

The Journey from Traditional Student to Adult Learner: Hurdles and Victories

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Alicia Roberson

Masters of Science in Marriage and Family Therapy, Valdosta State University, 2005
Bachelors of Fine Arts in Speech Communication, Valdosta State University, 2003

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This dissertation, "The Journey from Traditional Student to Adult Learner:
Hurdles and Victories," by Alicia Roberson, is approved by:

**Dissertation
Committee
Chair**

Karla M. Hull
Karla M. Hull, Ed.D.
Interim Dean, College of Education and Human Services
Professor of Leadership, Technology, & Workforce
Development

**Dissertation
Research Member**

Karla M. Hull
Karla M. Hull, Ed.D.
Interim Dean, College of Education and Human Services
Professor of Leadership, Technology, & Workforce
Development

**Committee
Members**

Janes Archibald
Janes Archibald, Ph.D.
Associate Professor of Leadership, Technology, &
Workforce Development

Jamie Workman
Jamie Workman, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor of Leadership, Technology, &
Workforce Development

**Dean of the
Graduate School**

Becky R. deMuy
Becky da Cruz, Ph.D., J.D.
Associate Provost for Graduate Studies and Research
Professor of Criminal Justice

Date of Defense March 23, 2021

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ABSTRACT

The following study was conducted with five adult learners who returned to complete an undergraduate degree after stopping or dropping out of college as traditional students. Basic interpretive inquiry was used to find themes in their stories to understand their experiences as traditional students that led to their departure, their reasons for returning to finish their degrees and their experiences as a returning adult learner. Each participant shared his or her experiences during a 90-minute interview process. The interviews were transcribed and themes were developed from the participant's responses.

From the interviews, the researcher gained a better understanding of the adult learner experiences. These findings were connected the conceptual frameworks for Schlossberg's transition theory and Knowles' andragogy. While the responsibilities for most of the participants as adult learners differed little from when they were traditional students, their motivation for attending had shifted from extrinsic to intrinsic. Additionally, as adult learners, the participants focused on the age difference between them and their peers and how that would impact their experience and sense of belonging. While institutional challenges existed like policies around transfer credit, course offerings and a lack of clear support structures specific to adult learners, the voice of faculty speaking encouragement to the participants made a significant impact on their experiences as students.

Based on these research findings, it is recommended that additional research be conducted on traditional age students with adult learner responsibilities, on the population of students who know they must take breaks in education and leave with a plan to return, and the experiences of faculty teaching adult learners.

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DEDICATION

To my mother, who taught me to be a life-long learner and to my father, my favorite reference librarian. To Stella, may you never stop being curious.

Chapter I

INTRODUCTION

Higher education administrators and higher education philanthropic foundations have focused on increasing enrollment through many different approaches. One approach has been strategically marketing to adults without a degree, but who have earned college credit to return to complete a degree. According to both Complete College America (CCA) and University System of Georgia's Complete College Georgia (CCG) reports, these efforts have been supported by national agendas, state agendas, and the financial backing of foundations across the country, including foundations like Lumina (2021 & 2011). In response to these marketing strategies, the number of returning adult learners in university classrooms has grown over the past few years to the point that the adult learner is not "non-traditional" anymore (Morris, 2012; Rabourn, Shoup, & Breck Lorenz, 2015). These adult learners are seeking a flexible process to meet very specific goals within many institutions that are still primarily structured to meet the needs of students who are 18-24 with far fewer life responsibilities. In order to successfully meet the CCA/CCG objectives higher education administrators need to understand the characteristics, needs, and motivations of adult learners and examine their policies and practices to ensure that these adult learners are successful in their pursuit of a degree. The purpose of this study is to understand the experiences of former traditional college students who have returned to college as adult learners to complete their undergraduate degrees.

National and State Agenda on Degree Completion

In response to Complete College America, the State of Georgia developed a completion plan to support the anticipated 2025 goal for 60% of Georgia jobs that require some college education (Lumina, 2021). In 2011, Georgia had 42% of the population with completed post-secondary education (CCG, 2011). As of 2019, 52.8% of Georgians have earned a two-year degree, post-secondary credentials or a four-year degree (Lumina, 2021). Like many other states, Georgia needs an educated workforce to increase economic wellbeing of the state. A shift has occurred in which the traditional college student accounts for only 25% of the nation's student body. A sub-set of the adult learner market is a group of adults who have already earned college credit, but have not completed a degree. It is estimated that 42% of the adult population in Georgia fall into this category (Morris, 2012).

To further support the college completion agenda and to address the needs of adult learners, "Go Back. Move Ahead," was created to target those in Georgia with college credit, but no college degree (2011). A campaign was launched through print, radio, and Internet to target potential students who could benefit from this program. Flexible programing provided online was highlighted in addition to the possibility for prior learning assessment credit. The successes of students in the program have been used to further promote this completion agenda (gobackmoveahead.org, 2011).

Additionally, the state of Georgia has sought to achieve the college completion goals through a strategic partnership between the University System of Georgia and the Technical College System of Georgia (Morris, 2012). Grant funding has been provided through the Gates Foundation, the Ford Foundation, the Carnegie Foundation, the

Kellogg Foundation and Lumina. Each of these foundations have completion goals supporting the increase of an educated workforce in the United States. In order to make the best use of these resources, institutions need to understand barriers adult learners may face as they attempt to complete their degrees.

Prior to college completion agendas set nationally, Sissel, Hansman, and Kasworm identified the politics of neglect related to adult learners in higher education (2001). They pointed out the lack of privilege held by adult learners on college campuses due to the inability of institutions to provide adequate services for adult students due to the services being built around the full-time, traditional student. Because these adult learners are part time, evening, and online, full access to services are not available. Those who support adult learners may understand their needs, but those who are serving them have little political voice and are often marginalized along with the students they serve. Their findings indicate that for adult learners to be in a position to be successful, it must become a market place for adult learners recognizing it to be a civic responsibility to create opportunities and privilege for all learners.

Barriers to Readmission/Reentry into College for Adult Learners

Barriers for re-entry and degree completion for adult learners include both personal and institutional factors (Kimmell, Gaylor, & Hayes, 2016; Quiggins, Ulmer, et al., 2016; Saar, Tahat & Roosalu, 2014). Affordability of attendance, including childcare and transportation were specific personal barriers identified by both Kimmel, Gaylor and Hayes as well as Saar, Tahat and Roosalu. Quiggins, et al (2016) found a perceived lack of support from institutions for adult learners to be the greatest institutional barrier for adult learners considering or recently returning to the college classroom.

Statement of the Problem

While there is existing research on the adult learner, little is known about the experience of adult learners who have returned to college and are successful in progressing toward degree completion (Quiggins, et al, 2016). What is known is largely based on quantitative data focused on the two-year college student. There is a need for research focusing on detailed information on the barriers, preferences, and motivations of adult learners. In this study I want to understand the experience of adult learners as they return to a four-year institution to complete their degree. The needs of adult learners, including needs, goals, barriers, and quality of educational experiences is critical for this growing student population (Rabourn, Shoup, &BrckaLorenz, 2015).

Significance of the Problem

With a national focus on degree completion, universities are increasing their efforts to recruit adult learners who began their college education as traditional freshmen but left the institution prior to completing a degree. As populations of returning adult learners grow in institutions of higher education, there will be a significant need to identify policies, practices, and resources that will be effective and appropriate in supporting the progression, retention and graduation of these adult learners.

A growing national agenda is focused on college degree completion rates increasing from 42% to 60% by 2020 to meet the projected workforce needs (University System of Georgia, 2011). To reach this goal, populations beyond the traditional full-time, first-time freshman (FTFTF) must be sought to either enroll in college for the first time, or to return to complete a degree. One population that has been identified in the national college completion conversation is that of the adult learner. While the adult

learner has landed in the spotlight of college completion, the resources focused at recruitment and retention are still prioritized with the traditional student in mind (Meyer, 2014). Although there is a focus on research related to retention, progression, and graduation (RPG), the majority of research in RPG is focused on FTFTF (Kasworm, 2010). Universities are increasing resources focused on the recruitment of adult learners in an effort to attain degree completion goals set by Complete College America (CCG; CCA). However, most institutions of higher education are built to support the needs of FTFTF. Thus, we may be systematically setting new recruits and returning students up for unnecessary struggles.

In order to meet the need of a more educated workforce through an increased number of those in the United States with a college education, we must better understand the needs of all sub-populations making up our college enrollments, not just that of the traditional FTFTF. Of the sub-populations being targeted, the adult learner is the one we know the least about in terms of experiences in education and needs that must be addressed to increase college degree completion (Anderson, 2011 and Clark, 2012). The findings of this research inform higher education administrators of the experience and needs of adult learners and assist higher education administrators in creating an environment that is conducive to the successful completion of degrees for returning adult students.

Conceptual Framework

The theoretical framework for this study is based on the concept of andragogy which states adults learn differently than children, (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2011)

and Schlossberg's transition theory (Schlossberg, et al. 1989). My interview questions were guided by this theoretical framework-for readmitted adult learners.

According to Adult Learning Theory, adults need to know how what is being taught can be applied in their or to their experiences (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2011). Related to this need to know is the fact that adult learners prefer to be self-directed which translates into a desire to be treated as someone capable of making decisions. The adult learner does not need to be taught to learn, but to have facilitation take place in an environment allowing learning to take place. A learner's experience is critical and welcomed in learning additional knowledge. Adult learners' experiences define them and must be respected in the learning process. Readiness to learn focuses on the timing at which knowledge is introduced, applied, and learned. Adult learners are "life-centered" in their approach to learning, meaning what is learned needs to have direct application to life or a life goal. For adults, the motivation to learn is based on external, wage related factors and internal, life satisfaction factors.

Schlossberg's transition theory provides a foundation of understanding that adult learners are often juggling multiple roles and role transitions as a natural part of life, the ability to transition impacts not only self, but also success in course work. Within transition theory, four factors impact the adult learner: situation, self, support, and strategies.

Research Design

A basic interpretive qualitative approach was used for this study using semi-structured, open-ended, individual interviews. Interviews are a form of qualitative research that provide an opportunity to explore an issue with depth through the open-

ended questions (Patton, 2002). This type of inquiry addresses the problem by analyzing the educational experiences of adult learners who have returned to college following their initial attempt at college as a first-time, full-time freshman, and provides rich data to increase our understanding of the needs of returning adult learners.

Purposive sampling was used to find participants with information rich stories. The researcher identified five participants whose backgrounds and reasons for returning to college are significantly different. While there are multiple forms of narrative analysis, thematic analysis was used to evaluate the transcripts of the interviews (Riessman, 2008). This form of analysis focuses on the content of the participants' stories. Themes that emerged from participants' stories were used to answer the following research questions:

Research Questions

1. In what ways are the educational experiences of readmitted adult learners different from their initial college educational experiences as a first time, full time freshman?
2. What are the perceptions of readmitted adult learners as to their readiness to complete their college degree?

Limitations

The limitations of this study include self-reporting interviews, generalizability, and researcher bias. As for self-reporting interviews, data based on interviews cannot be easily validated as factual since observations of what is being shared cannot be made (Patton, 2002). Additionally, memory retrieval and the levels of processing phenomenon can impact how memories are recalled later (Lavrakas, 2008). Recalling memory can be impacted by the type of information being retrieved, how long it has been since the

events being recalled, and uniqueness of an event. Retrieval errors such as forgetting, estimation error and telescoping can occur. Forgetting happens when a participant cannot recall the events. Estimation error occurs when best guesses are used. Telescoping takes place when the time and place being retrieved does not match with the time and place of the events being questioned in a survey or interview. While the nature of a qualitative study such as this does not result in generalizable data, it does provide rich data based in participant experiences allowing for readers to find relevance to the specific population. Researcher bias due to previous relationships with interview participants is a potential limitation in the study. Participant checks were completed by having the participants read script and provided opportunity to clarify or amend statements.

Definition of Terms

Andragogy-

“The art and science of helping adults learn.” (Knowles, 1980, p. 43)

Adult Learner-

Age 25 and older; diverse educational, cultural, and job experiences; adult responsibilities often including work (SREB, 2008)

Retention-

A measure of the rate at which students persist in their educational program at an institution, expressed as a percentage. For four-year institutions, this is the percentage of first-time bachelors (or equivalent) degree-seeking undergraduates from the previous fall who are again enrolled in the current fall. For all other institutions this is the percentage of first-time degree/certificate-seeking students from the previous fall who either re-

enrolled or successfully completed their program by the current fall. (Survey Component Glossary, n.d.)

