Adult Learner Choice in Noncredit Continuing Education: A Mixed-Method Exploration of Choice Factors

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ABSTRACT

As America's educational landscape rapidly changes due to evolving workforce demands and technological advancement, noncredit continuing education (NCCE) has gained prominence in supporting workforce needs. However, despite increasing provider competition, little research exists on how adult learners choose NCCE programs. This convergent mixed methods study identifies factors influencing adult learners' choices in NCCE program selection. It uses binary logistic regression analysis of survey data from 110 Georgia adult learners and thematic analysis of interviews with seven NCCE practitioners. The study examines the relationships between demographic characteristics and choice while exploring the perception of practitioners. Findings reveal that convenience-related factors (42% of all selection criteria) dominate adult learner choice. Demographic characteristics show limited predictive power, and employer-mandated training emerges as the strongest predictor of choice factors, with gaps existing between practitioner perceptions and actual adult learner behaviors. This research contributes to higher education choice literature by demonstrating the need for NCCE-specific frameworks and provides practitioners with evidence-based insights for program development in this understudied component of lifetime education.

Keywords: consumer choice, continuing education, noncredit education, adult learner, public higher education, employer-mandated training, program choice, educational marketing

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DEDICATION

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Chapter I

Introduction

The post-secondary education market has evolved over the last four decades, becoming a crowded and competitive market full of nonprofit and for-profit entities (Musselin, 2018). The amplified competition has driven industry leaders to increasingly embrace consumeristic approaches to attract learners to their schools and programs. To support these efforts, researchers have examined the multidimensional factors that influence learners' program choices (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2016). The general focus of this research has been targeted at students aged 17 to 25 seeking to participate in academic courses of study, including undergraduate and graduate programs. While still a relevant group to investigate, changes in the workforce and learner preference have elevated the importance of Noncredit Continuing Education (NCCE) programs and the need to understand the impact of institutional and personal characteristics on adult learner program choice. Driven in part by the changing workforce demands of the world's economy (World Economic Forum, 2023), alternative pathways for education and training outside of the traditional academic space are playing an ever-increasing role in education. The shifting demands for a lifelong workforce and professional training have resulted in a growing landscape of NCCE program providers, all vying for their piece of the training pie. Little is known about the complex choice influences at play on learners in NCCE. As a major player in the NCCE field, public agencies lack information that supports an understanding of the factors that influence consumer choice. As a public administrator working in the NCCE space, the lack of research on what drives choice and what is most important to learners challenges my ability to maximize our impact on the community and leverage our public resources effectively. The lack of research results in our use of unproven theories that similar influences exist between traditional higher education students and NCCE, which include preferences for program delivery and timing, perceived benefits, and how institutions communicate value to learners in a meaningful ways. It is at the juncture of an operator in the space, the increasing importance of workforce readiness, increasing enrollments, and the need to effectively leverage public resources warrants further research into NCCE, specifically the factors influencing adult learner choice.

Today, pressures on the workforce from extended career lengths, shifting preferences for education, and financial shortfalls in higher education have enhanced the role of NCCE as part of an individual's lifelong educational journey (Kotler et al., 2017; Simões & Soares, 2010). Comprised of private and public operations, the NCCE field competes amongst itself for learners in the same manner as their traditional academic brethren. The challenge for NCCE lies in the dearth of research on adult learner choice in the space. Although well-positioned to gain market share, Bob Hansen, chief executive officer at University Professional and Continuing Education Association, acknowledges that higher education is still challenged to succeed, sharing that the leaders in continuing education are routinely faced with a lack of data needed to meet their organizational goals successfully (Burt, 2022).

Through a mixed-method study, this dissertation on adult learner choice seeks to identify the relationship between background characteristics of learners and the factors of choice deemed most important when an adult learner selects an NCCE program. Examples of NCCE programs include but are not limited to non-credit certificate programs, certifications, boot camps, professional development programs, and soft skills training/courses. The two-part study combines feedback from practitioners and adult learners to analyze practitioner perception of the findings from adult learner choice responses. A quantitative survey has been developed and was administered to adult learners between November 2023 and April 2024 to ascertain what factors influence their choice in NCCE.

Specifically, this quantitative study seeks to understand how individual demographic characteristics, personal motivation, and the influence of who pays for the course affect adult learner choice. Like traditional academic student choice research, the results show that understanding choice is complicated and that many factors influence choice including the role of mandated participation, who pays, and age. In conjunction with the quantitative survey of adult learners, a series of semi-structured interviews with practitioners, the NCCE directors/associate directors, in the state was undertaken. The interviews with practitioners showed their on overall grounded understanding of the importance of convivence for adults but also their underappreciation for the role that mandated training participation plays in the choice process. This comparison provided insight into the need for a NCCE specific choice model and the potential benefits associated with program development and marketing for industry practitioners. Standing as an understudied arm of the educational field, the desired outcome from the study is that light is shed on the complexity of choice for adult learners in NCCE and that further research is warranted.

Background

Societal and workforce demands for a highly trained and qualified workforce have pushed the prominence of NCCE from a supplementary educational offering for college graduates in a limited number of fields to a dynamic field providing education and training for adults across the workforce throughout their lifetime. Driven in large part by the need to up-/re-skill the workforce due to rapidly evolving changes in processes and technology, NCCE has helped to maintain a qualified workforce. This increased relevance has sparked extensive growth in the field, with public and private organizations developing offerings to fulfill the ever-changing training needs. For administrators in the field, the growth of NCCE has necessitated an increased focus.

Growing from a moderately small number of organizations and businesses offering NCCE in years past, NCCE has grown into a big business in the world today. Large and small organizations have entered the NCCE market in the hopes of supporting/capitalizing on the ongoing training needs. Participating in these efforts are public organizations seeking to fulfill the vision and mission of public policy and operate in the community's best interest. It is this group of organizations where this study is primarily focused. The reason for this focus is to support the balance between serving the needs of the public, stewarding public resources, implementing policy goals, ensuring sustainability, managing affordability, and monitoring the effectiveness of public fund usage. Standing as a challenge to the management of affordability is a lack of research on adult learner choice available for public administrators to use in the course of their work.

Public NCCE organizations executing programs to support the community's needs face an increasingly competitive market. Many NCCE organizations have embraced marketing practices to inform and attract learners to their programs. For public policymakers, the impact of marketing expenditures on the cost of attendance has become a point of increasing concern (Cellini & Chaudhary, 2020), as well as accounting for the effectiveness of this use of public funds. The challenge for these administrators is that little academic research exists to assist in understanding adult learner choice in the field. As such, there are questions about the efficacy of public administrators' attempts to attract learners and how a better understanding of the adult learner's choice in NCCE could influence the money and time spent, thus improving the stewardship of public resources. This research aims to close the knowledge gap related to consumer purchasing influences in the noncredit space to allow public administrators in noncredit continuing education to meet the demands of their job and the expectations put upon them as public agents.

NCCE is a field on the rise. Demand is driven by workforce re-educational needs, ongoing professional development opportunities, and an increasing population looking to alternative credentials and training in opposition to traditional academic pathways to prepare for life in the workforce. According to a study from the World Economic Forum, looking at only those impacted by technological changes in the workforce, 50% of those currently employed will need updated skills by 2025 to continue thriving in the workforce (World Economic Forum, 2020). The NCCE field continues to grow through private and public organizations to meet this demand. To survive in the ever-growing competitive market, private and public organizations have begun continually investing in attracting learners.

Organizational investment comes in many forms, including personnel, time, and dollars by advertising to potential learners. The scale of investment in external dollars spent on attracting learners is staggering. Kantar, a global market research company that tracks higher education marketing spending, found that higher education institutions spent $2.2 billion on advertising in 2019 (Marcus, 2021). The bewildering component of the dollars spent is the percentage that public and nonprofit institutions spend. In 2016, an estimated 63% of total marketing and advertising spending was done by nonprofit and public higher education enterprises (Brock, 2017). In the dollars spent on marketing in 2019, this percentage equates to approximately $1.4 billion. Historically, marketing and advertising have been a bastion of for-profit and private organizations used to influence consumer behaviors, build customer loyalty, build brand awareness (Elken, 2019; Kotler, 1971; Shemyatikhina et al., 2020), and to share with potential consumers that their services and offerings are superior to other offerings (Temporal, 2015). Over the last thirty to forty years, these activities have extended beyond being a for-profit business exercise and have become standard practice (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2016) for colleges and universities in the US and the UK (Guilbault, 2018).

Higher education's embrace of these traditionally businesslike activities was largely driven by an increasingly competitive market from public and private educational enterprises and declining state and federal support (Oplatka, 2009). NCCEs now operate in the same competitive environment as their private counterparts, all competing for the same set of limited resources available from the public (Temporal, 2015).

This movement into a competitive marketplace, combined with the recognition that individuals looking to engage in studies of higher education have a complex and extended search deliberation (James-MacEachern & Yun, 2017), has necessitated that managers and agencies recognize and understand the importance of consumer buying habits (Leo et al., 2005). Studies have shown that marketing for any organization demands an understanding of the role that consumers play and the impacts of personal characteristics, cultural and social influences, and the influences that choice plays in the decision-making process (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2016; Idris & Whitfield, 2014; Wilson & Elliot, 2016). Private organizations long ago recognized this and began working to develop an understanding of these factors, ultimately developing marketing and advertising ecosystems that build upon company reputations with the understanding that the brand is the most valuable asset that organizations possess (Aaker, 2003; Blackett, 1993).

In the state of Georgia alone, it is hard to identify all the organizations engaged in NCCE activities, many of which are actively involved in attracting learners to their programs. While NCCE is traditionally considered a bastion of colleges and universities, they are not the only groups offering NCCE. Many public organizations are also involved in delivering NCCE training throughout the state. The challenge for these organizations is that little research exists to help understand adult learner choice in the field. Successful efforts to attract learners require that cultural, social, and personal characteristics which are known to leverage marketing and attract learners effectively (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2016). In the noncredit field, little formal research exists to help public administrators determine what drives adult consumer choice. Currently, only anecdotal findings, academic program research findings applied to the noncredit space, and industry research exist to support consumer buying habits in the noncredit continuing education space. This research seeks to close the knowledge gap and ultimately hopes to empower public administrators with insights into adult learner choice, which can be used to attract the learner and support the ongoing work of their organizations.

Statement of the Problem and Research Questions

Noncredit Continuing Education (NCCE) programs serve an important role in the higher education ecosystems. However, they lack needed academic research on the complex factors that influence learner choice, which is essential for their academic counterparts (Prach et al., 2022). NCCEs are generally self-supporting operations that require administrators to generate sufficient income to cover programming and staffing costs. This model presses public NCCEs to compete for learners, often resulting in investment in marketing activities (Craven & DuHamel, 2000) to establish the long-term sustainability of the operation. An often-understudied part of the educational system, NCCE is structured to meet the evolving needs of the workforce by providing targeted educational opportunities throughout an individual's working lifetime. While playing an essential role in the lifetime education of the workforce, NCCE growth and relevance are driven by disparate forces. The changes in workforce technology and career lengths lead the way in this growth, since workers move between fields requiring re-education. Additionally, from an institutional perspective, NCCE is seen as a pathway for the diversification of revenue streams for institutes of higher education.

Supporting the growing role of NCCE, a PEW research study found that 63% of the workforce engaged in professional training opportunities during a 12-month period (Horrigan, 2016). Extrapolating this to the Georgia workforce, this constitutes an estimated 3.3 million workers annually engaged in various continuing education forms. For public administrators in the NCCE field, this represents a staggering number of individuals to train, especially given that individuals enrolled in public technical and university systems in Georgia are less than 500,000 in the same period. In 2019, although not all programs were reported, the University System of Georgia's noncredit continuing education units collectively served more than 521,000 learners, contributing significantly to the state's workforce development (University System of Georgia, 2023). If the entire university system consistently reported participation, the numbers would be likely significantly greater. Recognizing the number of individuals primed for NCCE programs has driven NCCEs to compete for their share of the potential learner pie.

Growth in the importance of NCCE in the lifetime educational journey of its learners has created a multifaceted challenge. First, the NCCE space has become an increasingly competitive environment, similar to their academic counterparts, in that they compete for market share.

Second, little is known about the complex factors, including personal and institutional characteristics, that influence a learner's program choice. The challenge for NCCE administrators is that, unlike the for-credit educational space, which has ongoing academic conversations surrounding the potential learner influences, the NCCE space and its administrators lack specific research on how personal, environmental, and institutional characteristics influence an individual's program choice. The purpose of this study is to begin to answer these questions in support of both practitioners and in the hopes that extending academic research into the NCCE space will jumpstart a greater interest in examining behaviors and traits of learners beyond the K12 and collegiate environments.

Conceptual Framework

To respond to practitioners' needs on the choice factors that are most important in the final decision-making process, one must underpin the context for this research through the theory of higher education consumer choice. The following section outlines the general framework used in the design and subsequent study of this research.

When considering how adult learners approach their selection of a noncredit continuing education program, two college choice frameworks emerged to best frame the research: Hossler and Gallagher's three-stage model of college choice (1987) and the Iloh Model of College-Going Decision and Trajectories (2018). The Hossler and Gallagher model of college choice is widely recognized as the most popular college choice model (Iloh, 2018). Comprised of three stages, the Hossler and Gallagher model entails a predisposition phase, search phase, and the focused area for this research, the choice phase (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). The Hossler and Gallagher model provided a simplistic approach to consumer decision making that has been well-researched through the literature (Prach et al., 2022).

Although providing a quality foundation for exploration of consumer choice in NCCE, the Hossler and Gallagher model is focused on traditional-age students. It is at this juncture where the Iloh Model brings in additional context as the model examines choice through an ecological lens with a special focus on nontraditional students over the age of twenty five who have responsibilities associated with adulthood (Iloh, 2018). The Iloh model expands the conceptual importance time and obligations for adult learners when selecting a program, helping to frame the contextually different factors that parenthood, employment, and financial responsibilities have on them.

Highlighting these contextual differences and supporting the importance of differentiated model development for adult learners are the works of K. Patricia Cross and Malcolm Knowles. Cross's Chain of Response Model (COR) identified three barriers faced by adults when seeking further education: situational (family, life, work), institutional, and dispositional (self-perception and attitudes) (Cross, 1981). In Knowles' andragogy principle, the adult learning theory, he differentiates adult learning needs from a child's (pedagogy), including an adult's self-conception, readiness to learn, immediate application, internal motivation, and need to know. While this study is not focused on learning needs, the underpinning differences between youth and adult learners in the factors influencing their participation are critical to exploring adult learner choice in the NCCE context.

Not only are the differences between adult learners and traditional-age students important to explore because of the aforementioned differences, but the nature of noncredit continuing education programs versus traditional academic programs necessitates expanding the research on higher education choice into a new space. With motivational differences coming from many spaces, including personal to workforce demands, outcome expectations for the learners, and the influence of adult obligations, exploring choice in the noncredit space is critical.

With all the recognized differences and influences on adult learners this research leverages the conceptual foundation of the selection stage of choice proposed by Hossler and Gallagher (1987) and incorporates the conceptual ecological differences faced by adult learners highlighted by Iloh (2018) to explore how institutional/programmatic characteristics influence adult learner choice in NCCE at the point to selecting a program. Because of the contextual circumstances faced by adult learners, the reason behind participation, and the differentiation of programming between NCCE and traditional academic pursuits, choice influences are expected to deviate from the existing body of literature, which is predominantly focused on academic credit programs and traditional-aged students.

Leveraging findings from Iloh on adult learner influences and the foundational works of Patricia Cross (1980) and Malcolm Knowles (1988) regarding adult learners this research looks to extend choice theory discussion into the NCCE space, while focusing on factors that are not inherently unique to adult learners but are generally associated with adult learners and expected to influence choice. Specifically, this research will examine the relationship between an individual's highest educational attainment, household income, age, who paid for the program, and the influence of employer-mandated training on the factors of choice deemed most important when selecting an NCCE program.

Purpose of the Study

The study's purpose is to explore the institutional and programmatic choice factors germane to adult learners when they select a noncredit continuing education program. NCCE practitioners can leverage the information gained through the study in the development of programs and the marketing of said programs to adult learners. By leveraging this information in both program development and marketing, industry professionals should be able to maximize limited resources and generate the greatest impact for their organizations through additional learner participation.

Research Questions

This study has three quantitative research questions and two qualitative research questions. The following breaks down the research question by quantitative and qualitative methods.

Quantitative Research Questions

1. What relationship exists between demographic groups of adult learners and the NCCE choice factors deemed important when selecting a program, when looking at age, income, prior education, and parental status?
2. Does an individual's mandated participation in an NCCE program influence the choice factors they deem important when selecting a program?
3. Does who is paying for the course influence the choice factors deemed important when selecting an NCCE program?

Qualitative Research Questions:

1. Do the factors identified by NCCE leaders parallel what participants identify as key choice factors?
2. Do commonalities amongst the NCCE organizations' characteristics represented by the NCCE leaders, including size and continuum of staff, use of research tools, and number of learners, support a more accurate perception of the choice factors important to learners?

Definition of Terms

The following terms must be defined to provide needed context for the study. The following two definitions are provided for this study. It is acknowledged up front that the term noncredit continuing education is a term that does not have a universally accepted definition. The purpose of the definition is not to create a definition per se but to provide context to the primary research topic and to differentiate the programs termed NCCE under this study from other potential educational related terms. The following are the clarifications of terms for this study.

- Academic Program/For-Credit – An educational offering through an institute of higher education that leads towards an academic degree or certificate (e.g., associate's, bachelor's, master's, doctorate)
- Adult learner – an adult 18 years or older who has engaged in a noncredit continuing education program.
- Noncredit Continuing Education (NCCE). An educational offering provided for adults whereby the resulting outcome does not result in academic credit hour(s) or an academic degree. Noncredit continuing education is an umbrella term represented in the literature describing a varied taxonomy of educational programs, including alternative credentials, professional development, badges, personal development, occupational education, certificate programs, and more. Programs are often short in nature and are targeted to support the individual's skill upgrade, development of new skills, knowledge enhancement, and development of personal interests.
- Higher Education Institutions: Postsecondary educational institutions that are accredited by a nationally recognized accrediting agency or association: college, university, or postsecondary vocational school (Romanski, 2022).

- Traditional-age College Students – are students enrolled in an institution of higher education in an academic course of study and are typically defined by age (18–24)

Procedures

This study employs a convergent mixed methods design to examine choice factors in the NCCE. The approach allows simultaneous collection and analysis of qualitative and quantitative data, allowing the exploration of institutional choice factors in relation to demographic/individualized characteristics. For this study, the primary focus centered on the quantitative findings, which were supplemented by qualitative insights from practitioners.

Data collection occurred concurrently in late 2023 and early 2024. The quantitative study employed a survey that was comprised of adult learners in Georgia who had participated in NCCE programs within the past three years. The survey's sampling method was convenience, chosen based on the study’s exploratory nature. The survey examined relationships between demographic characteristics and choice factors. The qualitative component consisted of seven semi-structured interviews with NCCE directors and assistant directors, exploring their perspectives on programmatic and demographic characteristics influencing student choice.

The qualitative and quantitative findings were analyzed independently before being merged for integrated interpretation. Findings are presented through a contiguous approach, with Chapter 4 addressing the quantitative analysis of the research questions and Chapter 5 detailing qualitative findings from administrator interviews, including comparisons between practitioner perceptions and learner data.

Significance of the Study

The postsecondary educational environment has seen noticeable increases in noncredit offerings over the past two decades (Xu & Ran, 2020). Driven by the need to meet changing workforce demands of the modern workforce and supported by broad topic offerings, lower costs, and flexibility of offerings, NCCE has attracted many nontraditional students, including low-income and adult learners (Xu & Ran, 2020). Although NCCE's role and future outlook have increased, little is known about consumer choice habits. Despite NCCE's expanding role and positive growth trajectory, little is known student decision-making behaviors. Expanding on the conversation of higher education choice, this research extends beyond the traditional academic setting and extends the age of students studied. It explores adult learner choice influences in the noncredit continuing education context.

Data gleaned from this study should have implications for noncredit continuing education administrators and institutes of higher education as they determine both the design of future noncredit continuing education programs and for researchers as this exploration extends consumer choice research into new spaces. The findings should support future attempts to increase engagement through higher enrollment and support adult learners' needs through program structure and orientation.

Limitations of the Study

The study acknowledges the following limitations:

1. The influence factors were self-reported and could potentially not be an exhaustive list of factors that influence choice for adult learners in NCCE. The construction of the influence factor list was based on common factors identified previously in the literature for college choice. It is recognized that adult learners may recognize additional factors that influence choice that were not represented in the list. An option of "other" was provided, but questions remain about whether respondents would recognize the influences without prompting. In addition, the survey was sent post-participation in an

NCCE program. There is a recognition that some responses may be based on inference or a conceptualized memory of the influence (Bradburn et al., 1987).

2. The overall sample size of the quantitative research is relatively small, which limits the statistical significance of the findings.
3. There is a relative lack of research on choice in the NCCE setting. The limited research results in leveraging adjacent educational research for the purposes of this study. The study's exploratory nature and the limited focus on choice factors at the point of program selection account for some of this concern.
4. A convenience sampling technique was used, which prevents generalization and may have influenced those who participated in the study. The researcher acknowledged this at the onset. Given this was an exploratory study to guide future research on the topic, the study's limitations were acknowledged but determined to be an effective manner to proceed in the research.
5. The study is based on those who responded. The potential differences between non-respondents and respondents who participated could differ, with the chance that if non-respondents had responded, the results could manifest differently. The resulting response bias limits generalizability to the larger population (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).
6. Study participants self-reported participation in noncredit continuing education programs. A single definition was not provided to the learner for the purposes of self-reporting. This was largely due to the complexity surrounding the term noncredit and continuing education. Future research would benefit from a detailed outline of program types included in the research or through the use of a known participant pool.

Delimitations

The study was limited to adult learners within the state of Georgia. Participants must have participated in a noncredit continuing education program between 2021 and 2024. The study focuses on noncredit continuing education programs and is not inclusive of academic degree programs or programs that award academic credit. The mixed-methods research design leveraged logistic regression models to examine institutional and programmatic choice factors deemed most important by adult learners when they chose to purchase/participate in a noncredit continuing education program. The research included in-depth interviews with industry practitioners to support the mixed-methods approach.

The study design did not include differentiation between fields, industries, types of programs, or how they were delivered. Additionally, the study did not examine the motivation behind individual participation, outcomes, or the choice process itself. The study's exploratory nature sought to understand if existing factors of choice identified in higher education choice were relevant to adult learner choice in the noncredit continuing education space.

Organization of the Study

The research study is organized and presented in six chapters. Chapter 1 includes an introduction, background of the study, statement of problem, conceptual framework, purpose statement, research questions, definition of terms, discussion of procedures, outline of study significance, and discussion of limitations and delimitations. Chapter 2 is comprised of a detailed literature review, which will provide information on the history of NCCE, contextual background of NCCE in the state of Georgia, exploration of consumer choice theories laying the theoretical framework for the study, marketing in higher education, and a focused look at factors of choice. Chapter 3 includes a description of the research methodology used for this mixed-method study, a detailed review of research questions, sampling of participants, data collection procedures, an outline of risks, survey constructs, and an in-depth overview of both the quantitative and qualitative research design. Chapter 4 reports on the findings for the quantitative results of the study and will include both descriptive and inferential statistics of the quantitative survey findings. Chapter 5 shares the findings from the qualitative interviews with directors and associate directors of continuing education in Georgia. Chapter 6 concludes with a discussion of the research findings, practical applications for NCCE practitioners, and opportunities for future research.

Chapter II

Literature Review

Introduction

Although documented offerings of NCCE at colleges and universities have existed for over a century, they have only recently become a staple in the greater educational ecosystem. NCCE has increasingly gained importance due to the demands for an up/re-skilled workforce as technology processes evolve, changing consumer demands/preferences for education, and economic shifts in higher education driving extended offerings by institutes of higher education. This increased relevance has sparked extensive growth and competition for learners in the field, with public and private organizations developing offerings to fulfill the ever-changing training needs.

NCCE is a field represented by a diverse body of organizations ranging from large proprietary for-profit institutions to sole proprietor trainers to various public institutes of higher education. While each group in the field provides similar products and services, the driving motivations behind operations vary greatly. For this reason, the primary focus of this research is geared towards public higher education institutions. The reason for this focus is to support the balance between serving the needs of the public, stewarding public resources, implementing policy goals, ensuring sustainability, managing affordability, and monitoring the effectiveness of public funds. A challenge to the management of affordability and mission execution is a need for more research on adult learner choice available for administrators to use in the course of their work.

Successful exploration into the factors that influence choice in NCCE programs first requires a background understanding of the field of NCCE, along with higher education choice and the associated concepts that support its understanding. The following literature review will explore these concepts by first providing an overview of the historical and national perspective of NCCE as a field. Exploring NCCE from its humble origins, and a place where competition was limited to today's competitive national environment with diverse competition, the foundation of NCCE will be established. Next, as this study seeks to examine choice in the context of the state of Georgia, a deeper dive into the state-level picture of NCCE will provide readers with the context on which the study will be based.

After exploring the field of NCCE, an examination of theories of higher education choice and the associated complexities will be undertaken. Through the literature review, representative theories of choice will be explored along with examinations of student motivation, influences on behavior, sources of information, and the role of marketing in higher education choice. The review of choice theory and its associated factors will be almost exclusively in the traditional higher education choice framework, as choice in NCCE lacks a pool of academic research to support comparative analysis.

Public NCCE organizations executing programs to support the community's needs face an increasingly competitive market. Many NCCE organizations have embraced marketing and other business practices to inform and attract learners to their programs. Recognizing that public policymakers are increasingly concerned about the impact of marketing expenditures on the cost of attendance (Cellini & Chaudhary, 2020), as well as accounting for the effectiveness of public funds, it is crucial that NCCE administrators understand the behavior and choice habits of their learner pools. The challenge for these administrators is that there is a void in the academic body of research supporting their understanding of adult learner choice in the field. Without academic research supporting their actions, questions exist about the efficacy of NCCE administrators' attempts to attract learners and how a better understanding of the adult learner's choice in NCCE could influence the money and time spent, thus improving the stewardship of public resources. Successful efforts to attract learners require that cultural, social, and personal characteristics (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2016) are known to leverage marketing and attract learners effectively. More formal research is needed in the noncredit field to help public administrators determine what drives adult consumer choice.

The following literature review is designed to provide the reader with background into the origins and national perspective of NCCE, a localized look into NCCE in the state, and an in-depth investigation of critical topics to understand adult learner choice in NCCE. The context for much of the literature review will be from the perspective of the traditional for-credit academic higher education body of literature due to the limited availability of academic research for NCCE programs and their consumer base. Through this literature review, the reader will find that research on NCCE student decision-making is limited at best, primarily consisting of anecdotal evidence, findings that are leveraged from traditional higher education studies, and industry-generated reports.

This research seeks to close the knowledge gap and ultimately hopes to empower public administrators with insights into adult learner choice, which can be used to attract learners and support the ongoing work of their organizations.

History of Noncredit Continuing Education

Higher education has a storied history of living in an environment with limited competition (Musselin, 2018). Historically, students were generally predisposed to attend school in their areas because of economic limitations, social and physical mobility, and access to information on alternatives (D. W. Chapman, 1981). In this environment, coupled with strong economic support from state and federal funding sources, higher education operated with little need to differentiate itself or work to attract students. However, that is no longer applicable. Technological changes, increased information, declining state allocations (Kotler et al., 2017; Simões & Soares, 2010), population changes, globalization of the market, declining birth rates (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2016), and increased competition from private educational companies have pushed public higher education to fight for students (Mitchell et al., 2019). Universities now compete in a complex and risky environment, facing rapidly adjusting forces that increase the uncertainty in which they operate (Chapleo & O'Sullivan, 2017).

While higher education faces unprecedented challenges, the NCCE field is booming with a compound annual growth rate estimated by Arizton Advisory and Intelligence (2023) to be 7.47%, with a market size growing from $60.52 billion to $93.25 billion from 2022 to 2028. Increasing demand for NCCE is driven from the consumer side, with businesses and industries needing a skilled workforce in real-time, the ongoing discussion around the value of a traditional higher education degree, rapidly changing technology, and individual career lengths extending, forcing reeducation for many workers to stay marketable. On the flip side of this, from the academic side, decreasing revenues from state allocations (Briggs, 2006), shifting workforce demands (Šimenc & Kodelja, 2016; World Economic Forum, 2023), consumer preference changes (Kotler et al., 2017; Simões & Soares, 2010), the looming enrollment cliff, and increased competition from alternative delivery methods have pushed higher education units to seek alternative methods for creating revenues. For the traditional higher education system, these challenges are highlighted in most states' traditional funding model, whereby credit hours serve as the basis for assessment and funding. The credit hour has served as the foundational unit employed by post-secondary institutions in the evaluation of student progress, prior learning, and faculty workload (Erwin, 2020) and has stood as the cornerstone of funding systems across states and in the federal system (Milam & Voorhees, 2005). Potential shortfalls in enrollment and credit hours have a direct impact on the financial well-being of the university. For institutions seeking to diversify their sources of income, NCCE has stood as one of the means for higher education to strengthen their portfolios and develop additional economic stability.

