A Winding Path: Understanding Barriers to Education for Nontraditional Students at a Southeastern U.S. Community College

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ABSTRACT

This study was conducted to construct an understanding of barriers to education that threatened nontraditional students' continuation at a two-year community college. My investigation into this phenomenon was grounded in Knowles et al.'s (2020) theory of Andragogy, Cross' (1974; 1981) concept of barriers and Characteristics of Adults as Learners (CAL) Model, and Horn and Carroll's (1996) characterization of nontraditional students. My data collection and analysis processes for this study were anchored by a basic interpretative approach and the theory of constructivism. I collected data during two rounds of semi-structured interviews with participants. After interviews were transcribed verbatim, I conducted a two-cycle approach to data analysis. I began data analysis by Theming the Data: Phenomenologically. I constructed a central thematic statement from participants' stories: for participants, persisting despite barriers to education meant access to a better future. During the second cycle of data analysis, I used Pattern Coding to condense themes into three overarching subthemes: "Going Back to School," "Keeping Up," and "Having the Right Tools." My findings on these subthemes illuminated the types of barriers to education participants described. My findings suggest that situational barriers were the most substantial and consistent barrier to education that participants described and the most difficult barrier for participants to overcome. Finally, my study's findings also suggest that intrinsic motivation play an important role in nontraditional students' ability to persist when they encounter barriers that threaten their continuation in college.

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to the matriarchs in my family: my late mother, Susan Murphy; my grandmother, Beverly Woods; and my late grandmother, Evelyn Murphy. I love you. Thank you for being my counselors and cheerleaders. Your support and love have made all the difference in my life.

Chapter I

INTRODUCTION

By the 1980s, scholars recognized a trend in U.S. higher education enrollment: the number of traditional students enrolling in undergraduate programs was decreasing, and the number of nontraditional students enrolling in undergraduate programs was increasing (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Horn & Carroll, 1996). In a 1985 *Review of Educational Research* publication, Bean and Metzner explained that during the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, "institutional, curricular, political, economic, and social factors lead to a dramatic rise in enrollment levels of nontraditional students" (p. 486). In the latter half of the 1900s, more than 600 new community colleges were established; the GI Bill made college affordable for millions of Americans; workforce trends changed, and more jobs required a college degree; and more women enrolled in undergraduate programs than ever before (Bean & Metzner).

As enrollment among nontraditional students increased in U.S. higher education institutions, attrition rates among nontraditional students also increased (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Cross, 1981; Horn & Carroll, 1996). Bean and Metzner contended that "the chief difference between the attrition process of traditional and nontraditional students is that nontraditional students are more affected by the external environment than the social integration variables affecting traditional student attrition" (p. 485). Scholars Cross, Bean and Metzner, and Horn and Carroll all argued that a better understanding of nontraditional students' characteristics could lead to a better understanding of the enrollment and attrition trends of nontraditional students.

Horn and Carroll (1996) described nontraditional students' enrollment and attrition trends as a "phenomenon" in higher education (p. 8). They developed a Nontraditional Scale for the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) that expanded the criteria used to describe nontraditional students and formalized how nontraditional students were categorized. In their study, students who possessed one or more of the following characteristics would be described as a nontraditional student: "delayed enrollment into postsecondary education, attended part-time, financially independent, worked full-time while enrolled, had dependents other than a spouse, was a single parent, or did not obtain a standard high school diploma" (p. i). Students who possessed one of the characteristics above were considered at least "minimally nontraditional" (Horn & Carroll). Students who met two to three of the characteristics above were considered "moderately nontraditional," and students who met four or more of the characteristics above were characterized as "highly nontraditional" (Horn & Carroll). Finally, students who did not possess any of the characteristics described on the list above were characterized as "traditional" (Horn & Carroll).

In addition to the characteristics noted above, another way to understand nontraditional students is through Andragogy and its assumptions about adult learners. In *The Modern Practice of Adult Education: From Pedagogy to Andragogy*, Knowles (1980) defined *Andragogy* as the "arts and science of helping adults learn" (p. 43). In *The Adult Learner*, Knowles et al. (2020) described *Andragogy* as "any intentional and professionally guided activity that aims at a change in adult persons" (p. 39). Nontraditional students can be characterized as adult learners with unique needs that affect how they engage and succeed in higher education. Andragogy makes the following assumptions about adult learners:

1) Adult learners view themselves as capable learners, and their self-concept supports their autonomy and self-directed learning.
2) Adult learners' prior experiences are valuable to the learning process, and their lived experiences connect to what they are being asked to learn.
3) Adult learners' readiness to learn depends on how learning objectives relate to their real-life needs.
4) Adult learners' orientation to learning focus on direct application.
5) Adult learners' motivations are more intrinsically motivated than extrinsically motivated.
6) Adults need a clear understanding of why they are asked to learn something new (Knowles et al., 2020).

Adult learners' unique learning and dispositional needs may increase the tension between their roles and responsibilities as adults and their roles and responsibilities as college students, and this may be one root cause of the barriers nontraditional students experience in higher education. Shelton's (2021) case study examined the situational, dispositional, and institutional barriers adult learners encountered in higher education. He argued that nontraditional students in undergraduate programs in higher education "brought a different set of characteristics to the table and those characteristics exacerbated the effect" of the situational, dispositional, and institutional barriers they faced (p. 19).

One of the first scholars to identify and analyze the barriers to education nontraditional students encountered in college was education researcher K. Patricia Cross. During her 1974 symposium address entitled "Lowering the barriers for adult learners" at The Library Arts College and the Experienced Learner Conference, she argued that there

were three distinct categories for barriers to education: situational, dispositional, or institutional. Cross (1974; 1981) described situational barriers as obstacles students encounter when there is a conflict between their professional and personal responsibilities. She described dispositional barriers as students' attitudes that "preclude further learning," including "feelings of being too old to learn" (Cross, 1974, p. 6). She described institutional barriers as the college's "procedures or practices that prevent or discourage adults from learning," including "lack of flexible schedule" (p. 6). These three categories are well-established in scholarly literature (see Bell, 2012; see Cross 1974, 1981; see McClelland, 2014; see Shelton, 2021) on barriers adult learners encounter in college. Cross' three barriers are a starting point for the way I report and discuss findings in this study.

In addition to recognizing distinct barriers to education adult learners encountered in higher education, Cross (1974) also recognized that nontraditional populations, specifically adult learners, were increasing in undergraduate programs at community colleges in the 1970s. She argued that adult learners were more likely to attend community colleges than universities because these colleges were "very successful in casting new images of the openness of their campuses and their eagerness to serve older students" (p. 11). She explained that "the rise of community colleges, for example, increased the demand for access among groups not previously considering higher education; the appearance of new programs for adults is increasing the interest of adults in continuing their education" (Cross, 1974, pp. 12-13). Cross also argued that adult learners often experienced fewer barriers to undergraduate programs at community colleges because these colleges were more likely than universities to remove time- and location-specific barriers to education for students.

Many community colleges offer classes through different modalities, which can impact the types of barriers nontraditional students encounter. There are three common modalities for classes offered by most community colleges. First, there are traditional face-to-face courses where an instructor facilitates learning among students, and the students and instructor are in the same physical space during class time (Rehfuss et al., 2015). Second, there are hybrid (or blended) courses where an instructor facilitates synchronous online learning among students (Rehfuss et al.). While the instructor and students occupy the same digital space (like a virtual classroom), the students and instructor typically do not share the same physical space during class time (Rehfuss et al.). Third, there are online classes where students' learning is often asynchronous and self-directed; students learn in a fully online environment and may not have synchronized class meetings (Rehfuss et al.).

While literature on attrition rates among nontraditional students taking online classes at community colleges is limited, some studies have investigated this topic. In 2008, Aragon and Johnson conducted a study on the attrition rates among students in online classes at a rural Midwestern community college in the U.S. Aragon and Johnson found that adult learners were more likely to struggle in online classes than younger students because adult learners are more likely to be employed and have family responsibilities that took time away from their college responsibilities.

In U.S. higher education undergraduate programs, an estimated 8 million students—40% of all students in higher education—are nontraditional students (Chen et al., 2020; Digest, 2019; Gallagher, 2021). Nontraditional students in undergraduate programs have lower retention rates than traditional students in undergraduate programs (Chen et al.; Digest; Gallagher). Each year, more than half of nontraditional students dropped out of their

undergraduate programs: four million nontraditional students left higher education before earning an undergraduate degree (Digest; Gallagher). In U.S. community colleges, students are on average 28 years old, and 14% of all students are over 40 years old (Juszkiewica, 2020; Travers, 2016). Approximately 17% of community college students are single parents, and 41% of community college students are part-time students who are employed full-time (Juszkiewica; Travers).

Statement of the Problem

In a 2020 American Association of Community Colleges report on trends in community college enrollment, Juszkiewica wrote that "the decline in enrollment for adults over the age of 24 was highest between Fall 2016 and Fall 2017, subsided somewhat the following fall and increased recently between Fall 2018 and Fall 2019. The decrease in enrollment of this age group was more than double that for young adults, ages 18 to 24" (Juszkiewica, 2020, p. 6). When comparing adult learners to younger students, Juszkiewica found that adult learners (students over 24 years old) were less likely to earn a two-year degree at a community college within six years. Nearly 54% of all adult learners enrolled in undergraduate programs at U.S. community colleges did not earn an undergraduate degree after six years (Juszkiewica). Approximately 39% of younger students (those 20 years old or younger at the time of enrollment) enrolled in undergraduate programs at U.S. community colleges did not earn an undergraduate degree after six years (Juszkiewica).

Community colleges often market their programs as affordable, accessible pathways into undergraduate programs in higher education for nontraditional students (Cross, 1974; Juszkiewica, 2020). However, U.S. community colleges are losing over half of all nontraditional students who enroll at their colleges (Juszkiewica). When nontraditional

students drop out of undergraduate programs at community colleges, this is a loss for the college, the community, the workforce, and the individual. This is a loss of human capital: nontraditional students may struggle to rise economically without a college degree. Because of the substantial losses with this phenomenon, it is incumbent on scholars to address the barriers that may be contributing to these losses.

Purpose of the Study

As community colleges have both large nontraditional student populations and high attrition rates among nontraditional students, I determined that a two-year community college was an ideal location to conduct a study on nontraditional students' experiences in college. I conducted this study to investigate the phenomenon of nontraditional students who encounter barriers to education in college. More specifically, I designed this basic interpretative qualitative study to investigate the experiences of nontraditional students at a two-year community college in the Southeastern region of the United States. The purpose of this study is to construct an understanding of barriers to education that threatened nontraditional students' continuation at a two-year community college.

Research Question

I used the following research question to investigate nontraditional students' perceptions of barriers they encountered at a two-year community college: how do nontraditional students at a two-year community college describe the barriers that threaten their continuation in college?

Significance of the Study

When nontraditional students drop out of community college, the loss is significant for the student, for communities, and for the college. When compared to adults without

college degrees, adults with college degrees earn higher annual wages, are more likely to find employment, are less likely to be underemployed, are less likely to default on their student loans, are less likely to live in poverty, and contribute more tax revenue for their communities (Whistle, 2019). A 2017 report conducted by the U.S. Department of Commerce found that, among those who were 25-29 years old, "the average associate degree holder earned nearly $4,949 more than those who had completed some college and over $6,056 more than a high school graduate." Furthermore, each year, community colleges lose approximately $4 billion in revenue from students who drop out (Chen, 2022).

Nontraditional students along with employers; community college administrators, staff, and faculty; and local, state, and federal governments have a vested interest in improving attrition rates. In this study, I present a central thematic statement, as well as three subthemes, about barriers to education nontraditional students experienced at a two-year community college. My findings may offer preliminary contexts about nontraditional students' attrition at community colleges that could be investigated further during future studies on this topic. I hope this study encourages community college administrators, staff, and faculty to listen to the stories of the adult learners at their institutions to better understand the nontraditional populations they serve. Ideally, if these institutions better understand their nontraditional populations, then they may be able to deploy targeted interventions that decrease the barriers to education nontraditional students face at community colleges.

Theoretical Perspective

My data collection and analysis in this study are anchored by a basic interpretative approach and the theory of constructivism. A basic interpretative research approach focuses on how participants made "meaning of a situation or phenomenon" (Merriam, 2002, p. 6). A

basic interpretive approach also invites "the depth, openness, and detail" required to investigate a phenomenon (Patton, 2021, p. 14). Prasad (2005) argued that reality is socially constructed, and "human interpretation" is the "starting point for developing knowledge about the social world" (p. 13). Piaget's (1977) definition of constructivism asserts that "in the act of knowing, it is the human mind that actively gives meaning and order to that reality to which it is responding" (p. 17). Constructivism, as defined by Merriam et al. (2007), maintains that "learning is process of constructing meaning; it is how people make sense of their experiences" (p. 291). Thus, interpretivism offers insight into understanding actions (Dodge, 2011), while constructivism attempts to explain the actions (Piaget, 1977; Scott 2017).

Assumptions

I used purposeful sampling to select nontraditional students from a two-year community college to participant in this study, and I used semi-structured interviews to collect qualitative data from participants. I assumed that semi-structured interviews with nontraditional students at a two-year community college would provide sufficient qualitative data for me to investigate the situational, institutional, and dispositional barriers they encountered in college. I also assumed that from this data, I could construct an understanding of this phenomenon. Moreover, I assumed that participants who were characterized are moderately or highly nontraditional on the NCES's (1996) Nontraditional Scale were ideal participants for this study. I was operating under the assumption that participants who possessed multiple nontraditional characteristics were more likely to experience barriers to education than traditional learners. Furthermore, I assumed that Andragogy would permit a deeper understanding of nontraditional students as adult learners. Finally, my study is

contextually grounded in interpretivism tradition and in the epistemic and ontological assumptions of constructivism. I assume that cultural norms and social structures influence a person's understanding of the world and the meanings they make about their identity and the world around them. A person's worldview is a result of a socially constructed understanding of reality.

Limitations

My study was limited by racial diversity among participants and the COVID-19 pandemic. Racial diversity among participants was limited. While the college has a diverse student population, six of the eight participants who volunteered for interviews for this study identified as White. Chávez and Guido-DiBrito (1999) argued that "racial and ethnic identity can affect the relationship with learning that individuals have in their learning environments" (p. 45). A United States Department of Education (2016) report on diversity and inclusion in higher education found that "students of color face disproportionate barriers to completing higher education" (p. 39). Thus, the conclusions I reached in this study were based on an investigation of a relatively homogenous group of students at the college.

The COVID-19 pandemic also limited my study's data collection. By March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic had spread to the Southeastern United States, and the college where I conducted the study closed all physical facilities. All classes at the college were taught virtually for the remaining of the Spring 2020 Semester. I collected most of my data after March 2020. Therefore, I had limited access to participants because interviews with participants needed to be conducted over the telephone for participants' and my safety. After March 2020, nontraditional students were also more difficult to recruit for this study. During the first year of the pandemic, "37 percent of adults pursuing education abandoned their

educational goals due to financial hardships, changes at work, or lack of access to programs … Community college enrollment declined 11 percent in Spring 2021 compared to the year prior" (Gallagher, 2021).

Furthermore, the pandemic may have affected how participants described their experiences and how I interpreted participants' thoughts about their experiences. I conducted six interviews with participants and all follow-up interviews with all participants over the telephone. While I was able to analyze each participant's words and the tones of their voice, I was limited in the nonverbal communication I could analyze from participants. Denham and Onwuegbuzie (2013) examined the significance of nonverbal communication in qualitative research. They argued that "the collection of nonverbal communication can yield thicker descriptions and interpretations—and, thus, help qualitative researchers achieve verstehen (i.e., increased understanding) to a greater extent" (Denham & Onwuegbuzie, p. 674). Telephone interviews can create obstacles to fully observing participants' body language; however, interviewers who use active listening to build rapport and who use voice cues can collect rich data from telephone interviews (Denham & Onwuegbuzie).

Delimitations

I used purposeful sampling to select participants for this study. I delimited my participant selection in two ways. First, participants had to possess at least two of the characteristics on the Horn and Carroll's NCES (1996) Nontraditional Scale. All participants in this study were characterized as moderately nontraditional or highly nontraditional on the Nontraditional Scale. Second, participants had to be enrolled in an associate degree program at the college while they participated in this study. Since this study addresses barriers to

education nontraditional students experienced while earning a college degree, I wanted to collect data from nontraditional students enrolled in degree programs at the college.

I excluded any students in dual enrollment degree programs at the college from my study. Students in dual enrollment programs are high school students who take college courses for both college and high school credit at the college. Most dual enrollment students are under the age of 18 and cannot participant in this study because my IRB approvals do not allow me to collect data from participants younger than 18 years old. Also, dual enrollment students are only provisionally accepted as students at the college and cannot be classified as traditional or nontraditional students by the college.

Furthermore, I also excluded any nontraditional students enrolled in certificate or diploma programs, adult education classes, or continuing education classes at the college from my study. Certificate and diploma programs, adult education classes, and continuing education classes at the college can be completed in fewer semesters than associate degree programs at the college. Nontraditional students in associate degree programs may experience barriers to education at the college differently because they are more likely to be enrolled at the college longer than students in certificate and diploma programs, adult education classes, or continuing education classes at the college. I selected moderately to highly nontraditional students enrolled in associate degree programs at the college to participate in this study. I used these delimitations as a uniformed approach to participate selection for this study.

Definitions

The keys terms from this dissertation are defined below.

Andragogy. The "intentional and professionally guided activity that aims to change the adult person" (Knowles et al., 2020, p. 60).

Andragogical assumptions. Knowles et al.'s (2020) theory of Andragogy makes six assumptions about adult learners. These assumptions include: 1) adult learners view themselves as capable learners, and their self-concept supports their autonomy and self-directed learning; 2) adult learners' prior experiences are valuable to the learning process, and their lived experiences connect to what they are being asked to learn; 3) adult learners' readiness to learn depends on how learning objectives relate to their real-life needs; 4) adult learners' orientation to learning focus on direct application; 5) adult learners' motivations are more intrinsically motivated than extrinsically motivated; and 6) adults need a clear understanding of why they are asked to learn something new (Knowles et al., 2020; Merriam et al., 2007).

Dispositional barriers. the attitudes and perceptions students have about themselves as learners that impact their experiences in college (Chen et al., 2020; Cross, 1981; Fairchild, 2003; Pfordresher, 2016; Shelton, 2021).

Extrinsic motivation. external factors that increase a person's desire to learn (Knowles et al., 2020, p. 47).

Institutional barriers. barriers students experience in college that occur when students cannot regularly access college resources and services (Chen et al., 2020; Cross, 1981; Fairchild, 2003; Pfordresher, 2016; Shelton, 2021).

Intrinsic motivation. the "actions or beliefs that are inherently interesting and satisfy" (George, 2008, p. 13) as well as the "internal pressures" that increased a person's desire to learn (Knowles et al., 2020, p. 47).

Motivations. a person's "natural human capacity to direct energy in pursuit of a goal" (Ginsberg & Wlodkowski, 2009, p. vii).

Nontraditional students and *adult learners*. College students who possess at least one of the following characteristics: "delayed enrollment into postsecondary education, attended part-time, financially independent, worked full-time while enrolled, had dependents other than a spouse, was a single parent, or did not obtain a standard high school diploma" (Horn & Carroll, 1996, p. i).

Online classes or *online courses*. Education delivery methods that physically separate the learner from, in most cases, other learners as well as the instructor (Schlosser & Anderson, 1994; Wang et al., 2013).

Situational barriers. barriers students experience in college that are caused by conflicts between professional, family, personal, and college responsibilities (Chen et al., 2020; Cross, 1981; Fairchild, 2003; Pfordresher, 2016; Shelton, 2021).

Traditional students. students who are younger than 25 years old, attend college full-time, are financially dependent, do not have dependents, and entered college directly after graduating high school.

Dissertation Overview

In this chapter, I introduced my qualitative study. I discussed the statement of the problem, purpose, significance of this study, and theoretical perspective for this study. I also identified the research question, assumptions, limitations, delimitations, and definitions for this study. Chapter II reviews literature on nontraditional students; Andragogy; and situational, institutional, and dispositional barriers. Chapter III focuses on this study's methodologies, including details about the research design, the research site, participants, and

data collection and analysis methods. I discuss my findings in Chapter IV. I conclude my dissertation with a discussion of my findings in Chapter V, and I discuss the implications of my findings from this study and my recommendations for future research. I end my dissertation with a brief conclusion and my overall reflections about this study.

Chapter II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

I conducted this study to investigate nontraditional students' experiences at a two-year community college. In the following review of literature, I begin with a brief history of the rise of community colleges after World War II in the United States. I reviewed literature on the political and social influences that have impacted community colleges and nontraditional students' access to community colleges. This historical roadmap attempts to demonstrate how political decisions and shifts in social norms led to millions of nontraditional students attending community colleges today (Barrington, 2022).

I continue this chapter with a review of literature describing adult learners as nontraditional students, and I discuss research studies that investigated nontraditional students' characteristics. Next, I review research studies on barriers to education that nontraditional students encounter in higher education. I discuss both Cross' (1974; 1981) concept of barriers and Characteristics of Adults as Learners (CAL) Model. I also review literature and research studies on Andragogy in this chapter. I address both Knowles' et al. (2020) Andragogical assumptions about adult learners and the ways these assumptions extend to online learning environments. I end my literature review with a discussion of the intersections between Knowles' (1980; 1989) Andragogical theory and Cross' (1974; 1981) concept of barriers and CAL Model. Finally, I conclude this chapter with a summary of the overarching topics in this review of literature.

The Rise of Community Colleges

During the last half of the 20th century, the number of nontraditional students enrolled in higher education grew rapidly. Two critical factors contributed to this rapid growth. First, the federal government provided more financial support to colleges, universities, and students than ever before (Bean & Metzner, 1985). Second, the number of community colleges in the U.S. rose dramatically: nearly 600 new community colleges were established between 1945 to 1985 (Bean & Metzner).