Persistence or progression-

A student's continuation of higher education to include transferring to another institution of higher learning (Tinto, 2012)

Organization of the Study

This study is presented in five chapters. In the first chapter I provided an overview of topic, the significance of the study and present the research questions to be answered in the study. Chapter 2 includes a synthesized overview of the areas of literature contributing the development of the study and areas of research relevant to the study. In Chapter 3 includes discussion of the research methodology used to conduct the study. Chapter four presents data and analysis. Chapter five presents discussion and recommendations for future research.

Chapter II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The literature reviewed to inform this study falls into the following categories: college completion, adult learners, Schlossberg's Transition Theory and Grit. The literature reviewed creates an understanding of what is current in the research as it pertains to the study and supports the need to expand what we know of college completion for adult learners returning to college with the goal of completing requirements for an undergraduate degree.

College Completion

The college completion agenda has been on the radar of higher education administrators, policy makers, and politicians throughout this decade due to increased focus on programs such as Complete College America. In 2010, Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) set a goal of 60% graduation rates for adults 25-64 (SREB, 2010)). The U.S. Department of Education's strategic plan focused on the completion of college and lifelong learning opportunities for youth and adults (2011, 2014). In support of these national agendas, the state of Georgia, along with many other states, outlined a completion agenda (USG, 2011). The completion agenda for Georgia, Complete College Georgia, was designed to address the 18% deficiency the state has to meet the 60% completion rate by 2025 (Lumina, 2021).

In a quantitative study using hierarchical logistical regression on data from 290 students who returned to college, Berkovitz and O'Quin (2007) found that, the more semesters a student completed upon readmission impacts the likelihood of completing a degree. Additionally, they found younger students are most likely to graduate. In a qualitative study with African American males, Warde (2008) found the following four factors impacted college completion: recognition of the importance of a college degree, access to resources, a mentor, and resiliency.

College Completion Focus on Adult Learners

Adult learners are one of the targeted populations for completion agendas in our nation. The Southern Regional Educational Boards (SREB) road map to completion included a recommendation to increase access for adults in an effort to attract students who had previously stopped out of college to return (2010). According to the report No Time to Waste 2025 there are 60 million adults with some college credit in the U.S. and 29 million of those students started as traditionally aged student in the SREB states. Adult learners are identified as key to meeting completion goals.

The U.S. Department of Education (USDE) considers a measure of success for the completion goals to include an increase in degree attainment for those students 25-34 in age (2014). In the 2011 strategic plan, the USDE considered an increase in FASFA applications for those 25 years or older with no college degree a sign of success (USDE, 2011).

Like other states in the U.S., Georgia has also increased efforts to increase graduation rates by targeting adults in the workforce (USG, 2011). To reach the 60% completion goal, the state cannot rely on new graduates alone. This drive to increase the

educated workforce in Georgia has led to adult learners being part of the majority of students in higher education. This increase has come from a strategic approach to attract the 22% of working Georgians who already have some college credit, but no degree to return to college.

Pegg and Di Paolo conducted a qualitative study in the United Kingdom with 26 part-time adult learners to learn more about the use of institutional capital in the form of credit transfer (2013). Phone interviews were conducted to better understand the experience of students who were transferring, and in some cases, reducing time to degree. In these interviews the theme of “unfinished business” emerged for those who had their pursuit of higher education interrupted. The students in their narratives communicated that they leveraged how credit transferred to their benefit to complete degrees. A recommendation from the research was that higher education institutions need a more effective way for students with partial credit to be able to identify how course work from previous institutions will apply at a transfer institution. They also recommend higher education administrators identify barriers for students trying to re-engage so transfer articulations can be built with the student in mind.

Brock (2010) outlines the impact of federal policy and public perception of higher education to minorities including adult learners. In this outline, he focuses on interventions focused on completion rates at community colleges. Most of what he found was a focus on small scale initiatives and encouraged an increase in scalability of programs. Specifically, he stated the institutions in need of this assistance the most are those who are access minded to adult learners and underprepared students.

Factors that Impact College Degree Completion

Warde (2008) completed a phenomenological qualitative study of African American males who have earned a college degree. The sample was purposeful in seeking participants through offices and student organizations typically made up of African American males. The participants were asked to describe key events and experiences that led to successful college completion. In the focus groups, the participants identified an epiphany that higher education was important, access to resources to attend and persist, having a mentor, and resiliency were all key factors in degree completion for them.

Goings, conducted a qualitative study with 13 black, male, nontraditional students who returned to college (2018). In two semi-structure interviews, the participants indicated they had dropped out of college primarily due to being too involved or not involved in campus activities. Upon return they wanted to make up for lost time. They found that there was no programming for them as nontraditional students, but found informal and encouraging relationships with faculty a positive impact on their degree completion. Additionally, the participants had a driving force from the need to prove to others they could complete their degree.

Student Attrition

The structure of the college environment, in particularly that of the classroom design and delivery is key to confronting student attrition rates (Barefoot, 2004). The impact of advising, course sequencing, policies and practices within the university must also be considered.

Rhee (2008) conducted a multinomial, multilevel model quantitative study using old Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) data to determine the impact of institutional climate on student departure. Specifically, the impact of the diversity climate was studied. The study found the increased recruitment of minority students yielded a higher stop-out rate. University emphasis on diversity also increased stop-out rates.

Stratton, O'Toole and Wetzel (2004) conducted a multinomial logit model of attrition to differentiate between behaviors indicating a student will stop-out (short-term) instead of dropping out (long-term). These archival data from the 1990/94 Beginning Postsecondary Survey was analyzed finding that delayed matriculation, financial aid type during the first year of college, marital status, and parental status are significant predictors of the type of educational interruption a student will take. Additionally, work-study students and those receiving grants are most likely to persist.

Kimmel, Gaylor, Grubbs, and Hayes (2012), completed a comparative analysis of study conducted in 2004 with 683 face-to-face adult learners from four private and one public university in 2004 with 2010 data collected from 530 face-to-face and online adult learners at three private institutions. The study examined the results of the Motivations and Barriers to Adult Learners Questionnaire related to employment, income, motivation and barriers for those students participating in the study. While causation was identified for student enrollment or departure, the researchers found a decrease in student's financial situation may make it easier for a student to decide return to college, it does change the motivation to be driven by financial outcomes instead of learning for the sake of learning. This extrinsic motivation can encourage students to "college hop" and to focus on the cost over the value of an earned college degree. Financial insecurity and the

ability to pay back loans is taken into greater consideration for students returning in the 2010 survey verses those participating the 2004-2005 survey.

Bye, Pushkar, and Conway (2007) studied motivation for both traditional aged and adult learners. In this study 300 undergraduate students at a midsized, urban university were given the Motivated Strategies for Learning Questionnaire. Those participating in the study were between the ages of 18 and 60. The analysis of these data was first focused on the difference in traditional aged students and adult learned. Secondary to that was a focus on positive impact of intrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation for learning was found to be higher for adult learners than the traditionally aged student.

Merrill (2015) completed a qualitative study in which two female adult learners were interviewed and the as part of a larger sample who were enrolled at an elite university in the United Kingdom. The focus of the study was around why some working class students complete degrees while others do not. In the research process it emerged that returning to college for a working adult is challenging and make the argument that withdrawal is not always a terrible choice for students. To that point, the researcher suggests institutions do a better job at recognizing benefits of withdrawal for some students. Additionally, the researcher stated that universities must learn to challenge the status quo tom make space for adult learners so they can feel like respected and accepted members of the university community. In doing so, the university creates space of a more diverse population of students. Way identified to better support adult learners was through improved support prior to matriculation, entry into academic programs, and when students need to withdraw instead of framing it as failure.

Kimmel, Gaylor, and Hayes (2016) examined the impact of age of adult learners as a follow up to their 2012 comparative analysis of a 2004-2005 study that was later conducted in 2010 specifically related to motivations and barriers by age group. Like the previous study, the Motivations and Barriers to Adult Learners Questionnaire was the tool used for the survey. They found that age impacts motivation for seeking a degree. Students age 25-34 were motivated to enroll in hopes of a new career. While this was a motivating factor for those students ages 35+, they were also motivated by gaining respect from peers and pay increases resulting in an earned college degree. For those 35+ financial barriers related to childcare while attending class. Transportation remains a barrier across age groups. Financial aid, grants, and employee assistance programs are motivators for adult learner enrollment.

Fairchild (2003) identified barriers for adult learners for degree completion to be situational, dispositional, and institutional. Situational barriers identified were role conflicts and feelings of guilt related to being away from family to complete coursework, financial, and career conflicts. Dispositional barriers focus on the increased demands on the student and the time conflicts that arise, how they create stress, and how the students respond. Institutional barriers revolved around services and policies designed with the traditional student in mind. Taking these barriers into account, institutions have the following opportunities to better support adult learners: online registration, delivery of student services, parking, orientations for adult learners that address known challenges and ways students can connect to campus for success, campus employment, extracurricular engagement designed for adult learners, admissions criteria that is flexible

enough to address academic challenges associated with students who have been away from formal education for some time.

Adult Learners

Adult Learning Theory-Andragogy

The idea that adults learn differently from children first emerged in the 1800s within the writings of Thomas Pole (Draper, 1998). This initial conversation was around the education of adults for literacy as a way to teach morals and Christian principles through the reading of Biblical scripture. These ideas of adult learning later morphed into a more philosophical conversation around building independence and basic human dignity by the end of the 19th century. The conversation continued in Europe where a debate began around whether adult education and andragogy were one in the same in definition and philosophy. This debate has continued to the United States and into the 21st century. One of the ongoing questions is, while we better understand adult learners, do we really have a better understanding of how adults actually learn?

Situated in this ongoing debate is adult learning theory as it emerged in the United States in the late 1960s proposing that adult students learn differently from children, thus requiring a different approach to teaching adults than pedagogical approaches used with children (Knowles, Holton & Swanson, 2011). The andragological theory of adult learning is based on the following assumptions: the need to know, the learner's self-concept, the role of experience, readiness to learn, orientation to learning, and motivation. Adults can be defined by biological age, legal age, social age, or psychological age. For the purpose of adult learning theory, the psychological age is most critical when determining who is an adult learner.

While there are multiple theories related to adult learning, the work of Malcolm Knowles and the theory of andragogy is one of the more widely known of these theories (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007). Andragogy is “the art and science of helping adults learn” (Knowles, 1980). The idea of Knowles’ work being theory has been challenged by other educators such as Davenport and Davenport and Hartee during the 1980s when they questioned whether Knowles ideas of andragogy are a theory or merely a set of principles of practice for adult educators or a list of what an adult learner should be like (Merriam, 2001). Over time Knowles moved from viewing his own work as a theory to a set of assumptions about adult learners. More specifically, Knowles’ assumptions of an emerging adult learning theory are: a person evolves as with age to become self-direct human beings, life experience is a bedrock for learning, the developmental tasks of a person’s social role impact the person’s ability to learn, and the increased need to apply what is learned immediately as one ages (Knowles, 1980). Further assumptions about adult learners per Knowles’s perspective on andragogy that should be taken into account are the autonomy and growth-orientation of adult learners (Merriam, 2001). Programs designed for adult learners, in his research findings and recommendations, should be based in these assumptions.

Characteristics of Adult Learners

Anderson (2011) identified characteristics, both demographic and academic, that enhanced an adult learner’s retention through a sequential binary logistical regression using data from Noel-Levitz Adult Satisfaction Priorities Survey. Having children, a goal to earn a degree, and high grade point average increased the likelihood of an adult learner

to be retained. Additionally, satisfaction with academic advising had a positive impact on retention.

Kenner and Weinerman discussed the learning styles of adult learners that are shaped significantly by the world of work and the notion that the way of learning in that environment does not always translate into effective ways to learn in higher education (2011). This can be frustrating to an adult learner who is returning to the educational environment and should be taken into consideration by faculty and administrators supporting and teaching this population. The longer a student has been away from an academic setting the more challenging this can be for the student. Being able to assist an adult learner in identifying these ineffective strategies and developing new ones is a challenge for the educator, but can be very beneficial to the student.

