and successful degree completion. The institutional barriers include a lack of supportive services, inadequate academic advising, financial aid access, and limited academic resources. Nontraditional adult learners view these barriers as not being responsive to a learning environment that is conducive to their needs.

Situational barriers experienced by adult learners were time constraints due to family, childcare, caregiver responsibilities, and demanding work schedules. Motivational factors that affected nontraditional adult learners in their persistence efforts were perceived as their inability to access and complete learning activities. Personal barriers included health and mobility issues, a lack of transportation, and the inavailability of computer and internet access for required coursework.

To briefly state the proposed policy recommendations, the community college should provide flexibility in course scheduling, including the ability to take more courses online. Also the administration could take steps to expand and provide available advising services to nontraditional adult learners and to make sure they are aware of those resources. The lack of academic structure to meet the remedial needs of nontraditional adult learners who are less academically prepared than their traditional counterparts may also involve the transformation to the college culture. Nontraditional adult learner students who enroll in programs are expected to engage in the services provided by faculty and advisors that actively mentor these students.

Ongoing assessment of the effectiveness of remediation and other initiatives should become part of the institutional consideration as well. There are a variety of

factors to be considered by both the student and the institution and a range of concerns impacts a student's perception of how well the institution accommodate adult learners in respect to advising, instructors, courses, and other college supports. Academic policies designed for traditional students often do not conform to or in many cases apply to the needs of an adult learner-focused program.

During every stage of the nontraditional adult learner community college matriculation, the college administration, advisors, and those who provide instruction must understand how the adult audience learns and make decisions about the programs in which they are enrolled. The outcome of any particular program depends in large measure upon the policy recommendations by persons of authority making the choices of program curriculum offerings that adult learners participate in. This is also true of the person who is teaching in the classroom for effective adult learning, as instructors should be concerned with the maximization of learning for adult students. The findings from the study will provide a number of key recommendations for the adoption of new policies and practices in an approach toward nontraditional adult learner persistence, and for overcoming the barriers that prevent successful degree completion.

Needed Resources and Existing Supports

The resources required to implement the recommendations to maximize the community college efforts towards nontraditional adult learner persistence will include individuals specifically dedicated to nontraditional adult learners in their persistence goals. Key individuals from specific areas of the college will assume a responsibility to lead and direct the recommended college initiatives to include the administration,

program deans, research and retention personnel, lead instructors, and the community college curriculum coordinators to implement the policy recommendations. Other community college personnel to be included will be those responsible for the student support segment of the community college to include academic advisors, college admissions and intake personnel, learning center personnel, library, and other support staff. The community college structure or institutional support does include services that can be improved upon with the adoption of the policy recommendations. Currently there is an existing structure that encompasses administration, faculty, and limited support services at the community college that will be considered as the existing supports.

Potential Barriers and Potential Solutions to Barriers

Potential Barriers

A potential barrier toward the implementation of the policy recommendations paper is administrative support, which can be a barrier in the resistance to change or for reform of the current community college system process. Another barrier of the implementation may conflict with the existing community college policies, which will require approval beyond the local institutional level for changes that pertain to program and curriculum structure. The community college system is governed by the state and may require governmental approval for those specific changes. Opposition may also exist from key stakeholders to adopt all recommendations due to lack of commitment, and nonacceptance of the need to make the recommended changes. Timing of the potential recommendations, if fully implemented will need to begin at the start of the Spring Semester, 2020.

Nontraditional adults need guidance and direction just as traditional students do. Resources for advising and information already exist at the community college at some level, which mainly is designed for traditional aged students. However, the interviews suggested that the participants were not fully aware of resources available to them. Therefore, I recommend that the college expand the services available to nontraditional adult learners. Creating a specific office space for advising adult learners, as well as to increase efforts to inform them of campus services and resources could be made available to this population. For example, disseminating this information to nontraditional adult learners could assist in the challenges they face that affect their persistence.

In so far as scheduling is concerned, community colleges generally offer a number of classes whereas schedules are designed to conform to the needs of adult learners. These class offerings should be expanded. Many of those interviewed expressed frustration with simply not having enough time to meet the demands of jobs, family, and college. Offering more classes on nights and weekends would help to alleviate this problem. Furthermore, online classes are ideal for nontraditional adult learners because they are flexible; usually, the students' actual presence is limited to one to two hours attending online lectures, and sometimes those lectures can be listened to at the students' convenience. These course offerings should be greatly expanded, as they can be useful for traditional learners as well.

Potential Solutions to Barriers

Specific solutions that I will recommend will include re-establishing stakeholder relationships as a community building approach for a commitment to work together to

strengthen partnerships. This action will be essential to the community college. to provide system changes, and improved standards of practice for more positive student outcomes. The stakeholders in partner relationships are comprised of internal stakeholders, those who are workers at the community college. The external stakeholders include the community college governing board, elected officials, business and industry entities, and the community as a whole. Stakeholders are critical in the support and decisions that influence policy decision making and are comprised of three categories, the academic, the market entity, and the political. The academic administration are those inside the college that influence college decisions. The market entity is essential in recruitment efforts and appealing to prospective students. The political entity encompasses authority at the local level, the state, and the educational authority makes decisions in the instances of state approvals for course offerings, and the federal authority for regulations and community college funding.

I will engage the administration, all stakeholders, and others who are classified as academic entities in constructive dialogue to address potential barriers to avert them.