The collective shifts have changed the competitive landscape in higher education, ultimately resulting in the public institutions engaging in marketing activities, once the bastion of their for-profit counterparts alone, to survive and attract students. Marketing in higher education has risen out of this necessity and faces the fundamental need to manage image, reputation, and brand (Chapleo & O'Sullivan, 2017). As higher education units, NCCE departments have similar challenges and have begun engaging heavily in marketing to support their programs and activities. To date, little research exists in the subset of noncredit higher education related to consumer purchasing habits and influences. While noncredit education is the focus of this research, setting a baseline for discussion is necessary. As such, this research will use the existing research in academic higher education programs as a foundation to build a background and an argument. In conjunction with this study, a part of the research goal will be to determine the transferability of academic higher education research on consumer choice to noncredit education and to build knowledge that allows effective use of public resources through the improved application and use of marketing in the noncredit space.

Societal and workforce demands for a highly trained and qualified workforce have pushed the prominence of NCCE from a supplementary educational offering for college graduates in a limited number of fields to a dynamic field providing education and training for adults across the workforce throughout their lifetime. As a field, there is no exact origin to the timeframe when the field came into existence. In the United States, the birth of NCCE is often attributed to the passing of the Morrill Act, giving land-grant institutions a mission of distributing practical and applied learning intended to be distributed to citizens moving into new frontiers (Smith, 2021). Early examples that harken to today's NCCE can be found in the 1890s from the University of Wisconsin and Johns Hopkins, where they sponsored forums and lectures related to their specialties and community needs (W. L. Whelan, 2004). Further formalizing the NCCE movement can be found in the passing of the Smith-Lever Act in 1914. The congressionally passed Smith-Lever Act formalized the role of land-grant institutions to provide extension-related education in conjunction with the U.S. Department of Agriculture (Whelan, 2004).

Today, 112 land grant institutions continue the mission of providing outreach education to U.S. citizens as prescribed by congressional acts (Croft, 2022). Happily, these institutions are not alone in their mission to provide training and education outside of the formal academic setting. Expanding beyond agricultural training, NCCE training providers today vary in mission, organizational setup, and the training offered. Still, they share the common goal of meeting the educational demands of the modern workforce. NCCE provides institutions with the flexibility to be responsive to the changing demands of today's workforce (Erwin, 2020). Today, institutions utilize NCCE to respond to local training needs, develop emerging in-demand skills, and provide stepping stones to academic pathways (Erwin, 2020).

Framing the impact and growth of the field would help one understand the impact and role that NCCE plays in educating the workforce and beyond. Unfortunately, an accurate analysis of this impact is difficult, if not impossible. The challenges are multifaceted, but a few stand at the forefront. First, no publicly available national data collection includes information on the number of activities, courses, or students engaged in NCCE (Davaasambuu et al., 2018). Sporadic groups collect information on NCCE training, including the Association of Community Colleges (AACA), which reported that 4.1 million students enrolled in NCCE programs in Fall 2023 (AACC, 2025). However, the data is not consistently available.

Other official units, such as university systems, also have reporting requirements. However, these are often imperfect and incomplete pictures that do not consider the assessing impact. Previous studies have suggested that 70 – 80 % of states collect data on NCCE-related activity. Still, we know this is not a 100% representation due to the lack of funding tied to the data and the lack of tracking private, non-higher education practices (Erwin, 2020).

The second and equally challenging aspect of assessing impact is the need for more standardization in the field as to what constitutes continuing education. The lack of a unilateral agreement on the definition makes it challenging to combine data from differing systems, as the context behind the data may be inconsistent. Finally, the combination of providers between public and private higher education organizations and those outside the traditional academic space who provide training makes collecting a complete picture of the scope of NCCE training nearly impossible. For-profit private businesses have built extensive training libraries to support their organizations and, simultaneously, have made them available to individuals beyond their organization. Examples include LinkedIn Learning and Google's suite of learnings that provide formal and informal training to numerous individuals. However, these recognized challenges also help us realize the growth and relevance of the NCCE field.

Growing from a moderately small number of organizations and businesses offering NCCE in years past, NCCE has grown into a big business today. Large and small organizations have entered the NCCE market in the hopes of supporting/capitalizing on the ongoing training needs. Participating in these efforts are public organizations seeking to fulfill the vision and mission of public policy and operate in the community's best interest.

Demand is driven by workforce re-educational needs, ongoing professional development opportunities, and an increasing population looking to NCCE and training in opposition to traditional academic pathways to prepare for life in the workforce. According to a study from Zahida et al., looking at only those impacted by technological changes in the workforce, they estimate that 50% of those currently employed will need updated skills by 2025 to continue thriving in the workforce (2020). The NCCE field continues to grow through private and public organizations to meet this demand. Additionally, NCCE, as a field, has a countercyclical relationship to the economy. The demand for NCCE increases as the economy declines. When job competition increases, the workforce seeks to differentiate and upskill to create additional marketability. A study by PEW research in 2016 helps to support this theory in finding that 63% of working professionals, or 36% of all adults over the previous 12-month period, engaged in training or took a course to improve their job skills and expertise to support their career advancement (Horrigan, 2016). To survive in the ever-growing competitive market, private and public organizations have begun continually investing in attracting learners.

Organizational investment comes in many forms, including personnel, time, and dollars spent advertising to potential learners. The scale of investment in external dollars spent on attracting learners is staggering. Kantar, a global market research company that tracks higher education marketing spending, found that higher education institutions spent $2.2 billion on advertising in 2019 (Marcus, 2021). It's worth noting that for-profit institutions did not exclusively account for this expenditure. In 2016, nonprofit and public higher education enterprises made up an estimated 63% of the total marketing and advertising spending (Brock, 2017). In 2019 dollars, this percentage equates to approximately $1.4 billion. Historically, marketing and advertising have been staples of practice for-profit and private organizations used to influence consumer behaviors, build customer loyalty, build brand awareness (Elken, 2019; Kotler, 1971; Shemyatikhina et al., 2020), and to share with potential consumers that their services and offerings are superior to other offerings (Temporal, 2015). Over the last thirty to forty years, these activities have extended beyond being a for-profit business exercise and have become standard practice (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2016) for colleges and universities in the U.S. and the U.K. (Guilbault, 2018).

Higher education's embrace of these traditionally business-like activities was primarily driven by an increasingly competitive market from public and private educational enterprises and declining state and federal support (Oplatka, 2009). NCCEs now operate in the same competitive environment as their private counterparts, all competing for the same set of limited resources available from the public (Temporal, 2015).

This movement into a competitive marketplace, combined with the recognition that individuals looking to engage in studies of higher education have a complex and extended search deliberation (James-MacEachern & Yun, 2017), has necessitated that managers and agencies recognize and understand the importance of consumer buying habits (Leo et al., 2005). Studies have shown that marketing for any organization demands an understanding of the role that consumers play and the impacts of personal characteristics, cultural and social influences, and the influences that choice plays in the decision-making process (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2016; Idris & Whitfield, 2014; Wilson & Elliot, 2016). Private organizations long ago recognized this and began working to understand these factors, ultimately constructing marketing and advertising ecosystems that build upon company reputations with the knowledge that the brand is the most valuable asset that organizations possess (Aaker, 2003; Blackett, 1993).

Noncredit Continuing Education in Georgia

Why NCCE? This is a question that should be considered in a state context. This question is less relevant for private organizations, state entities, and associations. These entities are driven directly to provide training for their constituency. This is not always the case for the University System of Georgia (USG) and the Technical College System of Georgia (TCSG). Fulfilling the organization's mission can often be attributed to the rationale behind the offering, but today, other factors extend beyond the mission to drive the offerings. Higher education institutions in Georgia have seen a disinvestment in public funding for higher education since the 1990s (Shearer, 2019). This disinvestment, coupled with declining population and enrollment declines, has driven higher education institutions in the state to seek alternative methods for generating financial support for the institutions.

One method that is increasingly used to support this decline is through NCCE offerings. In conversations with NCCE directors across the state, they share that they are being asked to expand offerings and increase contributions to the institution. Not all focus on increasing NCCE is centered on financial windfalls. There is also a growing awareness of the lifetime educational needs of learners across the state. To this point, institutions are increasingly aware of developing and delivering ongoing learning opportunities to support the emerging needs of learners.

The functional mission of providing NCCE to learners is similar between regions, but the landscape of the field can differ regionally. In recognition, this section will look at NCCE from the perspective of the state of Georgia. Georgia is the 8^{th} most populous state in the U.S., with a population of 10.9 million (U.S. Census Bureau, 2022). Within this population are an estimated 6.6 million adults between the ages of 25 and 74. Comprising the preponderance of the workers in the state's workforce, the number of potential adult learners in the state has resulted in a robust and growing system for NCCE.

As a state, Georgia is the number one state for business, according to *Area Development* magazine, and it has been that way for the last 10 years (Kaelble, 2023). Georgia is an attractive place for businesses, driven by a strong economy, a dedication to economic development, access to a ready talent pool, and an infrastructure for training employees. Georgia's multifaceted infrastructure is in place to support the workforce's training needs. Comprised of a combination of higher education institutes, traditional four-year and technical colleges, private for-profit training companies, associations, and businesses, Georgia has a robust NCCE network delivered to learners through both public and private organizations. Although rife with competition, the ecosystem for NCCE in Georgia has evolved into a system where programming is complementary and supportive. In reality, high-demand programming is typically offered across multiple NCCE organizations to ensure broad availability; while specialized or niche programs, which serve narrower audiences, are generally offered by fewer organizations. This normalization is most clearly observable through the offerings of public higher education and associations.

Georgia's public higher education system is divided between two university systems: the USG and the TCSG. USG is composed of 26 institutions divided into four classifications: research universities, regional comprehensive universities, state universities, and state colleges. In the fiscal year 2021, USG institutions conferred more than seventy-two thousand degrees across bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees (University System of Georgia, n.d.). USG institutions award most undergraduate degrees in psychology, education, nursing, and business (University System of Georgia, n.d.). The TCSG has 22 colleges, with 88 campuses found throughout the state. TCSG, which provides technical education, adult education, and workforce training, is focused on building a competitive workforce through training, education, and career services (Technical College System of Georgia, n.d.).

The two robust higher education systems are mission-driven in support of disparate portions of the educational sphere in Georgia. Historically, TCSG focused on industry-specific career readiness, and USG offered broad-ranging education that supports exposure to a deep exploration of a wide range of topics from theory to application in preparation for careers in the future. In recent years, the clear separation between audiences served and programming has become muddled with TCSG moving into spaces once only filled by USG, including core curriculum offerings, dual enrollment, and higher-level degree and programming offerings. While overlap exists between the two groups, especially in the fields of technology and business, the two systems' focus and support stay generally separate. This extends into NCCE offerings, although in a less rigorously separated manner.

NCCE tends to have a less well-defined line of demarcation between mission and programs offered than its academic counterpart. That being said, NCCE programs tend to align with the strengths of their parent units. TCSG NCCE programs are often provided under the guise of workforce development and work readiness programs. TCSG in Georgia closely aligns with the state's business, industry, and economic development units. It generally aligns its NCCE offerings with the mission of supporting workforce readiness and development. The programs tend to target specific skills needed to operate technical jobs and roles effectively. This is not an exclusive offering from TCSG for NCCE, but it is the program and offering they are most recognized and thought of for delivery. For the USG NCCE units, programming follows the strengths of its academic programming and often supports its regional areas. Professional development programs focused on business, management, leadership, and specialized training tied to academic strengths are at hand. Usually, this programming is less business and industry-specific than the training TCSG offers. The counter to this statement can be found in the niche programming/certifications delivered through USG institutions.

An essential factor in understanding NCCE in Georgia is that it is unlike academic programming, which has a formal approval process for offerings negotiated and managed at a system level. An overseeing body does not typically govern NCCE offerings, as is typical for academic institutions. As such, institutions normally offer NCCE programs that are believed to be both a fit for the organizational strengths and those that meet communal needs. This causes an increased overlap of program offerings by NCCE organizations. The expanded offerings have a series of benefits and challenges. For consumers, there are increased choices of where to participate and provides competition in pricing. For the offering organizations, however, this competition makes the differentiation of programs challenging and, at times, creates confusion for consumers as they attempt to navigate a series of seemingly similar programs.

USG and TCSG stand as two of the primary organizations that offer NCCE in the state, but they are in no way alone. Associations, businesses, and other government entities are also purveyors of NCCE training. Associations, such as the Georgia Real Estate Association and Georgia Municipal Association, are examples of industry organizations that develop and deliver industry-specific training for their association bases. Additionally, governmental organizations/entities develop and provide training to support their workforce. For example, the

Georgia Department of Public Health provides training supporting public health workers across the state. Lastly, businesses and industries develop and offer internal training and professional development opportunities to support their workforce. The listed groups here are not an exhaustive list of NCCE providers in Georgia, but do stand as primary field representatives. The number of NCCE providers and the number of learners served would be challenging to calculate. The state does not require that NCCE providers register formally, making tracking and reporting extremely difficult.

Though no formal count exists to represent the number of NCCE organizations operating inside the space, ample evidence supports the field's growing and increasingly competitive nature. Rising competition, motivation to increase impact, organizational desires to fill budget shortfalls, and diversification of offerings by higher education organizations collectively have driven the necessity to understand consumer behaviors in the space. Supporting these needs, one finds consumer choice and, more specifically, higher education choice, whereby consumer habits, purchasing processes, influences, sources of information, and motivation are examined to support practitioners' efforts to attract learners. The following section will introduce and explore the concepts in and around consumer choice in the context of the higher education setting.

Consumer Choice

The commercialization of higher education has led to the proliferation of tools and strategies primarily associated with the business world (Drummond, 2004; Fay & Zavattaro, 2016), with marketing and consumer insights standing as vital elements required for practitioners' success. Driven by increased competition and economic demands put upon higher education institutions, there is little surprise that NCCE and higher education at-large leverage marketing activities to attract new students (Stephenson et al., 2016). This understanding that higher education operates in a competitive market has driven the need to research consumer choice in the field (Brown et al., 2009). The integration and use of consumer choice insights to inform marketing efforts are becoming prolific in the industry. Driven by increased global competition (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2016), shrinking state budgets, and a more informed consumer base (Briggs, 2006), practitioners seek to compete and understand how consumers operate in the space.

For higher education in general, this is a new foray. Fighting to fill seats in classes where students once were seemingly bountiful has taken the field into a new world of competition and forced higher education institutions to understand market demands as well as consumer needs and wants (Vrontis et al., 2007). Higher education administrators must understand the factors contributing to consumer choice (de Chernatony & Dall'Olmo Riley, 1998; Simões & Soares, 2010). Consumer attitudes and perceptions are routinely explored to ascertain how they interact with current market offerings in traditional academic higher education.

Three broad influences on choice commonly associated with and discussed in the context of consumer choice in higher education include external environment, branding and marketing, and individual perceptions and needs (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2016). The external environment encompasses the influences outside of the individual that influence and add context for a decision. External factors include economic, political, technological factors, competition (Kotler & Armstrong, 2013), reference groups, families, and social class (Peter & Olson, 2008). Branding and marketing represent the efforts whereby brands represent themselves through media and its relevance to how individuals perceive elements of brands. Individual perceptions and needs are the personal attitudes and beliefs about the market (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2016). The symbiotic relationship between meeting the needs of consumers, considering the influences at play on consumers, and marketing efforts undertaken by higher education has driven researchers to identify models that predict consumer buying habits and the impact that strategic marketing efforts can have on consumer choice (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2016).

Considerable research has been undertaken into the marketization of higher education, focusing on consumer choice determinants and the choice process itself (Simões & Soares, 2010). Research has shown that consumer choice does not occur without stimuli from many sources. Influences on consumer choice originate from a purchaser's environment that pushes them towards one option and away from others. External factors include competition, political, economic, technological, globalization (Kotler et al., 2017), culture, family, reference groups, and social class (Sheth, 2021). Higher education must focus on managing customer relationships to produce consumer value (Kotler et al., 2017). Higher educators must understand the consumers' needs to provide products and services that benefit them (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2016). To help with this, researchers have spent years developing models for analyzing consumer buying habits in higher education. However, as previously discussed, this research is focused on the traditional academic realm and does not encompass the differentiators relative to the noncredit continuing education field.

In an attempt to understand consumer choice patterns and behaviors, researchers in higher education examine consumer behavior in the field to develop an understanding of the factors at play in a student's selection of an institution. From this research, multiple theories of consumer choice in higher education have been and continue to be developed. Modeled similarly to consumer choice studies in the marketing/business sectors, the higher education choice field stands independently. As a field of study, consumer choice theories and behavior are studied regularly by researchers worldwide. Developed theories of higher education choice share commonalities and differences based on the approach and focus. The following sections highlight a representative set of choice theories in the field. The shared theories are not an exhaustive list; instead, they share those at the foundation of the field, commonly cited, representative examples, and theories whose framework aligns with the field of NCCE.

It has been espoused that two generations of choice models exist in the context of higher education choice. The first grouping, often referred to in recent literature as *traditional* or *mainstream*, are models developed in the 1970s through the 1990s. Standing as a solid foundation, the traditional models are often referenced in the literature and have provided a platform for more recent *neoclassical* or *modern* models to be developed in response to the increased competition for learners and the subsequent increase in marketing and branding efforts by universities. Theories of consumer choice are not single-dimensional. Generally, each theory establishes stages of the consumer choice process, from the recognition of need through post-consumption, and identifies the factors that influence each stage. Though the choice process is not the focus of this study, an exploration of a broad representation of models, including the exploration of individual models' influence factors, will help enrich the understanding of the complexity of choice in the educational setting. The following will examine a selection of choice models developed over the last 40 plus years for higher education, starting with a few foundational models and moving to more modern ones.

D. Chapman Model

Frequently referenced as an early model from which other models compare results and develop models, the Chapman Student College Model stands (Fernandez, 2010; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Vrontis et al., 2007). Although not commonly used today as a primary model for evaluating higher education choice, the conceptual underpinnings stand today and overlap with conceptual considerations of this study, including the role of personal, institutional, and of others in the decision-making process. The Chapman Student College Choice Model examines the impact of characteristics unique to the student, plus the influence of external sources on a student's college selection (Chapman, 1981). External influences identified through the model include other individuals, organizational communication, and the intuition's fixed characteristics. Personal characteristics highlighted in the Chapman model include socioeconomic status, family income, aptitude, past academic performance, and academic aspirations (Chapman, 1981).

Standing as a backdrop to many other decisions, Chapman found that socioeconomic status plays a significant role in the student choice process (Chapman, 1981). Including the influence socioeconomic status has on a student's reality of entering higher education, the distribution of school participation, and how economic status and financial realities shape student participation (Chapman, 1981). The model suggests that the reality of a student's socioeconomic status, in combination with financial aid, creates a realistic option of schools for the student and thus plays a significant role in influencing college choice (Chapman, 1981).

A hallmark trait of the Chapman model is the role that significant others (family and friends) play in the choice process. The model suggests that while friends have a unique impact on the choice, providing a picture of college life at a specific institution, direct recommendations of where to go, and providing a pull factor for those to attend school together, it is the role of the friends that is the most impactful individual influencer on a student's college choice (Chapman, 1981). The theory of friends being the greatest influence has found competing theories from other researchers who have argued that parents carry the greatest influence in college choice (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987).

Institutional characteristics and communication comprise the remaining components of the Chapman model. The model suggests that a combination of fixed and controllable institutional characteristics, including cost, financial aid, location, and availability, are core characteristics that influence choice. The final characteristic of the model is the institution's communication. Chapman found that printed materials were not a significant point of influence. However, he acknowledged that materials were needed for those predisposed to attend college, as students will actively seek them out. The model also suggests that on-campus visits, college recruiter trips to schools, and guidance counselors effectively influence choice. While mentioning marketing principles from the business world, the relative lack of existing research in the field caused a dismissal of the importance of these efforts in this model (Chapman, 1981).

Hossler and Gallagher Model

A three-phased approach modeled in part after the Jackson (1982) and Litten (1982) models (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987), the Hossler and Gallagher Model of choice established a linear approach to student decision-making. The Hossler and Gallagher model is frequently cited (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000) and stands as a commonly adopted framework for understanding college enrollments (Iloh, 2018). The three phases identified by the College Choice Model proposed by Hossler and Gallagher include the predisposition, search, and choice phases (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). In their development of the model, Hossler and Gallagher included the factors they believed were at play in influencing learner choice.

The first phase, predisposition, identifies the background characteristics influencing choice and the decision to attend college. Differing from the Chapman model's cornerstone belief that the influence of others was at the heart of choice, the Hossler and Gallagher model positioned the importance of socioeconomics, future goals, student academic ability, participation in co-curricular/academic activities, and the influence of family and friend groups on a learner's influence (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). Though acknowledging many influences, the parents are highlighted in this model as the primary influencers in the predisposition phase. The influence of parents and peer groups is manifested through their ability to expose students to higher education, encourage participation, and shape attitudes (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987).

The second phase in the Hossler and Gallagher model is the search phase. In this phase, which is a simplified version of what Chapman first proposed (R. Chapman, 1986), students are active participants in their investigation of the institution. Hossler and Gallagher propose that the search phase looks different for every learner. The findings include that higher achievers undertake a more rigorous search than their peers. Additionally, they suggest that income, SAT scores, and parental education levels influence the search phase. Income level and SAT scores result in fewer open choices of schools, with regionality becoming a focus. A parent's education level also plays an influential role. A parent's lack of awareness leads to a less efficient process and a reliance on school counselors and others to support the search process (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). Hossler and Gallagher's findings surrounding the importance of income, a parent's educational level, standardized scoring, and general awareness of higher education are all relatable concepts to the field of NCCE. It is reasonable to assume that income will continue to be a significant influencer of choice, regardless of the level of school participation one has.

Additionally, although not precisely on the same plane, an individual's predetermined capability level based on their own assessment, along with their prior engagement within the field of higher education, is likely to influence a learner's choice. It is reasonable to expect that increased higher education exposure will result in differing components of choice and self-selection based on preexisting exposure to schools and the associated expectation levels. For this study, specifically, the relationship between SES and prior educational participation in higher education against choice will be examined.

The third and final phase of Hossler and Gallagher's model is choice. This phase is the actual point at which the student makes a decision. According to Hossler and Gallagher, choice at this point is influenced by compiling factors and considerations, including the previous courting from the schools, evaluating the information from their parents, considering the impact of the brand, and determining the return on investment and financial outlay of the decision. Of particular note in this phase is the assertion that colleges and universities have a limited impact on this phase of the decision process, as it is too late to influence (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987).

Conceptual Model of College Choice

Developed by Laura Perna, the Conceptual Model of College Choice, combines economic and sociological concepts to examine college choice's "situational context" (Perna, 2006). Central to the model stands the economic model of human capital investment, whereby choice in college is based on the correlated relationship between expected costs and expected benefits. Not standing as simply an economic model, the principles of human capital investment are nested within four sociological layers that influence the choice model (Perna, 2006). The four contextualizing layers of support in the model include school and community, social, economic, and policy, the individual's habitus, and the context of higher education (Perna, 2006).

Not focused on a linear process of choice like the previous models, the Perna model contextualizes and recognizes the differences between students selecting a college. Starting with the habitus, the model's first layer focuses on students' demographic characteristics and social and cultural capital. The second layer accounts for school and community context. It looks at the availability and types of resources and the structural supports or barriers that may be in place for the learner. The third layer originates from higher education and is tied to its role in influencing choice. The last and outermost layer acknowledges that economic, public policy, and social forces combine to influence choice. The underlying theme of this model is that although college choice is a weighted cost-benefit analysis, that choice is not shaped by these factors alone. Outside sociological influences steer and influence choices (Perna, 2006).

Iloh Model of College-Going Decision and Trajectories

A different approach to addressing the selection of schools and programs, the Iloh Model of College-Going Decision and Trajectories (Iloh, 2018), examines college choice through an ecological lens with nontraditional students in mind. Proposed in response to the changing demographic makeup of higher education and positioning that traditional models fail to effectively consider the influences and factors at play for nontraditional learners, Iloh proposes an ideologically different approach to understanding choice in higher education.

The Iloh Model seeks to address the growing number of "post-traditional students" (Soares, 2013) engaged across the spectrum of higher education. Specifically, the model aims to allow for an understanding of learners over twenty-five who have developed responsibilities associated with adulthood, including parenthood, financial independence, and employment (Iloh, 2018). Bucking the trend to assess college choice through phases of the decision-making process. The Iloh Model positions three bidirectional forces: information, time, and opportunity, which are at play in a nonsequential process where the factors are interwoven, connected, and influential at different points based on different factors (Iloh, 2018).

Iloh positions the interplay of time, opportunity, and information as the root of the non-static college choice process (Iloh, 2018). Moreover, while these factors are discussed and considered in other models, the lens through which the Iloh Model views the interplay of these factors is unique. The context of information is in no way a unique component of choice models. However, the Iloh model acknowledges that the vehicles of information may be limited, old, or ineffective. Traditional models have shown that parents, guidance counselors, friends, family, and the schools themselves are highly regarded sources of information. For adult learners, the separation in time from when they received the information may result in their lacking quality current information to make decisions.

Assessing time in a multitude of ways, the Iloh Model acknowledges the complexity of time in decision-making. Time in the model is sought to help understand the social, historical, and educational events that lead to a particular decision (Iloh, 2018). Finally, the model examines how the context of opportunity influences participation. In the context of the opportunity model, the Iloh model excels in the adult learner category. Contextualizing reality and perception, the model considers the learner's life experiences, familial requirements, financial obligations, community, prior education, and location to help frame the factors at play in choice.

The Iloh Model, although less tested than some of the other models shared, begins to shed light on some of the modern challenges and influences at play in an adult learner's choice. While not a perfect model, as the three ecological components are broad and undefined, the model is likely the best starting place when considering the factors and influences in adult learner choice in NCCE. Future development and testing of this model focused on nontraditional learners is needed to assess its proper applicability.

Consumer Choice Model Recap

The review of college choice theories provides an inside view into the complexities of the higher education choice process. The review was designed to showcase a theoretical perspective of the journey, decision points, and potential influences students face when deciding which college to attend. While some commonalities can be found across the processes, each learner's journey is influenced by their situation and factors. It is doubtful that there is a one-size-fits-all approach that will conform to all learners and programs. The purpose of sharing the details on the choice process was to help identify how, when, and what influences may be necessary to consider when evaluating adult learner choice factors in NCCE. A broad perspective was used to formulate the framing, research questions, and survey instrument for this research.

Higher Education as a Service

Generations of researchers have studied consumer buying patterns. Historically, this research differentiates goods from services. Starting with Adam Smith, economists have debated the distinction between these two categories. Frequently, the differentiation includes heterogeneity, perishability, intangibility, and inseparability (Zeithaml et al., 1985). While often debated, goods tend to be tangible products that are transferable from the original owner, can be returned, and are separable from their seller (Suciu, 2013). Examples of goods include a T-shirt, a book, and a cup of coffee.

In the second category, one finds services. Services cannot easily be transported and are considered intangible (Turley & Moore, 1995). This intangibility of a service is the most frequently referenced differentiator between goods and services but is not the only differentiator (Suciu, 2013). Perishability and inseparability from the provider are also key characteristics of services. Perishability is a characteristic whereby the services cannot be returned, stored, or saved (Kotler, 2003). Inseparability refers to the inability to remove the provider from the equation. When services are provided, the provider plays an integral role, and the service is not receivable without continued provider interaction. This study is based on the premise that education finds itself in the realm of services. While unique in the spectrum, higher education is considered a service and is a rapidly growing sector in the service industry (Syed Alwi & Kitchen, 2014).

Historically, students pursuing degrees or education generally do not buy a degree, certificate, or diploma as a product. Instead, students invest their time, financial investment, and other interests, in their educational attainment's potential. A growing argument exists against the idea that learners are not "buying" an end product. Schools or programs with questionable academic standards or unscrupulous behavior provide students with little resistance to achieving a seemingly guaranteed end product. Additionally, some students and learners only care about the outcome and not the process by which it happens. These populations comprise a segment engaged in higher learning, but this study assumes this is not a representative group. Instead, these are players engaged on the periphery of the educational spectrum. The researcher believes that there is validity to those who see education as a product that is a means with a direct impact, and the preponderance of learners are invested in the combination of benefits that education has from the service perspective.