Rabourn, Shoup and BrckaLorenz (2015) analyzed data from the 2013 and 2014 National Survey of Student Engagement to identify characteristics of adult learners that differentiate them from the traditional-aged students with whom they attend class. Adult learners were found to be more academically engaged, interact less with classmates and faculty, have positive perceptions of interactions with others, and find their campus less supportive than the traditionally-aged students. Adult learners are more likely to be transfer, part-time and fully online students. While many adult learners are online, they desire hands-on teaching approaches often absent from the online classroom.

Strange conducted a quantitative study using ANOVAs to analyze 1310 responses to a self-reported survey on the ideal college professor and course by both traditional and non-traditional students at a 4-year university (2008). Themes that emerged from adult learners included the desire to have more rigorous classes that were applicable to life.

These adults were then motivated to master these skills. These adult learners also identified flexibility and organization as critical qualities in an ideal professor.

Barriers and Enrollment Factors

Quiggins, Ulmer, Hainline, Burris, Ritz and Dusen (2016) conducted a study using online survey data to identify motivation factor and perceived barriers faced by adult learners. The greatest motivating factor was intrinsic in nature including satisfaction with chosen major, course material peaking interests, and the ability to choose assignments of interests. The greatest perceived barriers faced by students were institutional ones due to the perceived lack of support through a distinct support office for adult learners, lack of mentoring programs, and support groups.

Noel-Levitz and CAEL conduct a National Adult Learners Satisfaction-Priorities report seek data from thousands of adult learners across the country to better understand priorities for learning experiences, their perceived strengths and challenges and factors impacting enrollment (2013). As for factors impacting enrollment at four-year institutions, the following are the top concerns for adult learns when considering enrolling: Program availability, convenience of course offerings (time and location), time (flexible pacing and time to degree), financial, impact on current employment, cost, transferability of credit).

Choa and Good conducted a qualitative study in which they interviewed 43 adult learners at both a large public university and a mid-sized private institution (2004). Data gathered from those interviewed led to the finding of a central theme of hopefulness across the stories from the student participants. From this concept of hopefulness motivation, financial investment, career opportunities, issues around transition, and the

impact of support systems were all impacted for the participants in spite of challenges often faced by adult learners, the hopefulness was a motivation to balance those challenges around roles in school, work, and home life. For some motivation to earn a degree was for self-fulfillment or an internal desire to learn for the enjoyment of it. For others, financial motivation around the hope of being able to bring in more income with a college degree was a key factor. Regardless of motivation, an integration of college education to career readiness or opportunity was strongly present in student stories. Because the pursuit of a college degree directly impacts family, friends, co-workers, and employers, the support systems for adult learners in the study were critical. They collectively acknowledge the negotiation and balance of these roles and relationships were challenging, but the support given from these systems also added to the idea of hopefulness. For some, those relationships, or changes like divorce in these relationships led to a start or return to higher education. Because of these findings, the researchers recommend counselors working with adult learners should be certain to consider the broader context of the student's life and how it impacts academic success. Additionally, outreach to this population of students may be necessary, especially if there are resources to support the student in the multiple roles they seek to balance. It is also recommended that higher education professionals should be able to help the adult learner make clear connections between education and career objectives.

Saar, Tahat and Roosalu (2014) analyzed data from the pre-economic crisis Survey of Adult Learners in Formal Education conduct in 2007 to identify perceived institutional barriers faced by adult learners in thirteen European countries. Responses varied based on the political and socio-economic landscape of the country. However,

diversification of higher education and affordability had the greatest impact on perceived barriers across the thirteen countries.

Stone, conducted a qualitative research study including 20 adult learners in final semesters of an undergraduate degree in Australia (2008). In the study financial and time constraints, transitions in personal relations, and balancing personal responsibilities were common barriers for students seeking degree completion. Specifically, the lack of support from family members emerged with the female participants. Both male and female participants also identified previous negative experiences with school being a mental barrier for them.

Goto and Martin support the concept of dispositional barriers and identify those as potential factors in student completion that lacks research (2009). In their mixed methods research in which they studied GED students in a technical college they identified barriers to institutional, informational, situational, or psychological. The focus of their research was on the psychological factors of because those psychological factors impact how students will address barriers faced by these adult learners on the path to degree completion such as financial, relational at both work and home, and transportation. Childcare and health problems emerged more than other barriers in this study. This study acknowledged these are not singular barriers to be tackled one at a time, but are often magnified as they are interconnected. The knowledge of available resources not only influenced a student furthering their education, but it also impacted the ability to overcome hurdles. Additionally, those who were able to overcome hurdles identified at least one person who they felt believed in them and supported them. The researchers concluded that perceptions and approach to barriers, resources, and support systems are

impacted by a student's psychological state, yet we know little about this barrier compared to the other barriers often referred to in higher education literature.

Markle (2015) used role theory as the theoretical framework in a mixed-methods study of nearly 500 non-traditional students at a large public institution in the southeastern United States in which the researcher examined factors impacting persistence. Confidence in graduating and grade point average of students emerged as a factor of success. The researcher did find that women often had challenges with role conflict, but most often persisted, especially if they were enrolled part time. The women's ultimate response to role conflict was around the idea of being oppressed by time. Having adequate time to meet the demands of multiple roles created a significant amount of stress which was the key factor in considering withdrawal. The older men were the more financial concerns impacted persistence. Across all participants was a feeling of marginalization due to institutional structures including policies and opportunities to engage in activities or support service.

Benson, Hewitt, Heagney, Devos, and Crosling (2010), conducted a longitudinal study across diverse groups of students to explore the factors impacting their university level studies. Narrative inquiry was used to conduct three semi-structured interviews along with two group meetings. Factors impacting the student's enrollment and subsequent success were: family, socio-economic status, family difficulties, gender, being a first generation student, migration, location, and experiences with education.

Marrero and Milacci (2018) conducted a qualitative study at two Hispanic Serving Institutions in the southeastern United States. Individual interviews were conducted with ten students approaching graduation their persistence in college.

Additionally, participants made journal entries for four weeks and were invited to a focus group. The findings included participants leveraging experiences dating back to childhood in which they had to persist that built character. Additionally, the participants recognized persistence due to relationships built with faculty, staff, and peers

Adult learners are absent from Tinton's *Completing College* (2012). Additionally, they are not part of the findings from Bowen, Chingos, and McPherson's *Crossing the Finish Line: Completing College at America's Universities* (2009). Both of these works are considered significant contributions to college completion from the past decade.

Giancola, Grawitch, and Borcbrockhert (2009) studied the impact of stress from work, life and school and coping as mediators between conflict and psychosocial outcomes with 159 students in a school of professional studies in St. Louis. Family-school and work school conflict was found to be a key stressor for adult learners. Work stressors were found to be greater than family stressors for the participants of the study. The researchers suggested this was due to the integral role work plays in the life of an adult learner. The researchers recommend more qualitative research to gather stories of adult learners. Specifically, the school stressors relating to classroom instruction, advising, and enrollment services like admissions and financial aid should be explored further in relation to the adult learner.

Kinser and Deitchman (2008) refer to adult learners returning to college as "tenacious persisters". In their mixed methods study the researchers compared the experience of the adults returning to college of their traditional counterparts. While motivations for attending college were similar, the study found adult learners to attribute their attendance patterns to their own short comings or barriers in their personal life than

those who took a more traditional path to their education. The study was conducted at a mid-sized community college. The researchers suggested a focus on what brought students back to higher education instead of risk for leaving again as an area for future research.

Zhang, Lui, and Hagedorn (2013) conducted a qualitative study to capture and analyze the stories of adult transfer students. The study took place at a research institution including a purposeful sample of seven students who had transferred from a community college. Semi-structured, open-ended questions were used in interviewing the students between 25-35 years of age at a Midwestern university. The following five themes emerged from their study: contribution of the community college, multiple roles of adult learners, management of time, campus relationships, and identifying as an adult student. Further, engagement on a college campus is different for adult learners than it is for the traditional student. This along with the challenge of balancing multiple roles, indicated institutions need to design programs to better support the adult learner.

Saar, Taht, and Roosalu (2014) analyzed data from the 2007 Survey of Adult Learners in Formal Education which surveyed adults in higher education in 13 European countries. The survey questions addressed issues of characteristics of the institution of higher learning, financing of the student's education, and the learning process including barriers and satisfaction. The researchers specifically sought to determine specific indicators impacting access, flexibility, and affordability of an institution and the role those factors played in a student's participation in higher education. The results varied based on the country in which the student attended, however, it was found that across the continent, macro-level and meso-level policy within the control of the institution can

affect the ability for an adult learner to participate in the higher education system including: shorter-duration programs, well developed online programs of study, and student support services specific to the needs of adult learners.

Francois (2014) surveyed 156 students in the Tampa, Florida area in programs ranging from associate degree to doctorate. Cluster sampling was used to conduct the Education Participant Scale with an accompanying demographic questionnaire. The survey is designed to measure adult learning orientations using the following categories: communication improvement, social contact/social relationships, educational preparation, professional advancement, family togetherness, social stimulation, and cognitive interest. The results of the study suggest professional advancement, cognitive interest, and educational preparation to be the motivating factor for adult learners to college for programs in business, education, and nursing. In a broader look, adult learners seeking an associate or bachelor's degree are primarily motivated by communication improvement. The researchers recommend these motivating factors be taken into account when recruiting and supporting adult learners returning to college.

Meyer (2014) conducted a qualitative study in which she interviewed 8 adult learners at a public research university in the Midwestern United States. The research focused on the experience of adult learners at an institution at which the majority of students are traditional age college students and the needs of the adult learners in the study. The findings indicated that due to the primary focus of the adult learner being in the classroom, the relationship with faculty impacted the students' perceptions of campus climate. One reason the focus for the adult learner was the classroom was the perception that extracurricular activities existed for the traditional student. The same perception of

focus on the younger student was true for campus services. Those adult learners working perceived a level of inflexibility due to the limited offering of courses that did not conflict with the roles and responsibilities of an adult learner. The design of the institution in and of itself placed the adult learner at a disadvantage. The researcher recommended more qualitative studies to explore the perceptions and experiences of a growing population on college campuses be conducted.

Benshoff presented a paper at the Annual Conference of the Association of Adult Development and Aging at which he discussed the challenges of the adult learners that had emerged in research during the 1970s and 1980s (1993). A recognition that adults differ from younger students on college campuses across the nation was foundation of the findings shared. Flexible schedules and a more kinesthetic approach to learning in which classroom work is clearly connected to the career setting is preferable to rote lecture. Family and finances are a significant factor for continuation of education for adult learners. Institutional ability to adapt programs originally designed for younger, traditionally aged students, to better serve adult learners is of benefit to both student and institution. For the student they have additional support to continue studies. For the institution, the ability to recruit, educate, and satisfy the students are of benefit.

Schlossberg's Transition Theory

Transition theory categorizes transitions and provides a system of coping (Schlossberg, 2011). Transitions can be anticipated (major life events like graduation, marriage, having children, career—starting, changing, retiring), unanticipated (disruptive events like health changes, accidents, loss of employment, unexpected promotions), or non-event (failing to meet major life events as anticipated like not marrying, having

children, being able to support yourself financially and retire). That these transitions happen are not as important as how they impact relationships. Coping with transitions is divided into four categories: Situation (What is the situation at transition? Does the transition add to or take away stress?), Self (How prepared is an individual to handle the transition psychologically? Are they optimistic and resilient? Where is locus of control? How much is unknown and how much of the unknown is comfortable for the person?), Support (Are there people or organizations that will be part of the transition who will support the individual?), and Strategies (To what extent can the individual identify solutions to deal with transition and execute strategies?).

Adults have many transitions related to life and role transitions (Schlossberg, 1975). Dealing with work and family and the roles related to both impact transition. When considering adding additional education through return to school or additional certification, these contemplations can take place in an information vacuum because those making decisions are not within the education system. Schlossberg found that several groups, including those who dropped out to school and are considering re-enrollment or indicated they were leaving one institution to attend another, often lacked support.