I will also elicit a buy-in based on the policy recommendations for new practices, and for the potential to implement them.

Project Implementation and Timetable

Upon approval of my project, I will forward the policy recommendations paper with a plan for implementation that will be presented to the community college administration, the community college governing board, and other key college personnel. System changes and strategies will be communicated by a formal presentation by me

during a scheduled meeting to establish guidelines for implementation of each recommendation. Specific aspects including policy goals will be addressed for adoption of the policy recommendations. These actions are proposed to be completed for implementation by Fall Term 2020, and fully adopted by the community college by Spring Term, 2021.

Roles and Responsibilities of Myself and Others Involved

Throughout the planning for implementation of the recommendations, I will collaborate with community college administrators, faculty, support staff, advisors, and other student affairs staff. This will be necessary to provide and communicate support for the recommendations for an on-campus implementation. According to research, an initial involvement and buy-in of a change process in an organization results in becoming more receptive of the changes with a more positive outcome (Health Policy Project, 2014).

Project Evaluation Plan

The evaluation of this project will be a formative evaluation prior to the completion of the project for the purpose of improving efforts to ensure the project is feasible. The overall evaluation goals of the project are to determine if the recommendations will be effective in reducing nontraditional adult learner noncompletion. The summary of the results will be of interest to the following key stakeholders, who include community college officials and administrators at the student service level of the institution, advisory board members, policymakers, and faculty department heads. Formative evaluation tools were designed to evaluate the effectiveness of this project. The evaluation can be found in Appendix A.

Project Implications

Local Impact

The project is based upon findings from the research study, in which participants at a local community college expressed individual perspectives through semistructured interviews of their community college experiences in the challenges and barriers attributed to their nonpersistence. In the findings were concerns expressed regarding their inability to persist to degree completion. Based on these findings, I have developed a recommendations plan to specifically address those issues to influence the elimination of institutional barriers to persistence and to attain successful degree completion.

The project's potential influence on social change will have positive benefits by increasing knowledge, and a better college environment in which nontraditional adult learners can persist to degree completion. Improving the learning experiences to encourage persistence and successful degree completion is a major step towards attitudinal and behavioral changes in pursuit of social change, and will contribute to a better educated society.

Nontraditional adult learners make up a significant portion of students in higher education yet they are often unnoticed. Chen (2017) followed up on the earlier 2014 study of nontraditional adult learners and reported that 47% of those enrolled in community and 4-year colleges were nontraditional adult learners. Most of these students are enrolled in community colleges, some to further their academic progress, others to attain work credentials and training, or continuing or professional education. Support from the postsecondary education community, federal and state policy makers,

institutional and administrative leaders, federal employers, and the public are all important entities in striving to meet the educational requirements of the adult learners, and to promote positive social change (NCES, 2017). The statistics on nontraditional adult learners are subject to some variance because of a lack of agreement on at what age becomes a nontraditional adult learner, the NCES uses age 24 as its benchmark.

Institutions are seeking ways to increase the number of students who ultimately complete a degree. While the nontraditional adult learner population is historically a demographic that remains an untapped potential, they could provide significant changes in completion rates (Lumina Foundation, 2016). According to research undertaken by the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education (2010), demographic shifts within our population threaten to lower education attainment unless efforts are made to acquire nontraditional adult learners into colleges and institutions of higher education, and to support their persistence efforts towards degree completion. The policy recommendations paper will provide strategies for improving the academic successes of nontraditional adult learners. It may suggest ways to remove the barriers that hamper this population in attaining academic goals and degree completion.

Furthermore, there may be a general change in societal perception of just who a college student is. Chen (2017) observed that the public perception of a college student is that of a young person who is attending a 4-year college, lives on or near the campus, and does not have a full-time job or support a family. However, this perception contradicts the actual situation of the typical community college student. Community colleges must structure their class offerings, physical environment, and culture to meet the needs of

community college students: these include many nontraditional students and such structural changes and accommodations should be made with them in mind.

The way society perceives the importance of higher education and its impact to transform lives has changed, and community colleges stands at the forefront of this change (Harbour, 2016). People who were educated and trained for careers in prior decades are often finding that their skills are obsolete or that the business sector for which they were trained no longer offers advancement opportunities. For these individuals, further higher education is vital so that they can retool their skills to adapt to the changing needs of the U. S. Workplace. Also, even in existing occupations, there is often a need to upgrade the skills, competencies, and credentials. Community colleges extend opportunities to do so. Therefore, the broader implications of this project are that further attention could be drawn to the needs of nontraditional adult learners, and the importance of eliminating institutional barriers that prevent persistence, and successful degree completion. Ultimately, increasing degree completion for this population would include a utilization of more supportive services to assist adult learners in their persistence efforts to successful degree completion.

Conclusion

In Section 3, the outline of the project was presented, project goals were described, in addition to the rationale for the selection of a recommendations paper. The review of literature was an appropriate manner in which to present evidenced based literature as it pertains to the appropriate genre of a recommendations paper for potential solutions and implications of best practices in view of the study problem.

The project's potential influence on social change will increase knowledge for creating a better college environment in which nontraditional adult learners can persist to degree completion, which will contribute to a better educated society. Improving the learning experiences to encourage persistence and successful degree completion is a major step towards attitudinal and behavioral changes in pursuit of social change. Section 4 will include my personal reflections and conclusions, project strengths and limitations, and recommendations for alternative approaches. Also, future directions for research are identified in the implications and applications section related to the findings of the study.