The lens deemed most appropriate for this study is the view that education is a service, whereby learners invest in the theoretical benefit of future jobs or lifestyles that can be recognized through education (Naudé & Ivy, 1999). With the extended commitment of time and the high cost of attendance, students' deliberation and search for schools are often protracted (James-MacEachern & Yun, 2017). The abstractness associated with service offerings can challenge consumers and providers to differentiate themselves and their service sector. The ephemeral nature of services , given that they are consumable in real-time, and thus prior evaluation of the product is difficult, makes the relationship between students and higher education brands significant (Hill, 1995). In recent years, changes in consumer behavior suggest an increasing commoditization of education, whereby education moves from a service to a product. More time and research are needed to determine the long-term applicability of this behavior. For this research study, education is considered a service.

In education, students must be viewed "as collaborative partners" with their schools and teachers (Bay & Daniel, 2001). Universities need to focus on improving student satisfaction and retention, which will, in turn, help to improve their image and attract new students. This is due to the symbiotic relationship that student outcomes play as a part of the brand development and success of an institute of higher education. The greater the success outcomes students experience through jobs, lifestyle, and income, the stronger the brand propositions become. This relationship, along with others such as athletics and research dollars, helps universities to develop their brand. In the service sector, brands and their associated qualities simplify consumer decision-making by reducing risk in the process (Erdem & Swait, 1998). Universities capitalize on this by adopting brand management strategies to differentiate themselves from the competition (Bunzel, 2007) and use this associated value to potential students by showing the benefits their service creates for them (Pop & Todea, 2018). The symbiotic relationship between the service aspect and marketing in higher education cannot be overstated. Going hand in hand, service outcomes and marketing are intertwined in higher education. As student outcomes increase, so will brand strength, which can be used in marketing efforts to attract new students.

A significant gap in the literature exists in assessing the relative importance of a brand and its associated characteristics in NCCE consumers' decision-making. It is reasonable to assume that similar traits and benefits should transfer. The multifaceted factors at play in an adult learner deciding to participate in NCCE may sway a brand's influence on a decision. This is where life, expected outcomes, finances, the why, and other factors collide as it relates to a consumer selecting one program over another.

Student Behavior and Motivational Factors

The preceding sections lay the groundwork for identifying the influences that impact choice on learners as they navigate the complex and crowded higher education market. A knowledgeable and increasingly mobile consumer base has developed through increased marketization, access to information, technological advances, and other factors. While hinted at in previous sections, research on actual student behavioral practices and motivations in the decision-making process has not been formally examined. The following sections will extend the discussion to influences on learner choice in higher education, explicitly focusing on the underlying motivations and influences in choice and proceeding into the behavioral actions of the consumer experience, taking time to highlight the when, where, how, and why those influences have on adult learner decision choice. The reader must understand that higher education choice is complicated and that it is unlikely that a comprehensive list of influences will ever be developed to satiate a permanent desire to understand consumer influences and choices in higher education. All research must establish baseline assumptions and work within a defined framework to analyze the question. It is also important to consider, as Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka (2016) point out, that influences change over time, and as a researcher, one should refer to the most recent research as a baseline for comparison.

Findings on the Influences on Choice Behavior

The marketization of higher education has resulted in a knowledgeable consumer base. Generally, a well-informed consumer base for a product means that purchasing decisions are made rationally. There is much debate on the accuracy of this assumption for higher education.

On the one hand, researchers believe this is the case based on the rationalization that extensive information is available to consumers regarding the expected economic (income) and career impact higher education can have on their long-term well-being. Thus, consumers make rational choices (Dashper et al., 2020). This view is juxtaposed with those who want to be cautious regarding rational decision-making in university choice based on evidence suggesting that students' consumer psychological approach does not follow the ideals of neoclassical economic purchasing actions (Menon et al., 2007).

This study errs on the side that higher education decisions are rationally based on the breadth of information available, the contrasting beliefs are supported in many ways by the complexity of the decisions themselves, and the influences dependent on each person and each situation that higher education choice maintains. Rational or not, the consumer choice process for higher education is complex, with multiple categories of factors influencing each decision. Influences on student choice are robust and include institutional, programmatic, financial, geographic, and institutional facilities (Fernandez, 2010). These factors are extensive and have been categorized by researchers over the last fifty years. This research will examine the varieties of decision and influence based on Kotler et al.'s (2017) categorical factoring of psychological, personal, social reference groups, and cultural elements as well as taking into consideration the nonhomogeneous nature of higher education which creates a diverse landscape of offerings, missions, status, and offerings for the consumer to select.

By evaluating the categorical influences on purchasing decisions, researchers operate much like marketers in developing segmentation of populations with commonalities influencing their purchasing behaviors. Personal demographic factors are an oft-studied component of this segmentation, with gender, age, economic status, parental education, and student readiness and qualifications as common factors. Highlighting the intricacy of choice is the demographic characteristic of Gender. Gender is a commonly researched factor in higher education (Cho et al., 2008), with differences between the genders being extremely complex (Zafar, 2013) and ever-changing. It is recommended to be referenced from a historical standpoint.

Often, gender is used as a normed component in statistical research analysis and usually does not provide statistically significant differences related to choice (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2016). While this may hold in many cases, there are exceptions. Research has found that gender may influence choice through programmatic subjects (Zafar, 2013), focusing on future earnings (Boudarbat & Montmarquette, 2009), academic expectations, institutional characteristics (Broekemier & Seshadri, 2000; Cho et al., 2008; Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2016), the decision-making process itself (Prach et al., 2022), concerns for campus security (Bowden & Wood, 2011; Cho et al., 2008), and the role of parents in the decision-making process (Bowden & Wood, 2011). Though differences have been found among researchers, the relative differences between genders are limited, and they have yet to identify differences across the board consistently.

While the gender differences found related to choice help to highlight the complexities around the choice process, researchers have evaluated the impact of a myriad of other factors on choice, with varying studies providing findings of impact across factors. In the context of this research, where income, prior education, parental status, and the role of who paid are studied, the following sections help share some common findings related to the choice influences in these contexts.

Income has continually been shown to influence higher education choice (Callender & Jackson, 2008; Cho et al., 2008; Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2016). Generally couched in the context of a parent’s or the household income pattern, the findings commonly show that choice is constrained by income, especially for those at the lower income levels (Callender & Jackson, 2008; Callender & Melis, 2022; Cho et al., 2008). The impacts of income, though, are not always uniform. Research suggests that income levels influence choice through the lens of cost (Cho et al., 2008; S. Walsh & Cullinan, 2017), mobility/proximity to home (Callender & Melis, 2022; Columbu et al., 2021; Sia, 2013), and prestige and status of institution (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2016).

Although not as common a demographic characteristic to study in the context of choice, age has also been shown to influence choice. Age often represents its influence in choice in the context of adult responsibilities, specifically, how an individual’s responsibilities to work and adult lifestyles pressure adults to focus on factors of convenience (Farquhar & Rowley, 2009). But age is dynamic, with research suggesting that age is influenced by cost (Connor et al., 2001; Maringe, 2006), and outcome expectations (Bonnema & Van Der Waldt, 2008; Maringe, 2006; Mbawuni & Nimako, 2015).

With age also comes the influence of adult responsibilities, including those having parental responsibilities. Studies have shown that learners who have parental responsibilities consider a variety of factors in their choice (Marandet & Wainwright, 2010; Sojkin et al., 2012). Highlighting the variety is the need for flexibility (Bailey et al., 2015). This allows individuals to balance their work life and familial obligations in a way that access to education fits within their lifestyles (Harker et al., 2001). Within the concept of convenience, adult responsibilities have highlighted the role that spatial limitations, location/distance from home, play in the choice decision process (Marandet & Wainwright, 2010).

An interesting component that has been shown to influence choice in previous studies is exposure to the higher education system. Generally researched in the context of a parent's prior experience with higher education, studies have shown that parents' prior education plays a role in influencing choice (Cho et al., 2008). Understood in the context of experience provides exposure of expectations and thus allows greater insights into the field at large, creating comfort in navigating opportunities. Beyond exposure, a parent's prior education has also been shown to influence the caliber of institution attended, with students whose parents have higher education degrees influenced by the quality and prestige of institutions (S. Walsh & Cullinan, 2017).

Research has provided a backdrop to the complexity of choice and how various factors can influence choice. With little research tied to NCCE programs, it is hard to know if the existing body of research tied to academic programs will hold true in the context of NCCE choice. The premise of this study is to expand upon the existing body of research by looking both at demographic and profile characteristics linked to adult learners and not as commonly found in traditional age students, and the context of NCCE to assess the collective relationship to choice.

Extensive research has gone into qualifying the drivers of consumer behaviors based on broad-ranging personal characteristics that extend beyond gender, including socioeconomics, demographic differences, and student and parent educational backgrounds (Kaye & Bates, 2017; C. Walsh et al., 2015). These studies have sought to predict or explain consumer behaviors when choosing higher education. Researching choice behaviors around demographics presents a means of segmenting the market to make connections about behavioral patterns.

The previous sections have discussed often explored consumer behavior patterns that are routinely reviewed and researched. On the other hand, age is not a common factor analyzed (Frazier et al., 2012) based mainly on the homogeneous nature of most higher education students

(18–22 years old). Suppose the basis of this research was targeted toward traditional higher education. It could be an overlooked topic in that case, but it becomes an essential factor based on the varied ages of those participating in noncredit programming. Marandet and Wainwright (2010) provided critical insights into the consumer behaviors of mature learners by finding that adult learners return to school to train for a specific trade and gain a qualification. Additionally, they found that mature students are likely to be influenced more by the institution's geographic location than their younger peers (Marandet & Wainwright, 2010; Reay et al., 2002). Additional studies have shown that mature students use more diverse information sources to support their decision-making (Harker et al., 2001).

As previously discussed, predicting consumers' behavior in higher education is complicated. Many factors influence choice, and every situation may be unique and have varied results. Keeping the varied situations in mind is essential as we look at generalized findings for specific factors of choice, as individualized experiences play a role in the decision process. Socioeconomic factors are commonly studied in conjunction with higher education choices. Studies have consistently shown that individuals with lower socioeconomic statuses share similar behavioral traits in their choice habits. It should be stated that some of these are not always by individual choice but are driven by factors outside of their control (finances) and, therefore, create increasingly forced-choice patterns. Studies have shown that lower SES individuals are more likely to be influenced by price/debt to attend a school geographically close by (Callender & Jackson, 2008).

Student Purchasing Behavior – Sources of Information

According to Gomes and Murphy (2003), the most critical element in influencing college choice is the acquisition of information. As a normed activity undertaken by prospective students

(Simões & Soares, 2010; Vrontis et al., 2007), information gathering uniquely influences learner choice in higher education. Whether it be the source of information, the quality, or a combination of these and other components, every learner assesses information to decipher between options According to Y. Chen et al. (2016), information sources frequently used in higher education decision-making include reference groups such as family members, peer groups, educational agents, recruiters, counselors, and social media; direct sources including university-based information; and media sources including news outlets and internet-based sites.

Originating from peers, family members, and social circles to interaction online with volumes of information provided by institutions and individuals alike, potential students have access to extensive expanses of information/opinions about potential schools during their decision-making process. The volume and variety of information sources available stand as a challenge to a practitioner to understand how the sources interact to support a learner's choice in a program. A commonly accessed factor in consumer choice research, researchers routinely attempt to understand the interactivity of information sources and choice. The following section will examine some of the frequently referenced sources of information and the associated findings. A common theme amongst research on the topic is not that unlike other components of choice in higher education, information sources used and their impact depend upon various factors. This is supported by the many studies that have suggested purchasing decisions and sources of information differ between segmented populations.

James-MacEachern and Yun (2017), as well as Simões and Soares, (2010) have found that reference groups influence students the most in the decision-making process, but are quick to state that this depends on the situation. Pizarro Milian, and Rizk (2018) found that students seldom base their decisions on rankings, relying instead on information from their peer and family networks. . Socioeconomic status has been found to factor into the search for general information. A study by Menon et al. (2007) found that students with higher socioeconomic status were more likely to seek more significant amounts of information during their search. At the same time, reference groups such as family are routinely consulted for students of families that have limited educational experience.

Increasingly, social media platforms have entered the realm of trusted information sources. Organizations, including higher education, can leverage social media platforms to create and share user-generated content, facilitating interactions with the firm and other consumers (Saboo et al., 2016). Social media can also be seen as an extension of a trusted community resource group that provides firsthand insight and beliefs into unknown perspectives in an organization. Social sharing from within trusted networks is a growing source of trusted information for learners in their decision-making process.

Studies have also suggested that gender differences exist between information sources, with females putting weight on teachers, career counselors, and parents' influence compared to their male counterparts, who ranked the influences as unimportant (Maringe, 2006). Sources of information are likened to the influences on choice itself. They are varied and dependent upon multiple factors. Looking at a group that has been widely studied on this subject in international students is representative of this assertion.

For international students, studies have shown a diverse set of information sources that include educational agents, parents, and the internet as their primary source for deciding on a university to attend (Chen, 2008; James-MacEachern & Yun, 2017); with the university website often being the primary tool used for research (Gai et al., 2016; James-MacEachern & Yun, 2017). MacEachern and Yun (2017) also identified the relative importance of social networks, counselors, institutional representatives, and families as sources of information that significantly influence international students' choices.

As with other research, the findings around the sources and relevance of information sources are based on traditional higher education market research and do not extend directly into the NCCE field. Driven by the difference between the reference groups, it is reasonable to assume that the sources referenced and trusted by NCCE students should differ from those of their traditional academic students. Highlighting this expectation includes the idea that parental influence is likely irrelevant to an adult learner. For NCCE professionals, understanding the avenues used and trusted for information will help maximize efforts related to marketing and sharing information with learners.

Marketing Higher Education

Higher education as a field stands at a crossroads. Nearly 50 years after entering the higher education vernacular as a topic of conversation and study, marketing has become a critically important concept for the sector (Elken, 2019). Today, the post-secondary educational field has more than 5,916 institutions across the private and public continuum (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022), all jockeying for a share of the same shrinking student market (Becher & Trowler, 2001; Stephenson et al., 2016). Impacted by the great recession, the global COVID pandemic, and other factors, traditional college-age students are expected to decline from a peak of 3.93 million in 2025 to an estimated 3.52 million in 2037 (Bransberger et al., 2020). In addition to the declining population of traditional-aged students, higher education faces challenges from increased competition (Simões & Soares, 2010), the rise of a brand-conscious middle class (Sheth, 2021), a heterogeneous student body, and continually reducing public financing all of which have propelled higher education to focus on the effectiveness and efficiency of marketing strategies (Trullas et al., 2018). If these factors were not enough, higher education is fighting to attract a student population that has access to unprecedented amounts of information, driven by transparency in government policy actions and by the nature of organizational sharing via websites and news sources, helping them navigate complex higher education purchasing decisions (Moogan & Baron, 2003). The data they pull is ever-growing through new marketing avenues, including an indirect marketing output found through consumer sharing. Its influence has exponentially expanded through the ease of sharing personalized insights online (Sheth, 2021).

For higher education organizations, this access, along with new players in the field by way of private educational organizations, the globalization of the market, and the other factors previously mentioned, have forced them to differentiate themselves from the rest (Elken, 2019; Schofield et al., 2013). Marketing is the tool many have chosen to create this differentiation. Seen as a must to maintain economic viability, higher education institutions have engaged in integrated marketing practices (Scullion & Molesworth, 2016; Tomlinson, 2017) based on the effectiveness they have seen in the private sector and in hopes that through its use, they will create competitive advantages over their competition (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2016; Royo-Vela & Hünermund, 2016).

As a means of differentiation and to combat the increasing competition, higher education institutions have turned to marketing as a tool to support student acquisition and actively influence their decisions (Shemyatikhina et al., 2020). The push to leverage marketing in this manner can be found throughout the literature, including suggestions that higher education should operate like a corporate brand (Whelan, S. & Wohlfeil, 2006). Higher education has taken this to heart and, as a means of increasing market share, has embraced branding as a mechanism to build bonds with their customers (Karens et al., 2016) by identifying that quality matters more than the price in higher education as a means of differentiation amongst competitors (Musselin, 2018). This is due in large part to the fact that the institutions with the strongest reputations do not necessarily have the highest associated cost (Hasse & Krücken, 2013). Additionally, research institutions have recognized that to stay competitive, they must shift beyond local and national audiences and seek a global one (Musselin, 2018). Successful marketing demands an understanding of consumers' roles, the impacts of personal characteristics, cultural and social influences, and the influences that choice plays in the decision-making role (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2016).

In higher education, branding and marketing help buyers comprehend an intangible product by creating memorable audiences and developing central messages that allow students to recognize the intangible benefits, otherwise known as service outputs, they should expect from their university and product (Anctil, 2008). But why market and brand? This is a fair question, but the answer is not that simple for many higher education institutions. Public higher education, both on the credit and noncredit side of the spectrum, has long-standing traditions and publicly chartered missions to serve the masses (Harlow, 1937). However, engaging in marketing to meet the mission alone is not enough. Higher education institutions are generally large employers in their areas and serve as an economic engine for the surrounding communities. A failure to sustain not only impacts their mission but can also have detrimental economic impacts on the community.

Universities worldwide began recognizing and acting on the need to engage in marketing and branding in the 1980s (Kotler & Fox, 1995). Initially, these actions were undertaken with little formality, but forty years later, it is an entrenched management practice implemented by higher education leaders across the board. The increased competition in the field and reduced public funding cemented its presence. Marketing and branding in the higher education sector is a new trend compared to the private business world, but these activities are now more critical than ever (Durkin et al., 2012). Growing competition between institutions has caused universities to increase their competitive stances and engage with increasing strategies related to marketing their organizations (Hasse & Krücken, 2013). While no genesis exists for marketing in higher education, the introduction of the *U.S. World News Report* rankings of academic institutions in 1983, provided a launching point for higher education institutions to differentiate their offerings from those of their peers and served as the relative launching point for much of the activity (Musselin, 2018). Research has shown that branding is a key differentiator in higher education consumer choice (Aaker, 2003). Fay and Zavattaro found that, based on branding and marketing benefits, it was little surprise that higher education institutions looked to differentiate themselves through marketing and branding (2016). Innovative higher education enterprises have heeded this knowledge, and as a result, a drastic increase in branding has been seen across the field (Stensaker, 2007). In higher education, a brand serves as a benchmark between unsuccessful and successful organizations by establishing a value proposition that meets the "rational, emotional needs" of the consumer (de Chernatony & Dall'Olmo Riley, 1998).

In business terms, marketing and branding in higher education and understanding their usage are still relatively new compared to their private business counterparts. This understanding is in its infancy for the noncredit side of higher education, with little research focused on its effectiveness or application. NCCE faces many of the same challenges that have driven their academic counterparts to embrace marketing and branding strategies and, as such, have followed suit. The challenge for NCCE is the lack of research recognizing the efficacy of these activities.

With these units investing and operating like their academic counterparts and identifying higher education's place along the private and public continuum, researchers need to analyze the role of branding and marketing in the field (Ferlie et al., 2008).

Summary of Literature Review

The study of the influences on adult learner choice in NCCE is of growing importance to NCCE public administrators across the U.S. Changing economic realities for higher education institutions, increased competition, changing consumer preferences, institutional mission diversification, and the influence of technology in the workforce are driving the growth of the understudied field of NCCE. A review of the literature on adult learner choice in NCCE established a conceptual understanding of the field and a theoretical foundation of choice in higher education, including relevant theories, the conceptualization of higher education as a service, factors influencing choice, sources of information, and the role of marketing in higher education.

Introducing the history, background, and mission through both a national and local perspective, the NCCE field was unpacked for readers. Often understudied and frankly misunderstood or unknown to outsiders, the in-depth look at the field and its history highlighted the storied history and role of the NCCE field in the context of the lifetime educational journeys of learners. Notably, reviewing the history and field helps showcase the number of learners the field has the potential to impact, and the relative lack of continuity found in the field is largely due to the lack of unified regulations required to participate. NCCE, unlike its academic counterpart, often operates without many of the formal controls found in academic programming, resulting in increased players in the field and limited ability to track the fields full impact.

Increasing competition and the role that NCCE plays for organizations are predicated on exploring the factors that influence choice in the educational context.

Research suggests that higher education learners take a consumerist approach to selecting programs of study. They are influenced by a dynamic set of factors, including demographic characteristics, outcome expectations, costs, location, and many other factors. In recognition of the multitude of factors, an in-depth examination of consumer choice theories, choice factors, sources of information, and marketing in higher education was undertaken.

The findings show the complex nature of the consumer journey in higher education. From the consumer buying process to the factors influencing choice, understanding these dynamics is necessary for professionals in the field. The research consistently demonstrated that understanding the complex decision factors influencing higher education choices by a highly informed consumer base is critical for an organization to meet its goal. The research highlighted that industry practitioners need to take a scientific approach to attract learners, so additional research is needed.

It is essential to highlight that the research compiled for this study should be tempered by the understanding that the selection of programs is a complex process often affected by many factors. This complexity includes the factor that consumer behaviors, preferences, and trends change over time. Finally, another important caveat to note on the research provided is that the preponderance of research focuses explicitly on traditional-age students in the context of a traditional higher education model and not on NCCE. Further exploration of this study in the context of NCCE is necessary. Without additional research, practitioners and leaders in the field operate without the information necessary to support their ability to attract, communicate, and support NCCE learners.

Study Hypotheses

The lifeblood of noncredit higher education organizations are their learners. Given funding models predicated on self-sustainability, understanding what impacts an adult learner's choice must be deciphered by NCCE leaders and organizations. Currently, NCCE practitioners are operating on a scant amount of research identifying adult learner choice patterns in the NCCE field. The lack of research on the determinants and influences facing adult learner choice in NCCE entails that public administrators are engaged in activities to attract learners based on feelings, past experiences, and research conducted on traditional academic-age learners intending to participate in undergraduate courses. Aiming to close this knowledge gap and build a playbook on which noncredit higher education professionals can rely is the central research question for this paper. It involves understanding the influences of choice for adult learners in NCCE choice.

Three specific quantitative research hypotheses have been developed to identify these influences.

H1: Individual demographic characteristics have a statistically significant relationship to NCCE choice factors for adult learners.

Hypothesis 1a: The importance placed on NCCE choice factors will significantly differ across age backets.

Hypothesis 1b: The importance placed on NCCE choice factors will significantly differ across household income segments.

Hypothesis 1c: The importance placed on NCCE choice factors will significantly differ across levels of educational attainment.

Hypothesis 1d: The importance placed on NCCE choice factors will significantly differ based on parental status (i.e., whether learners have children at home).

Hypothesis one is a general hypothesis statement that covers the expected variation in influences that the independent variable, demographic characteristics, will have as it relates to the dependent variable, institutional factors/program choice factors. It is expected that significant differences will exist between the determinants associated with program choice - such as training provider type, delivery format, and institutional factors, which serve as the dependent variable - and participant demographic differences, including age, socioeconomic status, prior education, and parental status, which serve as the independent variables. It is expected that variable differences in the demographic characteristics of participants will have a significant relationship with the factors that influence choice in school. It is expected that differences in socioeconomic status, where individuals in lower financial brackets care most about price, program flexibility, and employment outlook after participation, and higher financial brackets will be more interested in convenience, quality of instruction, and networking. Additionally, examining the difference between parental statuses, a difference is expected between childless at-home participants and those with children at home, with the latter highly valuing program flexibility and location. To test this, demographic factors will be examined independently to see how differences within the characteristics influence choice.

H2: Mandated program participation will be a significant predictor of choice factors. The reason why someone participates in a program is expected to influence choice. For example, it is believed that those who are participating of their own accord will be more sensitive to cost and expectation of outcomes than those who are taking programs because they are mandated through work or to maintain licensure/certification to participate, which are likely to value elements of convenience as a key factor in choice. To test this, an analysis will be undertaken by examining a series of predetermined reasons for participation and the factors influencing choice to determine the relationship between the motivations behind participation and the factors influencing choice.

H3: Noticeable differences will exist between employer paid and individual paid choice factors.

NCCE program participation can be funded by both the person enrolled and from an outside source supporting the individuals ongoing training needs. It is believed that individuals who self-fund, including loans and other sources from which they are personally responsible, will have to identify factors related to program cost are more important to them than those not financially responsible for their course participation.

Through a mixed-method approach, the qualitative components of this research will be used to examine how practitioner's perceptions of adult learning choice correspond to the findings from the quantitative analysis of choice influences. Specifically, the questions that will be examined include:

1. Do the factors identified by NCCE leaders parallel what participants identify as key choice factors?
2. Do commonalities amongst the NCCE organizations' characteristics represented by the NCCE leaders, including size and continuum of staff, use of research tools, and number of learners, support a more accurate perception of the choice factors important to learners?

Chapter III

Methodology

As previously acknowledged, the preponderance of the academic research surrounding choice lies in the context of the study of traditional higher education setting. By using the existing body of literature in higher education as the context for this study, not only can the study examine an understudied cross-section of higher education, including NCCE and adult participants, but the study also allows for assessment of the reliability of previous and future study findings for traditional higher education students to the adult learners engaged in NCCE.

The findings from this research will support the future development of NCCE programs, ensuring that development considers the relevant factors that influence adult learners when selecting programs. The findings will also help practitioners communicate with potential learners, highlighting the appropriate value propositions and critical choice factors throughout engagements and communication.

Research Questions

Many questions remain unexplored concerning NCCE and consumer choice. The broad base of exploration necessitates a concise focus of study. Knowledge should be built through the study to enhance the academic body of information and daily operations. For this study, which is focused on understanding the influences on adult learner choice in NCCE, three quantitative and two qualitative research questions were developed. The following sections detail these questions and provide insights into the reasons behind the choices and the outcome expectations from the study.

Quantitative Research Questions:

1. What relationship exists between demographic groups of adult learners and the NCCE choice factors deemed important when selecting a program?
    a. Do the choice factors deemed important in selecting an NCCE course vary across age brackets?
    b. Do the choice factors deemed important in selecting an NCCE course vary across different household income segments?
    c. Do the choice factors deemed important in selecting an NCCE course vary between educational levels?
    d. Do the choice factors deemed important in selecting an NCCE course vary between parental status segments?
2. Does an individual's mandated participation in an NCCE program influence the choice factors they deem important when selecting a program?
3. Does who is paying for the course influence the important choice factors when selecting an NCCE program?

Qualitative Research Questions:

4. Do the factors identified by NCCE leaders parallel what participants identify as key choice factors?
5. Do commonalities amongst the NCCE organizations' characteristics represented by the NCCE leaders, including size and continuum of staff, use of research tools, and number of learners, support a more accurate perception of the choice factors important to learners?

The quantitative questions seek to extend the body of research around choice in higher education beyond traditional higher education into NCCE. Guided in part by findings from previous studies, the quantitative research questions explored the relationship between factors previously shown to influence choice in higher education, along with exploring factors that align with the NCCE framework. Within each research question, prior research has supported the development of the questions themselves and the expected outcomes for the research.

Supported by previous findings, we know that older students are concerned about cost (Connor & Dewson, 2001), coupled with the influence that income/SES has shown on consumer choice through a student's knowledge of programs, and the prestige of the institution attended (Cho et. al, 2008; Hemsley-Brown, 1999; Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2015). Considering these findings, differences are expected to be found in choice factors across socioeconomic statuses, where individuals in lower financial brackets care most about price, program flexibility, and employment outlook after participation, and those in higher economic brackets will be more interested in convenience, quality of instruction, and networking.

Students with parental responsibility face additional barriers, challenges, and influences on academic participation that are not at play with other students (Marandet & Wainwright, 2010). Driven by family opinion and expectations, learners over 30 and especially those with families, are expected to consult with their partners and consider a wide array of considerations because of the additional responsibilities that they hold outside of the academic environment (Marandet & Wainwright, 2010; Sojkin et al., 2012). Recognizing the influences of outside class responsibilities, including work and childcare, a difference across parental statuses is expected, especially between childless at-home participants and those with children at home, with the latter highly valuing program flexibility and location.

Little research exists connecting an individual's prior education and the influences on choice in NCCE. However, research has shown that a parent's higher education experience influences choice by providing insight into how things work and through the influence a parent's prior education can have on a learners choice (Boudarbat & Montmarquette, 2009; Siegfried & Getz, 2006) . These findings lend credibility to the assumption that an adult learner's previous educational experience will likely influence NCCE choices based on their familiarity and experience with the higher education spectrum.

Motivation for selecting higher education is well documented, whereby students often choose programs based on career opportunities, specific programs, location, and financial capacity (James-MacEachern & Yun, 2017). Yet, little is known about the influences on why someone participates in a program in NCCE. As in higher education, why someone participates is expected to influence the factors of choice significantly. There is an expectation that individuals participating based on personal motivation in NCCE are expected to be more sensitive to cost and other factors than individuals who are mandated to participate. Both assumptions stem from the idea that economic factors drive choice, similar to the income patterns discussed earlier.