Schlossberg, Lynch, Chickering connected transitions and adult learners nearly 3 decades ago (1989). The focus of the transition strategy is through developing institutional support services and to create a culture that includes the needs of adult learners. Transitions often interrupt adult learn attendance and the institution can be better equipped to offer supports and strategies to navigate those transitions.

Grit

While grit is addressed related to K-12 and undergraduate students, research specific to adult learners is scant at best within the literature. Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, and Kelly completed a series of six studies around grit and those in high academic achievement across a variety of settings including ivy league schools, a national military academy and a national spelling bee (2007). They found grit, “perseverance and passion for long term goals” (p. 1087), adds significantly to talent for those who are high achievers.

The U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Educational Technology compiled a report focusing on the critical factors of success in the 21st and identified grit, tenacity and perseverance as such factors (2013). The purpose in reviewing research and practice of these critical factors was to inform key decision and policy makers as to how technology can be utilized in developing grit, tenacity and perseverance in students. The overarching finding of the 14 conclusions is that these three critical factors must be prioritized by policy makers, administrators, teachers, and parents.

Reed and Jeremiah studies the impact of grit on both students and as future professionals (2017). Their work focused on ways faculty members can use project based and experiential learning to assist students in developing grit. For students it is important to develop a growth mindset through a combination of academic and extra-curricular activities. They also explored work at Fisk-Vanderbilt in a masters-to-PhD bridge program which includes a mentoring program for students and the removal of standardized testing that is an initial barrier for many students. The conclusion of the study is that grit is a factor of student success that should not be overlooked.

Bailey-Taylor identified ways in which Schlossberg's transition theory can be integrated with the Appreciative Advising model to better support adult learners as they transition through higher education (2009). Appreciative advising incorporates 6 phases in which an advisor works with a student including disarm, discover, dream, design, deliver and don't settle (Bloom, J., Hutson, B., & He, Y., 2008). The questions asked through the appreciative advising model, naturally support Schlossberg's 4 S transition system (Bailey-Taylor, 2009). The open ended questions that are positive in nature can help lead students to discover things about themselves to encourage college completion as they reflect on times in the past in which they have been successful or have helped someone else be successful. This is focus on finding strengths. Additionally, the concept of self in Schlossberg's transition theory is supported in the dream stage in which advisors work with students to envision successful completion of college and how life could look after degree attainment. In the design phase students and advisor create a plan to reach the goals outline in the dream phase. In doing so, support systems are identified through the concept of a personal "presidential cabinet" to address barriers adult learners face like childcare, finances, and household responsibilities. This support system can also provide emotional support in the form of encouragement that the degree attainment is an achievable goal. Through the deliver phase students implement strategies of success. Advisors provide encouragement to leverage strategies to overcome challenges and barriers to success. The article concludes with the statement that advisors will be critical in adult learner degree completion.

Karmelita (2017), studied the perception of transition using narrative inquiry over the course of an 8-week transition program designed for adult learners. Semi-structured

interviews we conducted with five of the six participants at the beginning of the program and at the end. Additionally, participants were asked to journal at least four times during enrollment in the program. Instructors in the program were also interviewed. Based on these interviews the following suggestions were made for those creating such program: connect course work to life, use technology, remediate, seek to create an atmosphere for relationships to develop among the students and instructors as well as student services, and to create meaningful experience. Of these recommendations, the adult learners participating in the study most wanted to have a space to connect with each other.

This chapter provided a review of literature that provides context for this research. The research of this study is situated in the following categories of research: college completion, college completion focus on adult learners, factors that impact college degree completion, student attrition, adult learners, Schlossberg's Transition Theory, and Grit. Chapter 3 provides the details of the research methods executed to conduct the study.

Chapter III

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study is to understand the experiences of former traditional college students who have returned to college as adult learners to complete their undergraduate degrees. In this chapter the research design, data collection, and data analysis are outlined.

Research Design

The research methodology for this qualitative study is basic interpretative research design. The researcher is interested in: “(1) how people interpret their experiences, (2) how they construct their worlds, and (3) what meaning they attribute to their experiences” (Merriam, 2009, p. 23.). The study was conducted with five adult learners who originally attended college as a traditional student and left higher education without attaining a degree and later returned as an adult learner and earned a degree. One semi-structured, open-ended interview was conducted with research informants. This type of inquiry addressed the problem by analyzing the educational experiences of adult learners who have returned to college after stopping out following their initial attempt at college as a first-time, full-time freshman, and it provides rich data to provide depth to our understanding of returning adult learners.

Research Questions

The research questions to be explored in this study include:

1. In what ways are the educational experiences of readmitted adult learners different from their initial college educational experiences as a first time, full time?
2. What are the perceptions of readmitted adult learners as to their readiness to complete their college degree?

Setting

The study took place at a comprehensive university located in the Southeastern United States. The institutional enrollment is approximately 11,000 students. The institution awards associates, bachelor, masters and doctoral degrees. The average age of undergraduate students is 21. The percent of undergraduate, adult learners (age 25 and older) is 16.1%.

Participants

Purposive sampling was used to find participants with information rich stories. According to Lavrakas, purposive sampling is used when a researcher is seeking a representative population that is not random in nature (2008). Five adult learners were identified through professional relationships with the researcher who represented a cross section of diverse backgrounds. Four females and one male participated in the study. Two of the three participants had children while completing their degrees. All participants worked while earning their degree. Four of the five participants went on to earn graduate work. Each adult learner successfully returned to complete their degree after previously earning course credit as a traditional student.

Data Collection

Interviews are a form of qualitative research that provide an opportunity to explore an issue with depth through the open-ended questions (Patton, 2002). Each participant was interviewed for approximately 90 minutes. The interview provided an opportunity to gain in-depth knowledge of the participants' history of initial experience of higher education as a traditional student and the experience as an adult learner completing a degree.

Approval to Conduct Study

Prior to beginning the research, full IRB approval was granted by the university where the study is conducted. This study adhered to the guidelines involving human subjects and be compliant with the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Code of Federal Regulations, 45 CFR § 46.102 (2009), (See Appendix A).

Invitations to Participate in Interviews

Upon receiving approval to conduct research, the researcher contacted five adult learners known through professional relationships to participate in an interview. These relationships all evolved through work as an advisor or administrator. The researcher met participants over the years as an advisor and administrator. Because of the interest in the adult learner experience, the researcher had built relationships with alumni and colleagues within her field who left college and returned as adult learners to complete their degree. Many of those professional relationships were maintained over the years. An email was sent inviting them to share their educational experiences as a traditional and adult learner (See Appendix B).

Consent to Participate in Study

Before beginning the interviews, a Consent Statement indicating the purpose of the interview was read which included participation is voluntary and decisions by participants to continue with the interview is consent, and that a procedure meant to assure more anonymity for participants since no written document with their name will be used for the consent statement (See Appendix C for Consent Statement).

Interviews

The individual interviews were audio recorded on a digital recording device. The recordings were transferred to a password protected computer file for analysis. Notes were taken during the interview to allow for the formation of additional questions that emerged during the interview, which enhanced later analysis and serve as a backup should there be a technological failure with the recording (Patton, 2002). Once audio recordings were transcribed, they were deleted from all devices and files used for recording. Verbal consent to be interviewed was completed at the beginning of the interview.

The interview was divided into three focus areas (See Appendix D). In the first phase of the interview, questions focused on the adult learner's experience of higher education as a traditional student. In the second phase, the focus was on the adult learner's experience as an adult learner returning to college. In the third phase of the interview, focused on how they would talk about their educational experience to another adult considering returning to college and to current higher education administrators. At the conclusion of the interview, each adult learner was informed of a future invitation to

read the final transcript of the interviews allowing for clarification of statements (member checks for validity/reliability) would be sent.

Data Processing and Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to evaluate the transcripts of the interviews (Riessman, 2008). This form of analysis focuses on the content of the participants' stories. Themes that emerge from participants' stories were used to answer the research questions. To obtain a sense of the whole, each interview was read and listened to three times prior to analysis (Worthen and McNeill, 1996). Once the analysis for each participant was completed, themes that emerge across all participants was identified and analyzed.

Transcription

Audio files were submitted to a professional transcription service for conversion from audio to transcript file. The transcriptions were then reviewed while listening to the audio recording three times by the researcher. Edits were made to the transcription during the review to correct transcription to reflect what was actually said by the participants.

Once the transcriptions accurately reflected the interview, each transcript was read for demographic data. A second reading was completed to identify initial themes emerging and to allow the researcher to become familiar with the stories of the participants. Once more familiar with the stories, the researcher created an excel spreadsheet with interview questions and transferred answers from each participant to a grid that included a column from each question with key comments and a column for themes. Finally, a spreadsheet was created with the interview questions, answers, key

comments, and a column for themes with all participants to allow for the identification of themes across participants.

Researcher as Interviewer

The researcher is an adult learner as a doctoral student. Additionally, the researcher's husband has completed a second undergraduate degree and a graduate degree during their marriage. In the researcher's professional role, she has worked with learning support students. On the campus where she works, many of these students are adult learners. The researcher has attended several conferences focused on the adult learners and how institutions and administrators can better support this population of students. Sitting and listening to completion agendas with adult learners at the center of some efforts led to the researcher having concerns about adults being encouraged to return to colleges not ready to support them based on her experiences as a transfer counselor, advisor and administrator. Entering this research project, the researcher believes higher education administrators are encouraging adult learners to return to institutions that are not prepared to serve students based on the assumption of andragogy. There are specific programs that have been developed to meet the needs of adult learners with the assumptions in mind, but they are few and far between. The researcher is concerned students are not being set up for success as institutions aggressively recruit them to return to school with additional responsibilities in life.

As an adult learner, the researcher is in a program designed with working adults in mind. Online and weekend coursework allowed for her to balance work, school, and demands from home. The same was true for her husband's graduate work. However, his undergraduate program of study which he completed as a second degree, adult learner

required him to work nights and weekends in order to complete the program. He was unable to work full time. By the end of his undergraduate degree, he suffered from migraines related to shift work. The researcher as an advisor and administrator watched adult learner attending for the first time and returning awkwardly move through enrollment and re-enrollment processes where they were easily lost. She listened to stories of frustrations around credits lost due to transferring from one institution to another. Going into the study, the researcher knew it would be important to be aware of the bias she may have due to her experiences and passion to advocate for the support of adult learners.

Validity and Trustworthiness

The researcher sought a neutral stance while conducting research, analyzing data and reporting findings to increase validity and trustworthiness of the study (Patton, 2002). Data was collected in a systematic manner following research protocol with each interview. Each interview was read five times. The first three for ensuring accuracy of the transcription. The fourth time they were read for demographic information. The fifth time they were read to identify initial themes. Then, each transcript was transferred to an excel spreadsheet to clearly identify answers to each question from participants individually. Once this step was complete, then the researcher combined all excel grids to identify the themes that emerged across participants. The researcher sought to meet Guba's constructs of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (1981).

Credibility

Credibility in qualitative research refers to believability of results from the perspectives of the participant (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility in this study will be

achieved through a variety of strategies recommended by Shenton (2004). Those strategies include triangulation, iterative questioning, frequent debriefing, and member checks.

Triangulation. Triangulation will be achieved through use of individual interviews with participants who bring different demographics to the study. Common threads across the participants built validation for data.

Iterative questioning. Shenton (2004) defined iterative questioning as the researcher asking probing and rephrasing questions. Rephrasing of questions is based on the responses of the participant in the interview process. This purpose of this approach is to clarify meaning, identify richer data, and discover possible falsified data (Shenton, 2004). In addition to the interview questions that have been predetermined, probing questions to follow up on responses were asked to gather additional data during the interview process.

Frequent debriefing. The researcher debriefed with the dissertation chairperson to discuss emerging themes. These debriefings were conducted via email, over the phone and in one on one meetings.

Member Checks. Once the individual interviews were transcribed, the participants were provided with a copy to verify accuracy. Participant feedback was included by allowing them to read the transcript and have the opportunity to amend any statements they did not feel accurately represents the story of their college education.

Transferability

Transferability refers to the generalizability of results to other settings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Details pertaining to the institutional profile was provided, allowing others

at mid-sized institutions to see their own institution as the institution at which the researcher was conducted. Thick, rich data has been used to describe students participating in such a way that allows readers to identify students in similar situations on their own campuses.