Section 4: Reflections and Conclusions

Introduction

In Section 4, I conclude with my reflections and conclusions pertaining to my project study. In this section, recommendations for future research in nontraditional adult learner persistence to degree completion are presented in addition to the implications, applications, and directions for future research. Qualities of leadership and change as a doctoral researcher, scholar, and practitioner are also featured. I conclude the section with my recommendations for continued research on the topic towards positive social change.

The problem examined in this qualitative case study was the influences and perceived challenges that affect non-traditional adult learners' persistence at a local community college. I used Tinto's student integration model as the conceptual framework to guide the inquiry. The research questions focused on the perceptions and experiences that influenced the nonpersistence of the adult learners. Nine nontraditional adult learners aged 25 years old and over who were first-time postsecondary students during the Fall Terms of 2013 and 2014, and did not complete degree requirements were purposefully selected. Data were collected from the semistructured interviews with the participants.

In Section 4, I focus on the project strengths and limitations, scholarship, development of the project, and leadership and change. I also provide self-analysis as a scholar, practitioner, and project developer. This section concludes with a reflection on the importance of the work, implications, applications, and directions for future research.

Project Strengths and Limitations

Strengths

Being based on study findings, the policy recommendations paper (see Appendix A) that has been designed as a straightforward and understandable model to positively influence institutional policy is a significant strength of this project study. This paper was supported by evidenced-based best practices and scholarly supported by an extensive review of literature. Another strength of the project study is the potential for the administration and its stakeholders to collaborate in efforts to endorse the recommendations. This action would strongly influence the consideration for new policies to address adult learner persistence for more successful degree completion.

Limitations

Although the results of the study are relevant as a foundation for future studies, limitations existed in this project. Participants in this study included only those in a specific age range as a descriptor of nontraditional adult learners; however, addressing other factors may have revealed more information as a determinant of noncompleters in their persistence efforts. Another limitation of the project was the focus of a single community college, which limited the ability to obtain additional perspectives. Due to the nature of qualitative research, data collected for this study may be subject to different interpretations by other readers.

Recommendations for Alternative Approaches

An alternative approach to present the findings of my project study would have been a position or white paper that provided information based on the study results. Suggestions and evidenced best practices to improve nontraditional adult learner persistence and degree completion could have been developed this way. Using this approach, the paper would be produced and easily distributed to the community college administration and to stakeholders of the study site by e-mail communication. Although a position paper or white paper could not provide an immediate opportunity for concerns and questions, a follow-up could be completed by scheduling a meeting to further explain the position or white paper to the community college administration and stakeholders for possible implementation. Another recommendation to consider as an alternative approach would be to obtain professional educational consulting services that work specifically with higher education institutions. Assisting the community college to align their mission of enrollment goals to improve retention and student persistence, could lead to more successful degree completion.

Scholarship, Project Development, and Leadership and Change

Scholarship

Undertaking this project study, and conducting research has helped me develop as a scholar and practitioner in the field of higher education. Although an arduous task in the undertaking, my analytical and critical thinking skills have increased immensely through completing this project. I have obtained a greater awareness in my discernment, and a more holistic view of research. I have reviewed and evaluated countless studies and

theories in my research, which have greatly influenced this study. This study has allowed me to examine the experiences and perspectives of nontraditional adult noncompleters in their persistence efforts, the conceptual framework that guided the research inquiry, and the knowledge gained from the entire research process. Pursuant to this study, I have achieved considerable growth in my research skills, contributing to a higher level of learning throughout this doctoral journey.

Project Development

In developing a policy recommendations paper for my project, I compiled the main thematic issues that emerged from the study findings. I explored how best to provide recommendations based on those relevant themes to address the barriers experienced by nontraditional adult learners, and to determine strategies to align them with those specific recommended areas. A policy recommendations paper was developed to influence new and improved practices for nontraditional adult learners at the community college in an effort to focus on surmounting those barriers to improve student persistence, retention, and ultimately nontraditional adult learner degree completion.

Leadership and Change

Leadership to invoke or to influence change is foremost in providing information, resources, instruction, and support in higher education, as well as for the betterment of society through positively influencing social change (Ganta & Manukonda, 2014; Lonescu, 2014; McNair, Albertine, Cooper, McDonald, & Major, 2016). Effective leadership in higher education that is continuous can improve the performance of the institution towards managing and sustaining a viable organization. Pursuing a doctoral

degree epitomizes the desire for leadership and advocacy. With my doctoral, it is my intention to lead as a positive change agent to influence, collaborate, and facilitate in the higher education learning community for the improvement of current processes, and for the betterment of the learning experiences of nontraditional adult learner noncompleters striving for persistence and successful degree completion.

Analysis of Self as Scholar

I have gained significant awareness and an appreciation for the process of inquiry, reflection, and to a higher order of critical thinking, and finding the voice that I needed to convey. As I continued to strive for the higher level of mastery that a scholar possesses, I realized that in the undertaking of such a profound task, merely being a student does not make you a scholar. The value of learning through research and the dissemination of scholarly knowledge provides more and new opportunities for profound growth. Completing this doctoral project study was a true test of endurance, commitment, determination, patience, perseverance, persistence, and most of all, a heightened ability to conduct the research and maintain the integrity of the study.