To better understand community colleges and nontraditional students in modern America, I examined how the political and social changes in America after World War II impacted the development of community colleges and the rise of nontraditional students. President Franklin D. Roosevelt's GI Bill of Rights contributed to an increase of nontraditional students in higher education. The GI Bill was signed into law in 1944. By 1950, 8 million veterans had enrolled in undergraduate degree programs, and the number of Americans with a degree from a college or university "doubled between 1940 and 1950" ("75 Years," 2019, para. 7).

Furthermore, the National Defense Education Act of 1958 and the Higher Education Act of 1965 "endorsed the political view that encouraging college attendance promoted the general welfare of the nation and that the federal government, in addition to state governments, had a legitimate role in financially supporting higher education institutions" (Bean & Metzner, 1985, p. 487). The Higher Education Act of 1965 increased federal financial support for college and university programs that served nontraditional students (Bean & Metzner).

Additionally, under this act, the Basic Educational Opportunity Grant (BEOG) program was established, which would become known as the Pell Grant in 1980. This grant provided direct financial support to low-income students who were enrolled in undergraduate programs. Ultimately, these grants made colleges and universities affordable for millions of adults ("75 Years," 2019; Bean & Metzner, 1985). The expansion of federal student aid programs and the rapid growth of physical community college campuses meant adult learners had more options than ever when choosing which higher education institution to attend (Bean & Metzner).

Both the number of community colleges and the number of nontraditional students attending community colleges continued to grow in the 21st century. In a 2022 report on community college trends, the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) reported that there were 1,167 community colleges in the U.S. The AACC (2022) report also found that community colleges enrolled nearly 12.4 million students annually, which means that nearly half of all postsecondary students in the U.S. are enrolled at a community college. In a 2022 Community College Review report, K. Barrington stated that "the number of nontraditional students in colleges hit 8.9 million in 2010 and has risen another 35% to exceed 12 million. Of those, about 14% are enrolled in community college and, by 2026, it is anticipated that 13.3 million nontraditional students will be pursuing a college education" (para. 2).

Adult Learners as Nontraditional Students

Scholarly literature on adult learners often labels them as nontraditional students in higher education, and the characteristics of these nontraditional students distinguish them from traditional learners (Choy, 2002). At the 1974 The Library Arts College and the

Experienced Learner Conference, K. Patricia Cross coined the term "nontraditional students" in a symposium address on adult learners. She recognized that nontraditional students had different needs in higher education from traditional students. She characterized nontraditional students as students who were older, had families, and commuted to college. Nontraditional students may experience barriers to education more frequently than traditional students because of their unique characteristics as adults (Chen, 2017; Chen et al., 2020; Cross, 1974).

Some scholars (Juszkiewica, 2020; Steward & Rue, 1983) used age as a primary characteristic for distinguishing traditional students from nontraditional students in higher education. For example, in their 1983 study on college students who commuted to a four-year university, Steward and Rue defined traditional students as students who were between 18-24 years old and nontraditional students as students who were 25 years in age and older. In a 2020 American Association of Community Colleges report on trends in community college enrollment, Juszkiewica used age to distinguish adult learners from young adult learners. She used the term "adult learners" to described community college students who were over 24 years old (Juszkiewica, 2020, p. 12). She found that, in U.S. community colleges, students are on average 28 years in age, and 14% of all students are over 40 years old (Juszkiewica). Juszkiewica also reported that approximately 17% of community college students are single parents, and 41% of community college students are part-time students who were employed full-time.

Bean and Metzner (1985) maintained that "the difference between traditional and nontraditional students is a matter of extent; traditional and nontraditional students cannot be easily classified into simple dichotomous categories" (p. 488). Like Cross (1974), Bean and Metzner argued that nontraditional students were typically older students who commuted to

college. Their 1985 study presented a conceptual model for understanding previous studies on attrition rates among nontraditional undergraduate students. They found that, for nontraditional students, social integration variables had "only minimal effects on retention, partly due to the way nontraditional students were defined and partly because social variables from the outside environment are expected to be of greater importance than college social integration variables" (p. 530). They also found that "environmental variables, such as family responsibilities, can play a significant role in the attrition process for nontraditional students" (p. 530).

In a NCES study, Horn and Carroll (1996) developed a framework that described seven common nontraditional characteristics and measured these characteristics on a Nontraditional Scale. Horn and Carroll's argued that nontraditional students must possess at least one of the following characteristics:

1) The student "delayed enrollment into postsecondary education."
2) They attended college part-time.
3) They were "financially independent."
4) They were employed full-time while enrolled in college.
5) They "had dependents other than a spouse."
6) They were a single parent.
7) They "did not obtain a standard high school diploma." (p. i)

Horn and Carroll used these characteristics to measure students on the Nontraditional Scale. Students who did not have any of the characteristics on the Nontraditional Scale were described as "traditional." When a student possessed only one characteristic, the student was described as "minimally nontraditional" on the Nontraditional Scale. When a student

possessed two or three characteristics, the student was described as "moderately nontraditional" on the scale. Students who possessed four or more characteristics were described as "highly nontraditional" on the scale.

Barriers to Education

Nontraditional students' characteristics suggest that these students have unique learning needs, and when these needs are adequately met by colleges, nontraditional students can encounter obstacles to education. In her 1974 address, Cross argued that nontraditional students in higher education encountered situational, dispositional, and institutional barriers more frequently than traditional students. Cross explained that nontraditional students encountered situational barriers to education when their responsibilities as students conflicted with their professional and personal responsibilities. She also explained that nontraditional students encountered dispositional barriers to education when students' attitudes and beliefs about themselves impeded their learning. Finally, she stated that these students were more likely to face institutional barriers to education anytime college "procedures or practices" hindered their learning (Cross, 1974, p. 6).

Cross (1981) developed the Characteristics of Adults as Learners (CAL) Model to analyze lifelong learning programs (Zhang & Zheng, 2013). The CAL Model presents two characteristics—personal characteristics and situational characteristics—that could impact adults' learning (Cross; Zhang & Zheng). Personal characteristics that impact adults' learning include physiological characteristics (i.e., age and developmental stages) and sociocultural characteristics (i.e., life phases) (Cross; Zhang & Zheng). The CAL Model's situational characteristics include two circumstances that affect adults' learning: a) learning full-time

versus learning part-time and b) "voluntary learning" versus "compulsory learning" (Cross, 1981, p. 235).

After examining literature on adult learners, Fairchild (2003) identified situational, dispositional, and institutional barriers as common problems for adult learners in higher education. For adult learners, family, financial, and job responsibilities took priority over education, which creates situational barriers for adult learners in higher education (Fairchild, 2003). Dispositional barriers also impact the way adult learners engage their education: Adult learners experience greater role demands as they balance being a student and family member, and adult learners need strong support from family and friends to succeed academically.

Furthermore, Fairchild maintained that women experienced increased "role strain" in higher education as women encountered greater demands to perform many roles, such as student, mother, caregiver, and employee. Fairchild added that "women with low-income report more role conflict" that created dispositional barriers to their education (p. 13). Finally, in reference to institutional barriers, Fairchild noted that adult learners often engaged in higher education designed for traditional learners, requiring that adult learners "persist against difficult odds in an institutional system that does not recognize them for who they are and is not designed to meet their needs" (p. 14).

Shelton (2021) investigated situational, dispositional, and institutional barriers to education and how these barriers impacted nontraditional students' retention rates and degree completion in undergraduate programs at a four-year university. Shelton's "findings supported the original theory" that situational, institutional, and dispositional barriers to education "had an impact on the nontraditional student's ability to access and pursue higher education" (p. 90). Shelton concluded that the barriers, especially situational barriers,

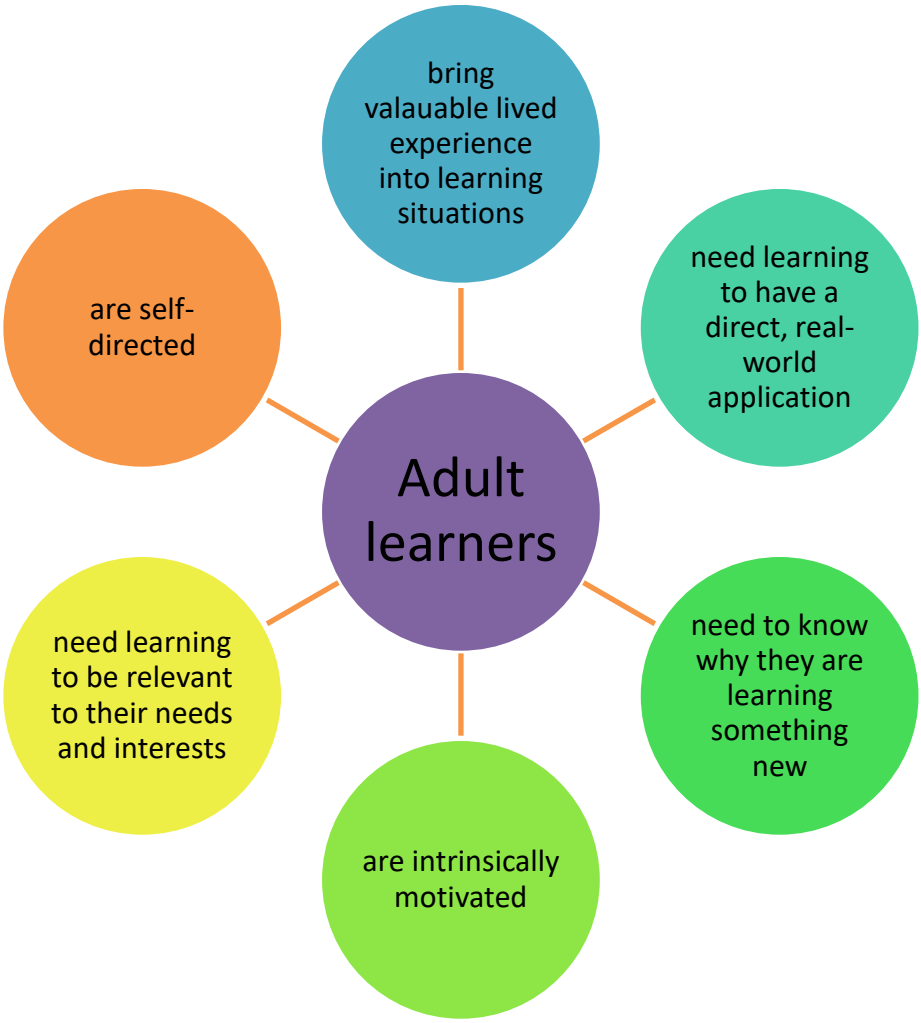
nontraditional students encountered in undergraduate programs in higher education negatively impacted their retention rates. Shelton found that "over 60% of the students surveyed agreed [that a] Situational Barrier was a deterrent to their ability to access and pursue higher education" (p. 56). Approximately 51% of respondents in his study reported that Institutional Barriers were "a hindrance to their access and pursuit of higher education" (p. 69). Finally, over 81% of respondents reported that they did not feel too old to integrate into college, which means that most respondents did not feel this dispositional barrier hindered their education.

Andragogy

I relied on Andragogy, specifically Knowles et al.'s (2020) assumptions about adult learners, to guide my understanding of adult learners in higher education. Knowles et al. defined Andragogy as "any intentional and professionally guided activity that aim at a change in adult persons" (p. 39). Knowles et al. identified six assumptions of adult learners. First, adult learners view themselves as capable learners, and their self-concept supports their autonomy and self-directed learning (Knowles et al.). Second, adult learners' prior experiences are valuable to the learning process, and their lived experiences connect to what they are being asked to learn (Knowles et al.). Third, adult learners' readiness to learn depends on how learning objectives relate to their real-life needs (Knowles et al.). Fourth, adult learners' orientation to learning focus on direct application (Knowles et al.). Fifth, adult learners' motivations are more intrinsically motivated than extrinsically motivated (Knowles et al.). Lastly, adult learners need a clear understanding of why they are asked to learn something new (Knowles et al.). Figure 1 below illustrates Andragogy's six assumptions about adult learners.

Figure 1

Andragogy's Six Assumptions about Adult Learners (Knowles et al., 2020)



Andragogy and Online Learning

In many higher education institutions, students take courses that typically fall into one of three modalities:

1) Traditional face-to-face courses: the students learn together in the same physical environment, and learning is guided by an instructor (Rehfuss et al., 2015).

2) Hybrid (or blended) courses: students learn in both physical and online environments, learning is guided by an instructor, and learning online may be synchronous and asynchronous (Rehfuss et al.).
3) Online courses: students learn in a fully online environment—often through an online learning management system (LMS) like Blackboard and an instructor facilitates online learning through asynchronized or synchronous lessons (Rehfuss et al.).

Adult learners lead busy personal and professional lives outside college (Kara et al., 2019). Therefore, adult learners cannot always choose the course modality they prefer (Rehfuss et al., 2015). Instead, they choose courses that fit their existing schedule, and they may settle for online courses when class times and locations for face-to-face or hybrid classes do not fit their schedules (Knightly et al., 2007; Stack, 2015).

Ke and Kwak (2013) addressed the relevance of Andragogy in online learning. Referencing Knowles et al. (2005), they wrote, "Andragogy deems autonomy and active learning as two key tenets of adult learning, explaining that learners need to know 'how learning will be conducted, what learning will occur, and why learning is important' and perform self-directed learning by taking control of the techniques and of the purposes of learning" (p. 100).

Knowles et al. (2020) expanded Knowles's (1980) Andragogical assumptions for adult learners to apply to adults learning in online environments. First, Knowles' (1980) assumed that adult learners need to know why they need to learn something new. Knowles et al. (2020) added that "adult learners, even in online settings, may not necessarily know what specific skills and information they need but have identified gaps in their knowledge, and

they specifically want to know why they need to learn something before they learn it" (p. 246). Second, Knowles (1980) assumed that adults need to be self-directed learners. Knowles et al. (2020) added that adult learners, including those in online courses, are "engaged by the prospect of discovery and choice, and as such guidance is preferred over direction" from an instructor (Knowles et al., 2020, p. 247).

Furthermore, Knowles et al. (2020) made two assumptions about Andragogical approaches to online learning. The first assumption was that Andragogy can be applied to online learning environments:

> By framing online learning experiences with andragogical principles as the foundation, adult learners and facilitators can benefit from a collaborative and dynamic learning environment. When online learning environments feature courses that demonstrate relevance with perceived learner needs, aligned with real learning contexts that support a problem-solving approach, use instructional technologies and strategies that can capture and draw on the learners' experiences, and support self-directedness, learners and educators can enjoy rewarding and engaging learning experiences. (Knowles et al., 2020, p. 248)

The second assumption was that online learning environments are ideal spaces for adult learners to learn:

> Today's adult online learners demonstrate characteristics of self-directedness, are purpose-oriented, internally motivated, and need to see the relevancy of what they will learn and how it is applicable to their immediate lives. Straddled with adult responsibilities, the flexibility and accessibility of online learning makes it a viable educational option for an increasing number of adults. Using the principles set forth

by Knowles (1984a), online facilitators can tailor learning that is best suited for non-traditional adult students. (Knowles et al, 2020, p. 248)

Andragogy and Motivation

Ginsberg and Wlodkowski (2009) argued that learning and motivation are "inseparable" (p. 27). They defined motivation as "the natural human capacity to direct energy in pursuit of a goal" (Ginsberg & Wlodkowski, p. vii). They posited that motivation is often ruled by a person's emotions, and people experience extrinsic and intrinsic motivation (Ginsberg & Wlodkowski). Knowles et al. (2020) described extrinsic motivation as external factors—like earning a higher salary—that increased a person's desire to learn. Knowles et al. described intrinsic motivation as "internal pressures" (e.g., improved self-esteem and better quality of life) that increased a person's desire to learn (p. 47). Furthermore, one of Andragogy's key assumptions about adult learners is that they are more intrinsically motivated to learn than they are extrinsically motivated to learn (Knowles et al.).

Intrinsic Motivation, Persistence, and Nontraditional Students

Park and Choi (2009) investigated whether individual characteristics (e.g., age, gender, employment status), external factors (e.g., family support, scheduling conflicts, financial problems, health issues), and internal factors (e.g., technical skills, motivation, relevancy) affected adult learners' decisions to persist in online courses at a large Midwestern university. They analyzed quantitative data collected from 147 university students ($N = 147$) who did not complete an online course or who completed one online course at the university (Park & Choi, 2009). They found that both external factors and internal factors predicted learners' persistence in online courses (Park & Choi). Participants who persisted in online courses at the university reported higher levels of support from

family and employers than participants who dropped out of an online course at the university (Park & Choi). Furthermore, when compared to participants who dropped out of an online course, participants who persisted in online courses reported higher levels of motivation (Park & Choi). Specifically, they felt satisfied with their online learning experiences, and they found their online course relevant to their interests and lives outside the university (Park & Choi).

Like Park and Choi (2009), Bye, Pushkar, and Conway (2007) studied connections between motivation and persistence. They specifically investigated the relationships among motivation, interest, and age in traditional and nontraditional students ($N = 300$) at a university in the United States. Bye et al. (2007) used age to distinguish traditional and nontraditional students with students who were 28 years old or older were described as nontraditional. They reported the following findings:

1) Nontraditional students reported higher levels of intrinsic motivation for learning than traditional students reported.
2) For all students, interest [in a learning task] and age emerged as significant predictors of intrinsic motivation to learn, and both interest and intrinsic motivation significantly predicted positive effect (Bye et al., 2007, p. 141)

Bye et al. (2007) concluded that "strong intrinsic motivation may be necessary for nontraditional students to persist and succeed in the university environment over the long term" (p. 143).

George (2008) also investigated nontraditional students and intrinsic motivation. She defined intrinsic motivation as "actions or beliefs that are inherently interesting and satisfy" (George, p. 13). She examined the effects of nontraditional students' career goals and

socioeconomic mobility and their intrinsic motivation (George). George collected and analyzed data from 153 students ($N = 153$) at two community colleges in the Southeastern United States. She used a hierarchical regression and a path analysis to measure the effect of the variables (George). She found that "nontraditional student status alone does not affect students' intrinsic or extrinsic motivation for attending college" (George, p. 120). George also reported findings on students' perceptions of barriers at the college: "the perception of barriers is defined as students' educational outcome expectations. The results indicate that perception of barriers does not significantly affect student's motivation levels directly or indirectly" (p. 125). She added that "a student's perception of barriers to his or her educational outcome may not directly or indirectly influence extrinsic or intrinsic motivation for attending college" if they feel like they "have control over their college outcomes" (George, p. 127).

Intersections between Andragogy, Barriers, and CAL Model

Knowles (1989) argued that Andragogy is "a model of assumptions about learning or conceptual framework that serves as a basis for an emergent theory" (p. 112). Knowles (1980) also argued that Andragogy assumes that adult learners are intrinsically motivated to learn something and often learn best when their learning draws on their prior lived experiences and learning is self-directed. Knowles et al. (2020) explained that "prior experiences of the learner provide a rich resource of learning" and "the self-concept of adults is heavily dependent upon a move toward self-direction" (p. 312). Knowles et al. claimed that for some adult learners "prior experiences may be a barrier to learning because they have not been successful learners in traditional education" (p. 312). In a critique of Andragogy, Cross (1981) argued that "whether andragogy can serve as the foundation for a unifying

theory of adult education remains to be seen" (p. 227). Knowles (1984) viewed Andragogical theory as a "system of concepts" about adult learners (p. 8). Cross (1981) recognized that Knowles' assumptions of adult learners did not "account for variations in adult learning situations" (Knowles et al., 2020, p. 78). Cross' (1974; 1981) concept of barriers and CAL Model were designed to account for these variations.

In a review of literature on adult learning, scholars Zhang and Zheng (2013) stated that Cross viewed "a learning process as a function of personal characteristics, preferences, and practice of adult learners" (p. 5). Cross' (1981) CAL Model "does not assume that all adults are self-directed but acknowledges personal characteristics of the learner as well as situational characteristics of the learning environment to help determine the amount of self-direction that may exist and provide guidelines for adult education" (Zhang & Zheng, p. 4). Zhang and Zheng argued that the CAL Model offered researchers "a framework for analyzing the interaction between learners and their environments with consideration of learner's physiological, social, and psychological dimensions. The model implies that different learning strategies might be necessary for different individuals to accommodate the differences in their personal and situational characteristics" (p. 5). Knowles developed a theoretical framework for understanding the adult learner while Cross provided frameworks for investigating connections between an adult learner's characteristics and their learning environments.

Summary

In this chapter, I reviewed literature on community colleges, nontraditional students, barriers to education, and Andragogy. Moreover, I discussed Cross' (1981) critique of Knowles' (1980) Andragogical assumptions about adult learners. I also reviewed literature

on intrinsic motivation and nontraditional students' persistence in higher education. I ended this chapter with a discussion on intersections between Knowles' (1980; 1989) Andragogical theory and Cross' (1974; 1981) concept of barriers and CAL Model. In the following chapter, I present the methodology used to collect and analyze data for this study.

Chapter III

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study is to construct an understanding of barriers to education that threatened nontraditional students' continuation at a two-year community college. Therefore, the following research question guided my study: how do nontraditional students at a two-year community college describe the barriers that threaten their continuation in college? This chapter presents the methodology I used to conduct this study. The chapter begins with an overview of the study's conceptual framework, including the study's epistemic and ontological grounding; research site selection; participant sampling; and approaches to data collection and analysis. I conclude this chapter with a discussion on the study's goodness and trustworthiness, my positionality as a researcher, and a summary of the chapter.