Dependability

Dependability in qualitative research refers to a responsibility of the researcher to account for contextual changes (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Additionally, it refers to the extent to which, if repeated the research methods would yield similar findings. The methodology of the study is outlined in such a way allowing for others to conduct the same study on a similar campus with similar participants in which they will likely find the same results.

Confirmability

Confirmability is the extent to which a different researcher could confirm the findings in conducting the same study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). These data collected through individual interviews was analyzed. A data-oriented approach was taken to allow for the tracing of data collection to themes identified and recommendations made within the study (Shenton, 2004).

Summary

In seeking to understand the experiences of former traditional college students who have returned to college as adult learners, participants were recruited through purposive sampling from a university in the southeastern United States to complete a 90-minute, three phase interview on the participants' college experiences related to the return to college, the first time in college, and the view of the college experience in

totality. Narrative analysis was used to identify themes within and across the interviews.

The following chapter outlines the results of the research.

Chapter IV

RESULTS

The purpose of this study was to understand the experiences of former traditional college students who have returned to college as adult learners to complete their undergraduate degrees. The first three chapters provided an overview of the topic, significance of the study, an overview of the literature contributing to the research question, and the methodology used to conduct the study. This chapter will provide findings that resulted from the research, including brief profiles and themes that emerged.

Five adult learners participated in individual face-to-face interviews lasting approximately 90 minutes. The interviews were audio recorded and later transcribed. In the initial data analysis process, the interview transcription for each individual participant was entered into a matrix based on interview questions to identify individual themes. The next level of analysis for each participant was place into one matrix to identify themes that emerged among the research participants. Final analysis connected themes and supporting experiences through participant quotes to answer each research question.

Data Analysis and Findings

Five adult learners were interviewed for 90 minutes each in face-to-face, semi-structured interviews during which they shared their experiences as both a traditional and

adult learner in higher education. The participants each started the pursuit of an undergraduate degree as a traditionally aged student, stopped out of school prior to degree attainment and then returned to complete an undergraduate degree as an adult learner. Each participant has been assigned a pseudonym.

Brief Profiles of Adult Learners

Table 1 provides information on the age when participants' undergraduate degree was earned, gender, race, and the number of years it took to complete an undergraduate degree.

Table 1

Demographic Profile of Adult Learners.

<i>Adult Learner</i>	<i>Degree</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Race</i>	<i>Years to Degree</i>
Jessica	General Studies	Female	White	18
Connie	Sociology	Female	Multiracial	12
Bobby	Mass Communication	Male	White	20
Kat	General Studies	Female	White	13
Jackie	Legal Studies	Female	Black	18

Jessica. Jessica is a white female. She works in ministry. After obtaining her undergraduate degree in sociology, she later earned a graduate degree. Jessica initially pursued a degree in biology. She originally left undergraduate education to make more money immediately and to pursue a romantic relationship even though she only had her senior year left towards her degree.

Her primary motivation for returning to college was to be able to attend seminary. Upon returning as an adult learner at the age of 40, she worked full time, went to school part-time and completed her degree within 3 years without taking another break from her

education. She took advantage of academic renewal, a process whereby a student who sat out a certain number of years may retain the earned credit for courses with grades of A, B, and C and have the GPA reset to salvage her GPA upon her re-enrollment.

Connie. Connie is a multi-racial female. She works in higher education. After completing her undergraduate degree in sociology, she continued to earn a master's degree in sociology and continues her education in a doctoral program. She was the first of her family to attend college. She excelled academically in high school which led her to receive a full ride to a Historically Black College and University (HBCU) located nearly 1000 miles from her hometown. While she lived in a residence hall, beyond academics, she was not engaged in the institution. She maintained a high grade-point average, but only remained for one semester. The greatest impact on her departure from college was the distance from home and discord with roommates and the campus culture. After leaving the university she went to work full time. She then earned her associate degree at a junior college before she transferred to a local university where she earned her undergraduate degree.

Bobby. Bobby is a white male. He works in higher education. After completing his undergraduate degree in media studies, he continued his education and ultimately earned a terminal degree in his discipline. His first experience as a student in college was overseas through correspondence education associated with a military base where a parent was stationed. Working full time and not being able to commit to taking classes is what led to his initial departure from college.

Upon leaving college the first time, he worked full time, got married and the returned to the United States. Seven years after returning to the states, he enrolled at a

junior college that focused on non-traditional students. After earning his associate degree, he went to a traditional four-year institution.

Kat. Kat is a white female. Her first goal was to work with animals. She now works in customer service. She attended the same institution as both a traditional student and as an adult learner. The institution was a traditional brick and mortar college. Employment and earning a living were placed at a high priority from her family of origin which led to her first departure from higher education.

Her first major was in the sciences, but after 13 years of attending college on and off again, she changed her major to general studies once she realized she only needed one more semester to complete college. Upon leaving college each time, she worked more than full time, often working two jobs.

Jackie. Jackie is a black female. She did not have a specific major in mind when she first went to college. The learning and earning of a degree were her focus more than a specific discipline. After earning her undergraduate degree, she went on to earn a terminal degree in her discipline.

Her journey to degree attainment included multiple stopping and starting points all associated with being a military spouse. Each time they moved she would get the family settled prior to reenrolling in a new institution. She is now retired from working in higher education.

Themes from Research Question I

Research question 1 was designed to compare and contrast the differences, if any, between educational experiences as a traditional college student versus experiences as adult learners.

1. In what ways are the educational experiences of readmitted adult learners different from their initial college educational experiences as a first time, full time freshman?

After themes were generated for each participant, individual responses were merged, and themes were identified with all participants addressing research question 1. These themes are listed below in Table 2.

Table 2

Experiences as adult learners compared to that as traditional students

Theme	Representative Quotes
The Gray Haired	“You're going to be the old gray-haired lady in the room...I feel
Elephant in the Room	like the 5,000-pound elephant in the room, that everybody's looking at. In the grand scheme of things, they didn't even know I was breathing.” Jessica
	“Either the 18 year olds going to be like, "Why are they in here? Like she's old as my mom." Or the adult learners going to be, "Oh, these kids." Connie
	“I think also a challenge sometimes the professors didn't know what to do with somebody being a little older.” Bobby
	“I think it's way tougher having someone that's not 18 that doesn't have to work, than having someone that already has a full life and has one or two jobs and is still trying to make grades.” Kat
	“Learning amongst traditional students, sometimes it was hard because the traditional students didn't seem to be ready. They just didn't seem to be ready for college, and whereas I was here ready to learn,” Jackie

Priorities

“There for a motivation and a reason that's truly from the depths of your heart, and you're true to yourself, you're going to make those sacrifices, and you're going to recognize, it's just through a season.”

Jessica

“And my son knew if I was at that table, that's mommy work time, mommy school time. Got a little table for him to sit next to me for his school time. So we kind of made it a connection for the both of us. During this time this is what we going to do, school time.”

Connie

“I think we did well over 100 miles in a commute every day.”

Bobby

“It was okay to stop what you were doing and focus completely on it.” Kat

“Hadn't given up. ... after getting the kids and everything settled once again, I started attending again.” Jackie

Motivation

“I was doing it for me, and not in spite of me.” Jessica

“My coworker, she was going back and she was going back after nearly 25 years. And she was like, "Let's do this together."” Connie

“Developing and being able to see where everything's not really a battle. If all of a sudden it shifted it wasn't a duty it was more I'm growing. This is about what's going on for me and becoming a person. Making contributions. Then just something to do to satisfy others.” Bobby

“That was also a big goal in the back of my head, actually showing them that I did it.” Kat

“Through it all, it was my faith in God which kept me going. The obstacles, though they were many, were no match for the foundation I had. Thus my determination never waned.” Jackie

Voice of Faculty

“I went in and I asked some of those stupid questions, and they didn't make me feel like they were stupid questions. And they embraced me, and what it did is, it empowered me to ask the next question, and the next question.” Jessica

She appreciated me and my efforts. I'm there at night. She's like, "You can do it Connie, you can do it, you can do it." But she was one of those that saw... She noticed a struggle in me more than other people noticed a struggle in me.” Connie

“I was in one class and I know it was challenging on a couple occasions because of my wife's scheduling. I would be late for that class, but the faculty member was like, "I teach the same class three times in a row, you should come to the next one whenever you're late. Just say, "Hey, I'm here." I'll work with you." Bobby

“I think it was my very first biology class and the first thing he said was, is if you're working you'll never get your degree. And I was like, I'm going to get the degree. And then I guess when I tapered out I kept thinking about it. I was like, well he was right. So I guess that was always in the back of my head is working is always going to be ahead of school.” Kat

“It was refreshing, the fact that the faculty did show an interest and was willing to provide guidance in term of a suggested path to complete my studies.” Jackie

Over the course of the interviews, the following themes emerged related to educational experiences of readmitted adult learners, that were different from their initial college educational experiences as a first time, full time freshman: age, priorities, motivation and voice of the faculty. All five participants discussed age differences between them and their classmates. All attended as adult learners in institutions structurally designed for traditional students at some point.

However, two of the participants, started as traditionally aged students in settings designed for adult learners. They were each aware of their age differences in the classroom. One very specifically focused on not feeling as though she belonged and one very specifically found the traditional student frustrating.

They each talked about the impact of priorities on degree completion. Four of the five, as traditionally aged students, had priorities other than school related to working or not really wanting to be in college. When they left college the first time, they did not express a plan to return. One student was a mother the entire time she was in school. Additionally, she was a military spouse. Each time they moved as a family she had to reestablish the family, however, returning to the classroom for even one class at a time was always in her plans each time she departed.

They each talked about different motivations for entering college initially. One from the outset had a desire to earn a degree. One indicated there really was not anything else to do. The other three really did it due to family expectations. Upon returning to school the four who did not have an initial desire to earn a degree had gained that internal motivation.

Notably, all participants recalled the names of specific faculty members who had a positive impact on their route to graduation. Each of these positive encounters were expressed from their perspective and experiences as an adult learner. They note the encouragement and the feeling of faculty taking time to support them. In one case, a participant shared a negative experience from her first semester of college that continued to add discouragement to her self-talk related to her ability to complete her college degree and work at the same time.

Themes from Research Question II

Research question 2 was designed to understand the perceptions of adult learners based on their readiness to successfully complete their degrees as readmitted students.

2. What are the perceptions of readmitted adult learners regarding their readiness to successfully complete their college degree?

Themes for each participant and participants collectively emerged addressing research question 2. These themes are listed below in Table 3.

Table 3

Adult learners' perceptions of readiness.

Theme	Quotes
Fatalistic Mistakes & Barriers	<p>“I did go part-time...The University probably wouldn't want to do this, and I understand why, but my Undergrad was outrageously expensive for me, because I didn't understand until the end, the very, very end, how the fees worked. So, I would go through and take two classes, which bumped me where I had to pay all of those fees, and so, it would have been smarter for me if I would have sat down and looked ... And nobody's going to think about that.” Jessica</p> <p>“The four-year school just seemed to have a much more ... It seemed more fatalistic if you made a mistake.” Bobby</p>

“And I feel like at some point you should just be able to say, I'm 30 something years old, I'm working two jobs, that should be enough for you to understand why my grades slipped for a semester. And I felt really, I don't know, looked down on while I was going through the process. I mean they flipped it, I got my financial aid back. But that was a hard, it was already a hard semester anyway.” Kat

“It was definitely a hurdle, but because I had transferred from so many different colleges, it was something that I was used to them doing. :We can take this class, we can't take this class... it's hurtful to just consider all the money that's been wasted on different classes that's not accepted. And another problem that I had was transferring from quarter hours to semester hours. I mean, every time, it was like, "You're short this hour." And so, I had to make up for those that were lost. “Jackie

Juggling

“Didn't have a problem academically. Schedule a class, it sometimes got a little rough, the rules and guidelines of university not working, go to school on work time. So there was those late classes.” Connie

“Well, I think I did well when class was scheduled at a particular time. I didn't do well when it's like you're on your own just do it do it by yourself and pass the exams.” Bobby

“I set my classes up as much as I could, two or three days a week so that I could work full time around them.” Kat

“Give an assignment that's maybe a week or two out, so that in my duties as a wife or mom, I can get done what needs to be done without having so much pressure from the classroom to get it done overnight”
Jackie

Dog and Pony Show “To have a different type of orientation, that even came, and you have a little workshop, that's maybe 30 minutes, you get somebody in there who can help you understand time management, and can say, "When you came through the first time, you were the bee's knees, and it was all about you. Well, this time, most of you probably have a family or a job. You have some kind of responsibilities." To have tried to help figure that out, and then had those ...” Jessica

“We need a dog and pony show too. There's such a big production for undergrad students that come, their moms, their dads. There's a big production. Transfer, go log on online. Nontraditional or usually in that transfer group. And they don't get that, "Welcome. Hi. Great to have you here. And I think the discouragement comes in.” Connie

“I think maybe adult learners need an extra debrief to get back into a group after they've discovered school and you can do it well you're thriving and then it ends.” Bobby

Over the course of the interviews, the following themes emerged related to the perceptions of readmitted adult learners regarding their readiness to successfully complete their college degree: fatalistic mistakes and barriers, juggling, dog and pony show. The challenge of transferability of credit emerged as a challenge related to academic policy. A positive note was the ability to apply for academic renewal as a policy that supported student success. The modality and the availability of courses for working adults posed challenges for four of the five participants. Three of the five participants indicated an orientation or welcome back to college session that helped adult learners navigate the college environment would have been very helpful. The lack of such in some ways made them feel like they did not belong on campus.