Analysis of Self as Practitioner

The past few years of conducting research on nontraditional adult learner persistence, have increased my knowledge in this field and in the subject areas of attrition, persistence, and retention. I have facilitated, designed, and conducted workshops for the college community; participated in higher education forums; and presented at higher educational conferences. In conducting the research on nontraditional adult learners, I have also gained significant knowledge towards becoming a more skillful

and seasoned practitioner in higher education. The value of this new learning will afford me new opportunities for continued professional growth.

Analysis of Self as Project Developer

The outcome of any particular project depends in large measure upon the design and the deliverable project objective. As a project developer it was essential to design a project that would be responsive to the study problem, address the intended audience, and impact the research population. Because of this, I chose to develop a series of recommendations that are deliverable by an official paper to the community college administration, governing board members, and its stakeholders to address nontraditional adult learner persistence. The policy recommendations paper contains potential solutions for successful degree completion, which will lead to more positive academic outcomes for social change, higher earning potential for students, and economic growth for the community. The knowledge acquired from this research, and the skills acquired through conducting it have afforded me the ability to accomplish the development of this project.

Reflection on the Importance of the Work

When I began this journey, I anticipated many things, one of which was the timeliness of this undertaking; and what I could contribute to the knowledge concerning the persistence of nontraditional adult learners. As I worked in higher education for several years, I witnessed firsthand the challenges and barriers faced by this student population. I do hope that this project study will add to scholarly knowledge on adult learner persistence and its effects on community college retention and attrition. This project has provided me with the opportunity to develop valuable skills in conducting

research, writing this study, enhancing my scholarly voice, and developing a recommendations paper. Ultimately, the implementation of these recommendations will positively influence nontraditional adult learners' persistence to their successful degree completion; as well as positively impact adult learner retention.

Implications, Applications, and Directions for Future Research

Implications

This project can potentially impact positive social change by increasing knowledge towards creating a better college environment in which nontraditional adult learners can persist to degree completion, which will contribute to a better educated society. While social change is influenced by many factors from history, culture, geography, and demographics, the study of adult learner persistence occupies a central position in efforts to better understand those challenges faced by nontraditional noncompleters.

Applications

Improving the learning experiences of nontraditional adult learners to encourage persistence and successful degree completion is a major step towards attitudinal and behavioral change in pursuit of social change. Community colleges provide many societal benefits. Many such benefits are realized by nontraditional adult learners, because these colleges offer degree and career education paths that might not be otherwise available to the adult learners. Therefore, if the recommendations made in the resulting project are implemented and placed into practice, these initiatives could increase persistence and completion rates of nontraditional learners. An educated population is potentially of

significant benefit to society, and would result in improved personal lives, economic growth, and civic participation, as well as higher earning potential, and better career opportunities.

Directions for Future Research

One suggestfor future researchers would be to measure the effect of the recommendations provided in this project 1 year after implementation to determine if any significant changes occurred in the retention rates of nontraditional adult learners.

Although the project study was designed for a specific community college, it may be applicable to other community colleges that possess similar needs to improve nontraditional adult learner persistence, degree completion, and that which positively influences the retention of this population of students. I would like to have obtained additional data to examine nontraditional adult learner's intent and understanding of their chosen program of study, program requirements, and how the decision was made to enter their programs.

As a researcher, I believe that more interesting facts could have been revealed as to a possible lack of information at the time of entry into their programs of study, what drove their decision to enter their program, and how they decided to earn a degree, certificate, or a work credential. I would have also explored additional information by classroom observation, and possibly interviewing instructors. I would have included questions about anxieties that may have existed during some period of discovery while enrolled in their programs of study. More questions could have been posed as to the

understanding of the experiences of nontraditional noncompleters of their intent and commitment at the time of entry into the community college.

An institutional need exists to make evident how the factors of intention, commitment, adjustment, difficulty, congruence, isolation, obligations, finances, and learning all come to affect student departure (Tinto, 2016). Further studies could also be targeted to community college administrators, faculty, and staff for a comparison of their perceptions of nontraditional adult learner noncompleters' in their attempt to persist. Another suggestion for future research could be to investigate institutional resistance towards programs for nontraditional adult learners, which can promote enrollment and retention of adult learners, and how these changes can be implemented. This future research could also be conducted to address further persistence and retention efforts of nontraditional adult learners to contribute to the existing body of literature.

Conclusion

Retention and completion rates are important measures of the performance of institutions of higher learning. Understanding the cause of nontraditional adult learner non-completion was vital in seeking to increase the chance for adult learner access, participation, and ultimately successful completion. Insights obtained from study findings resulted in the design of a policy recommendations paper to address the lack of nontraditional adult learner persistence, and to address the barriers to persistence. The recommendations will be made available to the community college administration and the governing board members in consideration for possible implementation.

External commitments and circumstances affected nontraditional adult learners' goals. Activities within the institution and the lack thereof directly influenced nontraditional adult learners' decision to depart and not persist. While student outcomes fell short, leaders of institutions of higher learning must understand the urgency for more positive outcomes. The main goal of the community college is persistence to graduation, and the institution will need to provide policies that support nontraditional adult learners in their efforts to persist to successful degree completion. According to the U.S. Department of Education (2017), the discrepancy that exists between higher education enrollment compared to completion rates for nontraditional adult learners is that 42% of these students leave college before completing degree requirements compared to 19% of traditional aged students (Hutchens, 2016; LaRocca, 2015).