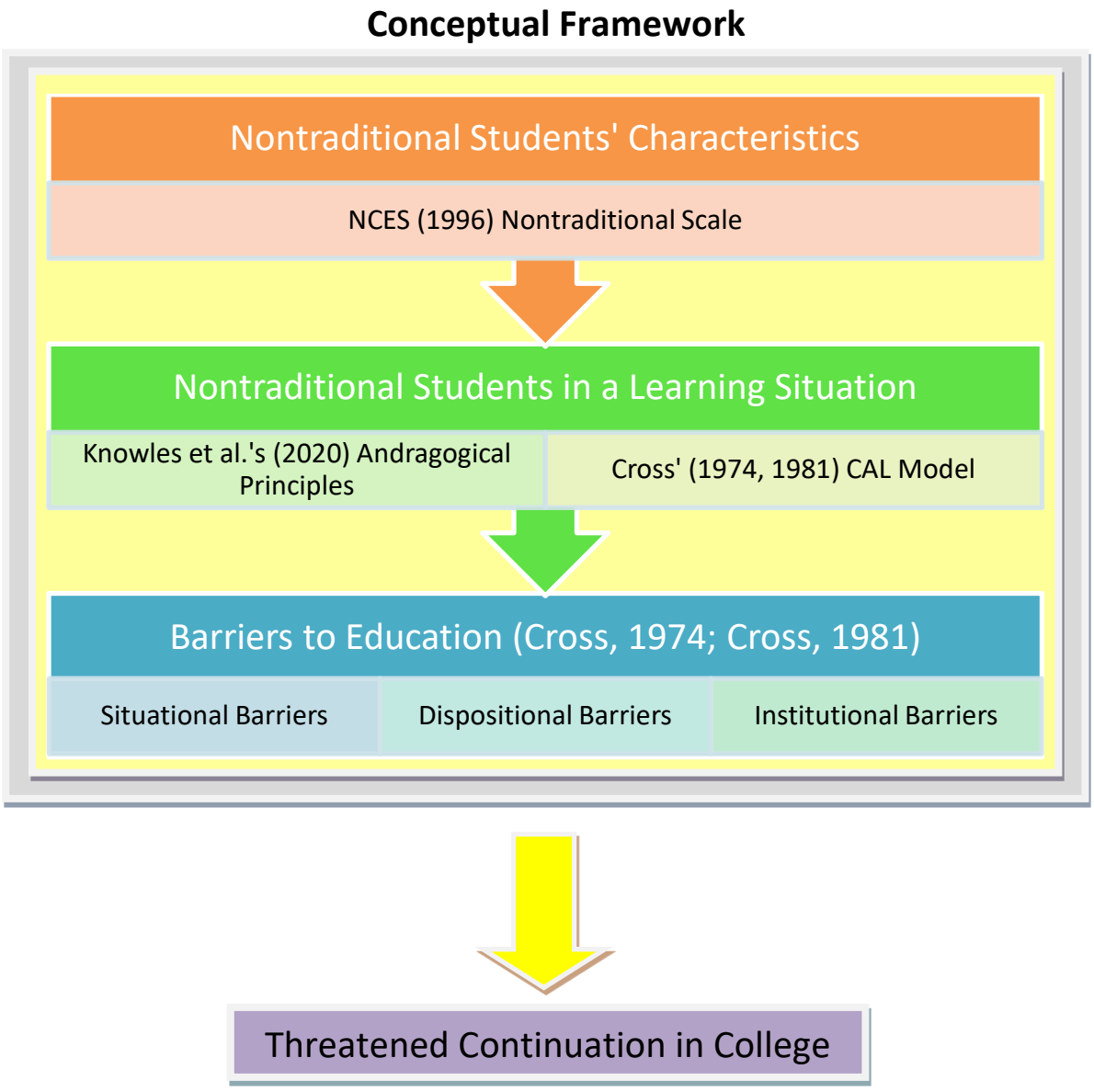
Conceptual Framework

Ravitch and Riggan (2017) have defined conceptual framework as "an argument about why the topic one wishes to study matters, and why the means proposed to study it are appropriate and rigorous" (p. 5). In this study, I employed Knowles et al.'s (2020) Andragogical theory, Cross' (1981) Characteristics of Adults as Learners (CAL) Model, and Cross' (1974) concept of barriers to education as frameworks to guide my investigation of nontraditional students' experiences at a two-year community college in the Southeastern region of the United States. My conceptual framework posits that nontraditional students experience barriers to education in college because their roles and responsibilities conflict with their roles and responsibilities as students. This conflict may threaten their continuation

in college. Figure 2 illustrates the framework I used to guide my understanding of nontraditional students' experiences at the community college where this study was conducted.

Figure 2

Framework for Investigating Nontraditional Students (Cross 1974; Cross, 1981; Knowles et al., 2020)



Adult learning scholars (see Cross, 1974; Fairchild, 2003; Knowles et al., 2020) distinguished adult learners as a unique population with learning needs that were different from the learning needs of traditional learners. Both Cross (1974) and Knowles et al. (2020) argued that adult learners experienced barriers to education any time their identities and responsibilities as adults came into conflict with their roles and responsibilities as students.

I relied on Knowles et al.'s (2020) theory of Andragogy to guide my assumptions about adult learners:

1) They view themselves as capable learners; their self-concept supports their autonomy and self-directed learning.
2) Their prior experiences are valuable to the learning process; their lived experiences connect to what they are being asked to learn.
3) Their readiness to learn depends on how learning objectives relate to their real-life needs.
4) Their orientation to learning focuses on direct application.
5) Their motivations are more intrinsically motivated than extrinsically motivated.
6) They need a clear understanding of why they are asked to learn something new. (Knowles et al., 2020)

Moreover, I relied on Cross' (1981) CAL Model to investigate connections between an adult learner's personal characteristics and the characteristics of their learning environment. I also employed Cross' (1974) concept of barriers to guide my understanding of the types of barriers adult learners encounter in college. Cross (1974) identified three distinct barriers (situational, dispositional, and institutional) that impact adult learners in college. Situational barriers occur when students experience conflict between their professional and

personal responsibilities (Cross, 1974). Dispositional barriers occur when students' attitudes impact their ability to learn (Cross, 1974). Institutional barriers occur when students encounter "procedures or practices" at the college that "prevent or discourage" learning (Cross, 1974, p. 6). In Chapter IV, I used Cross' terminology (i.e., situational barriers, dispositional barriers, and institutional barriers) as initial categories for findings on barriers to education participants described during their interviews. In Chapter V, I also used Cross' terminology when discussing barriers participants described. Therefore, Cross' three categories for barriers to education served as *a priori* themes. The categories offered a starting point for the way I report and discuss findings in this study.

Interpretivism

Patton (2021) stated, "qualitative research is a mode of inquiry that centralizes the complexity and subjectivity of lived experiences and values these aspects of human being and meaning making through methodological means" (p. 5). Interpretivism is a qualitative research approach in which "humans, including the researcher and study participants, are the primary instrument of study" (Patton, 2021, p. 5). Therefore, a basic interpretative research approach focuses on how participants make "meaning of a situation or phenomenon" (Merriam, 2002, p. 6). A basic interpretive approach also invites "the depth, openness, and detail" required to investigate a phenomenon because this approach invites broad, flexible inquiry (Patton, 2021, p. 14).

Prasad (2005) has argued that reality is socially constructed, and "human interpretation" is the "starting point for developing knowledge about the social world" (p. 13). Prasad's interpretivism emphasized "the social dimensions of reality construction" (Justis, 2020). Zimmerman (2001) and Justis (2020) posited that this emphasis was among

Prasad's most significant contributions to interpretivism. Justis (2020) claimed that Prasad's philosophy of reality construction "allows the individual to determine the meaning and place their understanding within the context of the world" (p. 8). Furthermore, Patton (2021) stated that qualitative researchers "tend to use an interpretivist framework in which research is structured to gather information from people to explain their subjective realities" (p. 6). Consequently, I chose to conduct semi-structured, in-depth interviews with participants for this study so I could analyze the way they described their subjective realities.

Constructivism

Both interpretivism and constructivism are grounded in the belief that a person can understand the "world of meaning" through their interpretations of meanings (Schwandt, 1998, p. 222). Piaget (1977) defined constructivism as "the act of knowing" and "it is the human mind that actively gives meaning and order to that reality to which it is responding" (p. 17). Merriam et al. (2007) defined constructivism as "a process of constructing meaning; it is how people make sense of their experiences" (p. 291). While interpretivism influenced the type of data collected in this study, constructivism offered a framework for interpretating how participants made meaning about their experiences and why they took certain actions when learning. Broadly, the theory of constructivism positions knowledge construction as an active process occurring within the learner; a learner's lived experiences influence how they view the world around them and how they process new information they encounter (Patton, 2021). More specifically, constructivism makes the following assumptions about learners:

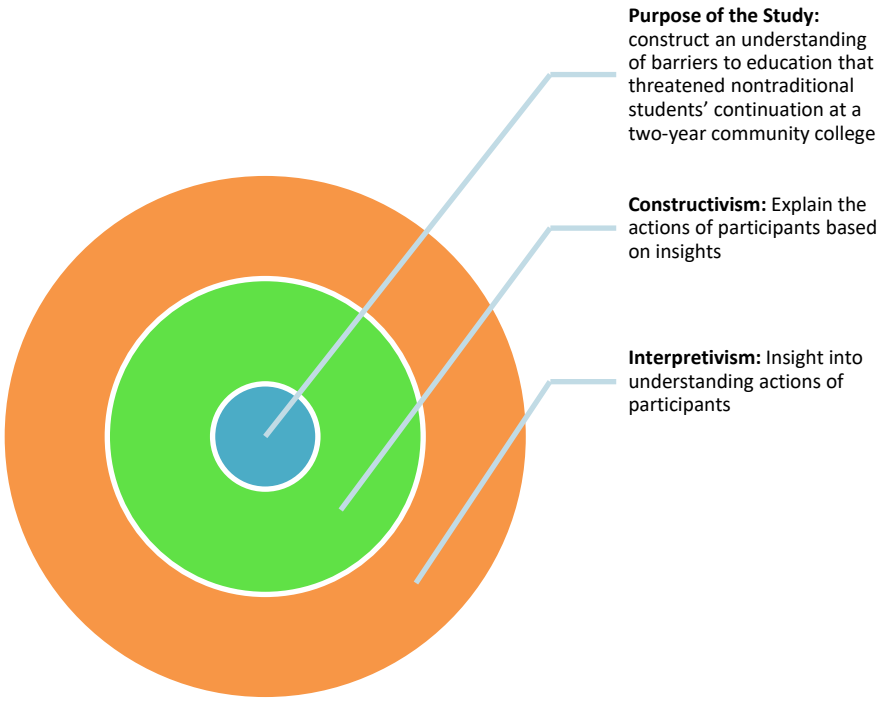
1) "Learners conceive understanding and form meaning via a blend of their own existing knowledge base, their actions, and their individual experiences."

2) Learners progressively incorporate "new experiences into old experiences, thus altering how they think and perceive the world around them. In essence, the individual learns through discovery, as personal development precedes learning."
3) "The theoretical focus on learning resides" within learners, "not the teacher" (Scott, 2017, p. 4).

Therefore, interpretivism offers insight into understanding actions (Dodge, 2011), while constructivism attempts to explain the actions (Piaget, 1977; Scott 2017). Figure 3 illustrates the how interpretivism and constructivism were used to construct an understanding of barriers to education that threatened nontraditional students' continuation at a two-year community college.

Figure 3

Connections among Interpretivism, Constructivism, and the Purpose of this Study



Ontological and Epistemological Orientation

Maxwell (2013) described ontology as a person's "ideas about reality" and epistemology as the ways in which a person "gains knowledge" about reality (p. 42). This study was epistemically and ontologically grounded in constructivism. Constructivism's epistemic claim asserts "that, in the act of knowing, it is the human mind that actively gives meaning and order to that reality to which it is responding," and a person's concepts of the world in which they live dictate their ontology (Piaget, 1977, p. 17).

Researcher Positionality

In basic interpretative studies, the researcher becomes an instrument of data collection and analysis (Maxwell, 2013). A researcher's unexamined biases and assumptions can negatively impact the validity of a research study's conclusions (Maxwell, 2012; Ravitch & Riggan, 2017). In this section, I address my experience with nontraditional students in higher education. I also address how these experiences influenced my decisions about design and methodology for this study.

I became interested in nontraditional students' experiences in higher education when I tutored nontraditional students at a Southeastern university 15 years ago. These nontraditional students typically attended college full-time, took care of multiple dependents, and worked at least part time. After a few semesters of tutoring, I recognized that nontraditional students struggled to persist in college when their roles and responsibilities outside college conflicted with their roles and responsibilities as a college student.

I realized I was observing a phenomenon in higher education, and nontraditional students' stories may provide meaning for this phenomenon. These realizations impacted my decision to use a basic interpretive design for this study. A basic interpretative approach

invites open, flexible inquiry when investigating how participants construct meaning of a phenomenon (Merriam, 2002; Patton, 2021).

Moreover, for 15 years, I have heard nontraditional students' stories about their winding path to college and their persistence in college. As a result, I have developed preconceptions about nontraditional students' college experiences. I presumed that nontraditional students were more likely to struggle in college than traditional students enrolled in college. When nontraditional students had to prioritize their responsibilities outside college over their responsibilities as college students, they were likely making tough decisions about how to prioritize their time. Consequently, I presumed that most nontraditional students who struggled with time management in college were not disengaged learners; they were likely overscheduled, overworked adults. While conducting this study, I reexamined these preconceptions for bias to help ensure my interpretations were rooted in participants' experiences rather than in my preconceptions about nontraditional students' experiences in college.

This study was grounded in constructivism. I believe a person's understanding of the world and the meanings they make about their identity and the world around them are influenced by cultural norms and societal structures. A person's understanding of their experiences reflects the unique ways they construct their worldview. Karp (2011) explained that "students create their own understanding of college, and these understandings influence their learning and the ways that they experience attempts to improve their outcomes" (p. 21). Therefore, my interpretation of nontraditional students' experiences reflects a construction of reality that was co-constructed by participants and me, the researcher.

Method

Before beginning data collection for this research study, I received approval to conduct this study from my university's Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the Protection of Human Subjects (see Appendix A). I received permission to conduct this study from the governing administrators at the community college, which was the site for this study (see Appendix B). I conducted two rounds of semi-structured interviews with eight participants. I audio recorded interviews, and I transcribed the interviews verbatim. I also conducted two rounds of member checking with participants. During each round of member checking, participants reviewed their interview transcript and my analytical memos on themes and patterns I gleaned from their interview data.

Research Site

The site for this study was two-year community college in a rural area in the Southeastern region of the United States. The college serves seven rural counties with campus locations in each county. In 2020, the college was the sixth largest community college in the state. It offers 130 associate degree, certificate, and diploma programs as well as adult education General Educational Development (GED) classes and continuing education classes.

In August 2022, I received enrollment data and student demographic information for the 2020-2021 academic year from the college's Office of Institutional Effectiveness. Nearly 91% of the students enrolled at the college are 18 years of age and older. During the 2020-2021 academic year, which ranges from August 2020 to July 2021, 6,153 students were enrolled in the college, and 5,589 of these students were 18 years of age or older. Approximately 40% (2,467) students at the college were between the ages of 18 and 20.

Twenty percent (1,246) of students were between the ages of 21 and 25, and 31% (1,876) of students were older than 26 years old. The age range distribution for students enrolled in the college during the 2020-2021 academic year is provided Figure 4.

At the college, 66% (4076) of students identified as female, and 34% (2,077) of students identified as male. Thirty-three percent (2,037) of students identified their race as Black or African American. Fifty-seven percent (3,507) of students identified their race as White. Eight percent (477) of students identified their race as Hispanic or Latino. The remaining 2% (132) of the college's population included students who did not report their race or who identified their race as American Indian or Alaskan Native, Asian, Pacific Islander, or biracial. The race distribution for students enrolled in the college during the 2020-2021 academic year is provided Figure 5.

Figure 4

Academic Year 2020-2021 Age Range Distribution at a Rural Community College in the Southeastern U.S.

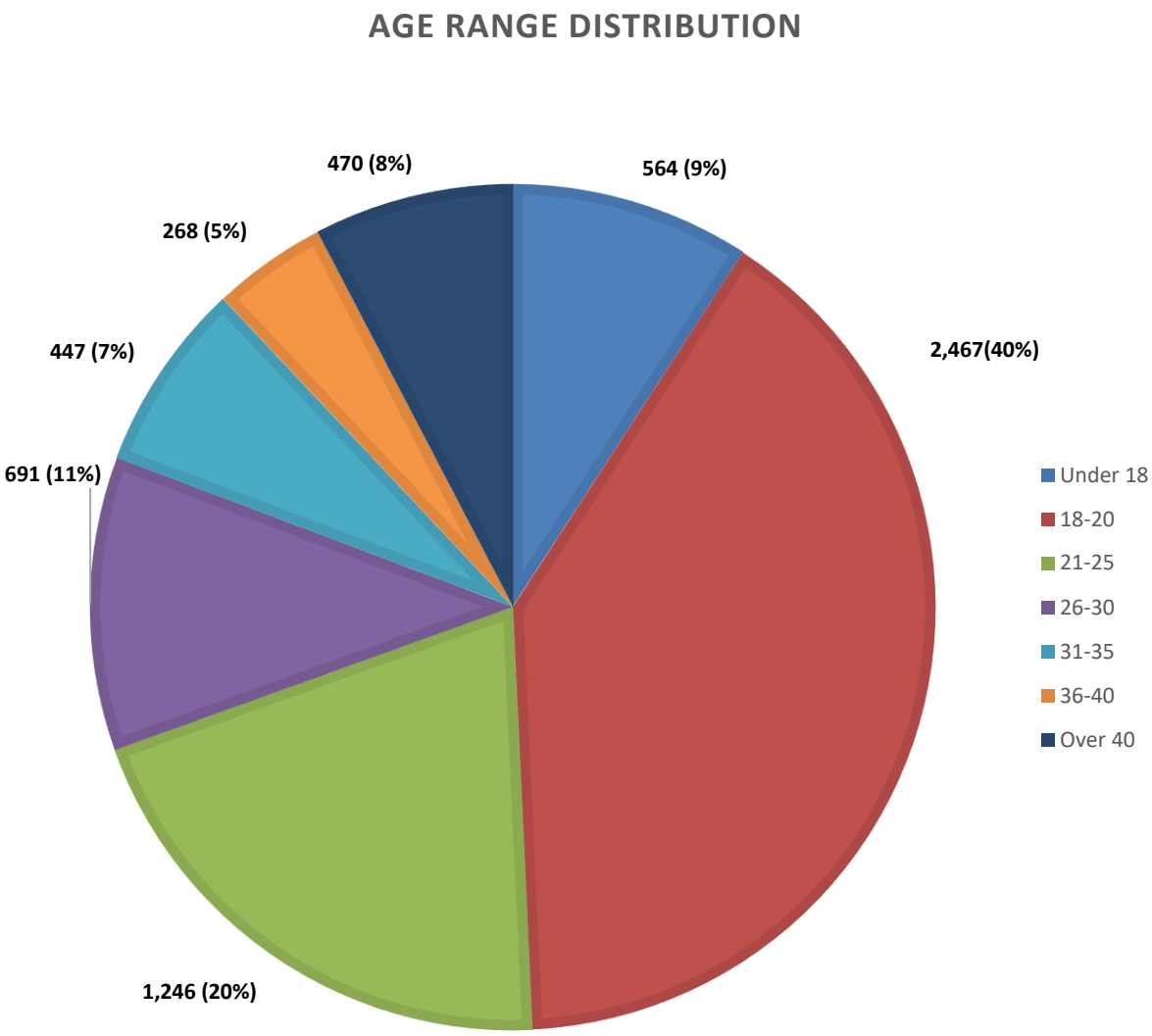
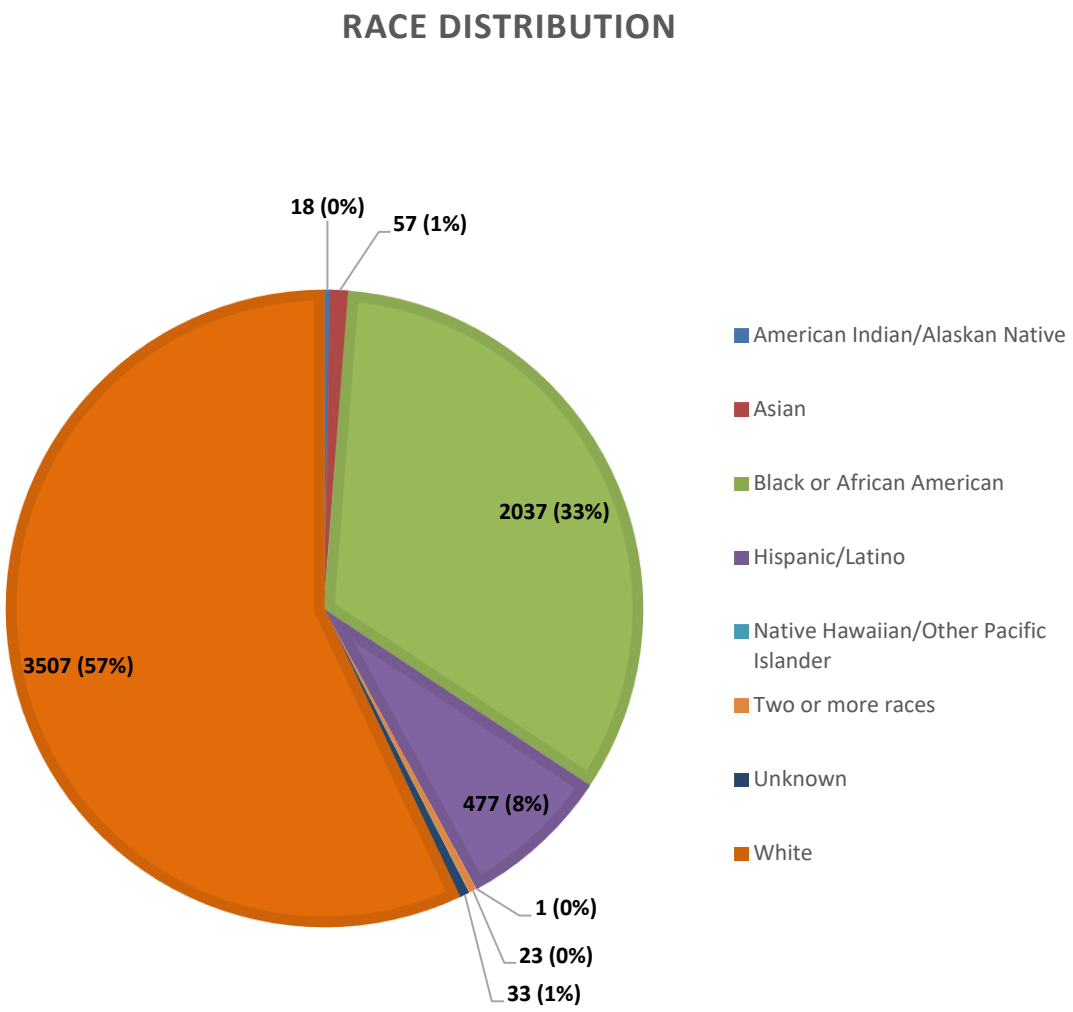


Figure 5

Academic Year 2020 -2021 Race Distribution at a Rural Community College in the Southeastern U.S.