Summary

This chapter provided the themes that emerged during the face-to-face interviews with the participants and how they answered the research questions.

All participants shared stories related to impact of age and institution, their priorities relate to college completion, their motivation related to completing their college education and the impact of faculty voices on their experiences. Additionally, most participants indicated challenges related academic policy, like transfer articulation, course availability, and questioning their mattering due to a lack of a “dog and pony

show” for the adult learners. Chapter 5 will conclude this study and will include an overview of the study, limitations and recommendations for future research.

Chapter V

CONCLUSIONS

As an academic advisor and higher education administrator, the researcher has been fortunate to work with adult learners for years. The researcher worked with them as a transfer counselor, as an academic advisor and part time instructor. For years the researcher has heard their stories and for years she has watched policies in many ways remain the same while institutions across the nation sought to bring back the traditional student who did not complete a degree to now complete as an adult learner. She watched them fight to complete their degrees and sometimes give up and leave, sometimes before they even walked in they really even walked back in the door. The Complete College America and Complete College Georgia initiatives really pushed me to look at how we as higher education professionals could better understand our adult learners so we could better prepare for their return. The findings of this study provide a richer understanding of how adult learners experience higher education and what they need to overcome hurdles they had as traditional students and that they bring to the table as adult learners so they can successfully complete their degrees.

In previous chapters, a statement of the problem of degree completion for returning adults was presented along with a review of literature of college completion, completion factors, completion factors specific to adult learners, adult learning theory, Schlossberg's Transition Theory and Grit. Additionally, the methodology of this study was outlined along with the findings from these data collected. This chapter includes a

summary of the study, discussion of the findings, implications for practice, and recommendations for future research.

Overview

This study examined experiences of five former traditional college students who have returned to college as adult learners to complete their undergraduate degrees. Open ended interviews were conducted, and narrative analysis completed to understand the experience of the adult learner first as a traditional student, then as an adult learner and an opportunity to share their thoughts on others returning to college as adult learners as well as what they wished high education administrators new about adult learners.

Research Questions

1. In what ways are the educational experiences of readmitted adult learners different from their initial college educational experiences as a first time, full time freshman?
2. What are the perceptions of readmitted adult learners as to their readiness to complete their college degree?

Discussion

Profiles of Participants

Five adult learners were interviewed for 90 minutes each in face-to-face, semi-structured interviews during which they shared their experiences as both a traditional and adult learner in higher education. One African American female, one multiracial female, two Caucasian females and one Caucasian male between mid-30s and late 50s. The participants each started the pursuit of an undergraduate degree as a

traditionally aged student, stopped out of school prior to degree attainment and then returned to complete an undergraduate degree as an adult learner. Each participant has been assigned a pseudonym.

Discussion of Themes and Conceptual Framework

The theoretical framework for this study is based on andragogy and Schlossberg's transition theory (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2011; Schlossberg et al., 1989). Schlossberg identified four S's that impact an adult learner's ability to transition (Schlossberg, 1989). First, the adult learner's situation must be taken into account. Is this a planned transition, what roles change, what is the duration of the change, and what are concurrent stressors must be considered. Next, the adult learner's self is considered. Their financial situation, gender, age, health, ethnicity, outlook on life and level of resilience all influence how one transitions. After self, the support they must be examined. The ways in which personal needs are met, relationships like family and friend, and the ability to have affirmation from others impacts transitions faced by adult learners. Finally, strategies used to cope with the transition to student impact the success of the adult learner.

Within andragogy, there are six assumptions about the adult learner (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2011). The need to know states that adult learners need to know why what they are learning is relevant to them. The second assumption, the learner's self-concept, states that an adult learner wants to be respected as independent and capable. The third assumption, prior experience, states that because of life experiences the adult learner brings different perspectives into the classroom that influence how they learn. The fourth assumption, a readiness to learn, addresses that adults are eager to learn what they need or want to know. The fifth assumption, orientation to learning, explains the need for

the adult learn to connect learning to experiences to ability to perform something. The final assumption, motivation, states that adult learner's motivation is internal. They seek to learn to better themselves or their situation. Throughout the study the stories of the research participants exemplified these concepts.

Jessica:

Jessica's situation as an adult learner included her working full time in ministry. Additionally, she was a care taker for her mother physically and emotionally. At the same time, her sister was battling cancer. While her roles did not change, how she approached her roles did. She explained, "I was trying to figure out how I was going to make it. I had a full time job that was not optional. I couldn't give that up. It was the whole purpose for me going back."

Jessica's when returned to school as a middle class, Caucasian female in her 40s. She had significant psychosocial resources. She had a clear goal for going to seminary and had a determined outlook to finish her degree to do what she was called to do. She was committed to successful completion. She explained, "God was calling me deeper. I knew I could not do that educationally unless I go my undergraduate degree."

Jessica's support network included her family, she indicated that they were supportive in the sense of asking how things were going, but finically she was on her own. Work allowed time for her to go to school, but her duties just moved around in terms of the time at which she did her work activities. Both her family and work team accepted that she was returning to school and understood the need for her to return to school. The greatest support she discussed in her interview was that of faculty and staff at

the university. She said, “But the ones (faculty) who did reach out and embrace me were the ones that just became arrows in my quiver.”

Jessica did have strategies to support her transition. She talked about having to decide what could be let go, what was good enough in terms of work projects, and what relationships that had to set aside for a season. She talked about her faith and praying a lot as she moved through her education. She stated “I did it with a lot of prayer. I did it with having to learn some boundaries at work. I actually had to evaluate things and I probably did my job better.”

From the perspective of andragogy, the greatest impact for Jessica was her motivation to learn. She did discuss her return college was the requirement of a bachelor’s degree to go to seminary, however, along the way that motivation became more intrinsic. She said “When I went back to school the second time, I fell in love with learning.” She also said, “I recognized that something better was coming my way in life, and for the first time, I was taking steps to get to where it was.”

Connie:

Connie’s situation when she returned to college an adult learner included the responsibility of being a single mom. Additionally, she worked full time. She talked about the challenges of balancing school, being a mom, and being a successful student. In order to do that she had to integrate her son, at times, into her learning. She shared, “I had a designated space for school work. My son knew if I was at the table that it was mommy’s school time. I got a little table for him to sit next to me for his school time.”

When Connie returned she was a working class, multiracial single mother in her late 20s. She was living in a town where she had no family present. She had always

enjoyed school and loved to learn. She was committed to her education and setting that example for her six-year-old son. She discussed that it took some time to get into a rhythm of being student. She said was tenacious and resilient. She shared, “My greatest challenge was getting readjusted because I was going to school four nights a week from five to ten at night.”

Connie’s mother was proud she was returning to college and cheered her on from hours away. Friends from church helped keep her son so she could logically go to school. During part of her education, she worked where she attended. She was not able to attend classes during the work day, but one institution where she attended was also her employer. There she had financial support through a tuition benefit program. The support she discussed at length was that of the faculty in her academic program at her university. She shared what one faculty show how much she cared about her as person because she regularly asked her, “I know your grades are good, but how is Connie today? You know you aren’t being good to yourself you can’t be good for anyone else.”

Connie had to be creative in her strategies for success. She leveraged the support she had in her faith community to care for her son. She found a job that made her education more affordable. She integrated her son into her own learning in a way that supported his learning and set an example for him. She shared advice for other adult learners that she applied to her experience. In that advice she said, “Take the emotion out. Do the assignments. Move forward.”

From the perspective of andragogy, prior experience of the learner, impacted Connie the most. She discussed how students of a traditional age are adults. She saw them in the classroom as a peer in the sense that they were both there to learn content,

successfully complete assignments, pass classes, and earn a degree. However, she also recognized that as someone who had lived life a bit longer than the traditional age student that she and other adult learners could be of support to them. She said, “I wished there was more adult learners could offer. Even if it was to serve as a mentor.”

Bobby:

Bobby’s situation when he returned was he had married into a family that believed taking time to achieve a goal, like completing your college education, was worthy. When he decided to return to college he lived overseas and he and his wife moved back to the United States of America for him to return to college. He said, “She knew I could do it and was wondering why I wasn’t. We had a conversation, so it was more of a collaboration.”

Bobby was a Caucasian, 25-year-old, married male when he returned to college. He worked and took classes in the evenings. Upon returning to college he discovered you can take out student loans and was able to work part time. While he is Caucasian the influence of his wife’s South Korean culture had an impact on him. He talked about them doing this as a team. He accepted that it may take him time to complete his degree, but that it was something he was willing to work for and wait for to earn. He also talked about the ways in which he had matured through being older when he returned to college. He said, “I think it was just partly being mature. Developing and being able to see that everything is not really a battle. It wasn’t a duty anymore. I was growing.”

Bobby’s support system was clearly centered around his wife. They shared a vehicle that revolved around coordinating a 100-mile commute. He talked about his parents helping him out financially as they could. His grandmother lived in one of the

towns where he attended school as an adult learner. She fed him lunch while he was in school. He was socially and emotionally surrounded by support. He also shared a story of a faculty member who recognized he had a commute. After he was a late a couple time from the commute the faculty member told him, “I teach the same class three times in a row. You should just come to the next one whenever you are late.”

Bobby had strategies for coping with the transition. One of his strategies was leveraging the significant support system he had around him. He talked about the importance of keeping lines of communication open with his faculty. He also discussed the importance of taking the time to identify the resources that are available on a college campus to students. He said “It is important to figure out the resources available to you. It isn’t just about being in the class and collecting the degree. It is also developing a network.”

In terms of the andragogy perspective, motivation to learn, was most important to Bobby. The support of his extended family was very helpful. However, Bobby needed to be at a place where he was attending college because he wanted to, not a position of duty. He also saw his return to college as practical step towards being able to provide for his family. He said, “I think for me, and I guess my wife, that this (college degree) is going to benefit us.”

Kat:

Kat’s situation when she returned to college included working multiple jobs and being a serious romantic relationship. This romantic relationship with actually triggered her return. She wanted to be engaged and get married and his stipulation was she needed to be enrolled and working towards a degree. Her family of origin believed that work was

more important than school. School was something that could be done, but not at the expense of your job. While this created emotional stressors for her, it also created opportunity to return. She was not the only person in school at the time. Her boyfriend, his sister and his mom were all enrolled in school. She said, “It was like everyone would just sit and actually do homework or projects. So I felt differently actually doing homework and finishing projects.”

Kat was in her 30s, working and a Caucasian female in a committed relationship. Being someone who worked was a significant part of how she viewed herself. Her initial motivation to return was external, but once she saw a clear path to graduation after 13 years of being in school on and off, she became motivated and committed to finishing her degree. She talked about how the courses in her new major were more engaging and you had to be involved in the discourse. She said, “I went from my previous major where I struggled to knocking out papers. I actually excelled in my final semester.”