The policy recommendations paper offers a plan of action for improved advising, flexible scheduling, increased student engagement, and to remove obstacles for a clearer path from admissions to degree completion (Bailey et al., 2015; Jenkins, Lahr, & Fink, 2017; Perna & Jones, 2013). Past efforts have created opportunities for institutions in research initiatives to provide information on adult learner-focused programs and strategies that address adult learner needs (Todd, Ravi, Akoh, & Gray, 2015).

To increase degree completion, the community college must not lose sight of what is crucial to meet the needs of this unique population of nontraditional adult learners to promote successful degree completion. Access, attainment, and success are critical for achieving increased rates of college completion, and for the nation's educational agenda for positive social change in the society.

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Appendix A: The Project

Nontraditional adult learners enter the community college, matriculate for one or more semesters, leave and do not persist to degree completion. These students then become “nontraditional noncompleters.” The consequences of this low persistence result in high student attrition, which attributes to budgetary loss and reduced revenue critical to the support of the college’s resources and services to students. The goal of the project was to identify strategies that community college authorities and stakeholders could implement to reduce attrition in this student population and foster their degree completion. The research was conducted to gather the perceptions, experiences, and viewpoints of former nontraditional community college students. This qualitative inquiry was deemed the best way to understand why nontraditional students leave the community college before degree completion.

As a result of the semistructured interviews, I learned that nontraditional adult learners perceived that there were institutional barriers due to the lack of essential student support. Needed services excluded them as adult learners, which therefore attributed to their inability to persist. Findings from the study generated specific themes. Based on the study, a policy recommendations paper was developed from the findings. The intended recipients of this policy recommendations paper will be community college administrators, governing board members, and other key student service personnel. Other individuals such as policymakers who perceive the problem of nontraditional adult degree completion failure as serious and wish to understand why the problem still persists for this student population may also be included to receive the policy recommendations

paper. This information will help community colleges in nontraditional adult learners' persistence efforts to complete degree requirements. The benefits from a greater occurrence of successful degree completion for these students would contribute to the community at large, and will positively influence community college completions.

Key recommendations summarized in the following paper will also influence current community college practice by providing strategic approaches to support nontraditional adult learner persistence, and community college retention efforts. The policy recommendations paper has been designed to create a campus environment that will place a priority in meeting more specific needs of the nontraditional adult learners to persist, and for successful degree completion.

The recommendations presented in this paper were designed to address institutional barriers to persistence. Necessary supports to improve learning experiences for greater persistence efforts to successful degree completion will be the objective. Creating a more inclusive campus environment for positive academic experiences will be the desired outcomes for nontraditional adult learners in the following policy recommendations paper.

Policy Recommendations Paper

Recommendation 1:

Implement student support services that are oriented specifically toward the nontraditional learner.

Theme: Institutional Barriers. Eliminating institutional barriers consisting of institutional practices that exclude or discourage adult learners from participating such as institutional policy and services that lack comprehensive supports play an important role in nontraditional adult learners' nonpersistence. According to Theme 1, Institutional Barriers, nontraditional adult learners experienced many challenges while attending the community college, and recognized that needed resources were not available to them as they were for traditional aged students. As a nontraditional adult learner, the opportunities to attend an orientation session was not available to them because orientation was offered during the day when the adult students were not on campus. The opportunity to obtain valuable information as it pertained to campus and class information, advising, business services, financial aid, study hubs, library, and technology access. All important information needed to navigate the community college campus and other essential student services were not made available to them outside of orientation. Traditional program structure was not designed for nontraditional adult learners, which presented a barrier to access to specific curriculums, and courses required to complete them. The lack of flexibility in course selection also limited course selection decisions.

Financial aid eligibility was limited when nontraditional adult learners were employed full-time and attended school part-time. Therefore, in the absence of other

available college funding that nontraditional adult learners could qualify for, funding was limited to the contributions the students could provide. Additional tuition and other instructional expenses presented hardships for the students in addition to the financial responsibility of family and other personal finances. The escalating costs to supplement books, fees, and other required instructional supplies creates yet another barrier that prevent successful degree completion. Given that a number of nontraditional adult learners depart as nontraditional noncompleters before their first year, continuous college supports are needed to guide adult learners to successful degree completion (Jenkins, 2018).

To better serve these adult learners in understanding the barriers and challenges they encounter can be addressed by providing convenient affordable course program access, stabilize added fees, establish fixed tuition to alleviate barriers to completion, and financial aid that limits the availability to nontraditional adult learners, which prevents their persistence. Financial issues are a major deterrent to the persistence of nontraditional adult learners. According to the adult learners, finances are a substantial barrier to their academic success.

Rigid policy that does not take into account even the most critical circumstances in the life of an adult learner could result in disillusioned students who conclude that the attainment of a degree is simply not within their reach. It is possible that in some cases this disappointing result could be averted. For example, a discerning administrator may be able to identify an adult learner who is in peril due to personal circumstances and work with that student on issues such as drop-add deadlines, withdrawal deadlines, or other

policies that are discretionary for the purpose of minimizing the institutional influence on whatever personal crisis the student is experiencing.

Programs that are designed to accommodate adult learners should also be reasonable in approach to the audience that they serve. Skillful administrators should be empowered to manage policies that left unmanaged would result in adding punitive impact to already dire circumstances in the lives of students (Brintaupt & Eady, 2014). Factors such as self-evaluation, attitudes about education, life transitions, importance of goals, and expectation that participation in higher education will meet them, and opportunities and barriers all influence the decision to participate (Tinto, 2016).