Overview of Participants

I interviewed eight participants for this study. I assigned pseudonyms (Monica, Joshua, Veronica, Michael, Tiffany, Alan, Sandra, and Amber) to each participant to protect

each participant's identity. The participants were between 20 to 56 years old. Five of the participants identified as women, and three of the participants identified as men. Two participants identified their race as Black. Five participants identified their race as White. One participant identified her race as Latina. Table 1 provides each participant's age, gender, and race.

Nontraditional Student Characteristics.

As discussed in Chapter 2, Horn and Carroll (1996) NCES Nontraditional Scale includes seven characteristics that describe nontraditional students:

1) Delayed enrollment into postsecondary education
2) Attended part-time
3) Financially independent
4) Worked full-time while enrolled
5) Had dependents other than a spouse
6) Was a single parent
7) Did not obtain a standard high school diploma (p. i).

Students who possess three nontraditional characteristics are characterized as moderately nontraditional (Horn & Carroll, 1996). Students who possess at least four nontraditional characteristics are characterized as highly nontraditional (Horn & Carroll, 1996).

Seven out of eight participants possessed at least three characteristics described on this scale. Five participants possessed between two and three characteristics on the Nontraditional Scale and were characterized as moderately nontraditional. Three participants possessed at least four characteristics on the Nontraditional Scale and are characterized as highly nontraditional. One participant possessed only two characteristics on the

Nontraditional Scale. Despite his score on the scale, I wanted to include him in this study. He returned to college at twenty-six after a short, life-changing military career, during which he was deployed to Afghanistan. Like all the participants interviewed for this study, he also followed a winding path to college. Table 2 presents participants' nontraditional characteristics, their scores on the Nontraditional Scale, and their characterization on the scale (moderately nontraditional or highly nontraditional) at the time of their first interview.

At the time of our first interviews, five participants reported that they were employed: three participants were employed full-time (working at least 40 hours per week) and two participants were employed part-time (working less than 40 hours per week). Three participants reported that they were unemployed. Of the eight participants, four participants delayed enrollment in a postsecondary institution after they graduated from high school. Four participants did not delay enrollment in a postsecondary institution. Two participants enrolled in degree programs at a college immediately after high school graduation. Another participant enrolled in technical certificate programs at a technical institute in Florida, and one participant enrolled in diploma programs at the community college immediately after her high school graduation.

Table 1

Participants' Demographic Information

	Monica	Joshua	Veronica	Michael	Tiffany	Alan	Sandra	Amber
Race	White	White	White	White	Latina	Black	Black	White
Gender	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Female
Age	29	27	20	54	50	42	56	30

Table 2

Participants' Nontraditional Characteristic, Score, and Characterization based on Horn and Carroll's (1996) NCES Nontraditional Scale

	Monica	Joshua	Veronica	Michael	Tiffany	Alan	Sandra	Amber
Delayed college enrollment	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	No	Yes	Yes
Enrollment status	Full-time student	Full-time student	Full-time student	Full-time student	Full-time student	Full-time student	Full-time student	Full-time student
Lived independently (financially independent)	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Employment status	Unemployed	Part-time employee	Full-time employee	Full-time employee	Unemployed	Unemployed	Part-time employee	Full-time employee
Dependents	1	0	0	3	1	2	4	2
Single parent	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	Yes
Obtained standard high school diploma	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Score on Nontraditional Scale	4	2	3	4	3	3	4	6
Nontraditional characterization	Highly	Moderately	Moderately	Highly	Moderately	Moderately	Moderately	Highly

The five oldest participants were parents; each reported that they were the primary caretaker for one or more dependents. The two youngest participants did not have dependents. Seven participants reported that they were financially independent and lived independently in a home they rented or owned. One participant reported living with his parents, who supported him financially. All participants were high school graduates. They all were enrolled full-time in one of the community college's associate degree programs at the time their first interview was conducted.

Sampling

I used purposeful sampling in this study and recruited students in a two-step process. After I received IRB approval and site permission to conduct my study, I conducted the first step of recruitment by working with the site's Distance Education Department and faculty members to recruit participants. I sent an email to all students at the college and requested they complete a questionnaire. The questionnaire was created in Qualtrics, and students accessed the questionnaire using a hyperlink provided in the email. A copy of my interview solicitation email and statement of consent is provided in Appendix C. The questionnaire asked participants to self-report their demographic information (e.g., gender, age, race) and their nontraditional students' characteristics (as defined by Horn & Carroll, 1996). The questionnaire concluded with a request for participants to provide their college email address and their telephone number if they were willing to be interviewed for this study. Of the requests sent to students, 212 students from the college responded.

I conducted the second step of recruitment and used purposeful sampling to select eight participants for this study. From this sample of respondents ($N = 212$), I identified students who were at least 18 years old, reported at least two nontraditional student

characteristics, and provided their college email address and their telephone number for interviews. I first contacted each participant via telephone to schedule interviews. The first eight students who agreed to participant were selected as participants in this study. Appendix D provides a copy of the questionnaire, and Appendix E includes script for initial telephone call. I did not select any respondents who were younger than 18 years old because they cannot provide consent to participate in this study. I also excluded any nontraditional students enrolled in certificate or diploma programs, adult education courses, or continuing education courses at the college from my study, as noted in my delimitations in Chapter 1.

Using a purposeful sample, I selected eight ($N = 8$) respondents for this study. I needed to interview enough individuals to reach a level of saturation with the qualitative data. Saturation occurs when a researcher reaches "a point of resonance" between what is heard from participants in interviews and what is described in academic literature (Ravitch & Riggan, 2017, p. 47). After interviewing eight participants, I recognized patterns among the experiences participants described, and I recognized connections between participants' descriptions to the descriptions in academic literature. I reached a point of saturation with my data after interviewing eight participants.

Data Collection

I collected data between December 2018 and December 2021. I chose semi-structured interviews as the method for data collection in this study because students' perceptions of their learning and the barriers they face are rooted in stories they tell (Dodge, 2011; Seidman, 1991). These stories reflect the ways participants construct meanings: "Telling stories is essentially a meaning-making process. When people tell stories, they select details of their experience from their stream of consciousness" (Seidman, 1991, p. 7). Semi-structured

interviews with open-ended questions are well-suited for my study's basic interpretative approach: a basic interpretative approach should have a flexible, open approach to investigating a phenomenon (Merriam, 2002; Patton, 2021).

I audio recorded each interview I conducted after receiving each participant's permission to record the interview. I recorded interviews using a password-protected digital application. During in-person interviews, I activated the application on a password-protected Android tablet, selected the record function, and placed the tablet between the participant and me throughout the interview. During telephone interviews, I used a speakerphone option on a digital telephone so that participants' voices could be easily recorded using the same application used during in-person interviews. After all audio recordings were transcribed, the audio files were deleted and removed from the tablet. Interviews, including follow-up interviews, were transcribed between December 2018 and December 2021. I transcribed each interview recording verbatim by hand within a week of the interview to ensure the qualitative data were accurate.

My initial contact with all respondents was via telephone. When I first spoke with respondents, I introduced myself, asked respondents their program of study at the college, and scheduled a time for an interview. I was able to confirm during this initial contact that each respondent was enrolled in an associate degree program at the college. I conducted two rounds of interviews with each participant for this study. During my first round of interviews, I began each interview by reading the research statement of consent to participate. The statement included details about the research study, data collection and storage procedures, participants' right to discontinue the interview at any time, and participants' right to confidentiality. After reading the research statement of consent to participants and receiving

each participant's consent to participate, I asked each participant to provide their demographic information and their characteristics as nontraditional students. I then asked each participant open-ended questions about their perceptions of learning experiences at the college. First-round interviews ranged from 30 minutes to 75 minutes in length. First-round interviews were conducted between December 2018 and December 2020.

Follow-up Interviews.

As my data collection process took several years to complete because of the COVID-19 pandemic, I felt compelled to conduct second-round interviews to follow-up with participants. I contacted each participant via email to request a follow-up interview. I had established consistent email connections with all participants during my first round of member checking, so I felt comfortable reaching out to participants through email. I conducted one follow-up interview with each participant. During follow-up interviews, participants can expand on or clarify their responses (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Follow-up interviews ranged in 20 minutes to 30 minutes in length and were conducted between August 2021 and November 2021. A copy of my first-round interview protocol guide is provided in Appendix E, and a copy of my second-round interview protocol guide is provided in Appendix F.

I conducted all eight follow-up interviews via telephone with participants for their convenience and because the COVID-19 pandemic was ongoing. After each audio-recorded follow-up interview, I transcribed the interview verbatim within a week of the interview. Next, I conducted my two-cycle approach to data analysis. Finally, I conducted a final member check via email with each participant so they could approve the transcript from their

follow-up interview and any analytical memos on the themes and patterns I gleaned from their interview data.

I was able to interview participants about their academic progress during follow-up interviews. In March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic took hold in the United States, and the physical location for my research site was shut down. I had to forego in person interviews after March 2020 for the safety of participants and for my safety since the COVID-19 virus was highly transmissible from person to person. After March 2020, I conducted all interviews with participants over the telephone. Each of these events caused delays in the data collection process and slowed down my dissertation progress overall.

Rapport Building.

Semi-structured in-depth interview questions invite a "freer exchange between the interviewer and the interviewee" (Dodge, 2011, p. 54). I wanted participants to feel like they were having an open conversation about their perceptions. I used open-ended questions that encouraged participants to provide detailed explanations for their experiences. Open-ended questions included both general and specific questions that cannot be fully answered with a simple "yes" or "no" response from participants (Esterberg, 2002).

Another way to build rapport with participants is through active listening. For the researcher, actively listening involves "attentive, empathic, nonjudgmental, listening in order to invite, and engender talk" (Josselson, 2013, p. 66). I used active listening in each interview I conducted. First, I created a brief first-round interview guide (see Appendix D). This allowed me to develop a conversational exchange guided by the participant as my interview guide did not set rigid parameters for the interview and the types of questions I could ask of participants. Second, when participants responded to questions, I actively listened to their

responses. During interviews, actively listening includes observing participants' social and non-verbal cues, like body language, tone of voice, and gestures (Denham & Onwuegbuzie, 2013). Third, I also monitored my social and non-verbal cues during interviews. I maintained a nonjudgmental tone of voice throughout the interviews, and I offered reassuring nods as participants shared personal or sensitive stories. Finally, I asked clarifying questions as the interviews continued. DeJonckheere and Vaughn (2019) explained that as "the interview progresses, the interviewer can repeat the words used by the interviewee, use planned and unplanned follow-up questions that invite further clarification, exploration or elaboration" (p. 6). Whenever I asked clarifying questions, I used the same language the participant used when describing something to ask them to elaborate on what they described.

Analytic Memos

Concurrent with first and second cycles of data analysis and with Theming the Data, I wrote analytic memos. Saldaña (2021) wrote, "Researcher reflection through analytic memo writing, coupled with second cycle coding, will condense the number of codes and provide a reanalysis of the data" (p. 140). I used analytic memos to record my reflections about the data I analyzed. Throughout the data analysis process, I wrote analytic memos, which guided my construction of a central thematic statement and subthemes.

Throughout the first and second cycles of theme development, I wrote analytic memos in comment threads along the right margins of the Word document for each transcript. Saldaña (2021) explained that "analytic memo writing documents reflections on: your coding processes and code choices; how the process of inquiry is taking shape; and the emergent patterns, categories, and subcategories, themes, and concepts in your data" (p. 58). I shared analytic memos about central thematic statements and subthemes with participants.

Each participant had an opportunity to review these memos to verify that my interpretations and assumptions about their experiences were reliable.

Throughout the data collection and analysis processes, I maintained an audio trail of my data collection, data analysis, and decision-making processes to increase my study's dependability (Dodge, 2011; Merriam, 2002). An audit trail provides transparency in qualitative studies (Merriam, 2002). This trail is "a detailed explanation of the data collection and analysis methods and how decisions are made throughout the study" (Dodge, 2011, p. 60). I provide the audit trail in Appendix G at the end of this dissertation.

I also used analytic memo writing to engage in reflexivity. Reflexivity requires "critical self-reflection by the researcher regarding assumptions, biases, and the relationship to the study" (Dodge, 2011, p. 61). Through reflexive analytic memos, I identified my own assumptions and biases that influenced my interpretations of interview data. Analytic memos help researchers keep an open mind as they review and analyze data in a qualitative study (Dodge, 2011; Stake, 1995). When researchers write analytic memos and engage in reflexivity, they "learn to understand their research as their participants do, rather than import their own assumptions" on the data (Dodge, 2011, p. 60).

Data Analysis

I transcribed audio recordings of interviews into a Microsoft Office Word document within one week of conducting each interview. The transcriptions were stored on a password-protect laptop computer. I removed repetitive phrases and extraneous comments that were not pertinent to the study from each transcript. Each participant then reviewed their transcript during member checks. After conducting member checks, I deleted the audio recordings from the interviews from my computer's hard drive.

Coding.

All transcripts and coded data were stored on a password-protected laptop computer. I analyzed data using a two-cycle approach. A two-cycle approach to data analysis is recommended when conducting thematic analysis of qualitative data (Saldaña, 2021; Shaw, 2019). I also chose to manually code data in my study rather than use computer software to code data. I did this because manual coding invites the researcher to closely investigate the nuances and complexities of the participants' stories (Gallagher, 2007). Manual coding systems respect "the sheer quantity of complexity of qualitative data and the surrounding contexts" that cannot be adequately analyzed using data analysis software (Gallagher, 2007, p. 73). I conducted two manual cycles of data analysis to ensure I accurately and thoroughly interpreted participants' experiences. My first cycle of data analysis method was Theming the Data: Phenomenologically, and my second cycle of data analysis was Pattern Coding.

First Cycle of Data Analysis.

My first cycle of coding began as I transcribed each interview. I used In Vivo Themes as a coding system while Theming the Data: Phenomenologically method. In Vivo Themes are "culled directly from the participants' own language that succinctly capture and summarize a major idea" (p. 260). Theming the Data is ideal for analyzing interview data and "exploring a participant's psychological world of beliefs, constructs, identity development, and emotional experiences" (Saldaña, 2021, p. 268). Weston et al. (2001) explained that "there is a reciprocal relationship between the development of a coding system and the evolution of understanding a phenomenon" (p. 397). When analyzing interview data, themes "may be identified at manifest level (directly observable in the information) or at the latent level (underlying the phenomenon)" (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003, p. 38). Therefore,

theming data through a phenomenological lens "symbolizes data through two specific prompts: what something *is* (the manifest) and what something *means* (the latent)" (Saldaña, 2021, p. 268). By Theming the Data: Phenomenologically, I was able to construct a central thematic statement based on participants' stories about their experiences in college: persisting in college—despite facing barriers to education—meant access to a better future.

Second Cycle of Data Analysis.

I employed a Pattern Coding method for the second cycle of data analysis. Saldaña (2021) explained that "first cycle coding is a way to initially summarize segments of data. Pattern Coding, as a second cycle method, is a way of grouping those summaries into a smaller number of condensed categories, themes, or concepts" (p. 322). Therefore, I relied on Pattern Coding to condense the number of themes I constructed during the first cycle of datal analysis. The process of Pattern Coding data illuminated overarching patterns across interview transcripts. Moreover, Pattern Coding is useful for studies that search "causes and explanations in the data" (Saldaña, 2021, p. 322), which is a goal of interpretative qualitative research. At the end of my second cycle of data analysis, I identified three subthemes that also illuminated the barriers to education participants described: "Going Back to School," "Keeping Up," and "Having the Right Tools."

Member Checks.

Member checks include sharing a transcription with a participant so a participant can review their responses provided during their interview; member checks like this help qualitative studies maintain validity and trustworthiness because participants can evaluate the accuracy of the transcripts (Creswell, 2005; Creswell & Miller, 2000; Saldaña, 2021). I conducted two rounds of member checking with participants. During each round of member

checking, I sent an email to each participant through the college's multifactor authentication email service. In the email, I included a copy of the interview transcript and my analytic memos on themes and patterns I extracted from their interview data.

The first round of member checking with a participant took place after I transcribed their first interview and wrote analytical memos on themes and patterns that I gleaned from their interview data. The second round of member checking with a participant took place after I transcribed their follow-up interview and wrote additional analytical memos about themes and patterns gleaned from their interview data. During both rounds of member checking, participants were able to verify that their transcripts accurately captured their responses and that the themes and patterns I constructed were an accurate interpretation of their experiences. All eight participants responded via email to both the first and second round of member checking emails I sent to them. All participants confirmed that their interview transcripts and my analytical memos were an accurate interpretation of their experiences. An audit trail with interview and transcription dates is provided in Appendix F.

Summary

This chapter addressed my study's research procedures. I introduced the epistemological and ontological orientation and theoretical framework used for this study's methodologies. I discussed my positionality as a researcher, the research procedures, including details about the research site, participants, data collection methods, and approaches to data analysis. I also used several strategies to increase the credibility of this study. These strategies included constructing themes in data using a two-cycle approach, conducting member checks with participants, maintaining an audit trail, and writing analytic memos that checked the goodness and trustworthiness of data collected during interviews

(Dodge, 2011; Saldaña, 2021). In the following chapter, I present the study's findings. In Chapter V, I discuss my findings for this study, the conclusions I reached based on my findings and the literature I reviewed, the implications of my study, my recommendations for further research on this topic, and a brief conclusion for the study and my reflections about this study.

Chapter IV

RESEARCH FINDINGS

I conducted this qualitative study to construct an understanding of barriers to education that threatened nontraditional students' continuation at a two-year community college. I used the following research question for this study: how do nontraditional students at a two-year community college describe the barriers that threaten their continuation in college? I begin this chapter with an overview of participants' demographic information. After this overview, I present a detailed profile of each participant interviewed for this study.

Participant Descriptions and Profiles

In this section, I provide detailed descriptions of and profiles for the eight participants I interviewed for this study. I begin each participant's description with a verbatim excerpt from their interview; these excerpts provide insights into how participants described who they are or how they described their lived experiences. In each description, I present the participant's demographic information and their degree progress at the time of our first interview. After each participant's description, I provide a detailed profile about each participant based on information gathered during interviews with them. I describe their pathways to college, their reflections about their college journey, and their degree progress at the time of the second interview.

Monica

> *I am the first of my mother's three children to go to college. It has been approximately 10 or 11 years since I graduated high school … My son is the reason I*

am driven, determined, and very ambitious to make a career for myself and a future for him.

At the time of our first interview, Monica was 29 years old. She possessed four characteristics on the NCES (1996) Nontraditional Scale: 1) delayed college enrollment, 2) attended college at least part-time, 3) financially independent, and 4) had a dependent. Therefore, Monica is described as highly nontraditional on the Nontraditional Scale. Monica was enrolled in a forestry program at the college. She had been a full-time student at the college for three semesters, and she was two semesters away from graduating with her associate degree from the college.

I interviewed Monica for the first time in person in December 2018. She wanted to meet on the college campus on a Monday morning after one of her forestry classes. We decided to meet in an empty classroom on the college campus. The classroom was filled with student desks and chairs organized in rows. I arrived at the classroom first, and I chose a student desk near the door of the classroom so Monica could easily see me when she arrived.

As I pulled out my interview guide, Monica entered the classroom door. She laughed and said, "Sorry for the outfit and clay," as she sat down in a desk beside me. I politely smiled and assured her that her outfit was acceptable for our interview. She was wearing a long-sleeve t-shirt with the college's logo; a pair of khaki shorts; and hiking boots with bright, patterned socks peeking above the top of the boots. Her boots and shorts had spots of dried red clay stuck to them. She explained that she had just come inside from counting quail coveys in the college's nature reserve next to the campus.

Monica described herself as a white, middle-class woman. She also described herself as a first-generation college student. She explained, "I am the first of my mother's three

children to go to college. It has been approximately 10 or 11 years since I graduated high school." When Monica graduated from high school, she decided not to go to college so she could serve as a full-time caretaker to her ailing grandparents. Monica stated that her grandparents "raised her" during her childhood, and she continued to live with them after she graduated from high school. Unfortunately, both of Monica's grandparents passed away from degenerative illnesses before Monica's 23 birthday.

At 25 years old, Monica met and married her husband, and they had a son together. Monica and her husband moved into a small mobile home they rented a few months before their son was born. Monica's husband is employed full-time at a local sawmill, and his income financially supports their household. Monica was a stay-at-home mother with her son until he was three years old when he was old enough to attend a local public school pre-kindergarten program during the day. She described herself as a "born caretaker." She explained her living situations as a child:

> I have always taken care of people in my life. My parents weren't grown-ups. As a kid, I tried to take care of them, but my grandparents stepped in, and they took care of me while my parents tried to get their life together. Now, I take care of my son and my husband. That's my full-time job.

During my first interview with Monica, she said that her son was enrolled in pre-kindergarten school program at a local primary school. With her son in a school program for several hours each weekday, Monica felt like she had the time and motivation to attend college. During our first interview, she explained, "My son is the reason I am driven, determined, and very ambitious to make a career for myself and a future for him."

I conducted a second interview with Monica in August 2021. Our interview was over the telephone, but I could still hear the same upbeat tone in her voice that I remembered from our first interview. Monica had remained on track in her degree program, and she graduated two semesters after our first interview. After graduation, she had been hired to a management crew at a wildlife reserve. When I asked her about how she felt about her path to college and into the workforce, she stated:

> I always wanted to go to college. I enjoyed being outside, so I thought why not do a forestry program at the college. My college advisor helped me find a job at the reserve after I graduated. I can work at the reserve during the day while my husband works, and my son goes to school. I can bring money home. I was able to buy a car, so my husband and I don't have to share a car anymore.