Previous research on higher education decisions has shown that price differences and financial aid availability significantly influence what learners choose, supporting the idea that people approach these decisions from an economic standpoint (Callender & Melis, 2022; Vrontis et al., 2007). NCCE program participation can be funded by both the person enrolled and from an outside source supporting the individual’s ongoing training needs. It is believed that individuals who self-fund, including personal loans from banks or other sources from which they are personally responsible, will have to identify factors more important to them in their program choice than those not financially accountable for their course participation.

The two qualitative research questions are designed to assess practitioners' perceptions of the findings of the quantitative analysis. The expectation for the qualitative analysis holds that practitioners operate with an incomplete picture to the factors that influence adult choice in NCCE. Supporting this inaccurate presumption are the thoughts of industry leader Bob Hansen, chief executive officer at the University Professional and Continuing Education Association (UPCEA), who acknowledges that higher education is still challenged to succeed, sharing that the leaders in continuing education are routinely faced with a lack of data needed to meet their organizational goals successfully (Burt, 2022). Therefore, practitioners are forced to operate on personal perceptions or research on choice adjacent studies focused on academic programs. These findings, should they be found, are not indicative of a lack of engagement or understanding of adult learners but are likely to highlight the need to continue to professionalize the NCCE field through increased academic research on the field as it relates to consumer choice.

The two methodologies employed in this research are complementary in that they allow the quantitative research findings on student choice to be enriched through the real-world perceptions of industry practitioners. There is an assumption that, as found in the traditional higher education space, competition for students will continue to present challenges to institutions, and an increased focus on marketing will also apply to the NCCE space. Since the two fields are not the same, there are questions to assess whether administrators in NCCE have a different grasp of the influences on choice from their traditional higher education brethren.

A mixed-method approach was selected for this research because it provides informative learning on multiple fronts through a singular study. As previously shared, NCCE choice is understudied, with few researchers focused on the topic. With some research, wide gaps exist in our general understanding of the topic from an academic perspective. The mixed-method approach allows for an exploratory analysis of the topic whereby statistical inferences on choice factors for adult learners are developed, and a picture of the accuracy of practitioners' perceptions on the topic is developed. The resulting mixed-method findings provide an enhanced analysis connecting research findings on learner influences with the current operational practices and perception of industry leaders and opening research opportunities for future studies.

Hypotheses and Expected Relationships

Drawing from the literature review and theoretical framework outlined earlier, this study is guided by several hypotheses about how demographic and situational factors will influence adult learners' choice patterns in non-credit continuing education (NCCE). These expectations are based on choice research theory, which shows that people's personal circumstances and characteristics shape how they make educational decisions. While plenty of research has looked at selection processes in traditional degree programs, the diverse range of adult learners in NCCE requires a fresh look at how individual traits interact with program selection. The hypotheses reflect the realities that adult learners face and extend existing choice theory into the NCCE context.

When it comes to demographic influences, age is expected to significantly affect selection priorities, with specific impact on delivery preferences. Older adults will likely be more sensitive to program format, while younger learners will be less concerned about how content is delivered. For younger adults, program flexibility becomes crucial because of the time pressures and competing responsibilities in their lives. Household income should create clear patterns too, with lower-income households showing much greater sensitivity to costs compared to those with higher incomes.

Educational background will shape choices in ways that might seem surprising. People with less formal education are expected to place higher value on brand reputation, quality indicators, and outcome promises than those with advanced degrees. This happens because learners with limited educational experience often see institutional prestige as something that will boost the value of their training. On the flip side, highly educated individuals may care less about institutional reputation and focus more on whether the curriculum content and schedule work with their already packed lives.

Parental responsibility will prove highly significant, with parents prioritizing schedule, location, and delivery methods more than childless learners. Additionally, parents will demonstrate heightened cost concerns compared to those without dependents. However, demographic characteristics alone will not drive all selection behaviors.

The nature of participation will also shape decision-making. Representing a concept outside traditional selection literature, voluntary versus mandated enrollment should create different priorities. Voluntary participants will demonstrate higher sensitivity to cost than those required to attend, reflecting their personal financial investment. Finally, payment source will influence decisions, with self-funded learners showing more concern about program cost and outcome propositions than those receiving external funding. Similar to mandated versus voluntary enrollment, these funding differences stem from the personal financial accountability that self-payment creates.

The qualitative component of this study predicts outcomes tied to practitioner perceptions and organizational sophistication in recognizing learner priorities. NCCE leaders will likely demonstrate an incomplete understanding of decision-driving factors. Grounded in industry leader Bob Hansen's acknowledgement that NCCE leaders lack data supporting their competitive efforts (Burt, 2022), practitioners will probably rely on research from traditional academic programs and personal assumptions that misalign with NCCE learners' actual needs and beliefs. Therefore, a significant gap will exist between practitioner perceptions and the factors this study identifies as relevant.

Additionally, well-resourced organizations with sophisticated marketing practices and longer-tenured staff will demonstrate more accurate recognition of important selection drivers. This expectation reflects the assumption that such organizations that possess enhanced insights and experience are more in tune with consumer behavior patterns than their less resourced or experienced peers. The previous hypotheses lay the foundation of the study and are discussed in detail throughout the paper.

Research Design

Despite years of research undertaken to understand the factors that influence consumer choice in the traditional academic realm, limited research exists to shed light on the factors relevant to a subset of the higher education spectrum of NCCE. In recognition of the enhanced value of integrating qualitative and quantitative mixed-method research (Creswell & Clark, 2017), a convergent mixed-method study was designed to explore choice in NCCE.

A convergent or parallel study design is the most well-known and likely the most commonly applied mixed-method approach (Creswell & Clark, 2017). In design, convergent methodology allows researchers "to obtain different but complementary data on the same topic"

(Morse, 1991). In a convergent design, the researcher collects and analyzes qualitative and quantitative data during the same research phase and merges the two sets to generate an overall interpretation (Creswell & Clark, 2017). This research will use comparative analysis to synthesize the qualitative and quantitative findings and develop a comprehensive review of the phenomenon (Creswell & Clark, 2017). The benefit of this research method is the efficiency of design, with data collection commencing simultaneously and the ability to independently analyze the data. While this study focuses mainly on numbers and data, the insights from interviews and observations will help explain the bigger picture and support the conclusions.

Adult learners face many factors when making educational choices. With the increasing importance of lifelong learning, we need to explore what influences these decisions and understand how people working in the field see things. This creates a complicated puzzle to solve.

In support of the complex nature of the study, the mixed-method approach allows for an in-depth examination of the concepts of the study. Predominantly a quantitative study enriched by the findings of the qualitative study, the convergent design methodology provided the researcher an opportunity to assess the connection between consumer behavior and practitioner beliefs. The practical connection between the practitioners' quantitative and qualitative findings provides a contextual rationale for the benefit and future benefits of this and other similar studies.

The qualitative and quantitative data collection was done concurrently during late 2023 and early 2024. The data sets were analyzed independently before combining the qualitative and quantitative data through merging techniques. Merging is a method of integration where researchers combine two data sets for comparison and analysis (Fetters et al., 2013).

The findings from the mixed-method study are presented through a contiguous approach. A contiguous approach to reporting mixed-methods involves presenting the qualitative and quantitative techniques in a single report in two sections (Fetters et al., 2013). The analysis of the qualitative and quantitative data results is conducted separately in two distinct chapters. Chapter 4 presents the findings from the quantitative portion of the study and includes calculated statistics supporting the three research questions. Chapter 5 presents the qualitative findings from interviews with administrators in the field. Chapter 5 provides independent contextual understanding for practitioners and compares practitioners' perceptions with the quantitative results of learners.

Quantitative Inquiry

The primary focus of the study is the results from the quantitative analysis of adult learners' choice factors. To effectively study the multifaceted influences on adult learner choice and adequately address the three quantitative research questions, it was determined that a descriptive quantitative study best fit the research demands. This research does not seek to identify causality; instead, it aims to identify relationships that may exist between individual characteristics and choice factors. A cross-sectional study design was used to get a broad snapshot of consumer choice in NCCE, allowing the research, as Setia (2016) points out, to establish a baseline understanding of a field that has very little existing research.

The cross-sectional approach allows an exploration of different relationships and patterns without getting too deep into any one aspect and provides a solid foundation to build more focused studies in the future. Additionally, a cross-sectional approach is a commonly used method employed by businesses and marketers to understand consumer preferences (Rindfleisch et al., 2008). With consumer choice as a central theme of this research, a cross-sectional approach is an appropriate research practice.

Characteristics of a cross-sectional study include a time-bound nature where the survey is distributed at one time and the selection of participants is based on inclusion or exclusion characteristics (Setia, 2016; Strang, 2015). From a research perspective, the benefits of the study model include the ability to administer the study to smaller populations and lower costs (Grimes & Schulz, 2002).

Based on the planned study, an electronic survey was identified as the most appropriate approach for data collection. Supporting this decision includes previous research that found surveys effectively gather responses quickly and target larger audiences (Jones et al., 2013). In addition to the increased audience and quick acquisition aspects of surveys, they also provide a low acquisition cost (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Shough & Yates, 2011).

Population.

Any researcher must build an appropriate sample population supporting the research design. As this research focuses on understanding consumer choice factors for adult participants in NCCE in Georgia, the study population is limited based on age, location, and previous participation status. The state of Georgia was chosen as the population of study for research based on two main factors. First, the researcher is based in an NCCE organization within the state. The findings should provide real-world support and knowledge to the primary pool of learners supported by the researcher's home institution. Second, educational structures and norms for NCCE differ between regions. Contextualizing these differences can be challenging, and by focusing on a single state, the researcher can more easily relate the findings to the norms of the state. In addition to the localized nature of the population, the limitation of the population pool was done in part based on previous findings that age, social status, income, geography, and cultural factors have been shown to influence student choice (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2015; Leo et al., 2005).

The population starts with adult learners who reside in the state of Georgia. Additionally, the population includes individuals who have/are participated, or are participating, in an NCCE program in the last three years. Identifying an accurate assessment of the potential population that meets the selection criteria is impossible due to a lack of adequate reporting mechanisms for participation in NCCE. However, previous studies found that 46% of adults participated in an educational activity over a twelve-month period, with 30% participating in work-related courses and 21% in personal interest courses (Kim et al., 2004). These findings suggest a potential participant pool of over 50% of the adult population. For the state of Georgia, with an estimated 8.4 million adults, an estimated minimum sample size suggests that there are at least 4.2 million individuals within the study population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2022).

The developed survey was available for this research from late 2023 through mid-2024. The survey was open to all participants and followed the IRB's procedural requirements for data collection. A total of 255 participants partook in the survey, however many of these participants fell outside of the target geographical area of Georgia or did not fully complete the survey. After accounting for participation status and location, the remaining pool of qualified participants resulted in a sample of n = 110. The lower-than-desired sample numbers impact the study in a couple of ways. First, the generalizability of the data will be influenced by an increased margin of error. Second, the lower numbers will also limit the stratification amongst demographic characteristics. Details of this will be reported in Chapter 4.

Sampling and Sampling Procedures.

The development of the sample used a non-probability voluntary response method, which acknowledges the higher risk of sampling bias. The exploratory nature of this study and the benefits associated with voluntary response sampling, including the generally lower cost and convenience of this sampling method, made this method more practical for the scope of this research. To be included in the sample, participants must be Georgia residents, and currently participating in or have participated in a noncredit continuing education program within the past three years.

Determination of the sample size is an integral part of the research process. The generalizability depends upon the confidence level and margins of error used in the calculations and assessments, along with determining the appropriate sample size. For this research, the sample size was determined to be n = 97 (*Sample Size Calculator - Qualtrics*, n.d.). The calculated results were based on an estimated population of 990,000 people, with a confidence level of 95% and a margin of error of ± 10%. It is recognized that the lower margin of error will result in less generalizability outside of the study. The low collection rate of survey responses required a higher margin of error to allow for a statistically relevant sample size to be met.

Data Collection Procedures and Management.

The research and data collection procedures were authorized by the Valdosta State University Institutional Review Board (Protocol Number: 04441-2023). The letter of approval for the study can be found in Appendix A. Data collection was undertaken using an anonymous electronic survey delivered through Qualtrics, an electronic survey platform.

The survey was open and available from November 2023 through April 2024. Solicitations to participate in the survey instrument were conducted on three separate occasions.

The requests to participate in the study included three separate emails to leaders of NCCE programs in Georgia and posts on social media platforms. Each method included a lead-in of seeking dissertation study participants, a short outline of the audience sought, and the timeframe expected to participate in the study.

The initial plan to solicit research participants entailed emailing the survey to the director and assistant directors of noncredit continuing education throughout Georgia. When first launching the survey in October 2023, the survey was only sent to the state directors and assistant directors of NCCE. Unfortunately, that initial email blast to the directors and assistant directors didn't generate nearly as many responses as desired. Thus, in February 2024, the low response numbers necessitated diversifying the method of soliciting participants. Considering the multitude of options available along with resources available, it was determined that providing the opportunity to participate via social media was the next best opportunity for soliciting responses.

As such, the survey was made available via social platforms. The survey and posts were shareable, and participants were encouraged to share with others. Leveraging Facebook and LinkedIn, posts soliciting individual survey responses were sought, and the posts were made through the researcher's accounts. They were made shareable for anyone who wished to distribute them to other audiences. Social posts were made in February and March 2024.

Risks.

The nature of this study and the topic provides limited to no risk to any participants. For participants who completed the quantitative survey instrument, no personally identifiable information was collected to allow for any connection to the individual. The innocuous nature of the questions provided no realistic chance of creating undue stress for the participant. The information from the quantitative study is reported only in the aggregate, again separating it further from the individually non-identifiable data. Survey participation was voluntary, and participants could quit the survey at any time should they not want to proceed.

The qualitative study presents limited to no perceived risk to the individual. Organizational demographic information collected is publicly available, as the questions pertain to public institutions of higher education. The interview questions that sought to understand the practitioners' perceptions related to the influences on choice for adult learners were opinions of witnessed/individual perceptions, and were not a topic that is controversial or risky from a professional perspective. All interview candidates read an IRB-approved consent statement that shared their ability to end and/or not respond to any interview questions they were uncomfortable with. When reported, the feedback has been stripped of identifiable information and only include a reference to the University System of Georgia Grouping category in which the institution falls.

Survey and Operationalization of Constructs.

Previous research has shown that poorly developed surveys threaten the study's internal validity and can result in misleading findings that are not effectively connected to the research questions (Bastos et al., 2014). The initial goal of this study was to identify an existing survey used in another academic research project. The potential benefits of using an existing survey include: a simplified comparison between previous research findings, a potential increase in generalizability, and an increase in the external validity, collectively providing for the ability to hold a more comprehensive dialogue around the concept (Berry et al., 2002).

Through an extensive literature review, no survey was identified that fulfilled the needs of this study. The literature review process did support identifying themes/concepts/response choices that have been applied in other studies that were implemented in the newly developed survey for this research. Using the findings from the literature review, a new survey titled Adult Learner Choice in Noncredit Continuing Education was created. The survey can be found in Appendix B.

The Adult Learner Choice in Noncredit Continuing Education Questionnaire consists of four sections: demographics, previous course participation, information sources, and institutional factors. These four categories make up the study's independent and dependent variables, with demographics, and motivational factors comprising the independent variables and the program and institutional factors making up the dependent variables.

Part I of the survey involves the collection of demographic information. The survey collected information on age range, gender, race, household income, residency (city and state only), highest education, employment status, and level of employment. The collection and analysis of these data points are central to the research questions and are of meaningful comparison, as previous studies on academic learners have shown that demographic differences have a significant relationship with choice factors (Kaye & Bates, 2017; C. Walsh et al., 2015).

Part II of the survey examines details about the program for which the respondent participated. First, survey respondents are prompted with a yes/no question to confirm participation in an NCCE program that meets the requirements of the study. Those who met the prior participation requirement were guided through the remaining questions, and those who did not meet the qualifications were thanked for their time, and the survey concluded. Data collection in this section includes why the respondent participated, whether the training was employer-mandated, the type of training provider, how the NCCE program was paid for, and programmatic details, including delivery mode, duration, and class times.

Part III collected data on the sources of information used by participants in their choice of program. Survey respondents were provided a list of 13 options, including "other," with a fill-in-the-blank, and were asked to select all that applied to the sources of information used in their decision process. Part 4 asked participants to choose the top three institutional/programmatic factors deemed important when they selected a program training provider. Eighteen factors, including personal beliefs and expectations, physical characteristics of the program and provider, and details and traits of the program, were provided for selection. The eighteen factors provided as response choices related to institutional/programmatic factors were amalgamations of responses found across multiple studies during the literature review process. This forth section, combined with the demographic characteristics of the survey respondents, explores the research questions as the primary research questions for this study.

Protection of anonymity and confidentiality were concepts considered during this research and survey design. No personally identifiable information was collected during data collection and research for this study. All information was collected under the principle of anonymity. In addition to the anonymity of existing information, the information will only be reported in aggregate, thus further removing any notion of identifiability. All data was extracted from the survey database for use in the study. The data was stored on the researcher's computer without external accessibility. Data will be stored for two years after completion of the dissertation.

Quantitative Data Analysis.

Results will be reported in Chapter 4 using a combination of statistical methods. Descriptive statistics will be provided to develop insights into the makeup and characteristics of the respondents. A combination of statistical methods was used to analyze the research questions due to the divergent nature of the study's dependent variables. The study's dependent variables are categorical data points. The dependent variables for the study include the training provider type, delivery format, class meeting times, length of the program, and institutional factors deemed important when making choice decisions. A series of binary logistical regression models were run as the primary analysis technique for this research.

Qualitative Inquiry

Mixed-method research designs are often preferred by researchers because they can more effectively evaluate a research question than either methodology alone (Palinkas et al., 2011). Qualitative inquiries are intended to create an in-depth understanding of the topic (Patton, 2002). This study's qualitative investigation is designed to assess practitioners' perceptions of the field compared to the survey findings. The perception assessment evaluates the potential value of future expanded studies around consumer choice in NCCE. Conceptually, seeing that many NCCE organizations operate in the business sphere, there is a chance that practitioners have an aligned understanding of choice in the space, and future exploration may or may not be relevant.

Qualitative Research Design.

Mays and Pope (1995) proposed that research is selective and trying to capture the literal truth is difficult at best, if not impossible. Beyond the challenge of capturing the truth from qualitative research, the duo also shares that research is collected through the prism of various methods, each with its strengths and weaknesses (Mays & Pope, 1995). As a convergent mixed-method study, the qualitative portion enriches the conversation around the quantitative data findings to support how practitioners' perceptions align with consumer preferences. While multiple analysis methods have pros and cons, with the goal of the interviews and qualitative portion of the research to enrich the conversation around the study's quantitative findings, thematic analysis was chosen as the appropriate qualitative method.

Thematic analysis is "a method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This design allows the researcher to explore the detailed account shared by interviewees that is purely qualitative in nature. Braun and Clark (2006) also suggest that thematic analysis is a flexible tool providing a complex, detailed, and comprehensive data analysis.

Recognizing that the right design is critical to the rigor and reliability of qualitative research, much time went into developing the design of the qualitative inquiry. The qualitative design consisted of a series of semi-structured interviews. The interview prompts can be found in Appendix C. An environment was created, allowing participants to explore and share their perceptions of the influences and factors they believed were important to adult learners in their choice of NCCE programs.

A purposeful sampling strategy was employed in the selection of interview participants. Purposeful sampling is a widely used sampling strategy for information-rich cases (Patton, 2002). For this research, a selection strategy was used whereby the participants were selected based on a predetermined series of criteria (Palinkas et al., 2015). This method of selection was chosen for multiple reasons. First, as Patton (2002) proposed, purposeful sampling is a widely used method to effectively use limited resources in selecting and identifying participants with detailed information related to the topic of study. Second, the scope and nature of the study to support practitioners in the state of Georgia supported the selection method. Upon selection, a series of semi-structured interviews were conducted.

The interviews with selected leaders of NCCE were conducted over Zoom. They consisted of approximately hour-long interviews, whereby participants' perceptions on a series of concepts related to adult learner choice in NCCE were explored. Questions included perceptions around the demographic characteristics of an individual they believe are most likely to influence choice, the influence of who pays affects choice, inquiries about how, if, and whether they differentiate marketing communication based on their perception of differing influences, and lastly, the research basis they use to inform programming and marketing.

Study Participants.

The selection of participants is instrumental in the success of a study. We know from previous researchers that the purposeful selection of study participants provides deep knowledge and information about the topics, enriching study findings (Glesne, 2011). Since the design of the interviews is to enhance the conversation around the influences of adult learners' choice in NCCE, identifying interview candidates with unique insights and responsibility for the development and offering of programs is critical. Building and/or having rapport with the interviewer supports the interviewee's comfort in responding openly and honestly about their feelings on the subject (Heath et al., 2018).

Expanding on Heath's concept of building rapport with interviewees is the concept of "backyard research," whereby familiarity with study participants has already laid the foundation for building rapport (Glesne, 2011). For this study, interview participants need specialized knowledge, interact in a regionally specific area, and are willing to share a combination of business information and personal insights into questions about their perceptions of the research questions. The combination of factors supports leveraging a participant pool from a known and selective group. For these purposes, this research leveraged the concept of "backyard research" and interviewed candidates from a committee of NCCE professionals from within the state of Georgia, where the researcher works. Before beginning the qualitative interview process, the researcher obtained Institutional Review Board approval through Valdosta State University.

Selection criteria for interview participants leveraged the researcher's familiarity and network to access members of a committee of leaders in NCCE. There were two required selection parameters for participants. First, they must be the equivalent of a director or associate director of NCCE. Second, the participants must hold this role at a state institute of higher education in Georgia. The narrow scope for interview participants was undertaken due to the similar missions of the organizations along with maintaining the regional focus of the research study. A total of seven interviews were conducted. Interviewees represent public institutions across the state of Georgia Table 1 provides descriptive data on the institutions represented by the interview participants.

Table 1

Participants' Organizational Descriptive Data

Participant	USG Org Type	# of Learners Served	Total Unit Employees	Years Providing NCCE	Continuum of Staff Seasonality (New to seasoned)
1	State University	1,200	6	50 +	½ new ½ seasoned vet
2	Comprehensive University	20,000	15	60 +	Newcomers*
3	State University	4,793	7	30 + (No exact history)	Newcomers*
4	Comprehensive University	< 4,000	5	35 + years (unsure of exact start)	½ new ½ seasoned vet
5	State University	6,000 – 7,000	6	NP	Newcomers*
6	Research University	8,000 – 15,000	22	65 +	70/30 seasoned to new
7	Comprehensive University	20,000	15	60 +	Newcomers*

Note. *The staff outside of leadership were defined as newcomers to the field by the interviewee.

Data Collection Procedures and Management.

Before beginning data collection and audio recording, participants were read a statement provided by the Institutional Review Board (IRB), listed as Appendix A, that provided assurances that participant information would remain anonymous and confidential. Participant consent was required before proceeding with the interview. The interview protocol was prepared prior to engagement with participants. To counter the concerns presented by Seidman, the interviews were structured to prevent leading questions influencing the direction and responses of the interview questions (Seidman, 2006).

As much as possible, the interviewer's role was focused on learning and not providing participatory discussion in the conversation. The researcher only provided guidance and clarification should the interviewee request it from the interviewer. The interview questions asked can be broken up into three sections. The first section considers background and statistical information; the second is opinion-based, open-ended questions. Background and statistical information were collected to support the analysis and potential commonalities that may or may not exist between NCCE leaders. The second question set was designed to assess NCCE practitioners' perceptions of the three quantitative research hypotheses for this study. The last set of questions was designed to understand the resources and tools related to marketing and market research that the organization may employ. The reasoning behind this question set assumed that NCCE organizations that heavily embrace these tactics may have better insights into consumer behaviors than those that do not.

During the interview, the NCCE leaders were first asked to share statistical, categorical, and demographic details about their NCCE organization. Questions included the number of learners served, target audience, description of NCCE portfolio mix, continuum of staffing from new to the field to seasoned veteran, organizational staffing level, and whether the CE team is part of a centralized or decentralized model. The second segment of questions sought to explore the personal perceptions of the NCCE leader on the influences on learners when selecting a program of choice. Specifically, NCCE leaders were asked to share their beliefs about the most important factors a learner considers when choosing a program, what demographic characteristics have the most significant influence on choice, and their perception of how paying for the program may affect a learner's choice. In addition, a few supplementary questions were asked to assess NCCE organizational practices that may support their understanding and responses to the previously asked questions. These questions included inquiries about using marketing and market research in their programming and decision-making.

The researcher recorded the interviews using the Zoom meeting platform, which recorded the audio. Using OtterAI and AtlasTI, the audio was transcribed to allow for data analysis. Through the data analysis process, repeated themes and concepts found in the transcripts were derived for use in the comparative analysis with the quantitative research findings (Rubin & Rubin, 2011).

Interview participants were promised anonymity, which was accomplished by not including personal data or institutional names in the write-up. Participants were referenced generically in conjunction with a title and the assignment of the University System of Georgia institution grouping title (Research University, Comprehensive University, State University, and State College). Transcripts from interviews were stored and accessible only on the researcher's computer and stored for three years after the dissertation is completed.

Qualitative Data Interpretation and Analysis.

Thematic analysis was conducted on the transcripts derived from the one-on-one semi-structured interviews conducted with directors and assistant directors of NCCE. The following describes how data interpretation and analysis were undertaken during this research.

In recognition of the laborious and time-consuming nature of hand-coding transcripts, technological systems were employed to support data analysis and winnow data (Guest et al., 2012). By winnowing the data, the attention is focused on relevant topics to the discussion, developing themes that support the comparative discussion with the quantitative data. Although Creswell suggested that it is appropriate for five to seven themes to be identified in the thematic analysis of the qualitative data (Creswell, 2014), the narrow scope of this study focused on only a few key themes to support the study at large.

Procedurally, for this research study, the qualitative analysis process followed Creswell and Creswell's (2018) eight-step process for qualitative analysis. Step one included the organization and preparation of the data. All interviews were transcribed. Step two constituted the review of all transcripts to conceive themes within the transcribed data. Step three included coding the transcripts. Words that represent themes were assigned to the text within the transcription data. In step four, descriptions and themes were developed using the comparative analysis with the quantitative findings. Step five comprised grouping codes into common themes. In step six, themes developed in the previous sections were coded into one of three groups, including surprising, expected, and unusual findings. The codes were converted into a conceptual map in step seven. Finally, in step eight, the narratives for the developed themes are analyzed in the findings and discussion sections of the paper (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The software package Atlas TI was used to support the processing of the interview feedback.

Credibility and Trustworthiness.

Historically, researchers have considered qualitative research as unscientific due to its lack of rigor associated with quantitative studies (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Critics of qualitative research contend that the studies lack replicability, are subject to strong researcher bias, and lack generalizability (Mays & Pope, 1995). Although still challenged in the 21st century, scholars argue against these ideals, especially when special attention is paid to rigor in the study (Cypress, 2017; Mays & Pope, 1995). By focusing on the rigor of qualitative research, alignment with the notions of validity and reliability is built, both of which are essential elements of quality (Brink, 1993).

Literature around qualitative research commonly discusses the concepts of authenticity, trustworthiness, and credibility (Lincoln et al., 2011) to help build and ensure the reliability of qualitative research. As a researcher, ensuring reliability is critical to supporting the study's validity. To account for these concerns, extra care was taken in the process of this research study. The following outlines the methods and conceptual steps undertaken to support this study's rigor, credibility, and trustworthiness.

The research design process was deliberate and thoughtful per the best practices established by Mays and Pope's (1995), with special attention paid to Morse et al.'s (2002) recommendations for ensuring reliability and validity were considered throughout the processes.

Additionally, as Yin (2009) suggested, detailed documentation of the procedures and steps undertaken is provided to support future researchers' ability to follow similar guidelines. In simple terms, described in detail later, the steps taken to support the procedures undertaken include a review of transcripts for obvious mistakes and a review for drift in codes and definitions. To counter the challenges to the reliability of the analysis, special attention was paid to the consistency of coding and theme development, which are common concerns influencing the credibility of the research. For this research, a single researcher developed the themes, and thus, concerns about inconsistent themes and coding behaviors are lessened.

Ethics

Conducting ethical research is a fundamental component of the educational research process. As a body of research, this study aims to, at a minimum, meet the basic principles of research ethics by producing beneficence, a good, and limiting any malfeasance, harm. To ensure ethical behaviors and protect participants, IRB approval, Protocol Number: 04441-2023, was received before beginning the research process. IRBs are designed to keep the ethics of educational research at the forefront with a focus on limiting harm and supporting the development of benefits.