Understanding and caring about what is going on within the life of the student is central to understanding persistence and academic success. Often, organizational policies and faculty approach to persistence difficulties are structured to be punitive in nature when students experience events in their lives that shake their commitment, academic performance, and persistence. These structures may not be intentionally punitive in light of the events that occur within the lives of adults students, but the manner in which a particular circumstance is handled could be the difference in whether or not a student's motivation has met a temporary setback or whether he or she has decided to give up participation altogether. The community college administration could initiate plans to retain adult students relative to students' efforts to sustain persistence and to impede underlying barriers that prevent successful completion of adult learners.

The college administration depends on the relationships of people within the organizational environment to direct and encourage adult learner persistence for

successful degree completion. As the community college administration and staff strengthen and sustain persistence efforts for all students, such endeavors for nontraditional adult learners have not been fully designed. Through cooperation, collaboration, and service, all members of the organization engage in the web of experience. However, the system supports are not fully designed to meet the ever-growing complexities of the institution in serving the nontraditional adult learner population, as well as to encourage persistence and retention in their attempt to complete degree requirements. The institutional culture is an important factor as to how adult learners perceive their community college experiences.

Recommendation 2:

A more supportive environment for nontraditional students should be fostered, particularly in terms of inclusion for such students to better integrate nontraditional adult learners into the community college. Expanded services that are inclusive to this population should be offered to establish a college environment more conducive to persistence and degree completion.

Themes: Institutional Barriers and Motivational and Personal. The Nontraditional adult learners expressed a number of challenges with adapting to the community college environment and felt a disconnect with the lack of campus supports because of little to no knowledge of campus resources that were available to them. A location in which to seek out information during their time on campus to attend classes should be accessible for this service.

Adult learners who enter the community college fail to persist to meet their academic goals and leave programs before degree completion due to the lack of academic preparedness and logistical challenges that presents significant hurdles. Academic background and preparation characteristics of nontraditional adult learners contribute to or hinder their academic success and persistence in the absence of supportive resources at the community college, and the unfamiliarity of its environment. Institutional culture and practices are important aspects in how they perceive their college experiences. These perceptions and behaviors affect the educational outcomes of the nontraditional adult learners as they persist in their education. Adult learners may have faced the rationalization of educators who ignore or lower expectations because something is wrong, something is missing, or they are viewed as not-as good as other students in the classroom.

As students reshape their identities and develop resilience, there is a need to discover the tools that will enable them to persist in their goals at the community college. Often nontraditional adult learners themselves do not realize their strengths and potential for success as students, and possible protective factors in support of them may surface while they move toward their goals at the community college. Compounding the problem of student attrition has been a disproportionate increase in adult or nontraditional adult learners and the need to provide needed resources and to help them in persisting to degree completion.

Recommendation 3:

Foster greater student engagement for nontraditional learners, acknowledging that their daily lives are different from those of traditional students as another indicator towards student persistence and for more successful degree completion.

Theme: Institutional Barriers. The responsibility to guide nontraditional adult learners toward a workable program to achieve the academic skills needed towards degree/credential completion should be a collaborative effort of faculty, college staff, and administrators. This action should include a synergistic effort to embrace and encourage adult student participation and engagement in community college activities, on and off-campus family events, available student benefits and discounts, and to be included in campus communications and messaging to establish a connection to the community college for adult learner engagement and support, and participation.

Activities offered at alternate times could accommodate nontraditional adult learners in increasing opportunities to access additional supports for other issues that may have an affect on their attendance and persistence. The more challenging circumstances in respect to persistence are the major events that occur in an adult learners' life such as death in the family, major illness to self or a family member in their care, loss of a job, or a myriad of other major crises that can occur. Accelerated courses by their very nature move at a fast pace and leave little time or room for a personal crisis. Administrators, advisors, faculty, and staff should receive training to discern real crises that are occurring in the lives of adult learners that warrant consideration or even exceptions to policy without compromising academic integrity.

Recommendation 4:

Train and designate academic advisors to be specifically assigned to nontraditional adult learners. By assigning academic advisors to the adult learners that are specific to their programs or designated curriculums that will continue as the advisor until completion of nontraditional adult learners' degree requirements.

Theme: Institutional Barriers. According to Waiwaiole (2018) whose study contributed to the CSSE 2018 National Report on Advising asserted that “advising is the cornerstone of student support,” and “students who are advised are more engaged (p. 4).” Nontraditional adult learners need the availability of essential services such as academic and program advising, which is integral to student success. An advising structure should be better aligned to permit access, communication, and support to nontraditional adult learners, and advisors should be skillful in talking with students about the nature of the program they are enrolling in coupled with the normal schedule of an adult. Advising systems should be developed to ensure that the degree plan information that adult learners receive provide the student with clear directions and is reliable. An effective advising system can provide adult learners and prospective students with a clear picture of how previous college credit will count toward the degree they are interested in pursuing. Faculty and advising interaction are important to nontraditional adult learner persistence and degree completion, and these links should be established early in their initial enrollment (Fosnacht, McCormick, Nailos, & Ribera, 2017).