Kat had a support system at home. They sat and did school work at the same time. She had multiple jobs, but her employers worked around her school schedule. She talked about how, again after she changed her major, that the faculty acted like they like their jobs and enjoyed their students. She talked about how they met them where they were and wanted to know their interests. The faculty were willing to help them connect assignments to their personal areas of interest. Referring to one of those assignments she said, “She had me write a paper on homeopathic remedies and holistic doctors versus medical doctors.”

Kat’s strategies for success included leveraging her support network. She set aside time at home to do school work. She made it a priority. She was willing to make a change

in her major that allowed her to have a more flexible schedule for both work and school. She built relationships with her faculty and asked questions when she did not understand. She found a faculty member who was willing to help her understand assignments in other classes. She shared, “I could take something to her and say ‘I need you to interpret this for me and tell me what they really want.’ and she was really helpful in that respect.”

The andragogy concept of readiness to learn. Kat was ready to find ways that what she was learning was meaningful to her and not just a means to an end. She said, “You actually had to participate. I enjoyed actually learning what they were teaching. I should have done that the whole time.”

Jackie:

Jackie’s situation was constantly changing as an adult learner. As a military spouse her family moved often. She never just quit school. Each time she departed it was due to a move. She attended in the United States and abroad. Each time she re-enrolled, she knew she would be departing before she finished her degree. Each time she knew she would likely be taking classes that late would feel like a waste of time and money when the next institution might not accept her course work or if they did they might not apply to her degree there. Her roles never changed over the time she was a student, she just kept moving and chipping away at every opportunity she had. She said, “You traveled as a cohort and you either took all the classes or you had to wait a year or so to come back.”

Jackie was a military spouse and mother each time to returned. She is an African American female. She spoke much about her determination to finish her degree. She spoke of her faith in God that encouraged her to never waiver in her pursuit. She said, “Through it all, it was my faith in God which kept me going. The obstacles, though they

were many, were no match for the foundation I had. Thus my determination never waned.”

Jackie’s support system from her family was many miles away throughout most of her journey. Her husband was supportive of her being in school, but his work often meant deployments. She spoke mostly about the support she received and needed from faculty. She talked about it being refreshing when she interacted with faculty who were willing to look at all the credit she brought to the table and that they were willing to provide guidance on how she could finish her studies. She said, “I needed someone who understood military life because really that is what I was dealing with, and so I needed the understanding from faculty that I am married, and I am supporting my husband somewhere else, so my mind is kind of on him, yet with my children we had different needs.”

Jackie’s strategies for transitioning as a student always began with getting her family settled after each move. She also leveraged relationships with faculty advisors due to her complex transfer history. When she had courses that allowed for it, Jackie would work ahead on assignments two and three weeks out. Later in her educational career, she was able to use some unemployment benefits to be a full time student for a while because that eased the financial burden of being in school. More than anything Jackie greatest strategy was not ever giving and seeing one class more was one class closer to a degree. She said, “I took one class a semester for the first two years of my college life.”

In terms of andragogy, motivation to learn is exhibited in Jackie. She attended multiple institutions. Sometimes full time, most the time part time. She was determined to finish her degree. She talked about the challenge of balancing everything, but she wanted

to learn and she did not want anyone to do anything special for her. She said, “I never wanted anyone to compromise of lower standards. I wanted to do the work that’s required in order to achieve what goes along with that.”

Through data analysis of the transcriptions, the researcher identified seven themes which emerged and connected the conceptual framework of andragogy and transition theory. These themes are listed in Table 4.

Table 4

Summary of Themes Connected to Conceptual Framework

Summary of Themes Connected to Conceptual Framework	
<i>Research Question One</i>	
Themes	Framework Connection
The Gray-Haired Elephant in the Room	Schlossberg-Transition-Self
Priorities	Schlossberg-Transition-Situation
Motivation	Andragogy-Readiness to Learn
Importance of Positive Faculty Voice	Schlossberg-Transition-Support
<i>Research Question Two</i>	
Themes	Framework Connection
Fatalistic Mistakes and Barriers	Andragogy-Role of the Learners’ Experiences
Juggling	Schlossberg-Transition Situation
Dog and Pony Show	Andragogy-Role of the Learners’ Experiences

The following focuses on the discussion of themes that emerged from these data and how the themes align with the conceptual framework. Additionally, themes will be tied to both answering the research questions and how the findings are relevant to and build on the existing literature.

Discussion of Research Question One

The theme, *The Gray-haired Elephant in the Room*, embodies Schlossberg's Transition Theory concept of self. Schlossberg identified age of on the demographics of a person that impacts how an individual sees life (Patton, et al, 2016). The awareness of age and how they were perceived, transcended all participants in the study. Their sense of self as the oldest person in the room, in many cases set them at a disadvantage. This perceived disadvantage related to the experience of an adult learner emerged in relationship to the institution, to faculty and to classmates. In most cases, the student saw their age as a deficit due to them being less than or not fitting. One exception was Jackie for whom, the age and immaturity of her traditional age classmates at times was seen as the hindrance to her own education that she and her family sacrificed for her to continue. As a traditional student, age did not impact the narrative of the experience in higher education. However, the recognition and a lens of their own age as they navigated higher education as an adult learner was evident as something they carried with them to class and completed assignments.

The theme, *Priorities*, exemplified both Schlossberg's Transition Theory concept of situation. According to the Schlossberg's transition theory, situation is the context of their specific situation at the time of transition (2011). When each adult learner in the study transitioned or stopped out of college initially their individual circumstances made of the situation that ultimately led to college being less of a priority and family and work increasing in priority level. Upon returning to college, the situation of their lives allowed for college to become a priority.

While they all worked, either inside or outside of the home, as both traditional and adult learners, how they placed their education on the list of priorities changed. In some cases, they had the support to work part time and go to school part time upon return. Others worked full time and took classes part time. Their expectations of being able to do it all or the need to set education aside, shifted when they became adult learners and returned to college.

Motivation, as a theme, ties to the concept of readiness to learn in andragogy. Readiness to learn indicates that part of becoming an adult is learning coping skills that are developmental in nature which do not always coincide with age of learning experiences (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2011). Multiple participants spoke to the idea of attending college at the traditional age was out of expectation, not because they wanted to do so. As adult learners those same students wanted to a degree for themselves, not to please others. They had developed the ability to balance and cope with the demands of being an adult learner that they were not ready for as traditional students. One exception to this was Jackie, who remained motivated and part of her coping with life was having to stop-out of college until her family responsibilities allowed her to return to school. She knew she could not cope with moving a family and getting her children settled while also attending school.

Importance of Positive Faculty Voice connects with Schlossberg's concept supports. Schlossberg indicates that the supports within a person's world impacts the transition (2011). Each participant recalled very specific experiences with faculty. All participants shared how faculty supported them as adult learners. Two of the five even indicated that they could remember the faculty members' names was a sign of the

positive impact on their ability to successfully navigate higher education as an adult learner. One participant also indicated a negative interaction that ultimately led to a script that she had to fight mentally that said she could not finish her degree and work at the same time. Noteworthy is that no participant noted the impact of positive faculty voice as a traditional student.

Quiggins, et al, identified that an adult learner's perceived lack of support from institution is one of the greatest barriers to adult learners who are returning to college (2016). Indeed, there were perceived hurdles around being the "gray-haired elephant in the room" and not fitting or belonging due to age that came through with each participant. However, the representative from the university who eased those concerns were the faculty who worked to understand the needs of the adult learn and who literally voiced "you can do this!" in a variety of ways. So, yes, perceived institutional hurdles are present in the minds of returning adults, but the positive faculty voice can combat the notions that an adult learner does not fit or belong.

Noteworthy also was one adult learner identifying her traditional aged peers as "adults too". Her barriers related to age were focused more on her responsibilities as a mom and employee on top of being a student. She was perceptive enough of her classmates to recognize, regardless of age, they had work and some were responsible for themselves, and legally, they were adults.

Bye, Pushkar and Conway found intrinsic motivation was higher in adult learners than their peer traditional students (2007). Except for one participant, each participant spoke of the change in motivation and why they wanted to earn a degree. Those four attended college as traditional students because of family or societal pressures that is the

next thing to do. Work and other priorities trumped college at some point, and they departed. However, when they returned, they were “doing it for me” either from a place of reaching a new educational or financial goal. Three spoke of family emotional support when they returned being helpful, but it was not out of obligation to make some proud that they returned. The one participant who did not indicate a difference spoke about her education in a way that she was intrinsically motivated to finish and her only reason for ever departing was related to family priorities that are tied to be a military spouse.

Discussion of Research Question Two

The theme “Fatalistic Mistakes and Barriers” is exemplary of andragogy's concept of learner's experience. Adult learners want their experiences and what they have learned formally and informally to be respected and value in the educational process (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2011). Very specifically, one adult learner pointed to feeling that mistakes at four-year institutions are “more fatalistic.” In addition to this, four of the five participants spoke to transfer credit going to waste because of curricular requirements that did not value their previous learning. One participant felt frustrated by the financial appeals process that did not take into consideration she was working two jobs in the way in which they communicated with her. While the aid was ultimately reinstated, she felt she was on the defensive when she was simply trying to survive.

The theme of juggling is supported by Schlossberg's concept of situation in transition theory. In this concept, the situation and circumstances of life for a person must be considered in terms of how they cope with transition (Schlossberg, 2011). Each participant was indeed juggling as an adult learner. They were juggling work, in some cases more than work job or caring for a family. One participant indicated the way a

faculty member gave out assignments was challenging. As a mother, sometimes on her own, she really needed to know assignments a couple of weeks in advance so she could plan her weeks to ensure the assignments were done. She always got them done, but when they were released weekly instead at the beginning of the term, it was more stressful for her as she juggled. Course availability and delivery method were a challenge for each participant as they juggled their family and work situation with academic responsibilities.

The theme Dog and Pony is supported by andragogy's concept of learner's experience. Again, this is taking into account who the adult learner and their experiences are of value (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2011). Specifically, within this theme was a conversation around orientation for adult learners. They indicated a need to know how the institution interacts with them as adults. They indicated they felt that was different from the type of orientation they had as adult learners. From their traditional experiences they were intimidated by places like the student union and they wondered what it might offer them as an adult learner. They wonder how their experiences fit there or would be enhanced there. They wanted to be welcomed back and for some the absence of a welcome for them felt discouraging and communicated that what they bring to the table did not matter.

Like Pegg and Di Paolo, this research also identified that transfer credit, the loss of credit in how it is applied to a degree at a new institution was a hurdle for three of our participants. One identified these challenges as "fatalistic". It was most challenging for the military spouse who moved from country to country or state to state where she picked up a few courses per assignment. In some cases, an advisor was able to help leverage

policy to use more credit, but it was not handled the same way at each institution. Some institutions were more restrictive than others. Where this research found an additional challenge around credit was the long term cost for being a part time student. One participant pointed out that she was finishing her degree when she really grasped how fees worked. She indicated that had she known it would have saved her money in the long run, she would have found a way to take at least one more course, if not more, to save her money on fees along. She perceived that her not understanding was financially beneficial to the institution because she kept paying those fees each additional term she was there.

Stone identified the balancing of personal responsibility as one of the challenges facing adult learners (2008). The theme juggling supports this research from each of the participants of this study. Four of participants juggled work and family responsibilities as traditional students. This led to their departure as traditional students. All participants in this study juggled work and family obligations. For one participant, as an adult learner, he communicated hours each day to complete his degree as an adult learner. Also, like Stone found, the female participants spoke less of the family support they had in returning to college. Beyond some emotional support, there was not support indicated by the female participants. The male participant spoke of his grandmother feeding him between classes and his wife working while he went to school. The way in which this study's participants spoke about the juggling as adult learners was matter of fact and just part of what was needed to have the Duckworth et al.'s concept of grit to complete (2007). These adult learners had very similar responsibilities on them as traditional students, but they pushed through and learned to juggle as adults.

Fairchild identified orientation for adult learners as an opportunity for institutions to better support that population of students (2003). Two of our adult learners found that lack of something to help them learn how to navigate the university of adults returning to college was a challenge and for one made services intimidating to her. They both indicated that they “need a dog and pony show, too” and that it does not need to be an add on to that for traditional students, but that it would be helpful to know how the university is designed to support an adult and why one would need to even go into a student union. Historically, orientation is an event for first time students, these two adult learners are ultimately proposing a reorientation for those who are returning to college. This idea of a reorientation is something new that institutions can consider as adult learners are readmitted to institutions they previously attended.