Informed consent was obtained from all participants before participation in the study. The informed consent language was provided by the approving IRB and can be found in Appendix A. Survey participants' consent was presented to them upon opening the survey link. Interview participants were orally presented with the approved consent language and asked to acknowledge their consent for participation. Both survey and interview participants were also provided with language that allowed them to cancel their participation at any time during the process.

Respect, confidentiality, and the trust of the participants in this study are of the utmost importance to the researcher. Without candid responses and participation, this research would not have been possible. The research aims to benefit the community and expand the study of consumer choice in the NCCE space. While survey participants are not expected to recognize a direct benefit, their participation and the qualitative feedback shared by the interview candidates should provide useful findings that support future program development and improved communication practices that will benefit future NCCE participants.

Limitations of the Study

Every research study is impacted by the decisions made by the researcher. In research, these decisions are known as delimitations, representing the self-imposed decisions that narrow the focus of what is being studied (Ross & Zaidi, 2019). These decisions support the focus of research questions and help constrain studies to specified constraints. The following outlines the core delimitations made for this study and the rationale behind them.

The definition of NCCE was clarified to narrow the subject pool. NCCE is a term that, as previously described, extends across a broad spectrum of education and training. The limitations and definitions were designed to help identify the qualitative interview candidates. Through the limiting definition, identifying and narrowing down individuals who provide similar training was possible. The researcher believes that although the idea of continuing education programs is relevant across a spectrum of offerings, the narrowing of the concept was necessary to compare similar organizations and not those with differing outcomes and missions. Keeping with the narrowing and refinement of the definition also led to the focus on a specific region. Regionally, similarities exist in the mission and program delivery types. By keeping the reference samples to the state of Georgia, the researcher was able to ensure continuity of contextual understanding of the interview candidates, and it allowed for the limitation of the influence that regionality plays in the consumer decision-making process (Leo et al., 2005).

The study provided a time-bound participation limitation for survey participants. The timeframe for participation in an NCCE program was restricted to three years to limit the impact that time has been found to have on consumer choice behaviors (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2016; Moschis, 2007). Age range presents another important delimitator for the study. The study focused on adult learners. Although the study is focused on those in their "working prime at 25 and older" (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, n.d.), participants who met the legal definition of being an adult (18 or older) were included. Inclusion was deeply debated, but it was determined that because population representants a key demographic constituency within the continuing education participant population that they would be included in the study. Additionally, it was determined that assuming that younger adults would not have the similar factors that influence their decision making was felt as an overstep, and for these reasons the youngest adult group was maintained in the study.

Lastly and importantly, the distribution models and selection of interview candidates are important decisions in the research process. Limited access to large sets of potential survey participants necessitated using a nonprobability model, a voluntary sample method, for data collection. Additionally, a few key factors supported the determination to use a known group to interview. First, the interview participants needed to be knowledgeable about the subject. Second, limiting the study to one state ensured that NCCE leaders could provide consistent perspectives insights across both qualitative and quantitative research components. Lastly, the interviewees are all employed by the same university system, which supports having some common pressures and understanding of the context in which each unit operates.

The researcher recognizes that all these choices influence the direction of the research and the findings. The researcher believes the boundaries set for the study will lead to a composed analysis of the field. By focusing on specific areas and accounting for key variables, the findings should be more dependable and meaningful within the context of this study.

Summary

This study explores consumer choice in an understudied portion of the education field. Specifically, the study seeks to expand our understanding of the factors influencing adult learner choice in NCCE. An extensive literature review highlighted the relationship between age, socioeconomics, and other demographic characteristics with higher education choices. In this chapter, hypotheses and research questions were described. Additionally, the nature of the mixed-method study was outlined, including the process for designing the questionnaire and the procedures used for interviewing and selecting survey and interview participants. Finally, details about the risks and limitations of the study were outlined for the reader.

Chapter IV

Quantitative Results

Overview

The study investigates the factors influencing adult learners' choice in NCCE. The chapter presents the findings from the quantitative analysis of demographic characteristics and choice factors through the lens of descriptive and inferential statistics. The chapter is organized into four sections: an introduction establishing the analytical framework, a comprehensive presentation of descriptive statistics, the primary analysis featuring binary logistic regression models addressing the key research questions, and a summary synthesizing the key quantitative findings.

Introduction

The literature review suggests that choice in higher education is multifaceted, and the many influences on an individual are likely to result in differing choice factors that are considered important depending on an individual's characteristics. A survey titled Adult Learner Choice in Noncredit Continuing Education was developed and distributed broadly through email and social media platforms to adults across Georgia. The instrument is divided into four sections:

- Part I – The Demographics section collected information on key demographic characteristics, including age, parental status, income level, gender, and educational attainment.
- Part II – The Previous Course Participation section asked learners for details about their most recent NCCE program engagement.

- Part III – The Information Sources section asked learners about the sources of information they used when deciding to engage in NCCE.
- Part IV – The Institution Choice Factors section asked learners to provide the top three institutionally/programmatically related factors influencing their purchase decision.

The Adult Learner Choice in Noncredit Continuing Education survey is in Appendix B.

Participants

The target audience for this research is adult learners who have participated in an NCCE program and live in the state of Georgia. To reach this population, a survey was distributed through email and made available on social media channels to all who wished to participate. The survey received 265 responses.

Before beginning data analysis, survey responses were reviewed to establish that the minimum criteria for research consideration were met. Multiple factors were used to clean the response data in preparation for quantitative analysis. First, the participants who failed to respond yes to their participation in a continuing education program in the last three years were excluded. Next, participants who reported a residence outside Georgia were removed. Finally, respondents who met the previous requirements but did not provide a response to the question measuring adult learner program choice factors (question IV-1 from the Adult Learner Choice in Noncredit Continuing Education questionnaire found in Appendix B) were removed from consideration. After applying these inclusion criteria, the final study population consisted of 110 participants ($N = 110$).

Data Analysis Methods

To analyze the influences on adult learner choice in NCCE and develop a comprehensive picture of the research audience, descriptive and inferential statistics were used to analyze the survey responses. Responses to the survey were exported from the Qualtrics Survey system for analysis in SPSS. Descriptive statistics were run on key independent and dependent variables for the research study to characterize, organize, and ultimately summarize the data to build a comprehensive picture of the study's variables.

The inferential statistics leveraged for this research was a binary logistic regression analysis. Through the regression models, a quantification of the relationship between a series of consumer characteristics (income, child at home, prior education, employer-mandated training, who paid, and age) and consumer choice factors established a model that highlights the consumer attributes that statistically influence the consumer choice factors selected. Model fit assessment tests using chi-squared for overall significance and Nagelkerke R^2 for determination of the variance proportions of the predictor were run across the model analysis. A significance level of .05 was applied to all statistical tests.

Descriptive Statistics

Examining the complex factors that influence choice in NCCE necessitates examining individual characteristics and variables included in the models. The descriptive data are broken down across multiple tables. While it is often common to see various variables combined into descriptive statistics tables, the nature of this study warrants the development of individualized tables to display the descriptive statistics.

This study aims to examine the relationship between consumer characteristics and noncredit education choice factors. This analysis focuses on six key choice factors that participants could identify as important in their decision-making process: delivery method, program of study, program flexibility, cost of participation, program schedule, and location.

Table 2 presents the binary response patterns for each choice factor across participant demographic and situational characteristics.

Notable patterns emerge across demographic groups, including no dramatic differences between age groups 18–34, 35–44, and 45–54 for most items. 55 + does stand out with dramatically lower importance ratings for delivery method (7.1%) compared to younger cohorts (42.9–50.0%) and counterintuitive findings where cost sensitivity does not correlate predictably with income levels. Additionally, situational factors appear to influence priorities significantly, with employer-mandated participants showing substantially higher emphasis on program flexibility (52.9% vs. 31.6%) but markedly lower concern for the cost (14.7% vs. 46.1%) than non-mandated participants. These descriptive statistics demonstrate the binary nature of each dependent variable and provide essential context for the logistic regression models presented later in this chapter, which examine how participant characteristics predict the likelihood of rating each factor as important.

Table 2

Noncredit Education Choice Factor Importance by Participant Characteristics

		Delivery Method		Program of Study		Program Flexibility		Cost of Participation		Program Schedule		Location	
	n	*n*	%	*n*	%	*n*	%	*n*	%	*n*	%	*n*	%
Age Groups													
18–34	30	14	46.7	13	43.3	15	50	15	50	9	30	7	23.3
35–44	38	19	50	14	36.8	13	34.2	9	23.7	12	31.6	8	21.1
45–54	28	12	42.9	12	42.9	11	39.3	11	39.3	11	39.3	3	10.7
55 and Over	14	1	7.1	5	35.7	3	21.4	5	35.7	6	42.9	5	35.7
Income Groups													
Less than $49,999	8	2	25	4	50	6	75	3	37.5	2	25	2	25
$50,000–$74,999	16	9	56.3	8	50	5	31.3	4	25	2	12.5	4	25
$75,000–$99,999	19	8	42.1	10	52.6	7	36.8	10	52.6	7	36.8	2	10.5
$100,000–$149,999	27	12	44.4	6	22.2	10	37	10	37	11	40.7	5	18.5
$150,000–$199,999	23	10	43.5	7	30.4	8	34.8	8	34.8	8	34.8	5	21.7
$200,000 or more	13	4	30.8	7	53.8	6	46.2	4	30.8	5	38.5	4	30.8
Education Level													
Less than Bachelor's	6	2	33.3	0	0	2	33.3	2	33.3	2	33.3	0	0
Bachelor's Degree	32	8	25	16	50	15	46.9	13	40.6	11	34.4	11	34.4
Master's Degree	58	32	55.2	24	41.4	19	32.8	25	43.1	23	39.7	11	19
Ph.D./Professional	14	4	28.6	4	28.6	6	42.9	0	0	2	14.3	1	7.1
Child at Home													
No	50	23	46	24	48	16	32	19	38	15	30	11	22
Yes	60	23	38.3	20	33.3	26	43.3	21	35	23	38.3	12	20
Employer Mandated													
No	76	32	42.1	31	40.8	24	31.6	35	46.1	31	40.8	14	18.4
Yes	34	14	41.2	13	38.2	18	52.9	5	14.7	7	20.6	9	26.5
Payment Source													
Not Self-Paid	79	29	36.7	28	35.4	30	38	24	30.4	30	38	16	20.3
Self-Paid	31	17	54.8	16	51.6	12	38.7	16	51.6	8	25.8	7	22.6

Table 3 provides a general demographic snapshot of the characteristics of the research participants. Participants are asked to provide general demographic characteristics in part one of the survey. The resulting age distributions reflect the demographic working ages of individuals and seem to represent an appropriate age distribution for those likely to engage in NCCE programming, as they represent the general workforce. The response rate for gender is skewed heavily to female respondents. Females represent nearly three out of four total responses. Since this research does not focus on gender differences, the percentage disparity should not impact the study findings. Finally, the current employment status of participants is provided. Unsurprisingly, based on the nature of NCCE programming, participation comes directly from those engaged in the workforce. Similar to thoughts on gender response, employment status is not a factor under consideration in this research.

Table 3

Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Baseline Characteristic	*n*	%
Age Groups (Independent Variable)		
18–34	30	27.3
35–44	38	34.5
45–54	28	25.5
55 and over	14	12.7
Total	110	100.0
Gender		
Male	30	27.3
Female	80	72.7
Total	110	100.0
Current Employment Status		
Employed full time	100	90.9
Employed part-time	1	0.9
Retired	4	3.6
Student	2	1.8
Other	2	1.8
Unemployed, not looking for work	1	0.9
Total	110	100.0

In general, the study participants are consistent with NCCE's target audience. NCCE is most often focused on providing professional skill development and training that supports adult learners in their professional lives. The participants' general demographic characteristics suggest that the audience's makeup is conducive to a meaningful interpretation of the influences on adult

NCCE choices. Delving into additional details about the participants, the following tables and commentary around participant characteristics and survey responses are designed to highlight descriptive statistics for the independent variables used in analyzing the research hypothesis. Specifically, additional demographic characteristics, including household income, parent/guardian status, age, and education, are examined with individual choice characteristics and factors that influence choice, including participation reason, who paid, and top factors that influenced choice.

Household income, as shown in Table 4, is one of the demographic characteristics that is expected to play a role in influencing choice. The expectation is that the important choice factors will change as income increases. Of note with the respondent set is that 80% of the respondents' household income is higher than the median household income for Georgia, which is $71,355 (*Georgia Data USA*, n.d.).

Table 4

Household Income (Independent Variable)

Income	*n*	%
Less than $49,999	8	7.3
$50,000–$74,999	16	14.5
$75,000–$99,999	19	17.3
$100,000–$149,999	27	24.5
$150,000–$199,999	23	20.9
$200,000 or more	13	11.8
Prefer not to answer	4	3.6
Total	110	100.0

A factor thought to influence choice in NCCE that has little prior academic research in the higher education context is that of parent/guardian status, as shown in Table 5. Parent/guardian status is understandably not frequently studied for traditional higher education learners due to the generalized age, timing, and situational norms for the traditional-aged higher education population. However, for adult learners participating in NCCE, it is believed that the demands levied against individuals with dependents/children will heavily influence choice in NCCE, as they have time and potentially economic demands that may not be present in other populations. A strong distribution of those living with and without children exists through multiple segments.

Table 5

Parent/Guardian Status (Independent Variable)

Status	*n*	%
Couple living with child/dependent	53	48.2
Couple with adult children	19	17.3
Couple childless	14	12.7
Single childless	9	8.2
Single with adult children	8	7.3
Single living with child/dependent	7	6.4
Total	110	100.0

While nearly 80% of respondents share having children/guardianship when compared to those actively living and caring for those children, adults living without children increase to 45.5% of the responding population. This differentiation is done because it is theorized that the direct influence of children at home is likely to impact an adult learner's choice.

The distribution of education found in the responding population in Table 6 does not reflect Georgia's educational attainment level, as seen below in Figure 1. The participant pool represents a demographic with much higher educational attainment rates when compared with the state attainment levels with 52.7% holding a Master’s degree and 12.7% holding a doctorate/professional degree when in the state these populations are represented by statewide 3% of individuals hold a Doctorate/professional degree and 7% with a Master’s degree. While the responses do not represent the State, there is an assumption that as the educational level changes, the influences on choice will also change. During the analysis, associate degrees and some college/no degrees are combined into a newly formed category of less than an undergraduate degree. This provides a larger category to allow for a more meaningful analysis.

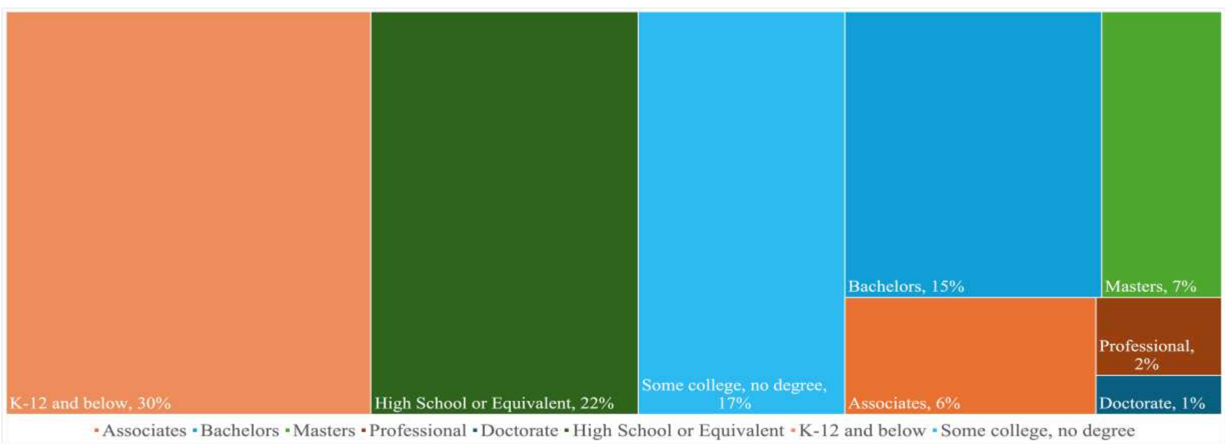
Table 6

Highest Educational Attainment (Independent Variable)

Education Level	*n*	%
Master's Degree	58	52.7
Bachelor's Degree	32	29.1
Ph.D./ Professional Degree	14	12.7
Some College Credit, No Degree	3	2.7
Associate's Degree	3	2.7
Total	110	100.0

Figure 1

Education in Georgia 2023



Note. Adapted from Data USA: Georgia, n.d. https://datausa.io/profile/geo/georgia#education

The motivation for someone to participate in an NCCE program can be varied. Studies suggest that adult learners are motivated by a myriad of factors when they choose to participate in a program (Callender & Jackson, 2008; Cho et al., 2008; Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2016; Sojkin et al., 2012). In the context of the research study, participants are asked two separate questions about the reason behind their participation. The results of these questions can be found in Table 7. The first question surrounding motivation is whether participation was employer-mandated. Nearly one in three participants is found to have participated based on an employer mandate.

Table 7

Participation Reason

Reason	*n*	%
Employer Mandated Training (Independent Variable)		
Yes	34	30.9
No	76	69.1
Total	110	100.0
Personal Why Participate		
Professional advancement in current field	26	23.6
Personal interest in the subject	17	15.5
Employer/job-mandated training	17	15.5
Improve current job performance	16	14.5
To earn additional certificate/certification	12	10.9
To maintain licensure/certification	11	10.0
Improving outlook on the future of job search	4	3.6
Other	3	2.7
Peers participating	2	1.8
Get a job in a new field	2	1.8
Family expectations/opinions	0	0.0
Total	110	100.0

Enriching the conversation around motivation, participants are also asked to respond to the motivational factor behind participation. Participants are asked to select from a series of 11 options, with the 11th option provided as *other* as a choice. Interestingly, only one option, family expectation/opinion, is not selected as a reason for participation in an NCCE program. This is interesting, as this is a common reason for participation in higher education (D. W. Chapman, 1981; Sheth, 2021). From a response perspective, professional development ranked as the most common reason for participation at 23%. While the highest percentages are highly distributed, the reasons for participation help to highlight the diversity of influences on NCCE learners, including those not commonly found in research on higher education choice.

Contextually, looking at the varied reasons behind participation provides an interesting segue for future research and exploration. For this study, a simplified analysis focuses on the difference between those participating in programs of their own free will and those who are mandated to participate. Although a simplified analysis, with little known about choice influences in NCCE, starting with mandated versus personal participation rationales should provide insights into how likely the why behind someone's participation may influence the most important choice factors.

How a course is paid is of considerable interest to this research, with a hypothesis explicitly focused on the relationship. Participants were asked to share how their NCCE program was paid for, and the responses are dominated by those whose courses were sponsored by their employers. In Table 8, the data shows that two payment methods are predominantly used to pay for programs. Accounting for nearly 62% of the valid responses, employer-paid makes up the majority of how courses were paid. With around 27%, self-funded payment represents the only other response with a meaningful number of responses.

Table 8

Who Paid for the Training (Independent Variable)

Variable	*n*	%
Employer	68	61.8
Self-paid - non loan	30	27.3
Other	6	5.5
No Cost/Free	2	1.8
Sponsored by an external source	2	1.8
Borrowed money from public/private entity	1	0.9
Military/workforce board	1	0.9
Total	110	100.0

This research focuses on understanding the relationship between the independent variables of individuals participating in NCCE and the dependent variables of choice represented by programmatic/institutional factors that drive individuals to select an NCCE program. Survey respondents are presented with seventeen option factors commonly found in the literature that have previously been shown to influence learner choice when selecting a program in the higher education spectrum. The survey asks participants to choose their top three reasons, with no order identified between them, for the factors that most influenced their participation. Presented with two frequency statistics in Table 9, each category is provided with both a percentage of total selections and a percentage of cases. The response percentage is the statistic that shows the percentage of times it was selected. The percentage of case statistics highlights the frequency at which a respondent selected the option. Between the two factors, the percentage of cases helps to illuminate the factor's relative importance to choose in NCCE as it shows the percentage of people who selected the item. With participants having the option of choosing three choice influences, looking at the response percentage alone does not adequately highlight the scaled relevance of response choices based on the number of people who selected the choice. Both response percentages are provided. It is important to note that no difference in response relevance is represented through either the response percent or the percent of case statistics. Both percentages are shared to provide readers with multiple points of review and analysis.

Figure 2

% of Total Responses

$$\% \ of \ Total \ Responses \ = \left(\frac{Number \ of \ Responses \ for \ a \ Choice}{Total \ Responses}\right) \times 100$$

Figure 3

% of Respondents Who Selected Choice

$$\% \; of \; Resondents \; Selected = \left(\frac{Number \; of \; Respondents \; Selecting \; a \; Choice}{Total \; Number \; of \; Responses}\right) \times 100$$

Four factors stand out as categories with the shared highest influence on choice based on their representative selected frequencies. The top four most selected factors that influenced choice include delivery method (41.8%), program of study (40.0%), program flexibility (38.2%), and cost of participation (36.4%). Nearly all factors show some margin of influence in NCCE choice, although the public image of the institution (5.5%), distance from home (7.3%), teaching reputation (9.1%), and personal perception of the institution (9.1%) hold lower overall choice frequency than the other options. It is interesting to note that while distance from home did not represent a high selection frequency compared to other options, location, a similar theme holds a higher frequency selection (20.9%).

Table 9

Frequency Analysis Choice Factor Selection

Institutional Choice Factors	*n*	% of Total Responses	% of Respondents Who Selected
Delivery method	46	12.30	41.80
Program of study	44	11.80	40.00
Program flexibility	42	11.30	38.20
Cost of participation	40	10.70	36.40
Program schedule	38	10.20	34.50
Location	23	6.20	20.90
Quality of instructors	20	5.40	18.20
Information supplied by institution	18	4.80	16.40
Academic reputation of institution	17	4.60	15.50
Employment outlook post-participation	17	4.60	15.50
Previous engagement with institution	15	4.00	13.60
Networking opportunities	13	3.50	11.80
Personal perception of institution	10	2.70	9.10
Teaching reputation	10	2.70	9.10
Distance from home	8	2.10	7.30
Public image of university	6	1.60	5.50
Other	6	1.60	5.50

The breadth of options available for participants to select as factors influencing choice presents a picture of important factors and those that are not, at least from an overarching perspective. The variety of choices also complicates the statistical analysis due to the number of options that statistical models are forced to review. The complicated and robust nature of the responses predicated an adapted examination of the factors for hypothesis testing. From the list of seventeen choice factors, a statistical average was established for both the percentage of total selections and the percentage of respondents selected. The rationale behind this decision was that factors with low response selection would have response numbers too low to support meaningful statistical analysis. Additionally, the resulting top 50% of responses represent the most commonly selected by participants. The statistical averages resulted in 5.89% and 19.96%, respectively. Multinomial regression modeling is undertaken to examine the potential relationship between factors for all factors falling equal to or above the statistical average. Six factors, including delivery method, program of study, program flexibility, cost of participation, program schedule, and location, all fell above the mean response average and were thus analyzed.

Test of Hypotheses

The purpose of this study is to assess the relationship between these independent variables and the six choice factors that fall above the mean in response percentage, as discussed in the preceding section. The Chi-square test for independence assesses the potential relationship between the independent and dependent variables. For each hypothesis, outcomes are evaluated via the Chi-squared test with a significance alpha value of 0.05.

The forthcoming series of binary logistic regression analyses are based on the demographic characteristics of respondents, independent variables, and the selection of choice factors that influenced choice at the point of purchase, dependent variables. Survey respondents are asked to select three factors they deem most important at the point of sale. Due to an oversight in the survey setup, respondents were mandated to select three choice options, but they were not limited to three selections. A total of 19 respondents selected more than three options. A series of binary logistic analyses are conducted after removing these respondents from the analysis to assess the potential impact of these additional responses.

The overall findings result in slightly different outcomes. Although the two analyses resulted in changes, it was determined to continue using the original response data, with $n = 110$ maintained. The decision to keep the original data collection is largely driven by the fact that although some chose to select more than three responses, the choices they selected are still important factors in their decision criteria. The data run on the reduced numbers will be provided as a footnote highlighting any differences in statistical findings for reference. The benefit of sharing the dual response outcomes is that it highlights the benefit to models by filtering responses, thus improving the overall quality of the output analysis.

The following sections present a statistical analysis of the three quantitative research questions, which examine the relationship between six dependent variables including delivery method, program of study, program flexibility, cost of participation, program schedule, and location, and the independent variables of participant age, income, prior education, child at home, mandated training, and who paid. The three research questions include the following. Do differences in demographic characteristics influence choice? Specifically, this research examines the relationship between household income/SES, age, having a child at home, and prior education. The following research question examines the potential relationship between mandated program participation and self-determined participation.

Data Consolidation and Category Mergers

To address low representation in certain categorical groups and allow the researcher to undertake meaningful statistical analysis through the regression analyses. Data consolidation was undertaken for categories with low representation in certain categorical groups: the following section outlines the combined data points and the rationale behind the mergers.

Demographic Category Consolidation

After reviewing the demographic statistics included in the inferential statistical analysis, several categorical groups do not provide a statistically significant population or a representative group, or meaningful analysis. A series of new grouped categories was developed to account for these limitations and ultimately improve analytical power. The following bullets highlight these changes.

- Income Categories: The two lowest income brackets are combined to establish a new category representing respondents with incomes less than $49,999, addressing the issue of low representation in these individual categories.
- Educational Attainment (Table 10): Educational achievement below a bachelor's degree (high school diploma, some college with no degree, and associate's degree) is consolidated into a single "Less than a bachelor's degree" category. It is acknowledged that an associate's degree constitutes a degree credential. However, the low representation (2.6% of the sample) does not support a meaningful analysis. The researcher moves it to the newly formed less than a bachelor's degree reported grouping.

Table 10

Combined Highest Educational Attainment

Original	Merged/Measured
High School Diploma	Less than a Bachelor's Degree
Some College No Degree	Less than a Bachelor's Degree
Associate's degree	Less than a Bachelor's Degree
Bachelor's Degree	Bachelor's Degree
Master's Degree	Master's Degree
Ph.D./ Professional Degree	Ph.D./ Professional Degree

Parental Status, shown in Table 11: The responses received for parental status are not unbalanced in a way that combining groups is necessary based on low response rates. Due to the exploratory nature of the research, the researcher determined that a simplified analysis factoring current childcare responsibilities versus non-current childcare requirements supports a meaningful exploration. Supporting the simplified analysis, the original response categories for parental status are recoded into two groups: those with children/dependents at home and those without.

Table 11

Combined Parental Status

Original	Merged/Measured
Single Childless	No (Child at Home)
Couple Childless	No (Child at Home)
Single w/ Adult Children	No (Child at Home)
Couple w/Adult Children	No (Child at Home)
Single w/ Child/Dependent at Home	Yes (Child at Home)
Couple with Child/Dependent at Home	Yes (Child at Home)

Payment Source, Table 12: Due to low response numbers in several funding categories (military/workforce board, borrowed money, and sponsored categories), responses are consolidated into two primary categories: *Self-Paid* and *Non-Self-Paid*. The Self-Paid category includes non-loan self-payment and borrowed money, while Non-Self-Paid encompasses employer-paid, military/workforce, and other external funding sources. Responses indicating no-cost are excluded from modeling due to extremely low representation and lack of fit with either category.

Table 12

Combined Groups Who Paid

Original	Merged/Measured
Employer Paid	Non-Self-Paid
Military/Workforce	Non-Self-Paid
Other	Non-Self-Paid
Self-Paid/Non-Loan	Self-Paid
Borrowed Money	Self-Paid

Rationale and Limitations

The decision to group categories from the survey results was made in an effort to create meaningful analysis. Several categories resulted in low distribution levels, resulting in low numbers from which to perform the statistical analysis. With the low numbers, it was determined that the best course of action to ensure robust statistical analysis could be undertaken was to combine the categories with low frequencies with other categories that, when combined, still maintain the integrity of the original categories. The categories were grouped logically, and the newly combined categories represent reasonable groups. The researcher does acknowledge the impact of combining categories on the research. However, given the low frequency of responses and the desire for a substantive statistical analysis, the decision to combine was undertaken.

Findings

The results from the logistic regression analysis examining the impact of an individual's background characteristics on adult learner choice in NCCE are presented in multiple tables. Through the analysis, an investigation is undertaken to explore how various situational and demographic factors influence six key choice factors: delivery method, program of study, program flexibility, cost of participation, program schedule, and location, which have been identified as likely key influencers of choice in NCCE.