Throughout our first and second interviews, Monica often referenced her son when she described what motivated her to persist in college. During our first interview, she stated, "I believe that the ambition is there. That there is enough drive that I have, especially with my little, biggest fan. That is my driving force. I must make sure if all else fails, mommy has his back."

Joshua

> *I find that this school offers me everything I need and that I want to reach my goal … As someone who had a previous attempt at a state university and in a private university, here I'm able to flourish. I believe I get more out of it; I get more tools. All in all, the school itself—instructors and everyone involved—is very helpful and accommodating, especially if you reach out and ask for it. I like it a lot here.*

At the time of our first interview, Joshua was 27 years old. He possessed two characteristics on the NCES (1996) Nontraditional Scale: 1) delayed college enrollment and 2) attended college at least part-time. Therefore, Joshua is described as moderately nontraditional on the Nontraditional Scale. He was enrolled in a registered nursing program at the college. He had been a full-time student at the college for four semesters. He was two semesters away from earning his license to practice nursing and from graduating with his associate degree from the college.

I conducted my first interview with Joshua in January 2019. Joshua and I scheduled an in-person interview in the same classroom where I conducted my interview with Monica. We met in an afternoon after he finished his on-campus classes for the day. I arrived before Joshua, and I sat at a student desk near the classroom entrance so he would easily see me when he entered the classroom. Joshua arrived shortly after I sat down. We both greeted each other with a smile. Joshua was dressed in white scrubs, typically worn by students in the college's nursing program.

Throughout our interview, I noticed that Joshua's voice became shaky, especially when he searched to find a word he could not immediately recall. He also sat with his with his fingers tightly locked together in his lap. Joshua seemed used to explaining his behaviors to strangers because early into the interview, he said, "I'm not like most people. I live with a TBI. My speech and coordination aren't like they used to be, and I take medications that make my hands shake a bit." Joshua explained that after his high school graduation, he enlisted in the military to help him pay for his college education because his parents couldn't afford to pay for his education. He wanted to serve in the military long enough to become eligible to receive funds from the GI Bill that he could use to pay for his college education.

While enlisted in the military, he was deployed to warzones in Afghanistan. In Afghanistan, Joshua suffered a traumatic brain injury (TBI) when a roadside bomb exploded near his vehicle. After his injury, he returned to the United States and was honorably discharged from the military.

Joshua decided to attend college after leaving the military. He enrolled in a state university, found an apartment with two roommates, and took a job as a part-time server at a restaurant. Joshua described struggling with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) during this time in his life; he found it difficult to attend classes regularly and maintain his work schedule. Without completing a full semester at the state university, Joshua unenrolled himself from college, quit his job, and moved an hour north to his hometown to be closer to his parents.

Back in his hometown, Joshua found an apartment in the town where his parents lived. He also enrolled in a private university near their home and worked as a full-time server at a restaurant. Despite these changes, Joshua described an ongoing struggle with PTSD, and he again found it difficult to work full-time and attend college full-time. Joshua decided to move in with his parents, work as a part-time server, and enroll as a full-time student in the nursing program at the college. His parents said they would help support him financially as long as he remained enrolled in classes full-time at the college.

I conducted my second interview with Joshua over the phone in September 2021. I could still hear the occasional shaking in his voice as he tried to remember a particular word. during our interview. Joshua explained that he had not finished the program at the college and that he had taken a full-time job as a night manager at a local restaurant. His new job paid him well enough for him to afford his own apartment. Since he was now financially

independent again, his score on the Nontraditional Scaled increased from two points on the scale to three points on the scale; however, he is still considered moderately nontraditional on the scale. He had decided to remain enrolled in college part-time taking one class a semester. He did not feel like he could manage living with a disability, working full-time, and taking classes full-time. When I asked him how her felt about his decisions, he stated, "This is not the hardest time in my life. I'll get to the finish line eventually; I'll graduate. I just have to figure it out." For Joshua, his time in the military had been traumatic and lifechanging, and these lived experiences affected how he approached college: "College isn't Afghanistan. I can do college."

Veronica

> *I was able to work and support my life outside of college. Actually, I was able to support myself in college, too.*

At the time of our first interview, Veronica was 20 years old. She possessed three characteristics on the NCES (1996) Nontraditional Scale: 1) attended college at least part-time, 2) financially independent, and 3) employed full-time. Therefore, Veronica is described as moderately nontraditional on the Nontraditional Scale. Veronica was one of two participants who did not delay enrollment in post-secondary institution after high school graduation. She was enrolled in the veterinary technology program at the college, and she was approximately two or three semesters away from graduating with her associate degree from the college.

I interviewed Veronica for the first time in person in June 2019. I met her in the same classroom where I interviewed Monica and Joshua. I arrived before Veronica, and I sat at the same desk near the classroom doorway so Veronica could see me as she entered the room.

Veronica entered the room wearing brightly colored scrubs. As she sat down, she thanked me for meeting her in the evening. She said, “I had a crazy day at work. We were busy all day, and I rushed from work to get here.” I smiled and assured her that I was happy to find a time to meet that worked with her work and school schedule. Throughout our interview, Veronica seemed calm despite the stressful workday. She took intermittent sips from a soda can she brought with her, and she her posture remained relaxed throughout the interview.

Veronica described herself as a white, middle class, first-generation college student. Veronica said that her parents, who she described as “often out of work,” could not afford to pay for her college education, so she took advantage of state programs that helped her start her college journey while she was still in high school. While in high school, Veronica participated in a state-funded dual-enrollment program so she could take college classes during her senior year of high school. Veronica completed three college courses at the community college before her high school graduation.

After her high school graduation, Veronica took a full-time clerical job at a local healthcare facility. She remained enrolled at the college part-time for two semesters immediately following her high school graduation. She explained that she did not want to work full-time and take classes full-time because she was worried that she would experience “burnout” and “lose motivation to keep going in college.” Veronica worked at the facility during the day and took online or evening classes at the college for a while. I asked Veronica what made her decide to switch from a part-time student to a full-time student at the college. She stated that her program “had expiration dates” for college math and science courses; if students did not complete the program within five years, then they would need to retake any college math or science courses that were taken five or more years ago. Veronica said, “I

keep reminding myself it's just a few more semesters. The pressure of working full-time and taking college classes full-time won't be forever."

Additionally, after her high school graduation, Veronica decided to move in with her partner, who rented a mobile home and worked full-time at a local car dealership. They did not have any children at the time of the first interview, and they planned to get married after she earned her degree at the college. They used their incomes to support themselves financially and to help pay for Veronica's college expenses.

I conducted my second interview with Veronica over the telephone in September 2021. Despite being a few semesters away from graduation during our first interview, Veronica had not graduated with her degree from the college at the time of our second interview. She explained that she had been promoted at her job, and the additional responsibilities at work meant she had "even less time for school." She described staying late at work several nights a week to finish reports for healthcare insurance companies. While the promotion did come with a salary increase, she felt unable to continue taking classes full-time at the college. When I asked Veronica if she still planned to finish the degree at the college, she said, "Of course. I'm just two classes away from graduating, and my advisor said I wouldn't have to retake classes. I don't want to work at my job forever. I like the money, but the office isn't managed well. Plus, I want to take care of animals. I want to keep working in healthcare, just not taking care of people."

Michael

> *There are certain goals that I want to achieve before I pass away in this life, and one of them is to graduate from this degree program. The next is to go back out into the*

field again and continue working. Then I would like to purchase a truck and a fifth wheel to travel the United States and Canada.

At the time of our first interview, Michael was 54 years old. He possessed four characteristics on the NCES (1996) Nontraditional Scale: 1) attended college at least part-time, 2) financially independent, 3) employed full-time, and 4) had dependents. Therefore, Michael is characterized as highly nontraditional on the Nontraditional Scale. Michael was enrolled in a computer networking program at the college. He had been enrolled full-time at the college for four semesters, and he was two semesters away from graduating with his associate degree.

I interviewed Michael for the first time in person in October 2019. We met in the same classroom where I had conducted the previous interviews because it was close to Michael's other classrooms. I arrived before Michael, and I found the same desk near the classroom entrance. Within a few minutes, Michael arrived wearing jean shorts and a light green t-shirt. He introduced himself with a wide smile. He sat down at a desk in front of me and propped up his feet on the chair next to him. Throughout the interview, he remained cheerful—the wide smile often appearing as he answered questions.

Michael described himself as a white, middle-class man. He had been married to his wife since he was 20, and they had three children. After graduating from high school, Michael spent nearly two years studying technology maintenance at a technical institute in Florida. By the mid-1980s, Michael recognized that his technology skills may be useful in the military, so he decided to join the military. While in the military, Michael was responsible for securing sensitive information; his job regularly required him to conduct computer and encryption maintenance. Michael saw the military as a "pathway to college."

He wanted a career in the military, but he also wanted to take advantage of the military's GI Bill to pay for college classes. He said, "I wanted to have more than one career. The military was just one career on the road to others. I knew I wanted to go to college, and the only way I could afford it was with military money."

After 20 years of service, Michael retired from the military, and he took a full-time job as a technical specialist for an international company, where he was employed at the time of our interview. He described traveling a lot for his job, "I'm all over the place with work. I just want to be in one place, and I'm hoping this degree will make that happen." When he was 52 years old, he enrolled in a computer networking program at the community college.

During our interview, I asked him why he decided to return to college after retiring from the military and while working full-time. He explained that he had raised three children with his wife, and since his children no longer lived at home, he wanted to earn a college degree while he had access to GI Bill funds to pay for college and find a job that did not require him to travel as often. He stated, "I'm going to try to get a job locally, but, you know, I hope I don't have to move again. I don't want to move again … I always felt like I should have had a degree a long time ago, and I figured since I have the time and the ability to do it, I should do it now before it's too late."

I conducted my second interview with Michael in September 2021. During our second interview, he explained he had graduated with his computer networking degree from the college. He was still searching for a new, local full-time job that would not require him to travel as much. Despite searching for a job for nearly a year, Michael said he was still optimistic about finding a new full-time job, "I'm fortunate that I have a job while looking for a job. I don't have the same pressure as other people who are out of work and trying to

find work." I asked Michael if this same optimism helped him graduate from college. He replied, "Absolutely. College is supposed to be hard. I knew I would struggle, but I knew they only way I would fail is if I quit college. I got to graduation one day at a time."

Tiffany

Financially, I wasn't confident that coming back to school was the right move for me.

At the time of our first interview, Tiffany was 50 years old. She possessed four characteristics on the NCES (1996) Nontraditional Scale: 1) delayed college enrollment, 2) employed full-time, 3) financial independent, and 4) had a dependent. Therefore, Tiffany is described as highly nontraditional on the Nontraditional Scale. Tiffany was enrolled in business management at the college. She had been a full-time student for five semesters, and she was scheduled to graduate with her associate degree at the end of the current semester.

I interviewed Tiffany in October 2019. Tiffany lived an hour away from the community college's campus; for her convenience, we conducted the interview over the telephone. When Tiffany answered the telephone at the start of our first interview, her voice was quiet. I was worried my rather loud speaking voice would be jarring for Tiffany, and I tried to meet her quiet tone as I apologized to her. Tiffany let out a short giggle as I lowered my voice and said, "Now, we can't both be quiet when we talk. You do you." I appreciated her reassurance—her kindness helped both of us settle into the interview.

Tiffany described herself as a Latina, middle-class woman and as a first-generation college student. She was married and had one child with her husband. After graduating from high school, Tiffany enrolled in diploma programs at the community college where she earned diplomas in accounting and in data processing. Diploma programs are completed in a semester or two at the college, and most diploma programs do not require degree-level

classes or only require six to nine credit hours of degree-level courses. Degree-level courses are courses that count toward the completion of an associate degree at the college, and associate degree programs at the college require at least sixty credit hours of degree-level courses.

After earning diplomas from the college, Tiffany accepted a full-time position as a data processor for a local branch of an international machinery and equipment company. Tiffany was employed at the branch for nearly 25 years before it was closed by the company. When the branch closed in 2016, employees' severance packages included access to a federal grant that would pay college tuition and fees for any employee who wanted to attend college. Tiffany decided to use the grant to return to college and earn her associate degree, and she enrolled in a business management program at the college full-time.

Tiffany described feeling apprehensive about attending college instead of finding a new job. Tiffany and her husband had a teenaged daughter who lived in their household, and Tiffany's husband's income as a bus driver became the only source of income for their family while Tiffany completed her college degree. She explained, "Financially, I wasn't confident that coming back to school was the right move for me. My daughter and husband have been supportive, so I just had to go for it. If I didn't enroll in college now, while I had the time and the grant, then I was never going to do it."

I conducted my second interview with Tiffany over the telephone in October 2021. When she answered my call, she was less quiet this time. She let out a full-throated "Hey! How's it been?" when she answered. I told Tiffany it was nice to sit down for a conversation again, and I was excited to hear any updates she could provide. Tiffany said that she graduated a few months after our first interview: "I graduated on time, completed a million

job applications, and then went to 30 job interviews." She laughed as she said, "30 job interviews." She explained that she began applying to full-time administrative jobs at businesses near where she lived. The application process felt "tedious" and "time consuming" to Tiffany. She clarified that "it only felt like a million applications and 30 job interviews."

She did complete seven job applications and four job interviews, but the hyperboles stood out to me because she described applying to jobs as "a full-time job on its own." A business wanted to hire Tiffany at the salary she wanted, and Tiffany accepted the position on the spot during the interview. I asked Tiffany how she felt now that she's working full-time again—this time with a degree, too. She replied, "I feel like I can do anything now. I can bounce back from losing a job. I can be a role model for my daughter. I can help support our family. It's a great feeling—it's a relief."

Alan

> *I talked to my wife, and I looked for any kind of push back—any financial reasons not to. She was very supportive. I knew that I would have to quit my job when I started my clinical internship. I didn't want to set us up to struggle, especially because my girls are so young. Being laid off actually worked out since I start clinicals soon anyways.*

At the time of our first interview, Alan was 42 years old. He possessed four characteristics on the NCES (1996) Nontraditional Scale: 1) attended college at least part-time, 2) financially independent, and 3) had dependents. Therefore, Alan is characterized as moderately nontraditional on the Nontraditional Scale. Alan was enrolled in the college's nursing program. He had been enrolled full-time at the college for two semesters, and he was three semesters away from graduating with his associate degree.

I interviewed Alan for the first time in May 2020. Our interview was conducted over the telephone because the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Alan answered my phone call with a quiet "Hello." At first, he seemed a bit shy to talk to me. He said he felt nervous about giving "the wrong answer" to questions I asked. I assured Alan that I was interested in understanding his experiences and that I was not looking for "right" or "wrong" answers. Alan became more comfortable as our interview continued. When I asked him about his family at the beginning of the interview, his shyness seemed to fade. He described his daughters as "silly and smart pint-sized versions" of him and his wife.

Alan described himself as a Black, middle-class man. After graduating from high school, Alan planned to attend a state college and study animal science. Before beginning his first semester of classes, he was offered a salaried position at a local distribution company. He accepted the position and decided to unenroll at the state college he was attending. In his mid-20s, he met and married his wife, who works as an executive at a local hospital. They had two daughters, ages 9 and 11, who lived in their household at the time of our first interview. In 2006, Alan enrolled in the community college's nursing program. He was enrolled part-time in 2006 and 2007 before leaving college again to focus on his job and growing his family.

In 2019, Alan returned to the nursing program as a full-time student. I interviewed Alan during the 2020 nationwide shutdown that occurred following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. A week before our interview, Alan was laid off from his job. His company experienced substantial financial losses after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and laid off nearly all nonessential employees. When I asked Alan how he felt about being laid off, he said, "I was kind of taken aback by being laid off. I was a good worker, but the pandemic just

crushed our business. As far as school goes, it really wasn't that bad. It was something I would have to do anyways." Alan explained that he had planned to resign from his full-time position in a few weeks when he began his clinical residency for his nursing program since his work schedule would have conflicted with his internship schedule.

I conducted my second interview with Alan over the telephone in November 2021. During this interview, the nervousness in his voice I noticed during his first interview was gone. When I asked him about his internship progress, he said, "I'm in my next-to-last semester. I'm almost done with my internship for this semester, and then I have one more semester to go. I'll start working in June of next year." Alan explained that his advisor helped him secure a letter of intent from a regional hospital that agreed to hire him once he graduated from the college as a licensed nurse. I asked Alan if college seemed easier now that he was a veteran college student nearing graduation. He offered the following reply:

> I think my schoolwork is easier because I have a routine at the hospital now. It's hard to leave the hospital behind when I get home. I'm around a lot of sick folks; many of them have COVID. I think about them when I look at my kids. Some of these people won't go home. I just try to remember that I'm going to have a job my daughters will be proud of. They will know I take care of people.

Sandra

> *I have always regretted not going back to school and getting a degree … I stayed at home with my children and homeschooled them. I said when my youngest child finished high school, I would go back to college … and my youngest is graduating high school soon … My kids are excited that I'm doing it. I think seeing me go back to school is encouraging for them, too.*

At the time of our first interview, Sandra was 56 years old. She possessed four characteristics on the NCES (1996) Nontraditional Scale: 1) delayed college enrollment, 2) attended college at least part-time, 3) financially independent, and 4) had dependents. Therefore, Sandra is characterized as moderately nontraditional on the Nontraditional Scale. Sandra was enrolled in the college's accounting program. She had been enrolled full-time at the college for four semesters, and she was two semesters away from graduating with her associate degree.

I interviewed Sandra for the first time in May 2020 over the telephone since we could not meet safely in person with the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Sandra seemed comfortable and open early in our conversation. At one point, she chuckled and remarked, "I'm an open book. Ask me whatever." Sandra described herself as a Black, middle-class woman. Sandra did not attend college after her high school graduation. At 20 years old, Sandra was married and decided to enroll in classes part-time at a local four-year university near her home. She did not complete a degree at this four-year college. Instead, she accepted a full-time position in an accounting department at a local business and worked there until she became pregnant with her first child. I asked her how she felt about leaving the college, and she replied, "I was happy to leave, honestly. My husband and I really wanted a family, and I wanted to be a full-time mom. College would have to wait, and I was OK with that."

After leaving the workforce, Sandra became a stay-at-home, raising and homeschooling four children, while her husband worked full-time as an executive at a local bank to financially support their household. When Sandra's youngest child neared his high school graduation, she returned to college full-time, enrolling in the college's accounting program, and she returned to the workforce, working part-time at a local accounting firm.

During our first interview, I asked Sandra why she chose to come back to college. She explained, "Because of my age—in this late stage of the game, I didn't want to pursue my bachelor's degree. It was conceivable that I could go to a point and finish a degree and not be in college at 65; this was more doable."

I conducted my second interview with Sandra over the telephone in October 2021. Sandra was nearing the end of her degree program, and she was scheduled to graduate with an associate degree in accounting at the end of the semester. I asked Sandra if she was looking forward to graduation. Almost singing the words, she said, "You better believe it!" She added, "I can't believe I made it here. Well, yes, I can. I worked so hard to get this degree. The late nights. Tracking down my kids to help me with my homework. All of it was worth it. I want my kids to see that there isn't one path to a successful life."

Amber

> *I never thought I would be doing this after getting divorced three years ago … I don't feel like I have an option. For me to take care of my kids, I have to do this. That's what helps me keep pushing: I don't have another option … When I left my husband, I left with nothing, except my children and an old, beat-up vehicle. I want to build a life where I can take care of them on my own.*

At the time of our first interview, Amber was 30 years old. She possessed six characteristics on the NCES (1996) Nontraditional Scale: 1) delayed college enrollment, 2) attended college at least part-time, 3) financially independent, 4) employed full-time, 5) was a single parent, and 6) had dependents. Therefore, Amber is characterized as highly nontraditional on the Nontraditional Scale. Amber's nontraditional score was the highest among all the participants. She was enrolled in the college's respiratory care program. She

had been enrolled full-time at the college for four semesters, and she was one semester away from graduating with her associate degree.

I interviewed Amber for the first time in June 2020. Our interview was conducted over the telephone as the COVID-19 pandemic continued to make it unsafe for us to meet in person. Amber spoke calmly throughout our first interview. Her tone of voice did not change much as she answered questions. Amber described herself as white, lower middle-class woman. After graduating from high school, Amber took a full-time job as a receptionist at a doctor's office. She quickly decided that job was not a good fit for her. She explained, "I quit that job after two months. I hated it. I was terrible using the phone. You would think after two months, I'd be able to transfer calls, but nope. I guess I wasn't ready for a real job." When she was 19 years old, Amber enrolled in diploma programs at the community college. She earned three diplomas in the healthcare field. By the time she turned 20 years old, she found full-time employment doing clerical work in the pulmonology department in a healthcare specialist center that was affiliated with a local hospital. Amber still worked for this employer at the time of our interview.

When she was 21 years old, Amber met and married her then husband and gave birth to their first child. She would give birth to their second child the following year. Amber described her marriage as a "constant fight." She explained that her husband's behavior was "chaotic" and "unpredictable." Amber worried about the environment their children would grow up in if they remained married:

> I didn't see a way for us to be good parents and be married. I had to leave. He wouldn't let me take anything, either. When I left my husband, I left with nothing,

except my children and an old, beat-up vehicle. I want to build a life where I can take care of them on my own.

Amber and her husband divorced when Amber was 27. She returned to college after her divorce at 28 years old. She said that her experiences in the pulmonology department lead to her interest in earning an associate degree in respiratory care at the community college. She explained, "I saw respiratory specialists at my job all day. I knew it was something that I could do. And I was pretty sure my boss would likely hire me as a specialist at our office if I got the degree." When I asked Amber why she wanted to earn a college degree, she explained that she wanted a job that gave her and her family more financial stability now that she was raising two children as a single parent. She stated, "The reason why I go to school is for my children."

I conducted my second interview with Amber over the telephone in October 2021. Throughout our second interview, Amber spoke in the same calm, even-toned voice. As she gave me updates about college, she explained that she graduated with her associate degree in respiratory care the previous semester. When I asked Amber how she felt about being a full-time parent and employee while also being a full-time student, she stated, "I really don't know how to describe the feeling. I was just in it; I kind of made myself keep going. If I was going to provide for my children and support myself, I had to make it work. I needed to build a better life for us, and the only way I could see that happening was getting a degree and a better-paying job."