Implications for Practice

The way in which the institution engages with adult learners impacts their experiences and how they ultimately navigate to degree from transfer policy, orientation, course schedules and offerings, and interactions with faculty and staff communicate to the adult learner if they are wanted and if the institution believes they belong and can be successful. They want to be seen and respected as more than a number. They want their individuals and priorities to be respected. They want the years they work previously at other institutions to have value. These implications impact faculty, staff in student affairs and student success units, and university administrators.

In terms of implications for faculty, as more adult learners enter or return to college campuses, faculty development on teaching and understanding adult learners is recommended. This is especially important as programs are built to recruit students into

those programs. If a curriculum is created to meet the needs of adult learners, the faculty teach in those programs need to also be aware of the challenges so their courses can be developed with the lens of the adult learner as their audience.

Understanding the faculty experience through the lens of teaching adult learners could transform the faculty and student experience. How are faculty prepared to meet adult learner needs? What experiences, or lack thereof, have impacted how a faculty member develops course work for a class with the adult learner in mind? From this researcher, the faculty voice impacts the adult learner experience of learning and perception of the institutions. Going forward where it was found that positive faculty relationships had a positive impact on adult learner degree completion also supports this recommendation (2018).

University administrators across divisions that impact the enrollment funnel, the process through which a student goes from prospective student to graduate, of adult learners needs to be tailored to what we know from the research: adults want to know they matter and what they bring to the institution is of value. From listening to the stories of the participants, that means courses transfer and are used so that what they have spent time and money on is applicable to the degree they are earning. That is also communicated by the institution to the adult learner by having orientation sessions that include their needs. Additionally, course offerings are as such that the adult learner can balance work, family and school and it not take over a decade to complete a degree.

University administrators across divisions need to ensure that what admissions is selling to adult learners is what they experience when they come to campus. University administrators need to look at the funnel for the traditional student and develop a funnel

that communicates to adult learners that their experiences matter and identify the ways in which the institution is poised to provide support to their situation as they transition to being college students from orientation to graduation. Additionally, those students who are readmitting after stopping out to their original institution should also be considered for a reorientation program that can update them on current support structures and how they are specifically helpful to an adult learner. Stepping back and looking as far down the line to the way commencement is designed and the communication that takes place about commencement and the messages delivered at commencement need to be evaluated through the adult learner lens.

Academic policies and practices need to be reviewed through the lens of the adult learner. Not just the policies, but how are adult learner friendly policies like academic renewal shared with eligible students. Transfer credit articulation rules need to be reviewed to make sure that rigor and integrity are maintained and the education a student brings with them is valued, especially when a student is staying in a similar program.

Many institutions have these types of policies that may make the four-year institution more returning adult learner friendly. However, how does this get practiced. How do adult learners learn about these policies? Who is looking at transferability of courses? How often are transfer courses that come in as a course title verses a director transfer evaluated? Is application and education of these policies communicated equitably or is it happenstance based on who a student interacts with in the return process? The answer to all these questions have implications for the adult learner experience in returning to college and completing a degree. Student attrition research supports the

importance the impact of policy and practice impacting student degree completion (Barefoot, 2004).

Many of these implications for practice will take time and intention and may not produce an immediate change of experience of the adult learner, however, one implication for practice that could be planned and implemented within a semesters time is developing the “dog and pony show” the participants indicated that was glaringly lacking for the adult learn. The audience for the “dog and pony show” should be any readmitted student to an institution and adult learner transfer students. With technology and enrollment management software, these populations can be found. Communication plans can be developed. Programming that takes less than an hour can be developed to be delivered during lunch hours, at the end of a work day or virtually. This programming can explain student services and student opportunities with the adult learn as the target audience. From the research in this study, this action alone could transfer the experience of the adult learn on a college campus. One of Knowles assumptions around adult learning theory takes into account that with age come evolution of self (1980). Quiggins et al identified one barrier for returning adults is a perception that there is a lack of support on college campuses to support adults (2016). This sort of programing supports Knowles assumptions and addresses the barrier from the team of researchers working with Quiggins. It tells them they are wanted, it makes the information relevant and it empowers them with the tools needed when they come upon challenging moments to know they are not alone. It communicates that the institution sees them and supports them.

Recommendations for Future Research

One of the participants in this study said, “I wish the terminology would change. Because the freshmen are adults, right?” Legally, she is correct. At the age of 18 in the United States of America, a person is considered a legal adult. In higher education we consider someone an adult learner based on age, really based on five years from when they graduated or should have graduated from high school. In addition to that, we often give attributes or make assumptions about adult learners like work or childcare. This is seen the literature in chapter two and stories of the research participants of this study.

Additional research needs to be conducted with the traditional age student who has the responsibilities that higher education historically has attributed to adult learners. Higher education needs to identify a group of students who may be marginalized and invisible because they look like a traditional student, but have the needs and responsibilities of an adult learner. How do we better identify and support those students who are traditional aged with children, caring for aging parents, emancipated, orphaned, or otherwise without a support structure? What are their needs? How can studies that have been historically conducted with and for adult learners be conducted with the traditional student who has traditionally, adult learner responsibilities?

Another population of adult learner's high education needs to know more about are those who left purposefully with a plan to return. Not everyone “quitting” or getting kicked out. Due to priorities in life, sometimes when a student starts college, they know they are going to have to start and stop. What do they, academic nomads, need from institutions: military members, military dependents, significant others following another’s career as the primary breadwinner? These adult learners exhibit the grit that

Duckworth and her colleagues have studied in other population (Duckworth, et al. 2007). Research around grit in adult learners could expand the literature on both grit and the adult learner experience and needs in higher education.

This research focused on the student but found faculty voices as a theme that emerged. The experiences of faculty, the front line of the institution, in how they have found ways to successfully support the adult learner and how teaching adult learners has transformed their teaching would be beneficial for faculty development opportunities.

A research team should be developed to continue understanding the adult learner through both qualitative and quantitative studies. This team should divide the focus to address faculty experiences, adult learner experiences, traditional students with adult responsibilities, and analyze the documentation on a campus to identify how, if at all, adult learners are a target audience in materials sent to potential students.

The research team should identify subpopulations of adult learners based on the student situation as Schlossberg identifies an impact on student success (Schlossberg, 2011). How is re-enrollment impacted by age, relationship status, care-giver status, career status (advancing in career or career changing)?

Conclusion

The research of Duckworth and her colleagues around grit, pursuing goals with passionate perseverance, dovetails with Knowles concept of andragogy (Duckworth, et al., 2007; Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2011). The motivation to learn is driven by the passion that overcomes adversity seen in our adult learner population. In many cases it is despite the university policies around transfer credit that Bobby and Jackie identified as frustrations that they persevered. It is in spite of their experiences and life-centeredness

being ignore by class offerings that all five participants bumped up against that they persevered. The voices of faculty that were encouraging that each research participant identified by name who changed the institutional dialogue to say “you matter” and “you can do this”. Bobby and Jessica suggest their ability to remember the names of those faculty years later is of significance. What our adult learners bring to higher education institutions in what they have learned through life and lecture must be respected through not only faculty and staff interactions, but also through the policies and practiced that impact their ability to continue to progress to degree.

There is little research on where grit and andragogy meet, but the stories of the participants of this study suggest that how individuals used grit, especially as adult learners returning to college, helps higher education administrators better understand the needs of this population of students being recruited back to higher education in droves. These voices of hurdles and victories need to be known so higher education professionals are not taking advantage of this population, but instead are giving an advantage.

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APPENDIX A:

Institutional Research Board Approval



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

PROTOCOL EXEMPTION REPORT

Protocol Number: 03774-2019 Investigator: Alicia Roberson
Supervising Faculty: Dr. Karla Hull
PROJECT TITLE: *The Journey from Traditional to Adult Learner: Hurdle and Victories.*

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD DETERMINATION:

This research protocol is Exempt from Institutional Review Board (IRB) oversight under Exemption Category 2. Your research study may begin immediately. If the nature of the research project changes such that exemption criteria may no longer apply, please consult with the IRB Administrator (irb@valdosta.edu) before continuing your research.

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS:

- *To eliminate the appearance or possibility of undue influence, all research related correspondence and activities under this approved protocol must be conducted as a VSU student – not as the Director College of Arts Advising Center.*
- *Upon completion of the research study all data (transcripts, data lists, email address list, etc.) must be securely maintained (locked file cabinet, password protected computer, etc.) and accessible only by the researcher for a minimum of 3 years.*
- *The researcher must read aloud the Research Statement of Consent to participants at the start of audio/video recording. The transcript must document the researcher's reading of the statement.*
- *Each participant must be offered a copy of the Research Statement.*
- *Exempt Protocol guidelines prohibit the collection, storage, and/or sharing of audio (or video) recordings. Interview/focus group recordings must be transcribed and immediately deleted from recording devices.*

If this box is checked, please submit any documents you revise to the IRB Administrator at irb@valdosta.edu to ensure an updated record of your exemption.

Elizabeth Ann Olfie 02.25.2019
Elizabeth Ann Olfie, IRB Administrator

Thank you for submitting an IRB application.
Please direct questions to irb@valdosta.edu or 229-253-2947.

Revised: 06.02.16

APPENDIX B:

Email to participant from researcher

Dear [insert name],

Thank you for your interest in participating in my study on adult learners. I would like to spend time with you for 60-90 minutes. The interview can be held on campus in a study room located in the library. You will have an opportunity to review the transcript of our interview to make corrections or clarifications to responses. I look forward to learning from your story so we can better support adult learners in completing a college degree. Will you please share with me the best times during the week for us to meet?

Sincerely,

Alicia

APPENDIX C:

Verbal Consent Script for Interviews

You are being asked to participate in a qualitative research project entitled "Journey from Traditional Student to Adult Learner: Hurdles and Victories" which is being conducted by Alicia Roberson and I am doctoral student in the Leadership program at Valdosta State University.

Your participation in this research is voluntary. The research involves a 90-minute interview. The interview will be audio recorded. Once the interviews have been transcribed, the audio recording will be destroyed. The transcripts will be stored on a computer and back up hard drive that are password protected to keep data secure in case the loss or theft. I will be saving transcripts for the designated time frame of three years as required by the IRB, once that time frame has passed, each of the transcriptions will be permanently erased from the secure hard drive.

You will be given a pseudonym to ensure confidentiality. Your name will not appear on any document associated with this study, including the transcription of the recorded interview. Likewise, your institution will remain anonymous.

You may choose not to partake in the interview, to stop responding at any time, or to skip any questions that you do not want to answer. If you choose to leave the study your audio taped conversations, and any written information linking them to the research study will be destroyed/shredded.

You must be at least 18 years of age to participate in this study. Your completion of the interview serves as your voluntary agreement to participate in this research project and your certification that you are 18 or older. You may be contacted after the interview if I have any additional questions to ask relating to your experiences and feedback.

I will give each participant a copy of the information BELOW before beginning the interview:

Questions regarding the purpose or procedures of the research should be directed to Alicia Roberson at aroberson@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 229-259-5045 or irb@valdosta.edu.

APPENDIX D:
Interview Questions

Phase 1: The first time around

When did you know you were going to attend college and what influenced that decision?

What was your original motivation for starting college?

Tell me about your college experience the first time around.

Responsibilities

Involvement

Living situation

Familial support

Financial aid

Academic

Was anyone an encourager, supporter or guide the first time around?

What were your greatest hurdles?

What were your greatest victories?

What do you think made you able to achieve these victories?

What ultimately led you to leave college the first time?

Phase 2 Returning to College

What was the impetus for your returning to college?

What were your greatest hurdles?

What were your greatest victories?

What do you think made you able to achieve these victories?

Has anyone served as an encourager, support or guide?

If yes, who and how?

If no, how have you encouraged yourself and found your way on your own?

Now that you are still moving forward (or completed your degree), what do you find to be the greatest hurdles to continuing your education each term?

What does a supportive learning environment look like for you now?

What do you think made this go round of college different from the first time?

Phase 3: Reflect back

What do you wish university decision makers would know about adult learners?

What would you share with a fellow adult learner who was returning to college?

Is there anything else you wish to share?