When examining how an adult learner's background characteristics influence their preference for delivery method, Table 13-Model 1 shows two statistically significant negative relationships in the independent variables of age and who paid. The negative statistical relationship associated with age ($\beta = -0.50$, $p = 0.04$) suggests that as age increases, the importance put upon the delivery method in the choice process becomes less of a priority. The findings in Model 1 support Hypothesis 1a, which stipulates that the importance of choice factors will vary across different age brackets. In addition, a statistically significant negative relationship exists between the delivery method ($\beta = -1.03$, $p = 0.04$) and how the course was paid, supporting the expected outcomes for Hypothesis 3. The results indicate that those who self-pay for courses are less likely to prioritize delivery method when selecting a program of study than their externally funded counterparts. As a model, the delivery method did not reach the predetermined significance level of $\alpha = 0.05$, but demonstrated marginal significance at $p < 0.1$ ($X^2 = 11.78$, df=6, $p = 0.07$), suggesting that the background characteristics constitute a meaningful predictor of delivery method, with age and payment source providing significant influence.

Table 13

Logistic Regression: Predictors of Noncredit Education Choice Factors (Models 1–3)

Predictor	Model 1: Delivery Method	Model 2: Program of Study	Model 3: Program Flexibility
Age (categorical)	-0.50 (.04)*	-0.10 (.67)	-0.21 (.36)
Income	0.04 (.78)	-0.07 (.63)	-0.04 (.82)
Prior Education	0.52 (.10)	0.11 (.70)	-0.09 (.76)
Child at Home	-0.55 (.24)	-0.57 (.21)	0.25 (.59)
Employer Mandated	0.19 (.69)	0.13 (.79)	0.91 (.05)*
Who Paid	-1.03 (.03)*	0.70 (.14)	0.12 (.80)
Constant	3.08 (.12)	0.09 (.94)	0.39 (.77)
Model χ^2	11.78	4.80	6.55
Nagelkerke R^2	0.14	0.06	0.08
N	106	106	106

Note. Values are presented as coefficients, with p-values in parentheses.
*$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$

Table 13-Model 2 explores the relationship between the program of study and adult learner background characteristics and situations. The model resulted in a lack of statistical significance between the factors. The findings indicate that background characteristics are a poor predictor for the program of study. Though the program of study does not suggest statistical significance, Table 13-Model 3 examining program flexibility resulted in a positive statistically significant relationship between employer/job-mandated participation and program flexibility (β

= 0.91, p = 0.05)[1]. The findings support Hypothesis 2 and indicate that individuals participating in mandated training are more likely to prioritize program flexibility than those taking classes independently. Considering that an employer mandates the training, it is logical for an individual to find a program that works within their working schedule so as not to impact their lives outside of work.

A strong negative relationship between employer-mandated training and cost ($\beta = -1.50$, $p = 0.01$) is presented in Table 14-Model 4 [2]. The findings indicate that those whose programs are paid for by an employer are less concerned with the program's cost when compared to those who self-direct their training. The findings again support Hypothesis 2, whereby choice factors were expected to be valued differently when the independence associated with choice was potentially impacted by employer intervention. With the reality that the employer could very likely be covering the cost of the course itself, the findings make logical sense. Overall, Model 4 is one of two statistically significant models (χ^2=13.03, df=6, p=0.04), strengthening the likelihood that the findings are not based on random chance[3].

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[1] Note The reduced model results in a slightly different outcome changing the significance factor from just within the frame for statistical significance at p= 0.05 to significance at p <0.1 at (β = 0.95., p = 0.06). The similar results suggest consistency of the outcome.

[2] Note. The reduced statistical model decreased the statistical significance from p=.008 to p=.011 still maintain statistical significance.

[3] Note. The reduced statistical model reduced the overall model significance below the statistically significant threshold but it remains significant at p<0.10 (χ^2=11.07, df=6, p=0.09)

Table 14

Logistic Regression: Predictors of Noncredit Education Choice Factors (Models 4–6)

Predictor	Model 4: Cost of Participation	Model 5: Program Schedule	Model 6: Location)
Age (Categorical)	-0.11(.65)	0.12 (.62)	-0.06 (.82)
Income	-0.07 (.66)	0.11 (.53)	0.14 (.44)
Prior Education	-0.20 (.53)	-0.15 (.64)	-0.47 (.17)
Child at Home	-0.09 (.85)	0.85 (.09)	-0.39 (.48)
Employer Mandated	-1.50 (.01)**	-1.37 (.01)*	0.55 (.32)
Who Paid	0.46 (.34)	-1.04 (.06)	0.13 (.81)
Constant	1.05 (.46)	-1.20 (.42)	-0.50 (.75)
Model Significance	13.03*	13.32*	2.95
Nagelkerke R^2	0.16	0.16	0.043
Observations	106	106	106

Note. Values are presented as coefficients, with p-values in parentheses.
*p < 0.05, **p < 0.01

Employer-mandated training emerged as a statistically significant predictor of program schedule. Highlighted in Table 14-Model 5, employer-mandated training engagement has a statistically significant negative relationship with program schedule ($\beta = -1.37$, $p = 0.01$). The statistical analysis indicates that those who participate in programs mandated by their employer/job are less concerned with the program schedule than those who elect to participate independently. Additionally, individuals who self-pay showed a significant negative relationship at $p < 0.10$ with concern for the program schedule ($\beta = -1.04$, $p = 0.06$)[4]. An interesting finding that may point to the prioritization of the educational opportunity itself and, thus, the individual, once determined to take the program, is willing to sacrifice the schedule for the program.

In addition to the marginal relationship for payment method, having children at home also showed marginal statistical significance ($\beta = 0.85$, $p = 0.09$), with a positive relationship

[4] Note. The reduced model moved the statistical significance for self-pay from significant at $p < .10$ at $p=0.06$ to significant at ($\beta = 1.58$, $p < 0.01$). The reduced model strengthens the connection between the factors.

valuing the program schedule[5]. These findings make sense, as parents must balance family obligations, work, other adult responsibilities, and the class when considering what program works for them.

No statistically significant relationships were found between the background characteristics and location as a preference, as shown in Table 14-Model 6. Additionally, the model itself lacked significance. The findings, although surprising, as the frequency of selection for location was above the mean, may also be indicative of the greater importance of other factors. Program mandates and limited choices of program locations may negate the significance of this factor as independently important.

Summary of Quantitative Findings

Chapter 4 presents data analysis and analysis of the quantitative results from survey participants, and reports on the findings of the hypotheses presented in Chapter 3. The chapter provides a detailed recap of the procedure to prepare the data for analysis. It includes an outline of survey questions, a review of survey participants, an outline of the statistical procedures taken, a robust overview of the descriptive statistics associated with participants, and an analysis of the research findings. The reported findings are based on a final participant count of 110 usable survey responses.

The chapter begins with a review of the descriptive statistics associated with the study participants. The review focuses on providing a detailed picture of the adult learner population that was sought as part of the study. The demographics help to highlight the diverse characteristics at play with adult learners, focusing on characteristics that are not commonly

[5] Note. The reduced model strengthened the relationship for having children at home from significant at $p < .10$ ($p = 0.9$) to conventional significance at ($\beta = 1.577$, $p = 0.015$).

studied in the course of consumer choice in higher education. Factors highlighting this information include parental status, employer-mandated training, program funding, previous education, and age. Although descriptive, the data provided provides key contextual information supporting the statistical analysis conducted in the chapter.

The frequency data collected on choice factors in Table 9 is an important component leveraged to support the statistical analysis. Using the data in the table, a statistical average was generated for the frequency selection. The newly generated mean determined which of the 17 choice factors would be incorporated into the paper's statistical modeling. The results determined six factors to be modeled through binary logistic regression modeling: program delivery, program of study, program flexibility, program cost, schedule, and location.

Next, the chapter presented the results of six binary logistic regression models, which examined the relationship between background characteristics and choice factors in NCCE. Specifically, the study examined if the relationship between demographic/background characteristics (age, income, prior education, a child at home, employer-mandated training, and payment source) resulted in the ability to significantly predict whether an adult learner would select one of the six factors of choice: program delivery, program of study, program flexibility, program cost, schedule, and location.

The statistical analysis results are mixed with only the expected outcomes. As revealed in Table 15, only part of the study's hypotheses were supported. The results highlight the complexities involved in the decision-making process as adults navigate a variety of background characteristics when deciding which NCCE option is right for them. Four demographic factors were analyzed as part of hypothesis 1. The findings resulted in only one demographic factor, age, that resulted in statistical significance. For age, the delivery method was the only statistically significant factor. The findings that income and prior education were not statistically significant with any of the choice factors were surprising and countered the study's expectations. Although not fully supported, having a child at home was significant at $p < .10$ with the program schedule.

Table 15

Hypothesis Recap

Hypothesis	Background Characteristic	Supported (Y/N)	Supporting Model
H1	Demographic Characteristics		
H1a	Age	Y	Model 1
H1b	Income	N	NA
H1c	Prior Education	N	NA
H1d	Child at Home	Partially	Model 5
H2	Employer Mandated	Y	Model 3, 4, 5
H3	Who Paid	Y	Model 1

Emerging as the most reliable predictor of choice, employer-mandated training (H2) exhibited statistical significance with three choice factors: program flexibility, program schedule, and delivery method. The results from the analysis suggest the significant influence that employer-mandated training has on the choice process for adult learners. The final hypothesis, H3, examined the impact of who paid for the course on choice. The findings resulted in a statistically significant relationship between who pays, and the delivery method of the course.

The diversified findings and partially supported findings are surprising and, at the same time, unsurprising, given the complexity of the factors that influence choice. The results suggest that employer-sponsored training over traditional demographic characteristics is the most important choice factor. It also highlights that choice is complicated and must be examined through a nuanced lens. In the next chapter, we continue to look at choice but do so through the lens of practitioners in the field. The next chapter provides the qualitative findings from interviews with directors and associate directors of continuing education in the field. The qualitative chapter focuses on capturing the perspective of the industry leaders and connecting them to the findings from this chapter. The final chapter will present a detailed discussion of the findings of Chapters 4 and 5, the practical implications, and future research recommendations.

Chapter V

Qualitative Results

Introduction

The primary objective of this chapter is to explore practitioners' perceptions of choice influences. Supplementary to this will be an assessment of the organizational characteristics representing the NCCE leaders to assess if commonalities exist amongst response perceptions based on a variety of institutional characteristics, including employee count, research tools leveraged, the number of learners served, target audience, employee experience levels, and other organizational characteristics. These commonalities will ultimately determine if specific organizational characteristics support an aligned understanding of the factors most relevant to learners in the choice process.

The researcher interviewed seven leaders of noncredit continuing education units within the University System of Georgia. The interviews sought to explore the perceptions of noncredit leaders as to what institutional/programmatic characteristics and individual learner demographic characteristics are most important when evaluating choices for NCCE learners. The semi-structured interviews facilitated an organic conversation between the NCCE leaders and the researcher. The organic nature supported an opportunity for experts in the field to expand on pertinent issues and expand where appropriate (McGrath et al., 2019).

In this chapter, the qualitative data gathered through the interviews with industry leaders sought to provide insight into leaders' perceptions in the context of the quantitative analysis conducted in the previous chapter.

Method

Study Participants

Participants in the study were selected using a purposeful sampling strategy. Purposeful sampling is a common strategy for information-rich research exploration (Patton, 2002). To effectively study perceptions of NCCE practitioners and what they believe influences choice for adult learners, the qualitative study population must have meaningful experience and insights into the field of study. The selection criteria for participation included the requirement of working in a public institute of higher education in Georgia and that participants must carry a role equivalent to a director or associated director of an NCCE unit.

As shown previously in Table 1, the following provides descriptive statistics for the institutions represented by participants in the qualitative interviews. Five of the seven interviewees were female, representing 71% of respondents, and all represented the equivalent of a director/assistant director of NCCE at their institution. The institutions represented by candidates are located throughout the state, including west central, southeast, central, west, and northwest Georgia, and constitute a mixture of urban, suburban, and rural institutions. Of special note, two institutions have multiple respondents. One institution experienced a leadership change during the interview process, and the incoming leader was interviewed along with the outgoing leader. Additionally, one intuition had two director-level participants engage in the process. Collectively, five USG institutions are represented through the interviews of the fifteen institutions with formal NCCE offices and programs.

The organization's marketing habits were assessed beyond the unit's basic institutional characteristics. Interviewees were asked to respond to the question, "Currently, do you differentiate your marketing/messaging based on any of these factors (demographics/choice/Institutional)?". The reason behind the question is twofold. First, the body of this research is loosely affiliated with marketing and communication. One byproduct of this study will be information that supports future marketing and communication efforts. However, for these outcomes to be leveraged, fully differentiated marketing is necessary. That brings us to the second purpose of the question: to assess the readiness/existing practices within the organizations this research seeks to support.

Table 16 shares the market research approaches and differentiated marketing practices reported by the practitioners across 5 organizations. Although only reporting on the five organizations represented all participants were asked the same information in case a different interpretation of the representative facts was presented. In this case, consistent reporting was provided by participants that overlap organizationally. The findings reveal significant variation in the sophistication and research methodology employed between the providers.

Table 16

Marketing Practices Participant Organizations

Organization	Participant	Program Market Research	Differentiated Marketing/ Communication	How
1	1	External	Yes	Postal Codes (SES), Age (youth/adult)
2	2, 7	External	No	NA
3	3, 5	Internal	No	NA
4	4	Internal	Yes	Employer vs. Individual
5	6	External	Yes	Robust Differentiation (Look alike audience profiles: SES, Age, Parental Status, Education, etc.)

Three organizations (60%) utilize external market research resources, while two leverage internal capabilities. However, leveraging external resources in program market research does not necessarily result in the use of differentiated marketing efforts. Three organizations (60%) currently engage in any form of differentiated marketing activities, with sophistication levels varying considerably. These range from basic segmentation using postal codes and age categories to comprehensive audience profiles incorporating socioeconomic, age, education, and other look-alike profile characteristics to differentiate marketing across audiences.

Data Collection

Interviews were conducted online through Qualtrics, a video conferencing tool. With consent from the interviewee, audio recordings were taken for each interview using the platform's built-in capabilities. Each interview began with reading a prepared statement provided by Valdosta State University's IRB, found in Appendix A, before the beginning of each interview. Participants had to acknowledge that they understood the prepared statement and were comfortable proceeding with the interview. To ensure consistency, the same interview protocol was used during each interview. Interviews were one-on-one between the researcher and the interviewee.

An interview guide (Appendix C) was developed and used to support the semi-structured interviews. Combined close-ended questions with simple response requirements and open-ended in-depth questions were used. The interview guide was structured according to previous research to provide ample time to explore the most relevant questions in the study (Adams, 2015).

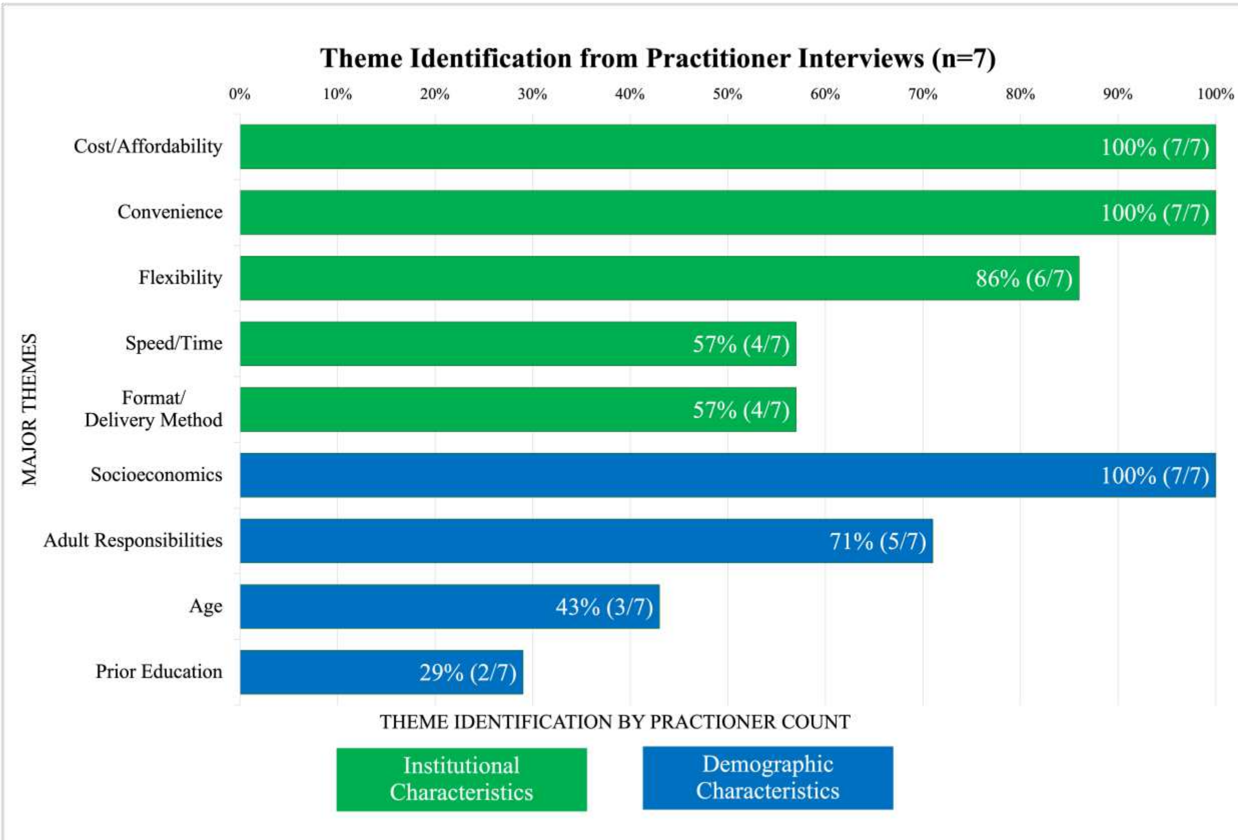
Data Analysis

Audio recordings derived from the interviews were transcribed through the online transcription service Otter AI. Upon transcription, the researcher thoroughly reviewed the developed transcripts to ensure verbatim transcripts were created. Transcripts were analyzed using the cleaned transcriptions and thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a method of research whereby patterns and themes are identified from a data set, providing insights into shared meanings and experiences to the researcher (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Following Braun and Clarke's (2012) six-step process for thematic analysis, the researcher familiarized himself with the data, generated initial codes, sought themes, reviewed themes as a recursive process, named/defined the themes, and finished by producing formal written analytical outputs of the themes and codes developed through the process.

Through the initial coding process, a total of fifty codes were yielded. Initial codes were then subsequently organized into themes and sub-themes. Themes and sub-themes were refined through an iterative process between the researcher's identification of themes and leveraging thematic identification supported through the use of AtlasTI. Selective codes were developed to narrow the analysis. The selective codes created larger categories with similarly linked concepts incorporated together. This process was repeated several times before the finalization of the themes that accurately reflected the sentiments shared by the research participants. Figure 4 below shows the final categories identified with the percentage and count of practitioner identification. For this research, the identified codes focused on concepts related to institutional/programmatic influences on choice and the demographic characteristics thought to have the most significant connection to choice in NCCE.

Figure 4

Practitioner Theme Identification



Findings

Factors Influencing Purchasing Choice.

Previous studies have shown the complexities involved in choice in higher education (Cho et al., 2008; Fernandez, 2010; Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2016; Kotler et al., 2017; Zafar, 2013). Due to the lack of research focused on NCCE choice, little is understood about the influences of choice in the field. Though research may lack in the space, there could be reasons beyond simply not having a focused research agenda, including the potential that the practitioners in the field are in touch with the influences, making research unnecessary.

Broken into two distinct categories of influences, interviewees were asked to provide insights into the perceptions of the individual demographic and institutional characteristics that influence consumer choice in the NCCE space. The semi-structured interviews were designed to allow the interviewee to navigate their perceptions of the influences through an open and thought-filled conversation. As will be seen in the nature of some of the shared comments. The responses provided by interviewees weaved in and out between professional perceptions and their own personal narratives. The personal influence on their perception makes for an unexpected outcome and is discussed further in later sections of the paper.

Programmatic/Institutional Factors of Choice.

The participants were asked what programmatic/institutional factors they believed were most important to influencing choice at the point of purchase for adult learners in NCCE programs based on their work and perceptions. Those who needed clarification or guidance on what constituted programmatic/institutional factors were given generic guidance from institutional factors previously explored in the literature, including cost, location (Marandet & Wainwright, 2010; Reay et al., 2002), programmatic offerings, schedule, and institutional facilities (Fernandez, 2010).

One important caveat given to the candidates to support their evaluation was to assess the influences, assuming that the program/content area had already been decided upon. The researcher recognizes that the choice of program topic is an important component of NCCE choice, but it falls out of the scope of this research. Thematically, two primary conceptual themes arose as institutional/programmatic influences on choice: convenience and affordability/cost. In addition to the two primary themes, a few subthemes were identified, including the brand's role and the community's influence.

Convenience of the Program.

The predominant theme to emerge from the interviews was the concept of convenience. Convenience as a theme bore out of a series of subthemes, including flexibility, work-life balance, family obligations, speed, time, and format, and are representative of the six classes of convenience identified in the literature, including time, effort, appropriateness, portability, avoidance of unpleasantry, and accessibility are recognized (Farquhar & Rowley, 2009).

As a theme, the role of convenience in choice is supported through previous research findings. These include the role of stress and time pressures on undergraduate students that push them to focus on the elements of convenience to ensure program completion (Sanford et al., 2017) and the influences that age, working hours, education, and lifestyle variables, including role overload, time pressures, and work devotion, can have on an individual's orientation towards convenience in choice (Farquhar & Rowley, 2009).

Flexibility.

The pressures and responsibilities of life for an adult learner were a common theme echoed throughout the interview process. Taking varying paths to describe the impact of work, family, and other pressures on adult learners led to the importance of program flexibility as a key component of choice for adult learners. In this context, flexibility refers to a multitude of factors, including the program's design and the ability of individuals to fit a program within the confines of their lives. This supports previous research where students with parental responsibilities and families consider a wide array of considerations in their decisions because of the responsibilities outside the educational environment (Marandet & Wainwright, 2010; Sojkin et al., 2012).

The demand for flexibility was highlighted in the context of work-life balance. The concept of work-life balance and flexibility was echoed from both the context of work and life balance. Participant 4 shared their experience regarding the importance of flexibility in the context of work responsibilities: "I know, if I wanted to go and do something right now, flexibility would be the key……I know I couldn't just attend a training during my day of eight to five…. I can't do it. I can't put aside the exact number of hours." Supporting this concept was Participant 1, who shared, "As you know, having a job influences choice… because to do all these things you have flexibility in your life." Participant 7 shared that differentiated employment statuses "like full-time working, not working, gainfully employed, ungainly employed" demand different flexibilities and will directly impact choice. As is seen through Participant 4's quote, personal narratives interweaving into the shared belief around what influences choice were common during the interview process. There is not necessarily anything wrong with this, as they are adults in the space, but it does highlight where personal experience may influence the respondents' perceptions in a way where their situational experiences are applied broadly to the audiences they serve whether representative or not.

The influence on adult learners extends beyond their work responsibilities. Respondents highlighted the role that flexibility plays in choice given familial obligations, supporting previous research findings on the influence adult responsibilities have on choice in adult learners. Participant 4 shared a sentiment echoed by others: "I just think a lot of it has to do with flexibility (Before starting a program). I have to come home and make supper and check on my wife. After that, I can start my program at night." Participant 6 highlighted this sentiment by recognizing that the familial role flexibility "makes it easier for me to sell the commitment to my family."

The role of family and work in the demand for flexibility is hard to overlook, as engagement in a program requires a time commitment that will inevitably take away from one or another of an adult learner's responsibilities. From an influence perspective, the "fit" within the adult responsibility construct is an important component of choice and is a factor that institutions can control through program delivery choices.

Format: Driven by Convenience.

A common theme that emerged from participant interviews was program format. Both in the context of preference and flexibility, the programmatic construct chosen by program administrators was highlighted in the thematic feedback from survey participants. As a controllable institutional, programmatic decision, respondents deemed the program delivery method an important factor of choice for adult learners. Supporting previous academic research, where it has been suggested that delivery format is potentially influenced by learning modality preference and the desire for flexibility that online learning provides on consumer choice (McPartlan et al., 2021) Participant 6 shared:

> "Personally, the first thing I look at is the format of the course. I'm going into an age and point in my life where I need to; I need to know how the format is delivered (to make work in life schedule). I need to know if it is live online. Is it working at my own pace? I need to know that I do not have to be somewhere physically."

The sentiments shared by Participant 6 reflect the real family and work responsibilities faced by adult learners, supporting previous studies that have suggested adult learners are influenced by the need for flexibility in learning so that they can engage in a program of study alongside their family responsibilities and employment (Bailey et al., 2015).

Echoed throughout the conversations, the connection between the accessibility of the program and the context of the program's delivery method was made. Participant 5 shared, when asked about the most important institutional choice factor, that "Accessibility is the most important factor" and that the accessibility question for learners is determined based on the delivery of the program, with learners asking, "Is the program online? What is the frequency?

And, if the program is in person, "What is the ease of getting there?". Practical questions asked by learners are part and parcel of adult learners who must navigate a host of personal and professional responsibilities when considering a format that supports their livelihood and needs.

Participant 4 shared, "What I see us doing through offering our online classes is supporting our adult learners with the flexibility part because they're really not coming to a class between nine to three, on Mondays and Tuesdays, for something like an HR certificate." Collectively, the preference for modality and the need for flexibility support falls within the construct of convenience as the concepts encapsulate appropriateness, where a product fits a consumer's needs, and accessibility, whereby proximity, flexibility, and availability are prioritized (Farquhar & Rowley, 2009).

Speed/Time.

In many of the same ways that program delivery elevated the concept of convenience, speed was a factor deemed relevant to choice by interview respondents. Participant 4 summed it up succinctly in sharing that "Adult learners look at the time commitment." This supports the idea that responsibilities that extend beyond the learning environment to include families and work; the speed with which programs are delivered and engaged was a commonly referenced theme. Participant 6: "I would pursue something fast and look at the program's format, price point, and length." Highlighting the stretched nature of adult learners, the need to proceed through an NCCE program with speed is not something you commonly find in the literature around higher education choices. The concept of the speed with which a program can be finished has not always been at the forefront of consideration in the traditional academic setting. Although not as historically important for traditional academic programs, the time commitment and speed are core considerations and a fixture in noncredit program designs, ensuring that the programs can meet the evolving needs of adult learners. It is important to note that time and speed are becoming commonplace considerations in higher education as the field adjusts to meet the demands of today's learners.

Adult learners are pulled in multiple directions, and moving through programs rapidly is of the utmost importance. Participant 7 may have succinctly shared that "learners only want to know how quickly they can get through that and earn that certification/ move through the program." It is easy to rationalize the importance of time and flexibility required for an adult learner. However, flexibility alone was not the only theme that emerged from the interviews.

Program Costs Role in Choice.

Participant 3, in a short yet impactful way, highlighted the second theme on the influences on choice in NCCE with the quote, "Is it worth my time and money?". While time has already been discussed in the context of convenience, the program's cost was of note to those interviewed. Supporting the findings of Connor and Dewson (2001), who found that older students are concerned about cost, along with multiple other researchers recognizing the importance of cost (Maringe, 2006) so too does the perception of the influence of cost resonate with the directors of NCCE interviewed. Cost was acknowledged by 100% of interviewees as a key factor in adult learner choice for NCCE programs.

Participant 6 said, "Price point is important to me when I'm looking." Participant 7 expanded on this, providing the relevance of price in choice and stating that "probably the price point is the determining factor" in choice. The cost of a program was nuanced and not strictly tied to concerns around the lowest price being significant. No cost was contextualized into its connection with outcome expectations. Supporting previous research, where outcome expectations (employment, income expectations, etc.) are noted as influences on choice

(Bonnema & Van Der Waldt, 2008; Maringe, 2006; Mbawuni & Nimako, 2015), the cost was also framed in what value is associated with the program.

Participant 2 shared, "Price, …. does it give them what they are working for. The price may not be the lowest…there is a range for where the program should be." The context in which the participant shares about price is that there is more to cost than the dollars alone. Instead of the money being important alone, it is the cost of the program coupled with the outcome expectations that are important in the decision process. Participants 6 and 4 shared similar sentiments around the cost of the program, highlighting the importance of the value proposition and outputs, with Participant 6 sharing, "Am I going to get something out?". This aligns with the concept of education as a service, in that learners invest in education for the theoretical benefits that can be recognized through education on jobs and lifestyles (Naudé & Ivy, 1999).