Contextual Ground of Participants' Experiences

Schwandt (1998) explained that both interpretivism and constructivism are grounded in the belief "that to understand the world of meaning one must interpret it" (p. 222). To

understand a phenomenon, researchers first investigate how participants construct meaning within specific contexts. “Social actors” construct “the world of lived reality,” and they “fashion meaning out of events and phenomena through prolonged, complex process of social interaction involving history, language, and action” (Schwandt, 1998, pp. 221-222). My role as an “inquirer” is to explain how meaning is constructed and to “clarify what and how meanings are embodied in language and actions of social actors” (Schwandt, 1998, p. 222).

I used a basic interpretative approach for this study. This approach aims to construct “meaning of a situation or phenomenon” (Merriam, 2002, p. 6) and invites “the depth, openness, and detail” required to investigate a phenomenon (Patton, 2021, p. 14). I investigated the phenomenon of nontraditional students who experienced barriers to education that threatened their continuation in college. Furthermore, I interpreted the meanings participants constructed from the stories they told about their experiences in college. I recognized that participants constructed their college experiences through their lived experiences, and their lived experiences affect the educational decisions they made and actions they took while in college.

Participants constructed meaning about their experiences based on their existing knowledge, their actions, and their lived experiences. I ground this belief in the epistemic premise of constructivism: “our understanding of this world is inevitably our construction, rather than a purely objective perception of reality” (Maxwell, 2013, p. 43). Thus, participants’ existing knowledge, their actions, and their lived experiences informed how they constructed meaning about their experiences at the college, and their experiences reflected their subjective understanding of themselves and the world around them.

Findings

In this section, I report the findings of the study. All participants described feeling determined to earn a degree despite obstacles they faced during their college journeys. Participants wanted to earn a college degree because they believed a degree would help them secure jobs with more financial security. Each participant described encountering barriers; yet each participant had continued to persist in college. I constructed a central thematic statement to describe this phenomenon: persisting in college—despite facing barriers to education—meant access to a better future. After I report my findings on the central thematic statement, I present my findings on three subthemes that directly address the barriers to education participants described. These three subthemes are titled "Going Back to School," "Keeping Up," and "Having the Right Tools." As I present these themes, I describe my findings within the context of *a priori* barriers (i.e., situational, dispositional, and institutional barriers) identified in scholarly literature (see Cross, 1981; see Pfordresher, 2016; see Shelton, 2021).

Central Thematic Statement

I interviewed eight participants for this study to answer the following research question: how do nontraditional students at a two-year community college describe the barriers that threaten their continuation in college? Each participant described encountering multiple obstacles in college during their interviews. As the literature predicted, participants described encountering situational, dispositional, and institutional barriers that threatened their continuation in college. Amber described obstacles she faced in college as "boulders" on "the road to graduation." Alan described the obstacles he faced in college as "just more hoops to jump through." Veronica stated that "a few bad experiences" in college would not

stop her "from achieving a better future." All eight participants saw themselves as adults persisting in college despite the barriers they encountered. Monica stated that she "learned a long time ago that life is rough for most people, but we all got to keep going because life isn't all bad." Sandra stated, "After raising so many children, there isn't much I can't handle." Therefore, in this study, a central thematic statement emerged from participants' descriptions about encountering barriers to education: persisting in college—despite facing barriers to education—meant access to a better future.

Subthemes

I also identified three subthemes within the data that illuminated the type of barriers participants described. I titled the first subtheme "Going Back to School." This subtheme addresses participants' complex identities and circumstances as adult learners. Many participants I interviewed described themselves as partners, parents, employees, and college students. At times, a participant's competing roles and responsibilities created situational barriers to education for them. The second subtheme, "Keeping Up," addresses participants' attitudes and perceptions about themselves and their learning experiences in college. Several participants described feeling unprepared or too old for college. These feelings created dispositional barriers to education for them. Finally, I titled the third subtheme "Having the Right Tools." This subtheme addresses the adequacies of tools and resources the college or instructor provides to students. Several participants described encountering obstacles to learning related to learning environments, instructional methodologies, and limited college resources. These obstacles created institutional barriers. For some participants, these institutional barriers left them feeling "overwhelmed" and "frustrated." As a result, some

participants described dispositional barriers that developed from encounters with institutional barriers.

Subtheme 1: Going Back to School.

Many participants described why they enrolled in college as adults. Several participants also described their personal and professional circumstances that impacted their decision to enroll in college. Furthermore, multiple participants described experiencing conflicts between their personal, professional, and college responsibilities. While all participants graduated from high school, none of the participants had completed a freshman degree-level course before enrolling at the college. For participants, returning to college was, as Tiffany described, "going back to school." Therefore, I use the subtheme "Going Back to School" to describe the personal and/or professional circumstances that created situational barriers for participants.

Monica, Amber, Alan, and Sandra described experiencing tension about their roles and responsibilities as a parent and a college student. Monica described feeling stressed at times. She stated that going to college "has a tendency to get a little stressed, having to manage my home life and my child and finding the time to do my schoolwork." While Amber did not describe feeling stressed, she did describe feeling worried. Amber stated, "I'm worried my kids' schoolwork may slip because I'm working on my own schoolwork. My fifth grader had a hard time last year. I really feel like I didn't help her enough."

Moreover, both Monica and Amber relied on family members for free childcare while in college. Monica stated, "Any time that I need help with my son, my sister takes him so I can go to class or work on homework, especially if I have a paper due or a particular project due. If I can't find a sitter there's usually not an option except him having to help me

working on my things, reading the chapters and whatnot while I still have my eyes on him until his dad can get home. My mom has watched him, taking him to the park one time a couple of semesters ago." Amber described a somewhat similar experience with childcare: "My parents help take care of my kids, my ex-husband and sister help take care of my kids. They're very supportive, so I don't have to worry about who's taking care of my kids."

After being laid off from his job, Alan became a full-time stay-at-home parent. Alan stated, "I had a lot of distractions and responsibilities during the day, so I did work at night." Furthermore, Alan did not want his responsibilities as a college student to interrupt his responsibilities as a parent during the day. He described studying for college classes and completing homework assignments at night so that his children would not feel like he is unavailable to them during the day. He stated, "After everyone goes to bed, I did stuff at night—not interrupting family life, especially because my girls are so young. I want them to know that I'm here."

Unlike Monica, Amber, and Alan, Sandra's children were all over 18 years old and self-sufficient at the time of our interview. Even though Sandra was no longer a full-time parent like Monica and Amber, her role as a parent influenced her decision to delay college enrollment. She stated, "I have always regretted not going back to school and getting a degree. But at the time, I stayed at home with my children and homeschooled them." Monica, Amber, and Sandra's lived experiences as parents impacted the actions they took in college. Their identities as mothers took priority over their identities as college students, and when they felt tension between these two identities, they described experiencing feelings of stress, worry, and regret.

Joshua, Veronica, and Tiffany also described experiencing situational barriers while enrolled in college. These participants described experiencing tension between their roles and responsibilities as employees and college students. Joshua addressed the tensions he felt balancing his responsibilities as a part-time restaurant employee and as a full-time college student. The hours he worked as a server at the local restaurant varied each day, and he was regularly asked by managers to work extra shifts at the restaurant. Joshua described online classes as "a double-edged sword." His description reflects his experiences as an employee and a college student:

> Say I get a week where I'm called in to work because we're lacking servers, and I'm working all the time, and I'm only able to make my face-to-face classes, it's very easy to forget about my online courses because I know I can get to it any time. But, at the same time, when I have weeks when I'm working and I have no real schedule, it's very helpful to be in online courses. I get home very late, maybe at midnight, and I can do my online homework and still be OK. And I really appreciate that about my courses.

Veronica explained that she often chose online classes over face-to-face classes because she was able to work full-time and attend college full-time. Online classes gave her flexibility to work full-time during the day and complete tasks for her college courses in the evening. She said that in online classes "it's easier to go about your day-by-day functions instead of having to quit this job because it wouldn't work around your college schedule." She also explained that she needs to work full-time to financially support herself in college. She described online learning as an advantage because she was able to keep her job while taking classes:

> I was able to work and support my life outside of college. Actually, I was able to support myself in college, too—the books are not cheap at all … There's a lot of advantages, but mainly being able to support yourself because if you can't support yourself, you can't really do college.

To Veronica, her continued full-time employment enabled her to continue her full-time enrollment in college.

At times, the situational barriers that participants described were related to institutional barriers, like the financial cost to attend college. Many participants described attending college as a financial strain on their household. Veronica explained that, despite working full-time, she struggled to afford the cost of college at times. Veronica relied on college scholarships and financial support from family members to help pay for college: "They help fund my college when I don't have money to fund for it … I also get scholarships."

Like Veronica, Tiffany also struggled to afford the cost of college. She stated, "Financially, I wasn't confident that coming back to school was the right move for me." She relied on a federal grant that helped her pay for college, and she supported her household with a temporary income she received from the federal Unemployment Insurance program. As Tiffany described her experiences with face-to-face and online classes, she also addressed her financial situation: "When I had in-person classes, I was much more involved in campus clubs. In the position I'm in, I don't go anywhere I don't have to go because that is just extra money for gas I have to spend. Now that I take more online classes, I'm less involved." Tiffany felt less connected to the college when she took online classes.

Moreover, Joshua and Michael also described their inability to afford college after graduating high school. They responded to this institutional barrier by enlisting in the military. Both Joshua and Michael enrolled in the military before attending college; they used GI Bill funds to pay for their college education because they believed they could not afford to attend college without this financial aid.

Subtheme 2: Keeping Up.

Many participants' attitudes and perceptions about themselves as learners resulted in dispositional barriers to education. Participants used words like "exhausted," "worried," "discouraged," and "apprehensive" to describe how they felt when learning in college. Participants described struggling in college classes because they lacked skills (e.g., computer literacy skills or time management skills); they did not feel ready to learn, especially in online courses; or they believed their age limited their ability to learn. Many participants felt like they struggled to keep up in their classes and with their younger classmates. Therefore, I use the subtheme "Keeping Up" to describe the dispositional barriers participants reported.

Michael, Monica, Joshua, Veronica, Tiffany, and Sandra's beliefs about themselves influenced how they described themselves as college students. Despite his experiences with computers in the military, Michael believed he struggled with computer literacy: "I'm not really computer literate, but I do know how to use a computer. I know how to fix them probably better than I know how to operate them." Michael also described struggling with motivation when completing college assignments. He stated, "I would sometimes cringe like, 'Oh, I've got to get that assignment done. I don't really want to do it, but I've got to do.'"

Monica, Joshua, and Veronica described their time management skills during our interviews. When Monica described herself as a learner, she stated, "My time management

skills aren't that great." She said that "time management skills" involved being "very self-disciplined." She added, "I can count many nights where I'm just exhausted." To Monica, a learner who is self-disciplined will have good time management skills, which means fewer late nights studying and completing assignments; fewer late nights in college curtails feelings of exhaustion.

Monica's feelings about time management in college classes were influenced by her experiences with different course modalities:

> To me more time is needed to dedicate to your online studies because you're basically breaking it down to where you can understand it … Whereas with your time management for your face-to-face classes, you can go in a little bit earlier, you can stay a little bit late and say, 'Hey, I was working on this a little bit and I had a hard time understanding this, so could you help me?'"

Monica believed she struggled more with time management in online classes because she was learning independently and physically isolated from her instructor. The institutional barriers Monica encountered in online classes lead to dispositional barriers about her ability to succeed in college.

Joshua also shared that he struggled with time management in college. Joshua described himself as a "procrastinator," and this was the most substantial dispositional barrier he faced. He stated, "Since I am a huge procrastinator—the ease and comfort of knowing all you need is access to a computer and the time to do something and sometimes you have a long time to do certain assignments that are relatively simple to do, I find it's very easy to ignore it and put it off because there's no teacher, there's no classroom to go to." He explained that face-to-face classes offered more structure for him than online classes: "I

certainly need that structured discipline in the face-to-face classroom. No matter how easy the class is online—for me, if I know something is easy, it's easy to forget about." While Veronica did not describe herself as a procrastinator, she did recognize that time management helped her manage feelings of procrastination: "I write everything down on sticky notes that's supposed to be due in a week or two … Even if the teachers don't use a lot of structure, I'll use my own structure to know that these assignments are due, so I don't procrastinate."

Like other participants, Sandra also described her online learning experiences at the college. She described feeling stressed as she acclimated to online learning: "Online classes were stressful for me at first until I learned to keep up with everything. I had to check my email frequently, check announcements frequently, check discussions frequently. I think I was afraid that I might miss an assignment in an online class because I didn't have a teacher to explain things to me face-to-face." At 56 years old, Sandra was the oldest participant interviewed for this study. She believed that as an older student she would struggle in college: "I wasn't very confident coming back to school. I just thought I had been out of it for so long that I might struggle to set aside time to study and do homework." Sandra's perception of herself was that of a "perfectionist." She explained, "I was worried I wouldn't perform at the level I expect myself to perform at, so I had to change my attitude going in. I was going to give myself a little bit of leeway. I didn't want to expect so much from myself that I set myself up for familiar and get discouraged and then drop out."

Like Sandra, Tiffany believed that her age impacted her feelings about using online resources at the college. She stated, "I don't use a lot of the resources the school has online because of my age." She also described feeling hesitant about taking an online class: "I was quite apprehensive about signing up for my online class because I wasn't sure what was

going to be required of me." She believed she would have a better experience learning in a face-to-face class than in an online class. She explained, "I like the visual parts of in-person classes and access to the instructor in the room."

Subtheme 3: Having the Right Tools.

Several participants described the ways in which learning environments, instructional methodologies, and college resources created institutional barriers for them. Monica, Veronica, and Amber described struggling with support in some of their college classes. Monica described the "differences between the support" in her online and face-to-face classes. She described her connection to her instructor and classmates in face-to-face classes: "We were actually able to help one another out, and I was actually able to go and see my professor and speak with him one-on-one." In online classes, Monica stated that she "had to scramble" to find what she needed. When explaining how she accessed support in online classes, she stated, "If you don't understand certain terms or something, it's easier to Google something than reach the professor … You can't just pick up the phone and call the professor's cell phone; you have to do the office hours and call their office phone." Monica viewed instructors as a college resource, and she believed that she received more support from instructors teaching face-to-face classes.

Veronica also addressed how communication with instructors impacted her experiences in classes. She described how a college instructor created "frustrating" institutional barriers in an online class one:

> There is a lack of communication from him; he's still has not put in any of our grades. It's beyond frustrating. So, I don't know what grade I have in that class. If he posts

> something, he wants it done immediately, but he doesn't want to grade it. I've had problems with him ever since I had started his class.

She compared this experience to her experiences with another instructor who also taught an online class: "With my other online teacher, she's real quick emailing back. Every time I email her—she writes back in 5 minutes." Veronica's attitude about her learning experiences changed based, in part, on how well the instructor communicated with her. When I asked Veronica where her she found the ability to persist in college, she replied, "I just keep going. Nothing is perfect, you know? I keep my expectations in check. I knew college would be hard, but I'm not going to let a few bad experiences stop me from achieving a better future."

Amber also described experiencing institutional barriers in her online classes. She explained, "I'll have some online classes that have work that doesn't match when we're reading in the textbook. It matters that I have tools to figure out what I'm supposed to learn in online classes." She felt better supported in her online classes when there was regular communication from her instructor: "Communication in online classes is so important. I read the announcements, but sometimes, especially when you're working and taking care of kids, you miss that one little line about a due date. It helps with teachers send out reminders about due dates."

Summary

In this chapter, I presented my findings from the interview data I analyzed for this study. After examining participants' stories about their college journey, I constructed a central thematic statement about participants' experiences: persisting in college—despite facing barriers to education—meant access to a better future. I also presented three subthemes ("Going Back to School," "Keeping Up," and "Having the Right Tools") that

detail the situational, dispositional, and institutional barriers participants described during interviews and my interpretations of their actions when they encountered barriers that threatened their continuation in college. As I examined these subthemes, I identify the obstacles participants encountered that were seemingly connected to more than one barrier. In the following chapter, I present a summary and the major findings of the study. I discuss my findings and present the implications of my study as well as recommendations for future research on this topic. Finally, I end Chapter V with a brief conclusion and my reflections about the study.

Chapter V

CONCLUSION

In Chapter I, I introduced my study's statement of the problem, purpose, significance, and the theoretical perspective. I also identified the research question, assumptions, limitations, delimitations, and definitions for this study as well. In Chapter II, I reviewed literature on nontraditional students; Andragogy; and situational, institutional, and dispositional barriers. In Chapter III, I described my study's methodologies; I provided details about the research design, the research site, participants, and data collection and analysis methods. In Chapter IV, I discussed my findings. In this chapter, I conclude my dissertation with a discussion of these findings. I answer my study's research question, and I discuss the implications of my findings from this study and my recommendations for future research. I end this chapter with a brief conclusion and my reflections about this study.

Summary of Study

My purpose for conducting this study was to construct an understanding of barriers to education that threatened nontraditional students' continuation in college. I used the following research question for this study: how do nontraditional students at a two-year community college describe the barriers that threaten their continuation in college? I interviewed eight moderately to highly nontraditional students (as identified on the 1996 NCES Nontraditional Scale) who attended a two-year community college in the Southeastern United States. In this chapter, I provide an answer to my study's research question. I discuss the findings presented in Chapter IV and how my findings relate to relevant literature on the

concept of barriers to education and on the theory of Andragogy. I also provide implications of this study for community college administrators and faculty as well as recommendations for addressing the barriers to education nontraditional students described. I end this chapter with recommendations for future research on this topic followed by a brief conclusion and my reflections about this study.

Major Findings

Based on participants' stories, I constructed an answer to the following research question: how do nontraditional students at a two-year community college describe the barriers that threaten their continuation in college? I answered this research question with a central thematic statement and three subthemes. I constructed a central thematic statement based on the experiences participants described during their interviews: persisting in college—despite facing barriers to education—meant access to a better future. I also constructed the three subthemes that describe the barriers participants described during their interview: "Going Back to School," "Keeping Up," and "Having the Right Tools."

Central Thematic Statement

All participants described encountering barriers to education that threatened their continuation in college, and despite these barriers, participants continued to persist in college. Therefore, I arrived at a central thematic statement based on my interpretation of participants descriptions during interviews: persisting in college—despite facing barriers to education—meant access to a better future. Auerbach and Silverstein (2003) suggested that themes "may be identified at manifest level (directly observable in the information) or at the latent level (underlying the phenomenon)" (p. 38). At the manifest level, participants described encountering obstacles to education, how they responded to barriers they encountered, and

the actions they took to overcome these barriers. At the latent level, participants descriptions indicated that they saw the intrinsic value of earning a college degree, and they were intrinsically motivated to earn their degree.

Subthemes

I also constructed three subthemes from participants' descriptions about their college experiences: "Going Back to School," "Keeping Up," and "Having the Right Tools." All participants described "going back to school." As they described "going back to school," they discussed their competing roles and responsibilities as adults and college students. Therefore, I constructed the subtheme "Going Back to School" to explain this common situational barrier to education participants described.

Moreover, several participants described feeling unprepared or too old for college. As they described "keeping up" in college, they discussed their attitudes and perceptions about themselves and their learning experiences in college. Therefore, I constructed the subtheme "Keeping Up" to explain this common dispositional barrier to education participants described.

Lastly, several participants described encountering obstacles to learning related to learning environments, instructional methodologies, and limited college resources. As they described "having the right tools" to learn, they discussed inadequate tools and resources at the college that created obstacles for them. Therefore, I constructed the subtheme "Having the Right Tools" to explain this common institutional barrier to education participants described.

My findings on these subthemes illuminated the types of barriers to education participants described. Situational barriers were the most substantial and consistent barrier to

education that participants described and the most difficult barrier for participants to overcome. Participants encountered situational barriers to education throughout their college journey, and participants' described shifts in their responses to situational barriers as they aged. For many participants, situational barriers threatened their ability to attend college, and consequently, they delayed enrolling in college. Several participants described their responsibilities to others, like to their family and employers, as the reason why they delayed enrollment in college. Interestingly, several participants described feeling a growing sense of the intrinsic value of earning a college degree as they aged. For these participants, delaying enrollment in college was no longer an insurmountable barrier for them because they felt more intrinsically motivated to earn a college degree than they did when they were younger.

Moreover, several participants also described enrolling in college once their responsibilities to others were reduced. For example, some participants delayed enrollment in college until their children were old enough to attend school or until their children graduated from high school before completing their college degree. Other participants described leaving a full-time job before returning to college. These findings suggest that some participants were more likely to persist in college because they felt as though 1) the external pressures contributing to situational barriers decreased and 2) their intrinsic motivation increased. My findings are consistent with Bye et al.'s (2007) findings that "strong intrinsic motivation may be necessary for nontraditional students to persist and succeed in the university environment over the long term" (p. 143).

Discussion

I relied on the following research question for this study: how do nontraditional students at a two-year community college describe the barriers that threaten their

continuation in college? After analyzing participants' stories, I found that participants followed a winding path through college. They also experienced multiple barriers to education, and despite these barriers, they continued to persist because they were intrinsically motivated.

I conducted two rounds of semi-structured interviews with eight participants. Using a two-cycle coding approach for analysis, I developed a central thematic statement: for participants, persisting in college—despite facing barriers to education—meant access to a better future. I also constructed three subthemes that described the types of obstacles to education participants encountered at the community college: "Going Back to School," "Keeping Up," and "Having the Right Tools." I interpreted the obstacles participants described as barriers to education, and each participant described experiencing barriers to education that threatened their continuation in college. While barriers may have threatened their continuation in college, all eight participants were enrolled in college at the time of our interview.

Barriers to Education

My subthemes were congruent with *a priori* themes—situational barriers, institutional barriers, and dispositional barriers—described by Cross (1974), Fairchild (2003), and Shelton (2021). Barriers were often interconnected; at times, participants described obstacles to education that were related to more than one type of barrier. Many participants described situational barriers and institutional barriers that lead to dispositional barriers. Therefore, the barriers that participants described cannot be adequately understood independent of each other or outside the context of their lived experiences.

Situational Barriers.