Additionally, a clear plan helps keep students focused during their enrollment. Having a clear picture of steady progress can become a significant motivating factor for

students and creates an extra incentive for students to complete the task at hand. An erosion of trust develops between adult learners and their advisors if the information proves to be unreliable. Outside interference or stress from work, family, and other responsibilities can also become a major obstacle for adult learners (Perna & Jones, 2013). Although institutional leaders can do little to reduce these pressures, it is important for advisors and faculty to understand what is happening in the lives of their students. There is no substitution for the understanding of real people who express genuine concern for students and what is happening in their lives.

Nontraditional adult learners should be linked with an advisor at initial enrollment and should be required to meet with the advisor to develop an academic plan based on the pathway created, and have frequent follow-up meetings regarding student progress. Faculty and advising interaction are important to nontraditional adult learner persistence and degree completion, and these links should be established early in their initial enrollment.

Advising should be made available during evening hours to provide these services to meet with the adult learners to serve in the capacity of a needed service that can respond to inquiries and concerns. An advising center should be provided to serve as a conduit to other on-campus departments when personnel is not available from specific departments after traditional operating hours.

Recommendation 5:

Change degree completions requirements so that pathways that require shorter time periods of time are available. Streamlining the degree path by creating true multiple

pathways for a shorter time to degree completion should be made available to nontraditional adult learners.

Theme: Institutional Barriers. The need exists to improve nontraditional adult learner persistence to degree completion to better serve and improve their community college persistence efforts. While nontraditional adult learner populations are increasing at the community college, adult learner persistence and degree completion may also improve by accommodating specific needs to help adult learners persist.

The myth of attending as a part-time student to complete degree requirements in a shorter period becomes impossible when curriculums are configured for full-time students. Additional time would be required for part-time students to fulfill degree requirements. Higher education program degree plans are not fully designed for part-time nontraditional adult learners. Part-time enrollment as a nontraditional adult learner is essential for those who work and family responsibilities that prohibit full-time enrollment. Providing learning opportunities that are specifically part-time will offer curriculum flexibility in program completion. This will eliminate the one size fits all community college offerings not designed for nontraditional adult learners.

To better serve the nontraditional adult learners in understanding the barriers and challenges encountered in their attempt to complete degree requirements can be addressed by providing more convenient and affordable course program access. Accelerated degree completion programs with accommodating course schedules should be designed to meet the needs of adult learners. Also, developing flexible scheduling of program offerings and multiple formats in course programming that coincides with

nontraditional adult learners' hours of attendance with an option to include weekend course offerings with alternate delivery modes and locations (Taylor, Dunn, & Winn, 2015).

Recommendation: 6

Consider life experiences as well as prior college course experiences as valid substitutes for college credits. Integration of life and prior learning experiences should be considered applicable towards college credits.

Theme: Institutional Barriers. The greater the amount of previous college experience a student has coming into a program, the greater the likelihood of persistence (Ruffalo-Noel Levitz, 2016). Students with a more college experience may be better prepared for the rigors of the accelerated learning approach than their traditional counterparts who have less overall educational experience. Learning assessment opportunities will also be recommended to include life and prior learning experience for college credits (Council for Adults & Experiential Learning, CAEL, 2015; Herman & Klein-Collins, 2015). This option could also provide the opportunity for flexibility for negotiating degree completion. Additionally, having a larger number of credits, even if they come from multiple institutions previously attended, may also create an added motivating factor since the degree completion program is designed and marketed such that successful students can finish their degree within a relatively short period of time in comparison to their previous experience or other traditional approaches.

Recommendation: 7

Provide the support services to nontraditional adult learners who require different or additional services not available to them outside of traditional school hours such as on nights and weekends.

Theme: Institutional Barriers. The identification of institutional community college supports can be communicated during nontraditional adult student orientations geared to acclimate them to the community college campus and available campus resources. Access to advisors and advising centers for information dissemination are important entities.

The availability of these conduits of communication should be established, in addition, to collegewide messaging that is disseminated by campus email distribution. Building locations, specific information pertaining to computer access and technology support, library and study hubs should be made available to nontraditional adult learners to enable them to obtain class schedules, email and message board notifications, and for course access. Orientation sessions can be provided for nontraditional adult learners outside of the traditional student orientation to communicate specific information pertaining to adult learners, for campus access to campus resources, and for other skills and academic workshops to empower the adult students. A hands-on informational session can be linked providing the session for their convenience, as well as an interactive session to provide critical information, conducted by institutional representatives. Current supportive services provided by the college are not targeted towards nontraditional adult learners (Adult Completion Network, 2016).

Recommendation 8:

Create a nontraditional adult student resource center on the community college campus specifically dedicated to provide assistance, access, and needed supports to adult learners.

Theme: Institutional Barriers. A resource center for this exclusive population could provide internal support when navigating through the institutional complexity of the community college environment. A dedicated space for nontraditional adult learners can attribute to more student engagement and peer interaction among adult learners towards a positive persistence effort. A provision of study hubs, tutoring centers, essential student services to include Advising, Financial Aid, Business Office services, Registrar's, and Veteran's Affairs services as critical supports could be made available for student access in an established adult learner center. Offering these provisions of campus services during extended hours will provide essential services to adult learners who are taking evening courses, and to obtain the support they need while on campus. Academic and social integration of nontraditional adult learners as supported by literature is critical to their persistence and success (Tinto, 2016).

Recommendation 9:

Provide on-campus childcare services that are available beyond traditional campus hours for evening students.