Demographic Influences on Choice

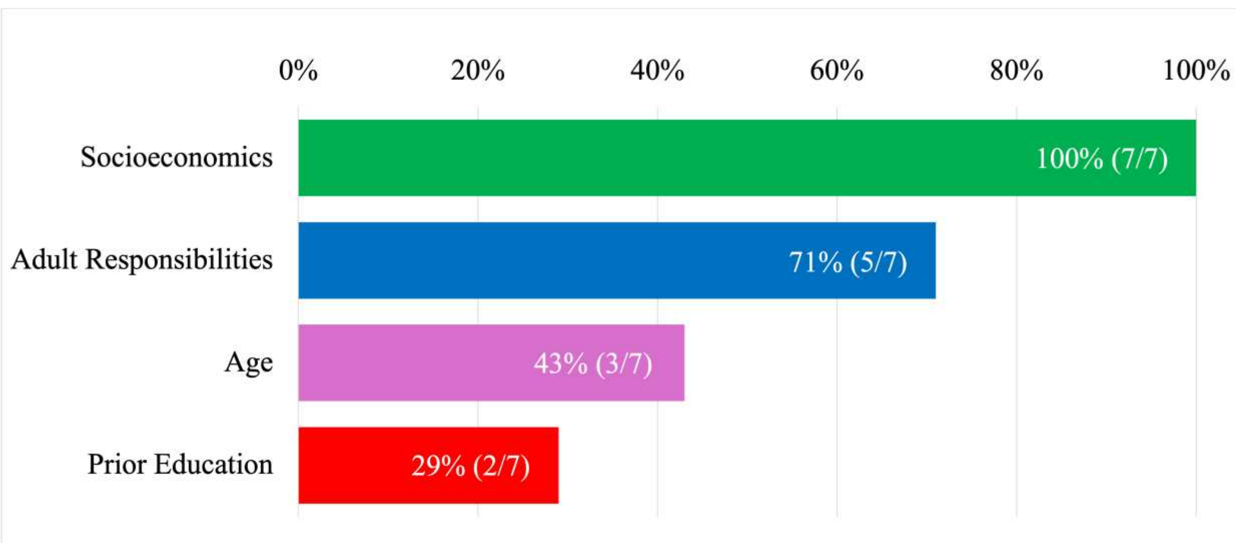
At its core, this research aims to identify what, if any, relationships exist between the demographic characteristics of the adult learners engaged in NCCE and the choice factors deemed most important when selecting an NCCE program. In the previous chapter, these factors were examined to develop a working understanding of the relationship between these factors. In part with the quantitative findings, this research seeks to understand the relationship between the findings and the existing perceptions of leaders within the state. Examining the relationship has been sought to assess how well industry leaders understand the influences and characteristics of the community they serve, when there is a lack of research on choice in the space.

The expectation is that a misalignment between the perception of practitioners will exist and thus support the importance of future exploration on the topic. However, since NCCE programs are built to meet the needs of working professionals, there is the possibility of a higher degree of alignment between practitioner perceptions and adult learner preference.

Figure 5 below highlights the individual demographic characteristics practitioners believe are most likely to influence choice in the field as found from the thematic analysis of the interviews. Four themes emerged from the interviews, including the concepts of adult responsibilities/work-life balance, age, socioeconomics, and the influences of prior education. In the following section, the qualitative findings from practitioners are shared, providing insights into their perceptions of why these factors are important in the NCCE choice context.

Figure 5

Demographic Themes Across Practitioner Responses



Adult Responsibilities.

Considering the pressures facing adult learners from a work and personal responsibility standpoint, it is unsurprising that interviewees commonly referenced work and family obligations. Although technically representing multiple demographic characteristics, including employment status and parental/familial obligations, the grouping of adult responsibilities contextually was intertwined through the interview responses. A limited body of research exists supporting the role of adult responsibilities on choice. Studies have suggested that an individual's working life and family obligations influence their need for programs that are easy to access and fit within their lifestyles (Harker et al., 2001).

Encapsulating the concepts of adult responsibility and work-life balance, the theme of the influence of adult responsibility was acknowledged by five of the seven interviewees. It is recognized that adult responsibilities are not a specific demographic characteristic that falls into a neat category that would generally be assessed in research. However, as a theme, it is believed that collective grouping represents a series of factors at play in the choice of adults that collectively and independently work together to influence choice for adult learners. The grouping of factors, which include parental responsibilities, family obligations, and employment, are traits shared by many adult learners, and all reasonably connect to generate influences in choice. In the quantitative analysis, these factors were broken down and examined in their independent states.

Collectively, the theme of adult responsibility centered around the concept of time. Time being limited, or obligated for adults, was thought to influence choice. Participant 4 shared a work-related example, "There's no time frame for crisis. I had to find a program that was after five." Participant 6, in the context of their work and personal life, shared:

"I'm at an age and point in my life where I need to know the program format. I need to know if the course meets in person, if I can work at my own pace, or if I need to be somewhere physically in person".

Adult learners typically face more constraints than traditional undergraduate students, with their additional responsibilities significantly influencing choice. Participant 4 highlighted this sentiment with "If I wanted to go and do something right now, flexibility would be the key," and Participant 7 provided partial context to the why being due to someone's working status either being "full-time working or not working," influence choice.

Contextual sentiments on the role that working and adult responsibilities have on them rang throughout the conversations with the interviewees. It came through their shared belief of the preference of working adults to do classes online or how parental scheduling and work put demands on adults that influence choice. These themes support previous academic findings where their employment and childcare highly influence mature students with dependent children (Marandet & Wainwright, 2010; Reay et al., 2002). The theme highlights the extended breadth of influences that adult learners face when selecting a program that is not often studied in the context of the traditional academic learner.

The Influence of Socioeconomics.

Supporting findings from research in the higher education choice literature, the impact of socioeconomic status/income level (SES) was a theme identified from the interviews. The influence of income emerged primarily from an economic standpoint of access and ability to pay, highlighting research on how SES influences choice in the context of cost and the ability to pay (Callender & Jackson, 2008). Although commonly referenced in the literature, the influence of SES related to the knowledge of programs influencing choice was not highlighted (Hemsley-Brown, 1999; Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2015).

The theme of the influence of SES in the noncredit space revolved around access and the ability to pay. Participant 1 shared that the impact of SES "Depends on the programming. Personal enrichment, a subset program set of NCCE, is going to attract (individuals with) higher SES with disposable income." In this case, the training she referred to is not always professionally oriented but does highlight the ability to pay for a program's role in the choice.

Participant 3 comments expand on this "It is going to matter about SES as what will come first. If money is tight, then cost first. SES, what is their capacity to take on programs?"

When not mandatory, the influence of the ability to pay is a reasonable concept to influence choice. In the previous section, the role that work-life/familial obligations play in choice, as well as the way that the cost of the program influences a family dynamic, is discussed.

"I think socioeconomics (is most important). I mean, clearly, it's sort of a root," the offerings of Participant 7 allude to the crux of the influences of NCCE. In a voluntary engagement such as NCCE, the ability to pay will play a critical role. Participant 2 shared, "Socioeconomics is at the top of the list for influencing demographics." Supporting the recognition of the role of economics comes in the form of a shared practice from one of the interviewees whose organization markets are based on postal carrier code. When asked why they chose to do this, they responded, "because those demographics indicate that maybe they would want to buy some professional education."

Taking the collective responses together, the perception of the interview respondents is that, in many ways, as SES changes, so should the relevant importance of cost. This would support previous research findings whereby cost is an important consideration, especially for those with lower household incomes (Cho et al., 2008).

Education.

Previous studies have shown that a parent's prior education can affect a student's choice (Cho et al., 2008). In these environments, parental experience supported and guided individuals' choices as a familiarity with the environment, and thus, a comfort exists in knowing how things work, navigating through options, and making choices more comfortably. Though only two of seven respondents expressed education as a demographic characteristic, the connection to the quantitative research question connecting an individual's prior education to choice supported the decision to include it in this conversation.

Participant 4 shared, "The demographic characteristics that influence choice the most is education level. You must be at a place as a student where you understand what you are getting. You have to understand what things are worth." Supporting this sentiment was Participant 2, who shared:

> "We expect that a lot of people have a degree. People that have a degree are more likely to have formal courses. They relate learning to taking a class. They are more likely to sign up for a class because they are comfortable with it."

The responses highlight two concepts. First, the responses highlight the similarity of a parent's prior education in the undergraduate space, influencing choice in the same way as an adult learner's higher education experience, influencing choice in the NCCE space due to familiarity. In addition, what it also shares, though not stated, is that 71% of respondents do not think that prior education plays a role in the choice of NCCE. Knowing that higher education choices are complicated and filled with many influences, the dispersed perceptions of demographic influences are not surprising, given the breadth of choices available. The following section will discuss the relationship between the thematic findings from the interviews and the quantitative study results.

Influence of Who Pays/Mandated Participation on Choice

As was explored in the quantitative section, the impact of who pays for a course was presented as a question to the interviewees. The question resulted in an unexpected outcome. The surprising response was not from the direct responses to the question, which all resounding yes, but instead from the generated commentary on how or why who pays makes a difference. Table 17 shows the responses to the question.

Table 17

Practitioners' Perception of External Funding on NCCE Choice

Participant	Who Pay Matters	What Changes	Details
1	Y	Limitations in choice/ Motivation	Employer mandates = less motivation
2	Y	Increase Directed Choice	Military/employer = limitations to choice
3	Y	Motivation	Goals, Financial Interest in Success
4	Y	Motivation	Motivation for Success
5	Y	Access (Limitations)/Cost Expansion	Increase the program opportunities/cost is less important
6	Y	Expand Cost Search	Cost is less important
7	Y	Motivation	Concerns that motivation will lack

Seeing how this question could easily be leading, the interviewer was careful not to direct the response to the question. The outcomes from the question resulted in an unexpected series of responses. The researcher expects the question would illicitly cause external payees to remove the cost concerns with the program. However, the cost itself did not constitute the preponderance of responses. The responses can be combined into three categories: motivation, limitations, and cost.

When delving into the impact of who pays for a course, the role of motivation was a prominent theme. Motivation is frequently discussed and an integral part of the research on higher education choice. Motivation was not a concept explored for this research, but it presents an excellent opportunity for future exploration. However, for the purposes of examining practitioners' perception of choice, a discussion in this context is needed due to the associated nuances. The feedback highlights that practitioners are concerned about program fit and outcomes for participants in the program. The fact that they are not chasing anyone in the program and instead want to ensure quality outcomes likely indicates that they attribute motivation as one of the most important factors of choice. The researcher agrees with the importance of understanding the why behind participation and that future research should explore the concept in the context of consumer choice in NCCE.

Limitations were the second most common theme identified by the practitioners. In the limitation discussion, they highlighted that external funding in the form of employer or military funding results in the choice of program limitations. This suggests that, beyond removing cost as a concern, freedom of choice may be removed from the participants who select the program. In the context of the response, it acknowledges the influence of mandated training on choice. Still, it also indicates that choice becomes directed instead of the participant's free will. The last theme identified focused on an individual's personal finances. The focus was not on the income level itself, but more about the individual's concern around the return on investment that an individual could expect from the program. It is about outcome expectations. Interestingly, in the context of this question specifically, only two of the seven respondents acknowledged increased opportunity due to financial constraints not being a part of the conversation. The responses highlight the complexity of choice and the various perspectives of NCCE practitioners. The following section explores the relationship between the thematic findings from the interviews and the quantitative study results.

Organizational Characteristics and Perception Alignment

To explore the influence that organizational characteristics may have on the accuracy of practitioners' perceptions, the researcher analyzed practitioner interview responses and institutional profiles (Tables and 16). The analysis explored whether differences in organizational characteristics, including the number of learners served, staffing makeup, market research approach, and marketing sophistication, appear to influence the accuracy of practitioner perception of key choice influences in NCCE.

No clear pattern emerged between organizational characteristics and practitioner perception of choice accuracy in this study. Participants whose organizations leveraged external market research and internal research capabilities and implemented sophisticated marketing approaches showed no differences from those practitioners whose organizations demonstrated less organizational sophistication. For example, Participant 6, representing the organization with the most sophisticated marketing practices, emphasized cost reduction, while Participant 4, from an organization with moderate sophistication, focused on motivational differences. Meanwhile, participants from organizations with no marketing differentiation, Participants 2, 3, 5, 7, offered equally varied and insightful perspectives ranging from employer mandates to financial interest in program success.

Similarly to marketing sophistication, an organization's size, the number of years they have provided NCCE programming, or their staff's experience levels did not appear to impact the accuracy of their perceptions with the quantitative findings. An example of this includes organizations that serve fewer than 5,000 learners, which were equally insightful as those serving over 15,000 participants. What was common amongst all participants was the influence of who pays for a course. Regardless of organizational size, all individuals believed that who is paying for the training matters. Although all agreed on the importance of who pays, multiple interpretations on how this influences choice were found.

The findings suggest that a practitioner's understanding of learner choice may be influenced more by their personal experience and institutional context, including mission and programming goals, rather than other organizational characteristics.

Relationship to Quantitative Findings

Although the respondents never stated in such simple terms, choice factors and influences are complicated. Through conducting the interviews, one found a winding conversation whereby one could hear the consternation of factors competing in the minds of the interview participants to articulate what exactly constituted the most important factors when looking at demographic and institutional choice characteristics for NCCE participants. The responses and findings of the quantitative exploration of this study supported the complexity of choice shared by interviewees. The following paragraphs will examine the relationship between the themes identified by the leaders in NCCE match the findings from quantitative results from NCCE learners.

The most dominant theme present in the qualitative interviews was the concept of convenience. Leveraging the framework Farquahar and Rowley (2009) proposed for convenience in time, effort, appropriateness, portability, avoidance of unpleasantry, and accessibility, the feedback from the industry leaders highlighted three contextual components of convenience as critical in choice. The industry leaders emphasized the importance of flexibility, speed/time, and format as factors of critical importance to adult learners when selecting a program. The findings from the quantitative study complement these assertions but do not necessarily confirm them.

From a descriptive statistics standpoint, looking at the influence of convenience found in Chapter 4 on choice, 48.6% of all survey responses, when adjusted to remove *program of study* and the *other* selection, were concepts associated with convenience, including distance, location, program flexibility, program schedule, and the delivery method. Constituting the highest percentage of total response selection, the findings suggest overarching importance to adult learners during the choice process and support practitioners' perception. Beyond the descriptive statistics, findings from the binary logistic regression analysis, although not wholly, do generally support the practitioners' perception of factors of importance. The findings that program schedule, flexibility, and delivery method all exhibit statistical significance to background characteristics support the practitioners' beliefs. While there is a general alignment, it is important to note that from a statistical standpoint, the relative importance of delivery method, program flexibility, and program schedule are primarily attributable to the influence of employer-mandated training.

Beyond convenience, cost was identified as an important factor by industry leaders. The descriptive statistics found that cost was the 4th highest selected individual factor. Cost was also supported as a statistically significant factor when examining the influence of employer-mandated training. In general, it is believed that cost is likely important to everyone, but the statistical significance of the relationship increases when mitigating factors like mandated training. While the directors recognized cost as a factor, they associated it with the impact of an employer paying and the socioeconomics of an individual. The statistical findings do not suggest differences exist as they relate to the importance of cost across income levels.

In addition to the institutional/programmatic factors, NCCE leaders were asked about their perceptions of the demographic characteristics of learners that were most likely to influence choice. Three themes emerged from the interviewees: the influence of being an adult learner, household income/SES, and prior education. When comparing these to the findings of the quantitative study, it is a bit of a mixed bag. Parental status and age are the only *adult learner* characteristics examined explicitly in the study. The quantitative results found that age holds a negative, statistically significant relationship to delivery method. The challenge with this finding is that the delivery method could be considered from either a preference of modality or a preference of modality for convenience. Having a child at home was significant at $p < .10$ in relation to the program schedule, though it did not reach the predetermined significance level. While not conventionally significant, there is an element of reasonable assumption that the totality of influences on adults has a somewhat similar effect on all learners and is likely represented through the frequency of choice preference. The role of work, life, kids, and more, on adults are likely to have similar influences regardless of your exact situation. This area for future exploration will be discussed in-depth in the next chapter. In addition to parental status, household income/SES was identified as a critical factor.

This perception of industry leaders appears misaligned with the role of SES when it comes to choice influences at the point of purchase. Household income was not found to be statistically significant across any of the models tested. The role of cost and socioeconomics will be discussed in the next chapter, as it is believed that the choice process interacts with cost early in the decision-making process.

The last demographic characteristic identified in the qualitative interviews was the role of education. There is a bit of a caveat here: while recognized as a potential influence, it was only discussed in two interviews. The quantitative analysis did not support the role of education. None of the binary models showed education as a predictor of choice. In the context of the interviews, the role of education stands at the crossroads of your individual comfort in an educational setting. This concept supports findings from previous research where a parent's prior education can influence choice (Cho et al., 2008; Ma, 2009). However, this was not supported by the quantitative findings.

Sometimes, what is not said is as telling as what is said. In the traditional academic setting, the role of academic reputation, teaching reputation, public image of the organization, and personal perception are all factors that have been shown to influence choice. In the context of NCCE, practitioners did not consider these factors important factors of choice. While not tested against statistical significance, the frequency analysis of choice suggests the limited importance of these factors to adult learners, which supports the practitioners' omission.

The overarching quantitative and qualitative findings are that choice is complicated. It appears that, in a roundabout way, practitioners have a strong market sense of factors that are important to adult learners when selecting a program of study but may not have a complete contextual understanding of how the factors interact. Throughout the next chapter, a discussion will be held on these items and future opportunities for research.

Conclusion

The qualitative analysis provides valuable context and nuance to the quantitative findings, underscoring the multifaceted nature of continuing education. The findings suggest that industry practitioners generally understand the items important to adult learners when selecting a program. While important, the generalized rationalization of the influence of being an adult learner does not consider the multifaceted influences that are at play on adult learners. The findings between this paper's quantitative and qualitative sections highlight the importance of understanding the motivation behind participation, the influence of employer-mandated training, and who pays can have on an adult learner.

The findings suggest that adult learners have similar concerns across the board regarding participation in an NCCE program. Still, the driving factors behind participation may be of greater importance to predicting why someone selects a program. The motivation behind participation, including personal motivation, mandated versus non-mandated, and who is paying for the program, appears significant to an adult learner's choice. Additionally, the choice process at large was not explored in this study. In the context of the qualitative interviews and looking at higher education choice literature, the process and timing of when factors are considered need additional exploration. Elements of the role of cost were brought up, that cost may be a factor long before the final choice. Therefore, the significance of cost observed at the point of purchase in this study may not represent its role in choice. The impact of cost on choice is expected to emerge as a prominent factor through an in-depth study of the NCCE choice process as a whole.

The exploratory nature of this study highlights the complexity of choice in NCCE and supports future exploration. The following chapter will provide a detailed discussion of the findings from this paper, relating it to the existing body of literature on higher education choice, suggestions for future research, and practical implications for practitioners in the field.

Chapter VI

Discussion

Introduction

Attracting students and developing programs that meet learners' needs are fundamental requirements for higher education administrators in the NCCE space to remain competitive in today's competitive landscape (Oplatka, 2009). With the ever-increasing competition, NCCE administrators must ensure their programs and marketing strategies effectively address the demands of the adult learner population they serve.

For NCCE administrators, the existing body of research on consumer choice inadequately explores the extended and complex nature (James-MacEachern & Yun, 2017) of consumer buying habits (Leo et al., 2005) in noncredit continuing education. This study, therefore, sought to explore the relationship between higher education consumer choice, focusing on adult learners in noncredit continuing education. The findings provide a foundation for exploring choice in NCCE and lay the groundwork for future exploration of NCCE choice.

This chapter connects findings from the quantitative analysis of survey responses from NCCE participants in Chapter 4 and the qualitative findings from interviews with NCCE directors in Georgia to the relevant literature. The discussion is organized around the research questions guiding this study, beginning with a quick recap of the purpose of the study, study limitations, and an analysis of each quantitative research question. The chapter then explores insights gained from the qualitative practitioner interview, insights into the implications for practice, recommendations for future research, and concludes with final parting observations.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to identify the relationship between key demographic and background characteristics: age, household income, highest educational attainment, parental status, mandated training versus independent participation, and self-paid versus external pay; and their influence on six factors of choice: program delivery, program of study, program flexibility, program cost, schedule, and location; that impact adult learners most when selecting an NCCE program. Under the higher education consumer choice theory umbrella, the study explored whether demographic or background characteristics could significantly predict which choice factors are prioritized by learners in NCCE.

The study was designed to provide insights into the factors that influence an adult learner when selecting an NCCE program to guide practitioners in the future in their program development and marketing. The study should provide NCCE practitioners with information that supports the effectiveness of program planning and how they communicate with potential learners in their marketing efforts. The mixed-method study was conducted in late 2023 and early 2024 between a combination of continuing education directors at the University System of Georgia NCCE units and among adult learners in Georgia who participated in an NCCE program in the previous three-year period.

Specifically, this study sought to explore the following research questions:

1. What relationship exists between demographic groups of adult learners and the NCCE choice factors deemed important when selecting a program?
    a. Do the choice factors deemed important in selecting an NCCE course vary across age brackets?

b. Do the choice factors deemed important in selecting an NCCE course vary across different household income segments?
c. Do the choice factors deemed important in selecting an NCCE course vary between educational levels?
d. Do the choice factors deemed important in selecting an NCCE course vary between parental status segments?

2. Does an individual's mandated participation in an NCCE program influence the choice factors they deem important when selecting a program?
3. Does who is paying for the course influence the choice factors deemed important when selecting an NCCE program?
4. Do the factors identified by NCCE leaders parallel what participants identify as key choice factors?
5. Do commonalities amongst the NCCE organizations' characteristics represented by the NCCE leaders, including size and continuum of staff, use of research tools, and number of learners, support a more accurate perception of the choice factors important to learners?

Limitations of Study

This study faces several limitations beyond those that directly impact the findings. First, the limited sample size for both qualitative interviews and quantitative surveys has implications for the replicability of the study and restricts the overall generalizability of the study. The narrow scope of the practitioner interviews may limit the identification of the factors influencing learner choice, and the limited survey responses may limit future comparative analyses.

Insufficient prior studies in the context of choice in the noncredit continuing education space further challenged the research, necessitating reliance on research from higher education body of literature, opposed to being directly tied to NCCE. Additionally, when participants self-report, concerns around social desirability bias are raised. In these instances, the concern is that participants may avoid answers that are socially undesirable (Nederhof, 1985).

From a research design perspective, an underlying question of the consistent interpretation of what constitutes an NCCE/continuing education program among different groups may have affected participants' comprehension of the study and influenced their responses. Finally, as Leo and colleagues (2005) identified, there is always a chance that time and location can influence participant responses thus impacting outcomes. While the researcher identified these limitations, other unrecognized constraints may also exist.

Findings

The findings confirm what other researchers have suggested, that choice is a complex and multidimensional concept with many factors at play (Callender & Jackson, 2008; Cho et al., 2008; Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2016; Iloh, 2018; Sojkin et al., 2012). The findings highlighted the relative lack of uniformity of choice factors providing statistical significance across demographic characteristics. Nevertheless, multiple findings warrant discussion and evaluation in the greater context of choice in the NCCE space.

While statistical analysis yielded mixed findings that will be discussed in detail later in the chapter, Table 9 in Chapter 4 provides valuable insight through its descriptive analysis of choice factors selected by survey participants. The table illustrates the complexity of choice influences with all factors having multiple selections as an influence on choice and validates the role that convenience plays in influencing adult learner choice. With 42% of all choice influences tied to factors associated with convenience, including location, schedule, flexibility, & delivery, the findings support previous findings from previous research on the importance of convenience factors for adult learners (Farquhar & Rowley, 2009; Iloh, 2018). It is easy to rationalize how this works. Adult responsibilities tax an adult learner's time. They need a program that fits their busy lifestyle that includes considerations for work and familial obligations (Harker et al., 2001).

Beyond convenience, the role of the NCCE program of study cannot be overlooked. While academic courses of study are not always considered the primary driver of choice in the for-credit space, they are important in the noncredit space. The same cannot be said in (NCCE), where program relevance appears more consistently significant. Indeed, 40% of all respondents in our study picked the program of study as a factor that influenced their choice, highlighting its central importance in noncredit education decisions. This number is an underrepresentation of the actual impact of the program of study on choice. The survey asked the participants about the choice factors that influenced choice at the point of purchase. Considering the choice process at large, it is believed that the program of study is a choice factor at play long before the purchase decision is made. The targeted nature of many NCCE programs with specific deliverables and outcomes leads one to assess the predetermined importance of choice reasonably. The following sections will discuss the findings from the inferential analysis conducted, examining background/demographic characteristics and choices.

Relationship between Demographics and Choice (H1)

Studies on choice in higher education have highlighted the importance of recognizing learners' social, cultural, and personal characteristics to attract learners (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2016). However, simply knowing an individual's demographic is too simplistic by itself to support the attraction of learners. To attract and build programs that meet the needs of learners, one needs to understand the factors that influence an individual's choice, preferably by connecting demographic characteristics to the statistically significant choice factors. A series of three demographic characteristics, age, household income, parental status, and prior education, were analyzed in relation to choice factors.

Age (H1a).

This study confirms, albeit only on a single dimension, that a statistically significant relationship between delivery method and age was found when comparing age to choice. The relationship found that individuals become less concerned with delivery methods as they age. This confirms and, at the same time, discounts previous findings that adult learners are focused on their preference for learning modality (Wong et al., 2022). Further research is needed to explore what predicates the negative relationship between age and preference for delivery methods. It does seem logical that as an individual's age increases, the demands on their time may lessen, and thus, they seek a program that fits in other ways. The challenge with this hypothesis rests in that no other dimension of choice resulted in a statistically significant relationship with choice.

The findings are surprising given previous research findings that adult learners are concerned with cost (Gaspar & Soares, 2021; Wong et al., 2022) and are concerned about location and ease of access (Harker et al., 2001). While these findings were not supported in this study, another set of findings related to adult learners provides an interesting point of discussion. Multiple researchers have previously identified that as people age, they are less influenced by outside factors in choice and do not like outside influences on learning modality (L.-H. Chen, 2008; Wong et al., 2022). The contextual findings from this research challenge the reality that adult learners are not influenced by outside factors when it comes to NCCE. This study found that 76% of respondents participated in mandated training. This information, coupled with statistical findings suggesting the relationship between flexibility, schedule, and cost, relates to mandated training choice, contradicts the idea of adults not being influenced by choice.

While age did result in a statistically significant finding, the results are limited to a singular choice option. This limited overlap leaves some questions about the actual degree of influence that age plays in influencing choice. Future research is needed to explore additional constructs of age and choice.

Household Income (H1b).

Contrary to the breadth of higher education research linking income to choice (Callender & Jackson, 2008; Cho et al., 2008; Columbu et al., 2021; Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2016; Reay et al., 2002; Wilkins et al., 2013), household income was not statistically significant in this study. This is contrary to previous studies, which found cost and location in higher education choice (Columbu et al., 2021). The divergence suggests that NCCE choice operates differently than the choice process for traditional higher education. In the higher education framework, income is often linked to concerns around the cost of attendance, especially in the context of geographic location (Cho et al., 2008; Columbu et al., 2021), the same is not clearly seen in the NCCE space.

It is surmised that the relationship between income and choice is tenuous and potentially impacted by different timing and factors than those at play in traditional higher education settings. Three primary factors are believed to influence the role of income in NCCE. First, it is believed that income may be a choice factor at play long before purchasing a program. In this context, the cost of a program is an early clearinghouse whereby programs are sorted based on an individual's ability to pay. In addition to the timing question and possibly more importantly, the mitigating influence of mandated participation and who pays is considered the most important factor of choice. In this study, over 60% of respondents had their program funded externally, and nearly one-third were mandated to participate in a program. The researcher believes these factors likely influence how choice factors are processed in the context of income, shifting the importance of key factors based on removing barriers or dictating participation.

Highest Educational Attainment Education (H1c).

The analysis did not result in a significant relationship being found between prior education and choice in NCCE. The findings contrast with existing literature that education influences choice, though the direct comparison is challenging given the contextual differences between the studies. Numerous studies have linked the role that a parent's prior education plays in choice (Cho et al., 2008; English & Umbach, 2016; Jheng et al., 2022; C. Walsh et al., 2015). The findings are based on a parent's prior educational level and their influence on a child's choice influences. The context in which the parent's education influences choice is related to comfort with how school works (Moogan & Baron, 2003) and is often tied to the increasing quality of the institution (Jheng et al., 2022; C. Walsh et al., 2015). The underpinning rationale of exposure and familiarity with the process that supported the parents' influence on choice was expected to manifest in a similar finding in the NCCE space. However, this study did not support the influence of education on choice.