As participants described why they were "going back to school," their responses illuminated the situational barriers they encountered along their college journey. Many participants worried that their financial, professional, and personal responsibilities would hinder their ability to attend college. Several participants believed that they would have to leave college if they lost access to financial support from college scholarships or federal programs. Participants who received scholarships or financial assistance from state or federal aid programs still described college as "expensive," and one participant described difficulties supporting themselves and their household financially while they were in college.

All participants in this study described their families during their interview. Several participants also believed earning a college degree was a critical step to securing a stable job and, by extension, a financially secure future for their families. Many participants stated that they attended college "for their children." I interpreted this to mean that these participants' saw college as a pathway to professional opportunities for themselves and financial independence for both them and their family. Participants also described persisting in college because they felt like they "had to do it" for the people that were financially dependent on them. Knowles et al. (2020) explained that "adults are responsive to some external motivators," like "better jobs" and "higher salaries" (p. 47). Participants' descriptions seemed to confirm this Andragogical assumption. Their motivations to persist in college were driven, in part, by the external motivators around them. Therefore, extrinsic motivation was an important component to participants' ability to persist when they encountered situational barriers.

Participants also described earning a college degree as a necessary step to finding a job they wanted to perform. Several participants described their desire for a job where they helped others. Other participants wanted jobs that gave them a sense of personal pride and increased their self-worth. Knowles et al. (2020) stated that "the most potent motivators are internal pressures" for adult learners (p. 47). Adult learners are intrinsically motivated to learn; they desire "increased job satisfaction" and jobs that increase their "self-esteem" and "quality of life" (Knowles et al., 2020, p. 47). Participants' descriptions seemed to also confirm this Andragogical assumption about motivation among adult learners. All participants reported feeling these internal pressures. Thus, I interpreted intrinsic motivation as one of the most salient components of participants' ability to persist when they encountered situational barriers as well as dispositional and institutional barriers.

Dispositional Barriers.

As participants described "keeping up" in college, their responses indicated that they encountered dispositional barriers during their college journey. Most participants described feeling at least one negative emotion (e.g., exhaustion, worry, discouraged, apprehension). Older participants described feeling like they struggled with technology in their classes, and they believed that their age negatively impacted their college experiences. In a review of literature about the obstacles adult learners encounter in online college classes, Kara et al. (2019) found that there was a "link between adult learners' characteristics and the appropriateness of the online environments" they encountered in college. They added that "computer and internet self-efficacy of adult learners play a significant role in online processes. The learners who have low perception of competency in these issues or the older

adult learners might have challenges in this process, and this might cause learner dropout" (Kara et al., 2019, p. 6).

Many participants also described struggling with time management skills or implementing personalized time management systems to help them better manage their time. Participants' time management issues were often caused by a conflict between their roles and responsibilities as college students and their roles and responsibilities as professionals and parents. While this root cause is indicative of situational barriers, these situational barriers often resulted in a dispositional change among participants. This finding suggests that these barriers can be interconnected. Participants who described time management issues often described feeling stressed or overwhelmed as they tried to keep up with their conflicting roles and responsibilities. Kara et al. (2019) reported that when adult learners "have insufficient or lack of time management skills, then this causes another challenge for them to continue their education" (p. 13). Despite encountering dispositional barriers, each participant persisted in college because they were motivated by internal pressures and external motivators.

Institutional Barriers.

As participants described "having the right tools" they needed to be successful in their college classes, their responses indicated that they encountered institutional barriers at the college, especially when taking online courses. The college offered on-campus day and evening classes as well as online classes so students could have flexible schedules that allowed them to maintain their busy lives outside of college. All participants had taken at least one online class at the college. Many participants described online classes as "convenient" and "flexible." However, several participants also described difficulties communicating with instructors in their online classes and feeling disconnected from their

instructor, peers, and campus life. These participants' descriptions suggested that some online instructors did not use Andragogical approaches in their online classes. Knowles et al. (2020) stated that when using Andragogical approaches online classes should be "a collaborative and dynamic learning environment" (p. 248). For these participants, online learning did not feel collaborative or dynamic. Ultimately, despite offering a variety of course modalities to help address situational and institutional barriers, the college had not adequately addressed these institutional barriers that arose in online classes.

Impacts on Motivation.

Ginsberg and Wlodkowski (2009) posit that motivation is inextricable linked to learning, and a key Andragogical assumptions about adult learners is that they learn best when they feel intrinsically motivated to learn (Knowles et al. 2020). Many participants described feeling "disconnected" and "isolated" from their instructor, their classmates, or college life in online classes. These participants found it difficult to gauge their proficiencies in some online classes, and they struggled at times to relate to the online learning environments in their college classes. The institutional barriers they encountered gave way to dispositional barriers, and the intrinsic motivation to learn was negatively impacted. Ginsberg and Wlodkowski's (2009) discussion on intrinsic motivation may provide an explanation for this phenomenon: "Intrinsic motivation is elicited when people know they are competently performing an activity that leads to a valued goal. This affirms the innate need to relate adequately to an environment" (p. 266).

Parker (2010) and Knowles et al. (2020) described online college courses as ideal learning environments for adult learners because such courses offered adults with professional, family, and other responsibilities outside college a way to earn a college degree

without attending traditional on-campus classes. Knowles et al. (2020) also claimed that adult learners have more control over their learning conditions when learning online, which appealed to "adults' desire to be self-directed in their learning" and allowed adult learners to "tailor the learning to their real-world needs" (p. 237). Some participants described choosing online classes over face-to-face classes to accommodate their schedules and responsibilities outside college. Interestingly, despite the flexibility and convenience of online learning, several participants described negative learning experiences in some online classes. I found that participants who reported negative learning experiences in an online class reported encountering several institutional barriers in the class. They described the inconvenience of communicating quickly with online instructors, especially if they felt an online instructor was inattentive and disengaged in the online learning environment. Therefore, I interpreted these participants' negative learning experiences in online classes as a result of multiple institutional barriers that caused online learning to be less convenient for them.

Implications

Based on my findings, I have identified two implications for community college administrators and faculty that will help them address the barriers to education. First, college administrators and faculty should design curricula and implement instructional strategies that are appropriate for the needs of nontraditional students. College administrators and faculty need to regularly evaluate the effectiveness of the curricula and instructional strategies, especially in online classes, and they should alter curricula and instructional strategies when necessary. Many participants described experiencing both institutional and dispositional barriers to education in online classes. Online classes should have clear expectations, and online instructional strategies should help students feel connected to the instructor, their

classmates, and their college. Chen (2017) argued that colleges are responsible for evaluating the institutional systems "that may interfere or prevent student entry and success" (p. 2). Referencing Hagedorn's 2005 study on adult students in postsecondary institution, Chen called for all postsecondary institutions to reconsider how they view and serve nontraditional students:

> The heterogeneity of both the nontraditional adult learner population and their learning needs demands that postsecondary education view them through a diversity perspective to engage institution-side changes. If not, postsecondary institutions will continue to view nontraditional adult learners as the "proverbial 'square peg' that meets resistance when forced to go through a round hole" that has been designed for the traditional student. (p. 3)

The second implication of my study is a call to make community college free to all nontraditional students. College administrators and the local, state, and federal organizations and agencies that provide scholarships and grants to college students need to increase financial support for nontraditional students to help address barriers related to these students' financial situations. Many participants described situational barriers to education centered on the cost of attending college. For the participants in this study, earning a college degree was a lifechanging action for them to take, and several participants delayed college enrollment because they did not feel they could afford the cost of community college.

My study also has implications for practitioners who, like I do, teach nontraditional students. The participants in this study were college students, but many of them were also partners, parents, and employees. I recognized that participants often experienced barriers in college when their responsibilities as college students conflicted with their responsibilities

outside college. At times, participants had to prioritize their responsibilities outside college over their responsibilities as college students. Some participants described how appreciative they were to instructors who were sympathetic and accommodating when these conflicts arose. I learned that when instructors see and treat our nontraditional students as dynamic humans with complex lives, they may experience a greater sense of support for and commitment to their educational goals.

Recommendations for Future Research

I conducted this study to investigate the phenomenon of nontraditional students who encountered barriers to education that threaten their continuation in college. Based on my findings, I aimed to construct an understanding of the barriers to education that nontraditional students described that threaten their continuation in college. I sampled participants from one community college in the Southeastern regional of the U.S. Therefore, I recommend replicating this study in other community colleges in other regions in the U.S. Replicating the study would help broaden researchers' understanding of nontraditional students' experiences at a two-year community college. Additional research on this topic would also expand the contexts from which barriers to education emerge. Furthermore, I did not follow participants' progress in college from semester to semester; although, I did ask them to report their progress in their degree programs during interviews. Researchers who conducted longitudinal studies on this topic could provide a better understanding of nontraditional students' persistence in college over several semesters.

Conclusion

Ideally, nontraditional students would not encounter barriers to education that threatened their continuation in college. After conducting this study, I recognize that college

educators, staff, and administrators need efficient ways to identify and evaluate the barriers to education affecting nontraditional students at their institutions. However, based on my own experiences conducting this study, I also recognize the difficulties in adequately understanding such a diverse population of students. Each nontraditional learner is a distinct individual with complicated, socially constructed views of themselves and the world around them. Moreover, as adults, they have unique lived experiences, which impact how they interpret their educational journey and how they respond to barriers to education. These complexities create obstacles for researchers studying nontraditional students and for educators and college staff and administrators serving nontraditional students. Solutions to barriers for one nontraditional student may not work for another nontraditional student facing a similar barrier. Furthermore, additional research needs to be conducted on the ways in which intrinsic motivation affects nontraditional students' ability to persist when they encounter barriers to education that threaten their continuation in college.

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APPENDIX A:

Informed Consent Documents

Institutional Review Board (IRB)

For the Protection of Human Research Participants

PROTOCOL EXEMPTION REPORT

PROTOCOL NUMBER:	**03636-2018**	**INVESTIGATOR:**	**Ms. Kristy Singletary**
		SUPERVISING FACULTY:	**Dr. Diane Wright & Dr. Vesta Whisler**
PROJECT TITLE:	***Predictive Factors in Adult Learners' Persistence in Online College Courses.***		

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:

- *Upon completion of this research study all compiled 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 at the start of audio recording.*
- *Audio taped/recorded interviews are not to be stored and/or shared. The recordings must be deleted **immediately** upon creation of **each** interview transcript.*

☒ ***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.***

Valdosta State University

APPLICATION FOR USE OF HUMAN PARTICIPANTS IN RESEARCH

EXEMPT APPLICATION

INSTRUCTIONS: Complete all required information, and check appropriate boxes. Attach all CITI training documents, answers to questions 12–15, and obtain all required signatures before submitting to the Office of Sponsored Programs & Research Administration.

Project Title: Predictive Factors in Adult Learners Persistence in Online College Courses **Project Dates:** 1/1/2014 (MM/DD/YYYY) to 12/01/2018 (MM/DD/YYYY)

Responsible Researcher: Kristy Singletary
Mailing Address: 1107 Oriole Dr. Thomasville, GA 31792
Department: Adult and Career Ed
Email: kmurphy@valdosta.edu
Telephone: 229 269 8339

Minimum # of Participants: 113
Maximum # of Participants: 135
External Funding: ☐ Yes ☑ No
If Yes, Sponsor:
(Note: If research will be externally funded, include a copy of the proposal or award that describes use of human participants.)

Supervising Faculty: Dr. Diane Wright and Dr. Vesta Whisler
Supervising Faculty Email: diwright@valdosta.edu, vrwhisler@valdosta.edu

VSU Status:
- ☐ FT/PT Faculty
- ☐ Adjunct Faculty
- ☐ Research Associate
- ☐ Administrator/Staff Member
- ☑ Graduate Student
  - ☑ Doctoral Dissertation
  - ☐ Master's Thesis
- ☐ Undergraduate Student
  - ☐ Senior Project
- ☐ *Unaffiliated Investigator

Co-Investigator	Institutional Affiliation	Email Address	*IRB FWA #

Note: Unaffiliated investigators must fill out the last column **IRB FWA #** and complete the **Unaffiliated Agreement** form at the link below:
http://www.valdosta.edu/academics/graduate-school/research/office-of-sponsored-programs-research-administration/institutional-review-board-irb-for-the-protection-of-human-research-participants.php

1. ☑ YES ☐ NO Does your proposed study (a) meet the Valdosta State University Institutional Review Board definition of research (as cited below) or (b) does it involve a condition for IRB oversight as listed below?

VSU IRB Definition of Research: Valdosta State University describes research as a systematic investigation, including research development, testing and evaluation designed to develop or contribute to generalizable knowledge.

Conditions: The following conditions may not meet the definition of "research" as provided above, but will cause your research to be subject to IRB oversight:

- Intent to produce results that will be submitted for peer-reviewed publication or presentation
- Include minors (e.g. those under the age of 18)
- Target potentially vulnerable individuals
- May place pregnant women and/or fetuses at risk of physical harm
- Deal with a topic of sensitive nature in a way which anonymity cannot be sustained
- Involve any activity that places the participants at more than minimal risk (see Question 9 for definition of "minimal risk")

2. ☑ YES ☐ NO Are the human participants in your study living individuals?

3. ☐ YES ☑ NO Are you collecting information about deceased persons that may put third parties (i.e., surviving spouses and/or living descendants) at more than minimal risk of harm?

4. ☑ YES ☐ NO Will you obtain data through intervention or interaction with living or third party individuals?
"Intervention" includes both physical procedures by which data are gathered (e.g. measurement of heart rate of venipuncture)
"Interaction" includes communication or interpersonal contact between the investigator and participant (e.g. surveying or interviewing)

5. ☐ YES ☑ NO Will you obtain identifiable private information about these individuals?
Private information includes information about behavior that occurs in a context in which an individual can reasonably expect that no observation or recording is taking place. Identifiable means that the identity of the participant maybe ascertained by the investigator.

Note: If you have questions as to whether your research requires IRB oversight, additional information is available at our website.
http://www.valdosta.edu/academics/graduate-school/research/office-of-sponsored-programs-research-administration/institutional-review-board-irb-for-the-protection-of-human-research-participants.php

Updated 07/08/2016

6. EDUCATIONAL REQUIREMENTS: In accordance with federal regulations, the VSU IRB requires all responsible researchers, co-investigators, key personnel, including unaffiliated investigators, and faculty advising student researchers to complete the CITI educational program. Co-investigators from other institutions are not required to complete this if they have a certificate of completion from their own federally assured IRB.
Please visit: http://ww.citiprogram.org to complete all of the following mandatory trainings:

1. Introduction
2. History and Ethical Principles
3. Defining Research with Human Subjects
4. The Regulations and the Social and Behavioral sciences
5. Basic Institutional Review Board (IRB) Regulations and Review Process
6. Assessing Risk in Social and Behavioral Sciences
7. Informed Consent
8. Privacy and Confidentiality
9. Valdosta State University Module

Additional modules may be required for specific types of research. Please check all that apply and complete the corresponding modules:

Study population targets	Additional CITI Modules Required
☐ a. Minors (under the age of 18)	Research with Children
☐ b. Public School Children	Research in Public Elementary and Secondary Schools
☐ c. Pregnant Women	Vulnerable Subjects
☐ d. Prisoners	Research with Prisoners
☐ e. Potentially vulnerable individuals (those whose consent maybe compromised due to socio-economic, educational or linguistic disadvantage.)	Research with Protected Populations
☐ f. Individuals in foreign countries	International Research
☐ g. Individuals from different cultures or individuals from a particular racial/ethnic group	Group Harms: Research with Culturally or Medically Vulnerable groups
☐ h. Individuals about whom data will be collected from records (e.g., educational, health, or employment records)	Records-Based Research
☐ i. Individuals from or about whom Private Health Information (PHI) subject to HIPAA compliance will be collected	HIPAA and Human Subjects
☐ j. Individuals from whom information will be collected via Internet	Internet Research
☐ k. VSU Employees	Workers as Research Subjects

7. ☐ YES ☑ NO ***Does the primary researcher, co-investigator, or any other key person, have a potential or actual significant financial conflict of interest in performance of the research?*** If YES, it is required that the researcher completes the CITI module "Conflicts of Interest in Research Involving Human Subjects" and complete the VSU Conflict of Interest form available at: http://www.valdosta.edu/grants/forms

8. As a researcher you are expected to follow VSU's code of ethics. Will there be an additional code of ethics followed?
Include organization's name & Web address:

9. Name and location of external organization(s) providing research participants (attach letter(s) of cooperation)
Southern Regional Technical College

10. ☐ YES ☑ NO ☐ UNCERTAIN **Does the study present more than minimal risk to the participants?**
"Minimal Risk" means that the risk of harm or discomfort anticipated in the proposed research are not greater, considering probability and magnitude, than those ordinarily encountered in daily life or during performance of routine physical or psychological examinations or tests. Note that the concept of risk includes psychological, emotional, or behavioral risks to employability, economic well-being, social standing, and risk of civil criminal liability.

11. Federal Regulations permit the exemption of some types of research from IRB Committee review.
NOTE: Studies involving *fetuses, pregnant women, children, or prisoners* are not eligible for exemption.

☐ Category 1: Research conducted in established or commonly accepted educational settings, involving normal educational practices, such as (i) research on regular and special education instructional strategies, or (ii) research on the effectiveness of or the comparison among instructional techniques, curricula, or classroom management methods.

☐ Category 2: Research involving the use of educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures or observation of public behavior, unless: (i) information obtained is recorded in such a manner that human subjects can be identified, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects; and (ii) any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research could reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, or reputation. Note: This category of exemption is not applicable to research involving minors (45 CFR 46.401 b).

Updated 07/08/2016

☐ **Category 3:** Research involving the use of educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior that is not exempt under **Category 2** if: (i) the human subjects are elected or appointed public officials or candidates for public office; or (ii) federal statute(s) require(s) without exception that the confidentiality of the personally identifiable information will be maintained throughout the research and thereafter.

☐ **Category 4:** Research involving the collection or study of existing data, documents, records, pathological specimens, or diagnostic specimens, if these sources are publicly available or if the information is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that subjects cannot be identified, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects.

☐ **Category 5:** Research and demonstration projects which are conducted by or subject to the approval of department or agency heads, and which are designed to study, evaluate, or otherwise examine: (i) Public benefit or service programs; (ii) procedures for obtaining benefits or services under those programs; (iii) possible changes in or alternatives to those programs or procedures; or (iv) possible changes in methods or levels of payment for benefits or services under those programs.

☐ **Category 6:** Taste and food quality evaluation and consumer acceptance studies, (i) if wholesome foods without additives are consumed or (ii) if a food is consumed that contains a food ingredient at or below the level and for a use found to be safe, or agricultural chemical or environmental contaminant at or below the level found to be safe, by the Food and Drug Administration or approved by the Environmental Protection Agency or the Food Safety and Inspection Service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Please answer each question below (12-15) in 1-3 paragraphs - answers to be submitted as a separate document.

12. In lay terms, what are the objectives of the proposed research?

13. Describe how the participants and/or data will be collected. Attach copies of posters, brochures, flyers, and/or signed letters of cooperation. Briefly describe the consent process utilized for this research.

14. Describe the research methodology. Attach all questionnaires, assessments, and/or focus group questions. If questionnaires or assessments will be developed during the research project please indicate the general nature of the questions in an attachment.

15. Describe how you will insure the privacy of participants and the confidentiality of the information about them, including how and by whom the date will be collected, managed, stored accessed, rendered anonymous, and destroyed.

CERTIFICATIONS AND REQUIRED SIGNATURES

Note: Applications without all required signatures will be not be reviewed.

Statement of Responsible Researcher:

I certify that I have completed required training regarding human participant research ethics and am familiar with the ethical guidelines and regulations regarding the protection of human participants from research risks. I will adhere to the policies and procedures of the Valdosta State University Institutional Review Board (IRB). I will not initiate this research project until I receive written exemption or approval from the IRB. I will not involve any participant in the research until I have obtained and documented his/her informed consent as required by the IRB. I agree to (a) report to the IRB any unanticipated problems or adverse events which become apparent during the course or as a result of the research and the actions taken as a result, (b) cooperate with the IRB in the continuing review of this project, (c) obtain prior approval from the IRB before amending or altering the scope of the project or the research protocol, and (d) maintain documentation of consent and research data and reports for a minimum of three years and in accordance with approved data retention and procedures and confidentiality requirements after completion of the final report or longer if required by the sponsor or the institution. I understand that my department chair/unit director/faculty advisor (if I am a student) will receive a copy of my IRB exemption or approval report.

SIGNATURE: _____ Date: 4/18/2018

Researcher

Statement of Faculty Advisor if Responsible Researcher is a Student:

I certify that I am familiar with the ethical guidelines and regulations regarding the protection of human participants from research risks and have completed training required by the VSU IRB. I agree to provide guidance and oversight as necessary to the above named student regarding the conduct of his/her research. I will ensure the student's timely requests for protocol modifications and/or continuing reviews, compliance with the ethical conduct of human participant research, and the submission of the final report. I understand that an IRB protocol cannot be closed until final report is submitted, and I agree that, if the student fails to complete a final report, I will be responsible for timely completion and submission of the report.

SIGNATURE: _____ Date: _____

Supervising Faculty Vesta R. Kilsheimer 4/25/18

Updated 07/08/2016

Valdosta State University

APPLICATION FOR USE OF HUMAN PARTICIPANTS IN RESEARCH

EXEMPT APPLICATION

INSTRUCTIONS: Complete all required information, and check appropriate boxes. Attach all CITI training documents, answers to questions 12–15, and obtain all required signatures before submitting to the Office of Sponsored Programs & Research Administration.

Project Title: Predictive Factors in Adult Learners Persistence in Online College Courses

Project Dates: 1/1/2014 (MM/DD/YYYY) to 12/01/2018 (MM/DD/YYYY)

Responsible Researcher: Kristy Singletary
Mailing Address: 1107 Oriole Dr. Thomasville, GA 31792
Department: Adult and Career Ed
Email: kmurphy@valdosta.edu
Telephone: 229 269 8339

Minimum # of Participants: 113
Maximum # of Participants: 135
External Funding: ☐ Yes ☑ No
If Yes, Sponsor:
(Note: If research will be externally funded, include a copy of the proposal or award that describes use of human participants.)