Themes: Childcare, Institutional and Situational Barriers. The unavailability of childcare were prevalent issues in the lives of nontraditional adult learners, which created a hardship when attending evening classes, and posed significant barriers to their

persistence (Lin, 2016). Nontraditional adult learners leave work and attend classes. An on-campus childcare service designed to provide this service after normal traditional hours can be beneficial, and aid in adult learner persistence. If nontraditional adult learners cannot make adequate childcare arrangements and are unable to afford it, they are unlikely to persist (Copper, 2017; Troester-Trate, 2017). Childcare services that are convenient, affordable, and provided on-campus could ease the pressures of being able to attend class while care is provided for the children, avoid delays in attending classes, and avoid additional transportation costs. If nontraditional adult learners are to be successful in completing their academic goals, focused services such as these can be supportive in their persistence efforts and must be developed and implemented.

Recommendation 10:

Provide access to technology laboratories and technical support outside of traditional class hours to enable full online access and technology usage.

Themes: Institutional Barriers, Situational Barriers, Time Management Motivation and Personal.

Subtheme: Technology. Class assignments require different applications and adequate technology. Needed technology access is not always available to adult learners when using computer laboratories with limited software permissions after traditional hours and unreliable technical support. In addition, nontraditional adult learners may not be as computer knowledgeable as their younger counterparts and may need to solicit help when using new technology.

Also nontraditional adult learners may not have available technology to access outside of the college campus, which can cause an additional hardship to complete assignments that require the use of the required technology. The technology center should include computers with easy access for adult students with printing capability, and technical support during evening class hours. Online access for required assignments and providing reliable and accessible technology laboratories to adult learners are important resources, and a needed support for nontraditional adult learner persistence. The technology center should include computers with easy access for adult students with printing capability, and a computer hotline for technical support during evening class hours. Computer usage workshops can be conducted by the technical laboratory assistants in the computer laboratories for adult learners who need additional assistance and in reinforcing their computer skills.

Summary of Recommendations

As the main goal of every college is persistence to graduation, the community college will have to create policies that are effective and provide much needed support in their efforts to encourage persistence of nontraditional adult learners. Campus supports, academic advising, childcare, career pathways, streamlining degrees, prior learning experiences, and encouraging student integration and engagement are all essential for nontraditional adult learners in their persistence efforts to enable degree completion. A provision for an adult student resource center has been recommended in addition to technology access, providing affordable course access, financial aid availability, and to eliminate institutional barriers for nontraditional adult learners.

While not an all-inclusive list, these services could encourage and support nontraditional adult learner persistence. The aforementioned are addressed in the recommendations paper with the objective of becoming an institutional priority in improving attrition, persistence, and ultimately successful degree completion. These recommendations will be presented to the community college administration, governing board, faculty, deans, and staff at the community college. The recommendations can be implemented with the adoption of, and use of in collaboration with key personnel at the community college to improve nontraditional adult learner persistence, community college retention, and attrition rates.

Project Evaluation

Questions

This formative evaluation will include questions relevant to the project as a method to solicit feed-back during the program activity phase. The project evaluation will help to better understand how well the program can work in order to assist to improve the project.

- | | <u>YES</u> | <u>NO</u> |
|---|------------|-----------|
| 1. What are the characteristics of the project population? | _____ | _____ |
| 2. Are the specific needs of this population addressed? | _____ | _____ |
| 3. Are resources currently available to address the specific needs? | _____ | _____ |
| _____ | | |

Appendix B: Interview Script

Hello,

I will like to thank you for agreeing to talk with me today. I am conducting a study on adult learner persistence as it pertains to the attrition of adult learners. You have been selected to participate in this study because you were enrolled as an adult learner who attended Southeast Community College, and have discontinued your enrollment before completing the degree/credential requirements. I will like to ask you some questions about your enrollment while at the community college. The interview will last approximately 1 hour. Your feedback will be instrumental in helping to determine what influences and/or barriers may have affected degree/credential completion.

If it is Ok, I will like to ask your permission to record the interview. The recording will be used only to help with notetaking. Your name will not be implicated in any way with the recording, or with any paperwork that we complete during the session. At the end of the interview if there are questions or information you would like to ask, or information that you would like to include as it pertains to this study, please feel free to discuss with me.

Thank you!

Appendix C: Interview Protocol

Student Demographic

- a. Age Range: {25-35} {35-45} {45-55} {55-65}
 - b. Gender?
 - c. Parental Status?
1. Why did you decide to enroll in the community college as an adult learner?
 2. What influences may have affected your enrollment as it pertains to (the community college, work, attendance, family, personal, other, etc.?)
 3. How helpful and accessible were instructors, advisors, financial aid, library staff, and other support services?
 4. What barriers did you encounter while you were enrolled at the community college?
 5. Reflecting on your experience at the community college, what services or resources were available to support academic success of adult learners, and which ones did you utilize while enrolled?
 6. How have your family and/or others supported you in your persistence efforts at the community college?
 7. For what reason or reasons did you discontinue enrollment at the community college?
 8. What would have been the determining influence for you to have continued your enrollment at the community college until degree completion?

9. Who did you inform, such as an academic advisor, faculty member, the Registrar's Office or Financial Aid, prior to your departure from the community college?

10. What additional information would like to share regarding your enrollment or departure from the community college?

***Follow-up Questions**

11. How do you feel that the community college is meeting or not meeting the needs of nontraditional adult learners?

12. What suggestions do you have to address adult learner needs in order to better assist in their pursuit of degree completion?

Thank you for being a participant in this research study!