Although previous studies have shown the connection to education, the absence of a significant relationship in the current analysis likely reflects the differences in population and the field. In light of the findings, other background characteristics and program motivation may likely usurp the role of prior education in the choice process for NCCE. The finding is interesting as it was expected that education would influence choice. It is believed, based on these findings, that the other influences on adult learners, whether it be motivation to participate, adult responsibilities, mandated participation, and who pays, are all greater in the choice process for adult learners and therefore relegate the importance of prior education as a noninfluential element. It is also proposed that the nature of NCCE programs themselves, in that they are short-term time commitments, have low barriers to participation, ease of engagement, and comparatively lower financial investment, may not rise to the level where familiarity and comfort in the educational setting are as important.

Parental Status (H1d).

Unlike previous studies that found parental status to be a significant factor of choice in NCCE, this study only found marginal significance. Previous studies found that convenience factors, including proximity and location, influence parents (Bailey et al., 2015; Harker et al., 2001; Marandet & Wainwright, 2010; Reay et al., 2002). Although this study did not find significance at the conventional levels, there is a marginal significance ($p=.090$) between parental status and schedule. The near significance levels support previous findings and suggest that parental status will have a similar influence on choice in NCCE as it does in the traditional higher education space.

The marginal findings support Iloh's (2018) model, which highlights the role that the unique considerations of adult learners, including parenthood, play on choice. In her model, the collective effect of adult responsibilities on choice is a focus, with key considerations being access and opportunity. Contrary to expectations, no other choice factors neared statistical significance outside the schedule. The outcomes are potentially explainable through two complementary explanations.

First, it could be the uniqueness of adult responsibilities around childcare positions. Adult learners with children at home may create specific scheduling dependencies that do not extend to other choice factors. This makes logical sense, as children often have extracurricular activities that would limit an adult learner to programs that fall during work hours or outside of the extracurricular activities, making parents particularly sensitive to scheduling activities.

Second, as Iloh (2018) suggests, the totality of adult responsibilities is responsible for influencing choice for adult learners. The lack of statistical significance for those with children at home and those without when looking at their choice preferences is likely a representation that all adults face pressures from life that influence their choice process. The constraints facing adults at large can include, but are not limited to, work and personal obligations, as well as financial concerns. The idea of the impact of adult responsibility supports several researchers' findings that found adults have to balance their work and family lives, and seek programs that meet their lifestyles and needs (Bailey et al., 2015; Harker et al., 2001).

The multidimensional nature of adult responsibilities provides an avenue for future study and exploration. In these studies, the combination of multiple adult responsibilities should be considered collectively in their relationship to choice patterns. The deeper dive would provide a more robust exploration of the complex decision-making process.

Relationship between Choice and Employer Mandated Vs. Self-Directed (H2)

The most significant finding in this research emerged from examining employer/mandated training and self-directed participation. The three choice factors of flexibility, schedule, and cost all had a statistically significant relationship with the training-mandated status. The findings are particularly significant given the hypothesis that an important relationship would exist between training mandate and choice.

The literature review revealed that employer-mandated training has not been examined as a study factor in research on higher education choice. The lack of participation is understandable, given that mandatory participation would be unusual in the traditional higher education environment. However, the nature of NCCE programming operates in a different context than its higher education peers, and it is common for training to be mandated by licensure requirements, certification maintenance, or mandated professional development. The gap highlights the most significant contribution of this research and the critical need to develop consumer choice models specific to the NCCE space.

The analysis revealed three distinct outcomes, one logical outcome, and two contradictory findings warranting discussion. As expected, cost showed statistical significance, with those mandated to participate in training having less concern for the program's cost than their self-directed peers. While not unexpected, this provides practitioners with insights into potential price sensitivity for programs based on their nature.

The most intriguing findings came from the factors of flexibility and schedule. In what would appear to be a contradiction to itself, the study found that employer-mandated participants are more sensitive to flexibility and less concerned with schedule than their self-directed peers. The outcome can possibly be explained in that the mandated nature of the program may make the schedule not an option in the first place, as the individuals are being told when to participate versus the flexibility in terms of the timing, delivery, and program engagement that meets the demands of the learner. The findings underscore the differences between NCCE choice behavior and traditional academic students' behavior. The role that mandated training plays in choice shapes the choice process for NCCE participants.

Relationship between Choice and Who Paid (H3)

The influence of who pays for NCCE participation revealed limited but meaningful statistical significance, showing that who pays for the course influences the choice preference for delivery method. While this represents a single statistically significant relationship, like the employer-mandated training findings, the broader implications suggest a more substantial role than the statistical analysis alone might indicate.

Examining who pays for a program is not a common theme in traditional higher education choice literature. Although not common in the context of who pays, extensive research exists regarding the role of finances in choice in higher education. The role of socioeconomics is a common theme discussed in higher education choice (Callender & Jackson, 2008; Columbu et al., 2021; English & Umbach, 2016; Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2016; Jheng et al., 2022; S. Walsh & Cullinan, 2017) and is highlighted by the impact that financial aid plays in influencing choice and enrollment patterns (Avery & Hoxby, 2004; Tierney, 1980). Higher education choice research has established the critical importance of financial considerations in the choice process (Wilkins et al., 2013).

Supporting the role that financial considerations play in choice, the differences in choice preferences found between those who self-pay for the course and those who are paid through external means support what previous researchers have found: that finances matter. This suggests that cost considerations may influence multiple aspects of program selection beyond the direct price comparison. The findings suggest a more significant relationship may exist, and additional exploration is needed for both the impact of income on choice and the role of external funding in NCCE.

Perceptions of Practitioners

The findings from the interviews with practitioners were enlightening and provided great insight into the two research questions tied to practitioners. The questions included exploring the relationship between practitioner perceptions as they relate to the research findings and how the difference in perception supports the need for academic exploration in the field. The interviews demonstrated that practitioners have a sense, albeit imperfect, of what was essential to learners even when it was not supported directly by the existing body of literature. The practitioners could scrape around the concepts of what was crucial to adult learners when selecting a program, even when they could not articulate that influence clearly. Based chiefly on feeling, the NCCE practitioners hit on elements that influence adult learners through convenience and cost. Still, they failed to recognize how the background characteristic of employee-mandated training affects the choice process.

When comparing practitioners' perceptions with the quantitative findings, an interesting finding was the role they believed household income would play in choice. Although not strongly supported from any one statistical perspective, the findings from the interviews support the role that income likely plays in choice. The why behind the participation is an overarching question that connects to this conversation. How does it impact the conversation if it is a need and not a want?

There was no clear demarcation between individual school types regarding the perceived influence of choice. It appears that personal biases and expectations of the director were the driving factors behind their responses and perception of influences. This was highlighted by those passionate about working with lower-income participants or those in smaller, more rural environments expressing concerns about the ability to afford programs. The relative importance of cost cannot be overlooked, but it seemed to be capitalized as a primary focus for many.

The interviews made it clear that the directors of NCCE consider many factors that influence choice in NCCE throughout their work. They expressed an understanding of the role that adult responsibilities (Bailey et al., 2015; Boudarbat & Montmarquette, 2009; Harker et al., 2001; Iloh, 2018; Marandet & Wainwright, 2010; Reay et al., 2002) play in choice by highlighting the role of fitting training around individual work as well as social, familial, and financial obligations. They seem to understand that they need to account for these in their programming and delivery. An interesting note regarding the findings noted in Chapter 5 was the manner in which practitioners weaved in and out of their personal narrative in conjunction with their professional opinions as they shared their beliefs during their interviews. At times, it was hard to distinguish when their lived experiences were the basis for their professional opinion versus when it was derived from a more unbiased professional standpoint. These findings create a challenge to the parallel findings and support for research question five.

The discrepancies, coupled with the potential influence of personal biases through practitioners' own lived experience, highlight the need for academic exploration through future research on NCCE choice. The gaps identified, including a lack of empirical support for their understanding of factors, the underestimation of the importance of mandated training influence, and the disconnect on the role of household income, reveal the lack of a framework that supports the field's understanding of choice. Additionally, the finding that personal biases rather than evidence-based knowledge often drive the director's perspectives highlights the disconnect between research and practitioners.

Beyond looking at the connection between the practitioner's beliefs and the output, the research also sought to understand if the commonalities amongst organizations support a more accurate perception of the critical factors in choice. The results of the interviews do not reveal any discernible patterns between organizational characteristics and a practitioner's understanding of the factors influencing learner choice. Participants using external research, internal research, sophisticated differentiated marketing, or no marketing differentiation all demonstrated varied and equally insightful yet potentially misaligned perspectives about what influences adult learner choices. This absence of correlation suggests that practitioner understanding of choice factors is likely driven by individual experience, institutional context, and personal perspective rather than through a formal understanding.

The disconnect impacts the effectiveness of program development and marketing efforts of practitioners, and without further exploration, they will continue to do so. The complexity of choice in NCCE and the difficulty practitioners had in clearly articulating the influences demonstrate a gap between practices and academic understanding. Continued exploration will elevate the field's sophistication and support the elevated engagement of practitioners.

Theoretical Implications

Higher education choice theory has a storied tradition of exploring the student decision-making process, yet this research reveals fundamental limitations when the frameworks are applied to the NCCE field. While the existing frameworks provide a foundation for conceptualizing the process and influence adult learners face in the NCCE field, the findings from the choice patterns in NCCE demonstrate the existing models do not adequately assess the decision-making process of the adult learner population.

Empirical Evidence Challenging Traditional Models

To identify the factors of choice that are most important in NCCE choice, an initial list of 17 factors of choice was developed through the literature review process. From the initial 17 factors, six choice factors, which include delivery method, program of study, program flexibility, cost, location, and schedule, are used as the primary factors for analysis for this study. While included in the initial list of factors for participants to select, several factors commonly found in traditional higher education choice research including the reputation of the institution, peer and family influence (D. W. Chapman, 1981), institutional engagement (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987), fit, and cost-benefit (outcome expectations) (Perna, 2004) were not revied as the frequency of participant selections resulted below the mean used for inclusion in the study.

The outcomes from the statistical analysis in this research found significant predictors of choice in the background/demographic characteristics of employer-mandated status, funding source, and age. The findings challenge the assumptions embedded in the traditional models. A representative example of this would be when a program is employer-mandated, there is a reduction in concern over cost, and a preference for flexibility. The reduced concern for cost contradicts the sensitivity to cost from the D.W. Chapman (1981) and Hossler and Gallagher (1987) frameworks.

Reconceptualizing Factors

Considering where existing choice models need revision and analyzing potential factors missing from the choice models, three areas need review, including the role of socioeconomics, adult responsibilities, and the employer as a missing stakeholder. The traditional choice models have heavily influenced the socioeconomics' role in the choice process (D. W. Chapman, 1981; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Perna, 2004). While it is unreasonable to assume that socioeconomics does not play a role in NCCE at any level, the cost of programs, the reasons behind participation, and other factors may usurp the degree to which income plays a role. This research suggests that income is likely more nuanced in NCCE and that the funding source's role in NCCE may be larger than the individual's income. The finding aligns more with Perna (2004), who suggested that choice is nested within a broad range of economic considerations. For NCCE, there is another economic layer that must be considered, and that is employer-paid.

Beyond economics, age was shown to have a statistical significance. The significance supports the conceptual belief that Iloh has that adult learners have differentiated needs and preferences (2018). Divergent from Iloh, statistically, only preference for delivery method changed with age, whereas Iloh suggested that adult learners were focused on time and opportunity. While not a part of the statistical findings, the descriptive findings that adults value elements of convenience support Iloh's concept that opportunity is key. What is likely the most significant missing factor is the role of the employer for adult learners.

The Chapman model emphasized the role of friends and family as primary influencers in choice (D. W. Chapman, 1981). In the context of NCCE, friends and family may constitute a misalignment, and employers are potentially likely to serve as the primary influencers on choice in the NCCE space. The study results showed employer mandates had multiple significant relationships with choice preferences. The finding suggests an essential gap in the existing body of research whereby outside influences, such as employers, are not readily considered.

Toward a New Choice Model

The findings from this research support the development of a new independent choice model crafted explicitly for the unique aspects of adult learners and NCCE programs. This theory must account for the differentiated choice process, the central role of adult responsibilities, participation motivation, the role of the training - motivation, the role of the employer, and the varying degrees of individual autonomy of choice in the process. This new framework would better serve practitioners and researchers who seek to understand how adult learners navigate NCCE choice, ultimately allowing for improved program design and marketing to support learner engagement and outcomes.

Implications for NCCE Practitioners

Providing practical direction for NCCE practitioners, this research guides practitioners in support of their efforts to improve program design and expand learner pools. For practitioners, the research provides a clear picture of the choice factors adult learners deem most important when selecting an NCCE program. In practice, the research suggests that practitioners should focus on developing programs and communicating value through the lens of convenience, as learners have clearly shared the role it plays in their decision-making. With 42% of participants' responses relating to a component of convenience, practitioners must prioritize program flexibility, schedule options, delivery method variety, and location accessibility when designing programs.

Unlike traditional higher education, where institutional reputation or peer influence may matter, NCCE participants appear to be primarily concerned with how programs fit into their complex adult lives. The benefit of this finding is that it provides actionable opportunities for practitioners without external influence. Practitioners can audit their existing portfolio to ensure that delivery format, scheduling options, and accessibility are maximized. In their marketing efforts, they can focus on these factors and highlight how programs fit into the busy lives of adult learners.

The impact of employer-mandated training on choice in NCCE is the most significant finding from the study. For practitioners, identifying which programs are employer-mandated versus which are not cannot be something that is overlooked. The study showed that those mandated to participate are less concerned with cost than their non-mandated peers, but they are more concerned with flexibility. The findings suggest that practitioners can explore a more aggressive pricing strategy for employer-mandated programs than for those that are not. In addition, close attention should be paid to marketing messaging and program design based on participation type.

The findings suggest that, contrary to traditional marketing wisdom, most demographic characteristics, such as household income, education level, and parental status, showed minimal predictive power for choice preferences. These findings instead suggest that practitioners should focus on participation motivation/the mandated nature of courses, and the funding sources for which programs are paid. A simple means of implementing this would be for practitioners to segment their marketing by mandated/sponsored participants or self-directed/funded.

The finding that the level of organizational marketing and research sophistication, along with the experience of their staff experience, did not correlate with a more accurate understanding of learner choice reveals there is likely a field-wide professional development need. The data suggest practitioners should not assume that larger budgets or external research automatically led to better insights. Instead, the field needs systematic knowledge sharing, professional development focused on learner choice research, and industry standards for understanding participant needs regardless of organizational size or resources.

Given the documented gap between practitioner perceptions and learner-shared preference, practitioners must move beyond self-guided intuitive program development and must employ data-driven approaches to development and marketing.

The practical application of this is to move beyond tracking enrollment numbers and basic contact information for participants and to include the collection of the influence of choice factors, participation motivation, and who paid for the program. A simple analysis of these patterns can inform program design and marketing strategies more effectively than demographic profiling or institutional assumptions about learner needs. The findings highlight existing research on choice in that it is critical to understand the demographic characteristics of learners (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2016) to stay competitive in the competitive markets (Simões & Soares, 2010). For practitioners, minor adjustments in practices and habits can support the changes necessary to compete in the competitive market for NCCE today successfully.

As an administrator myself, my immediate plans are to use what I have learned and adapt my organization's communication strategies. Specifically, I plan to consider what value propositions we use at different levels in the marketing funnel. For early funnel communications, I will seek to implement messaging that incorporates more employer-directed communications that support both a learner's and employers' understanding of the value proposition and outcome expectations of the course. Subsequently, as the funnel narrows, the communication that we will focus on will shift to focus on the elements of convenience and messaging that show how the program fits in an adult learner's constrained lives. In addition to messaging, we will examine the nature of our program design to ensure that the programs are structured to provide adults with the flexibility they desire while keep the rigor and outcomes of the program at the forefront.

Future Research Opportunities

This research was designed as an exploratory study into choice in the field of NCCE. The findings provided early insights into the differentiated choice needs of adult learners and paved the way for future exploration across a broad spectrum of opportunities. Future research opportunities are extensive, but the following recommendations outline a logical series of research paths that can be taken in the field:

1. Explore the sequence of choice in the noncredit continuing education space. This exploration constitutes the development of a consumer choice model for NCCE that is focused on adult learners.
2. Weigh the importance of choice factors and seek to understand any missing factors. Factors of choice for this study were pulled together from research in the context of traditional higher education. It is believed that beginning with an in-depth study of choice factors specific to NCCE through qualitative interviews of participants asking questions about choice, followed by a study of the importance of individual factors to adult learners, will strengthen the future exploration of choice when controlling for demographic and other characteristics.
3. Explore consumer choice in the context of participation motivation. Adult learner motivation has an existing body of research, but coupling it in the context of choice with information gleaned from exploring the choice process itself along with an expanded study of choice factors will continue to expand our understanding of choice.
4. In addition to studying choice at the macro level, there are opportunities to explore choice from at more granular levels. Opportunities for granular analysis include controlling for the program delivery type, program of study, and type of institution.

Summary

This exploratory study represents an extensive examination of higher education choices in NCCE. The study highlights the differences between the framework that adult learners use to make decisions and that of the traditional higher education student. As a study on NCCE choice, this research makes two significant contributions. First, it highlights the importance of convenience in NCCE choice. Accounting for nearly half of all choice selections, the concepts tied to convenience replace traditional predictors like socioeconomics and educational background as significant in the choice process.

In addition to the importance of convenience, the role that employer-mandated plays in the choice process. Standing as a factor that is not often studied in the context of choice research, the finding highlighted the reduced cost sensitivity of those mandated to train and showed the importance of program flexibility. These findings coupled with other nuggets uncovered through the research challenge the applicability of the current higher education choice models built for the NCCE field. The findings suggest the need to create a unique theory specific to NCCE, which includes the unique needs and influence of adult learners.

The research also reveals a potential disconnect between practitioners' perception of choice factors and the research findings. What is particularly surprising is that this misalignment was not predicated on where the individual worked. A consistent view of choice was held across the units, whether well or less resourced. Where differences in perception exist, the leading attributer appears to be the manifestation of the practitioner's perceptions being applied across the board. Either way, lacking research on factors driving choice likely hurts program success and enrollment growth.

While this study offers important initial insights, it shows how much work remains to be done, especially in creating better models for understanding how adults choose continuing education, what motivates their participation, and when different factors become important during their decision-making process. For a field serving adult learners' critical workforce development needs, these findings offer immediate practical guidance and a roadmap for building the evidence base necessary to serve this population more effectively in an increasingly competitive educational landscape.

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Appendix A:

IRB Approval

Institutional Review Board (IRB)
for the Protection of Human Research Participants

PROTOCOL EXEMPTION REPORT

Protocol Number: 04441-2023

Responsible Researcher: Noah Kiel Norris

Supervising Faculty: Dr. Joseph Robbins

Co-Investigator: n/a

Project Title: *Understanding Adult Learner Choice in Noncredit Continuing Education Programs in Georgia.*

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD DETERMINATION:

This research protocol is **exempt** from Institutional Review Board (IRB) oversight under 45 CFR 46.101(b) of the federal regulations, **category 2.** If the nature of the research changes such that exemption criteria no longer apply, please consult with the IRB Administrator (irb@valdosta.edu) before continuing your research study.

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS:

- *Upon completion of the research study, collected data must be securely maintained and accessible only by the researcher(s) for a minimum of 3 years. At the end of the required time, collected data must be permanently destroyed.*
- *Exempt protocol guidelines permit the recording of interview sessions provided recordings are made to create an accurate transcript. Exempt guidelines prohibit the collection, storage, and/or sharing of recordings. Upon creation of the transcript, the recorded interview session must be deleted immediately from recording and storage devices.*
- *As part of the informed consent process, recordings must include the researcher reading aloud the consent statement, confirming participant understanding, and establishing their willingness to take part in the interview. Participants must be provided with a copy of the research statement.*
- *To ensure confidentiality of participants, pseudonym lists must be kept in a separate secure file from corresponding name lists., email addresses, etc.*

☒ ***Please submit any documents you revise to the IRB Administrator at tmwright@valdosta.edu to ensure an updated record of your exemption.***

Elizabeth W. Olphie 09.22.2023

Elizabeth W. Olphie, IRB Administrator Date

Thank you for submitting an IRB application.
Please direct questions to irb@valdosta.edu or 229-259-5045.

Appendix B:

Survey Instrument

Adult Learner Choice in Noncredit Continuing Education Questionnaire

You are being asked to participate in a dissertation research project entitled *"Understanding Adult Learner Choice in Noncredit Continuing Education Programs in Georgia,"* which is being conducted by Noah Kiel Norris*,* a doctoral student at Valdosta State University. The purpose of the study is to understand factors that influences an individual's choice in non-credit continuing education programs. You will receive no direct benefits from participating in this research study. However, your responses may help us learn more about the most critical factors in adult continuing education choice. There are no foreseeable risks involved in participating in this study other than those encountered in day-to-day life. Participation should take approximately 5 minutes to complete. This survey is anonymous. No one, including the researcher, will be able to associate your responses with your identity. Your participation is voluntary. You may choose not to take the survey, to stop responding at any time, or to skip any questions that you do not want to answer. Participants must be at least 18 years of age to participate in this study. Your completion of the survey serves as your voluntary agreement to participate in this research project and your certification that you are 18 or older. You may print a copy of this statement for your records.

Questions regarding the purpose or procedures of the research should be directed to Noah Kiel Norris at nknorris@valdosta.edu. This study has been exempted from Institutional Review Board (IRB) review in accordance with Federal regulations. The IRB, a university committee established by Federal law, is responsible for protecting the rights and welfare of research participants. If you have concerns or questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the IRB Administrator at 229-253-2947 or irb@valdosta.edu.

Part I: Demographics: For the following questions, please select the corresponding options that best describe you?

1. Select the age group that you were in when you participated in the training program?
    a. Under 18 years old
    b. 18–24
    c. 25–34
    d. 35–44
    e. 45–54
    f. 55–64
    g. 65–74
    h. 75 and over

2. Gender Identity
    a. Female
    b. Male
    c. Non-binary
    d. Prefer not to answer
    e. Prefer to self-describe ___________________________________

3. Race

a. American Indian or Alaska Native
b. Asian
c. Black or African American
d. Hispanic or Latino or Spanish of any Origin
e. Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
f. White
g. Two or more races
h. Race and Ethnicity unknown
i. Prefer not to answer

4. Which of the following best describes your household income last year?
    a. Less than $29,999
    b. $30,000–$49,999
    c. $50,000–$74,999
    d. $75,000–$99,999
    e. $100,000–$149,000
    f. $150,000–$199,000
    g. $200,000 or more
    h. Prefer not to answer

5. Home City
6. Home State
7. What is the highest degree or level of education you have completed?
    a. Some High School
    b. High School
    c. Some College credit, no degree
    d. Associate Degree
    e. Trade/Technical/Vocational Training
    f. Bachelor's Degree
    g. Master's Degree
    h. Ph.D./Professional Degree
    i. Prefer not to answer

8. Parental/Guardian status
    a. Single childless
    b. Couple childless
    c. Single living with child/dependent
    d. Couple living with child/dependent
    e. Single with adult children
    f. Couple with adult children

9. What is your current employment status?
    a. Employed full-time
    b. Employed part-time
    c. Not employed, looking for work
    d. Not employed, NOT looking for work

e. Retired
f. Unable to work
g. Other_____

10. Which best describes your current position level?
    a. Intern
    b. Entry-level
    c. Associate
    d. Manager
    e. Senior Manager
    f. Director
    g. VP/President/Cabinet level
    h. Owner
    i. Unemployed
    j. Retired
    k. Other _________

Part II: Previous Course Participation

1. I have previously participated or am currently participating in a noncredit continuing education program in the last three years?
    a. Yes – continue to #2
    b. No – Jump to thank you
2. Was the noncredit continuing education employer/job mandated?
    a. Yes
    b. No
3. Thinking about your most recent noncredit program engagement, please indicate your primary reason for participating.
    a. Professional advancement in current field
    b. Get a job in a new field
    c. Family expectations/opinions
    d. Improving outlook on future job search
    e. Personal interest in the subject
    f. Employer/ job mandated training
    g. Peers participating
    h. Improve current job performance
    i. To earn additional certificate/certification
    j. To maintain licensure/certification
    k. Other __________________

4. What type of training provider did you last take a program with?
    a. 4–Year Public College/University
    b. 4–Year Private College/ University
    c. Technical College/School
    d. Junior College/Community College

e. Not-for profit training provider
f. For-profit training provider
g. Work sponsored in-house training
h. Massive Open Online Courses – MOOC (Coursera, edX, Udacity, etc.)
i. Unsure
j. Other (List) __________________

5. What delivery format best describes the training?
   a. Online: Self study/ self-paced
   b. Online: Live instruction online
   c. In-Person: Classroom
   d. Text-based/correspondence course
   e. Other

6. When did the class meet?
   a. Weekdays
   b. Weekends
   c. Both weekdays and weekends

7. What was the approximate number of contact/instructional hours for the program?
   ______ hours

8. Which statement best describes the duration of the program you attended?
   a. 1 day
   b. 1 week
   c. 2–4 weeks
   d. 5–8 weeks
   e. 9–12 weeks
   f. 4–5 months
   g. 6 months or longer

9. Approximately how much time passed between the time you began thinking about taking the program to the point that you registered for the program?
   a. No time, I made an immediate purchase
   b. Less than 1 month
   c. 2–4 months
   d. 5–6 months
   e. 7–12 months
   f. More than a year

10. Who paid for the continuing education program?
    a. Self-paid: non-loan
    b. Employer
    c. Military/workforce board
    d. Borrowed money from public/private entity

e. Other __________________

III: Information Sources

1. Thinking about the sources of information that you used to select your noncredit continuing education program, check all sources that influenced your decision.
    a. Training provider website
    b. Internet search recommendations
    c. Parents
    d. Other family/friends
    e. Colleagues
    f. Previous participants from the program
    g. School staff
    h. Employer
    i. Websites other
    j. Social media
    k. Fliers/brochure
    l. School communications
    m. Marketing

IV – Institutional Factors

1. Please check the top 3 factors that were important to you when you were selecting your choice of training provider.

    1. Distance from home
    2. Location
    3. Academic reputation of institution
    4. Personal perception of institution
    5. Employment outlook post participation
    6. Networking opportunities
    7. Teaching reputation
    8. Quality of instructors
    9. Information supplied by institution
    10. Program flexibility
    11. Delivery method
    12. Program schedule
    13. Previous engagement with institution
    14. Cost of participation
    15. Placement Service
    16. Public image of university
    17. Program of study
    18. Other _______________

VI: Thank you

Thank you for taking the time to participate in this survey, the information you provided provides no personally identifiable information and will be used only for the expressed use of the researcher. For questions or concerns, please email nknorris@valdosta.edu.

Appendix C:

Interview Questionnaire

Interview Questionnaire

You are being asked to participate in an interview as part of a research study entitled "Understanding Adult Learner Choice in Noncredit Continuing Education Programs in Georgia," which is being conducted by Noah Kiel Norris, a doctoral student at Valdosta State University. The purpose of the study is to identify factors that influence an individual's choice in non-credit continuing education programs. You will receive no direct benefits from participating in this research study. However, your responses may help us learn more about the most critical factors in adult continuing education choice. There are no foreseeable risks involved in participating in this study other than those encountered in day-to-day life. Participation should take approximately one hour. The interview will be audio-recorded to capture your concerns, opinions, and ideas. Once the interview recording has been transcribed, the recording will be deleted from recording devices. This research study and your participation will be kept confidential. Your identifiable information will be replaced with a pseudonym in publications or presentations. No one, including the researcher, will associate your responses with your identity. Your participation is voluntary. You may choose not to participate, to stop responding, or to skip questions you do not want to answer. You must be at least 18 years of age to participate in this study. Your participation in the interview serves as your voluntary agreement to participate in this research project and your certification that you are 18 years of age or older.

Questions regarding the purpose or procedures of the research should be directed to Noah Kiel Norris at nknorris@valdosta.edu. This study has been exempted from Institutional Review Board (IRB) review in accordance with Federal regulations. The IRB, a university committee established by Federal law, is responsible for protecting the rights and welfare of research participants. If you have concerns or questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the IRB Administrator at 229-253-2947 or irb@valdosta.edu.

1. Can you describe your continuing education department?
    a. How many learners do you serve?
    b. Target audience(s)?
    c. How would you describe the portfolio mix for your unit?
    d. How long has your institution offered CE?
    e. Thinking about you and your team, how would you rate yourselves on a continuum of seasoned vets to newcomers in the field?
    f. What is your staffing level (# of staff dedicated to NCCE)?
    g. Are you part of a centralized or decentralized continuing education unit?

2. What do you believe is the most important factor to a learner when they are considering an NCCE program?
3. When thinking about demographic characteristics, which ones do you think are most important to influencing someone's choice?
4. Currently, do you differentiate your marketing/messaging based on any of these factors?
5. What research do you currently/historically use to inform your programming and marketing efforts?
6. Do you think that who is paying for a course influences a learner's choice? How so?