Supervising Faculty: Dr. Diane Wright and Dr. Vesta Whisler
Supervising Faculty Email: diwright@valdosta.edu, vrwhisler@valdosta.edu

VSU Status:
- ☐ FT/PT Faculty
- ☐ Adjunct Faculty
- ☐ Research Associate
- ☐ Administrator/Staff Member
- ☑ Graduate Student
  - ☑ Doctoral Dissertation
  - ☐ Master's Thesis
- ☐ Undergraduate Student
  - ☐ Senior Project
- ☐ *Unaffiliated Investigator

Co-Investigator	Institutional Affiliation	Email Address	*IRB FWA #

Note: Unaffiliated investigators must fill out the last column IRB FWA # and complete the **Unaffiliated Agreement** form at the link below:
http://www.valdosta.edu/academics/graduate-school/research/office-of-sponsored-programs-research-administration/institutional-review-board-irb-for-the-protection-of-human-research-participants.php

1. ☑ YES ☐ NO **Does your proposed study (a) meet the Valdosta State University Institutional Review Board definition of research (as cited below) or (b) does it involve a condition for IRB oversight as listed below?**

VSU IRB Definition of Research: Valdosta State University describes research as a systematic investigation, including research development, testing and evaluation designed to develop or contribute to generalizable knowledge.

Conditions: The following conditions may not meet the definition of "research" as provided above, but will cause your research to be subject to IRB oversight:

- Intent to produce results that will be submitted for peer-reviewed publication or presentation
- Include minors (e.g. those under the age of 18)
- Target potentially vulnerable individuals
- May place pregnant women and/or fetuses at risk of physical harm
- Deal with a topic of sensitive nature in a way which anonymity cannot be sustained
- Involve any activity that places the participants at more than minimal risk (see Question 9 for definition of "minimal risk")

2. ☑ YES ☐ NO **Are the human participants in your study living individuals?**

3. ☐ YES ☑ NO **Are you collecting information about deceased persons that may put third parties (i.e., surviving spouses and/or living descendants) at more than minimal risk of harm?**

4. ☑ YES ☐ NO **Will you obtain data through intervention or interaction with living or third party individuals?**
"Intervention" includes both physical procedures by which data are gathered (e.g. measurement of heart rate of venipuncture)
"Interaction" includes communication or interpersonal contact between the investigator and participant (e.g. surveying or interviewing)

5. ☐ YES ☑ NO **Will you obtain identifiable private information about these individuals?**
Private information includes information about behavior that occurs in a context in which an individual can reasonably expect that no observation or recording is taking place. Identifiable means that the identity of the participant maybe ascertained by the investigator.

Note: If you have questions as to whether your research requires IRB oversight, additional information is available at our website.
http://www.valdosta.edu/academics/graduate-school/research/office-of-sponsored-programs-research-administration/institutional-review-board-irb-for-the-protection-of-human-research-participants.php

Updated 07/08/2016

6. EDUCATIONAL REQUIREMENTS: In accordance with federal regulations, the VSU IRB requires all responsible researchers, co-investigators, key personnel, including unaffiliated investigators, and faculty advising student researchers to complete the CITI educational program. Co-investigators from other institutions are not required to complete this if they have a certificate of completion from their own federally assured IRB.
Please visit: http://ww.citiprogram.org to complete all of the following mandatory trainings:

1. Introduction
2. History and Ethical Principles
3. Defining Research with Human Subjects
4. The Regulations and the Social and Behavioral sciences
5. Basic Institutional Review Board (IRB) Regulations and Review Process
6. Assessing Risk in Social and Behavioral Sciences
7. Informed Consent
8. Privacy and Confidentiality
9. Valdosta State University Module

Additional modules may be required for specific types of research. Please check all that apply and complete the corresponding modules:

Study population targets	Additional CITI Modules Required
☐ a. Minors (under the age of 18)	Research with Children
☐ b. Public School Children	Research in Public Elementary and Secondary Schools
☐ c. Pregnant Women	Vulnerable Subjects
☐ d. Prisoners	Research with Prisoners
☐ e. Potentially vulnerable individuals (those whose consent maybe compromised due to socio-economic, educational or linguistic disadvantage.)	Research with Protected Populations
☐ f. Individuals in foreign countries	International Research
☐ g. Individuals from different cultures or individuals from a particular racial/ethnic group	Group Harms: Research with Culturally or Medically Vulnerable groups
☐ h. Individuals about whom data will be collected from records (e.g., educational, health, or employment records)	Records-Based Research
☐ i. Individuals from or about whom Private Health Information (PHI) subject to HIPAA compliance will be collected	HIPAA and Human Subjects
☐ j. Individuals from whom information will be collected via Internet	Internet Research
☐ k. VSU Employees	Workers as Research Subjects

7. ☐ YES ☑ NO ***Does the primary researcher, co-investigator, or any other key person, have a potential or actual significant financial conflict of interest in performance of the research?*** If YES, it is required that the researcher completes the CITI module "Conflicts of Interest in Research Involving Human Subjects" and complete the VSU Conflict of Interest form available at: http://www.valdosta.edu/grants/forms

8. As a researcher you are expected to follow VSU's code of ethics. Will there be an additional code of ethics followed?
Include organization's name & Web address:

9. Name and location of external organization(s) providing research participants (attach letter(s) of cooperation)
Southern Regional Technical College

10. ☐ YES ☑ NO ☐ UNCERTAIN **Does the study present more than minimal risk to the participants?**
"Minimal Risk" means that the risk of harm or discomfort anticipated in the proposed research are not greater, considering probability and magnitude, than those ordinarily encountered in daily life or during performance of routine physical or psychological examinations or tests. Note that the concept of risk includes psychological, emotional, or behavioral risks to employability, economic well-being, social standing, and risk of civil criminal liability.

11. Federal Regulations permit the exemption of some types of research from IRB Committee review.
NOTE: Studies involving *fetuses, pregnant women, children, or prisoners* are not eligible for exemption.

☐ **Category 1:** Research conducted in established or commonly accepted educational settings, involving normal educational practices, such as (i) research on regular and special education instructional strategies, or (ii) research on the effectiveness of or the comparison among instructional techniques, curricula, or classroom management methods.

☐ **Category 2:** Research involving the use of educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures or observation of public behavior, unless: (i) information obtained is recorded in such a manner that human subjects can be identified, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects; and (ii) any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research could reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, or reputation. Note: This category of exemption is not applicable to research involving minors (45 CFR 46.401 b).

Updated 07/08/2016

☐ **Category 3:** Research involving the use of educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior that is not exempt under **Category 2** if: (i) the human subjects are elected or appointed public officials or candidates for public office; or (ii) federal statute(s) require(s) without exception that the confidentiality of the personally identifiable information will be maintained throughout the research and thereafter.

☐ **Category 4:** Research involving the collection or study of existing data, documents, records, pathological specimens, or diagnostic specimens, if these sources are publicly available or if the information is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that subjects cannot be identified, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects.

☐ **Category 5:** Research and demonstration projects which are conducted by or subject to the approval of department or agency heads, and which are designed to study, evaluate, or otherwise examine: (i) Public benefit or service programs; (ii) procedures for obtaining benefits or services under those programs; (iii) possible changes in or alternatives to those programs or procedures; or (iv) possible changes in methods or levels of payment for benefits or services under those programs.

☐ **Category 6:** Taste and food quality evaluation and consumer acceptance studies, (i) if wholesome foods without additives are consumed or (ii) if a food is consumed that contains a food ingredient at or below the level and for a use found to be safe, or agricultural chemical or environmental contaminant at or below the level found to be safe, by the Food and Drug Administration or approved by the Environmental Protection Agency or the Food Safety and Inspection Service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Please answer each question below (12-15) in 1-3 paragraphs - answers to be submitted as a separate document.

12. In lay terms, what are the objectives of the proposed research?

13. Describe how the participants and/or data will be collected. Attach copies of posters, brochures, flyers, and/or signed letters of cooperation. Briefly describe the consent process utilized for this research.

14. Describe the research methodology. Attach all questionnaires, assessments, and/or focus group questions. If questionnaires or assessments will be developed during the research project please indicate the general nature of the questions in an attachment.

15. Describe how you will insure the privacy of participants and the confidentiality of the information about them, including how and by whom the date will be collected, managed, stored accessed, rendered anonymous, and destroyed.

CERTIFICATIONS AND REQUIRED SIGNATURES

Note: Applications without all required signatures will be not be reviewed.

Statement of Responsible Researcher:

I certify that I have completed required training regarding human participant research ethics and am familiar with the ethical guidelines and regulations regarding the protection of human participants from research risks. I will adhere to the policies and procedures of the Valdosta State University Institutional Review Board (IRB). I will not initiate this research project until I receive written exemption or approval from the IRB. I will not involve any participant in the research until I have obtained and documented his/her informed consent as required by the IRB. I agree to (a) report to the IRB any unanticipated problems or adverse events which become apparent during the course or as a result of the research and the actions taken as a result, (b) cooperate with the IRB in the continuing review of this project, (c) obtain prior approval from the IRB before amending or altering the scope of the project or the research protocol, and (d) maintain documentation of consent and research data and reports for a minimum of three years and in accordance with approved data retention and procedures and confidentiality requirements after completion of the final report or longer if required by the sponsor or the institution. I understand that my department chair/unit director/faculty advisor (if I am a student) will receive a copy of my IRB exemption or approval report.

SIGNATURE: _____ Date: 04/18/2018
Responsible Researcher

Statement of Faculty Advisor if Responsible Researcher is a Student:

I certify that I am familiar with the ethical guidelines and regulations regarding the protection of human participants from research risks and have completed training required by the VSU IRB. I agree to provide guidance and oversight as necessary to the above named student regarding the conduct of his/her research. I will ensure the student's timely requests for protocol modifications and/or continuing reviews, compliance with the ethical conduct of human participant research, and the submission of the final report. I understand that an IRB protocol cannot be closed until final report is submitted, and I agree that, if the student fails to complete a final report, I will be responsible for timely completion and submission of the report.

SIGNATURE: _____ Date: 04/25/18
Supervising Faculty

Updated 07/08/2016

APPENDIX B:

Site Permission

From: [redacted]
Sent: Monday, February 05, 2018 8:34 AM
To: [redacted]
Cc: [redacted]
Subject: Dissertation Study at [redacted]

Kristy Singletary has served as an adjunct online ENGL instructor for SRTC (and previously SWGT) for more than 5 years. She has done a particularly outstanding job working with MOWR/Dually enrolled students taking ENGL 1101 and 1102 online.

Kristy is currently seeking her doctorate in education (Adult and Career Education) at Valdosta State University. She has developed a proposal for her dissertation, and would like to collect and analyze data from SRTC. The proposal focuses on predictive factors for adult learners' persistence in online classes.

Attached is a proposal draft. She would like to collect data as soon as possible, and the data will be collected through link to a Qualtrics survey that she would like to send out via email to as many students as possible taking online classes at SRTC.

She seeks your permission to move ahead. I believe the results would be of great interest to the college as well. Please email her if you have any questions or concerns.

[redacted]
Dean for Academic Affairs

From: [redacted]
Sent: Monday, February 05, 2018 8:40 AM

[redacted]

I'm definitely in support of any of our faculty and staff members as they progress through the arduous journey of earning a doctorate, inclusive of completing their dissertation. Sounds like a very interesting study. Good luck Kristy and let me know how I can help.

[redacted]
President

From: [redacted]
Sent: Monday, February 05, 2018 11:57 AM

I agree! Please let us know how Academic Affairs can assist.

[redacted]
Provost

APPENDIX C:

Interview Solicitation Email and Statement of Consent

Dear students,

I'm Ms. Kristy Singletary, an English Instructor at Southern Regional Technical College. I am completing a research study about students' college experiences. I invite you to participate in this study. Please complete this questionnaire to participate in this project: https://valdosta.co1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_d5bCDUdbDDYKKlD.

This questionnaire should not take more than a few minutes to complete. The first section on the questionnaire will ask for your demographic information. The final section of the questionnaire will invite you to participate in a short interview.

You can complete the questionnaire online anytime. Your responses to the questionnaire will be anonymous and all information collected from this questionnaire and from any interviews will be confidential.

If you're willing to participate in a short interview with me about your college experiences, please accept the invitation to me interviewed on the questionnaire or email me at ksingletary@southernregional.edu. A statement about the interview process and protocol are attached below.

Thank you for participating.

Kristy Singletary

Attachment: Statement to Consent for Interview Participants

You are being asked to participate in an interview as part of a research study on adult learners, which is being conducted by Kristy Singletary, a student at Valdosta State University.

The interviews will be audio taped to accurately capture your concerns, opinions, and ideas. Once the recordings have been transcribed, the tapes will be destroyed. No one, including the researcher, will be able to associate your responses with your identity. Your participation is voluntary. You may choose not to participate, to stop responding at any time, or to skip any questions that you do not want to answer. You must be at least 18 years of age to participate in this study. Your participation in the interview will serve as your voluntary agreement to participate in this research project and your certification that you are 18 years of age or older.

Questions regarding the purpose or procedures of the research should be directed to Kristy Singletary at kmurphy@valdosta.edu. This study has been exempted from Institutional Review Board (IRB) review in accordance with Federal regulations. The IRB, a university

committee established by Federal law, is responsible for protecting the rights and welfare of research participants. If you have concerns or questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the IRB Administrator at 229-253-2947 or irb@valdosta.edu.

APPENDIX D:

Questionnaire

Please select the response to each category below with the characteristic that accurately describes you.

Demographic Information and Nontraditional Student Characteristics

Age:

- You are 18 year of age or younger. O
- You are between ages 19 and 23. O
- You are 24 years of age or older. O

Current College Enrollment Status:

- You are enrolled in classes totaling 12 credit hours or more for the semester. O
- You are enrolled in classes totaling 11 credit hours or less for the semester. O

Initial College Enrollment:

- You began college in the fall directly following high school graduation. O
- You began college after the fall following high school graduation. O

Employment Status:

- You are employed part-time and work professionally or serve as a primary caregiver for less than 30 hours per week. O
- You are employed full-time and work professionally or serve as a primary caregiver for more than 30 hours per week. O
- You are not currently employed, and you do not serve as a primary caregiver O

Household Dependents:

- You *do* have any dependents for which you are responsible in your household. O
- You *do not* have any dependents for which you are responsible in your household O

Financial Independency

- You do not live independently without outside financial support. O
- You do live independently without outside financial support. O

Are you registered for an online class?

- Yes. O
- No. O

Interview Follow-Up

Instructions: Additional information will be collected from willing participants during an interview with the researcher. If you wish to share your opinions about your college experiences during a brief interview, then please provide your telephone number and email address below. The researcher may contact you via telephone or email to schedule a brief in-person or telephone interview appointment.

Telephone Number:
Email Address:

This concludes the survey. Thank you for taking time to participate in this research study. If you have any questions, please contact the researcher via e-mail anytime.

Kristy Singletary, Doctoral Candidate
Department of Adult and Career Education
College of Education
Valdosta State University
kmuprhy@valdosta.edu

APPENDIX E:

First-round Interview Protocol Guide

First-round Interview Protocol Guide

I. Initial Telephone call:

   a. Hi, I'm Kristy Singletary. I'm contacting you because you completed a questionnaire at your college, and you expressed interest in providing an interview about your experiences at the college. Would you be able to schedule an interview with me sometime in the next week or two?

      i. Prior to COVID-19 outbreak: interviews could be schedule in person or over the telephone

      ii. After COVID-19 outbreak: all interviews conducted over the telephone

   b. What is your program of study at the college?

II. Introductions

   a. Hi, I'm Kristy Singletary. Thank you for sitting down with me for an interview today. Before we get started today, I need to read a statement of consent to you to ensure you're voluntarily participating in this interview and that you're aware of the procedures I will follow during and after our interview.

   b. Statement of Consent: I am a doctoral candidate at Valdosta State University, and I am conducting a research study on adult learners. The interviews like this one will be audio taped to accurately capture your concerns, opinions, and ideas. Once the recordings have been transcribed, the tapes will be destroyed.

No one, including the researcher, will be able to associate your responses with your identity. Your participation is voluntary. You may choose not to participate, to stop responding at any time, or to skip any questions that you do not want to answer. You must be at least 18 years of age to participate in this study. Your participation in the interview will serve as your voluntary agreement to participate in this research project and your certification that you are 18 years of age or older. Questions regarding the purpose or procedures of the research should be directed to Kristy Singletary at kmurphy@valdosta.edu. This study has been exempted from Institutional Review Board (IRB) review in accordance with Federal regulations. The IRB, a university committee established by Federal law, is responsible for protecting the rights and welfare of research participants. If you have concerns or questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the IRB Administrator at 229-253-2947 or irb@valdosta.edu.

III. Demographic and nontraditional student characteristics

a. What is your race and gender?
b. How old are you?
c. What's your major, and how long have you been at SRTC?
d. How many hours do you end up working a week, like a busy week?
e. Do you have children/dependents?
f. Do you support yourself financially?
g. How many hours do you take each semester?
h. Did you enroll in college right after high school graduation?

i. How many people live in your household?

j. Are you currently enrolled in classes here?

IV. Research question: how do nontraditional students at a two-year community college describe the barriers that threaten their continuation in college?

a. When you talk about the family that's around you people that you see on a regular basis, how supportive are those people in helping you get your college degree?

b. How much stress have you experienced taking college classes?

c. How confident are you that this is the right college for you to be at right now?

d. How much do you trust yourself to do well in a class like that where there isn't face-to-face communication?

e. What resources have you used to help you in your classes?

f. Would you rather take online classes or face-to-face classes? Or does it depend on the subject you're learning?

g. How many semesters have you taken online classes since you started? Have you had at least one online class each semester?

h. If you were taking an online class, what would you say makes an online class good?

i. How do you approach learning in tough classes?

j. How do you approach learning in online classes?

k. How often do you find class activities enjoyable? What makes these activities fun to you?

l. Do you feel like you spend more time doing work in your online classes than you did your face-to-face classes?

m. Do you find that you're more overwhelmed in your online classes than you are your face-to-face classes? If yes, why are online classes more challenging to you?

n. What do you think the college is doing to help you be successful in online classes?

V. Questions incorporated into protocol after March 2020, which was the start of COVID-19 Pandemic; all students transitioned to virtual learning from March 2020 through May 2020.

a. What type of classes did you take before the COVID-19 closure?

b. How did you feel about switching to fully online classes during the Spring 2020 semester?

VI. Closings

a. Is there anything else you would like to share that I did not ask you about during our interview today?

b. Thank you for sitting down with me. Remember, I will follow the procedures I shared with you at the beginning of this interview to protect your confidentiality. I will share a written transcript of this interview with you soon, and I will ask you to review that transcript to ensure your responses are accurate. I may also ask you to participate in a follow-up interview, and of course, you can reach out to me anytime if you have anything you wish to add to our discussion today.

APPENDIX F:

Second-round Interview Protocol Guide

Second-round Interview Protocol Guide

I. Introduction

a. Thank you for chatting with me again and for reviewing the data I sent to you.

c. I know we covered this during our first chat, but I wanted to provide you with the statement of consent again. I am a doctoral candidate at Valdosta State University, and I am conducting a research study on adult learners. The interviews like this one will be audio taped to accurately capture your concerns, opinions, and ideas. Once the recordings have been transcribed, the tapes will be destroyed. No one, including the researcher, will be able to associate your responses with your identity. Your participation is voluntary. You may choose not to participate, to stop responding at any time, or to skip any questions that you do not want to answer. You must be at least 18 years of age to participate in this study. Your participation in the interview will serve as your voluntary agreement to participate in this research project and your certification that you are 18 years of age or older. Questions regarding the purpose or procedures of the research should be directed to Kristy Singletary at kmurphy@valdosta.edu. This study has been exempted from Institutional Review Board (IRB) review in accordance with Federal regulations. The IRB, a university committee established by Federal law, is responsible for protecting the rights and welfare of research participants. If you have concerns or questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the IRB Administrator at 229-253-2947 or irb@valdosta.edu.

II. Has any of your demographic information or nontraditional student characteristics changed?

III. How have your studies progressed since last time we chatted?

   a. Have you graduated?

   b. You have already reviewed the transcript from our first interview. Have any of your feelings changed?

      i. How supportive has your family been as you continued your education?

      ii. Did your stress level change as you continued your education?

      iii. How confident are you that this is the right college for you?

      iv. What were the most helpful resources you used in college?

      v. Was going to college "worth it" for you?

IV. Closings

   a. Is there anything else you would like to share that I did not ask you about during our interview today?

   b. Thank you for sitting down with me. Remember, I will follow the procedures I shared with you at the beginning of this interview to protect your confidentiality. I will share a written transcript of this interview with you soon, and I will ask you to review that transcript to ensure your responses are accurate. I may also ask you to participate in a follow-up interview, and of course, you can reach out to me anytime if you have anything you wish to add to our discussion today.

APPENDIX G:

Audit Trail

August 2014	• Identified site for research study. • Made preliminary methodological decisions for dissertation.
September 2014-December 2014	• Developed prospectus for study in dissertation conceptualization course.
January 2015-April 2016	• Drafted dissertation proposal in "Dissertation Dive-In" (DDI) writing group conducted by VSU's IDEA Center (Innovative Designs for Enhancing the Academy).
April 2016	• Defended dissertation proposal.
August 2016-December 2017	• Revised dissertation proposal in writing group.
January 2018	• Began IRB approval application.
February 2018	• Established communication with research study site. • Requested permission from site administrators to conduct study.
February 5, 2018	• Received permission via email from site administrators to conduct study.
April 2018	• Finalized and submitted IRB approval application.
May 17, 2018	• Received IRB approval.
June 2018	• Selected a new methodologist for dissertation committee (previous researcher retired).
August 2018	• Created study's questionnaire in Qualtrics.
September 2018-September 2019	• Emailed research site faculty, requesting help recruiting participants (email included study details, informed consent information, and link to Qualtrics questionnaire). • Reviewed questionnaire responses in Qualtrics and used purposeful sample to select moderately and highly NALs ($N = 8$) as potential participants for interviews. • Drafted dissertation chapters 1, 2, and 3.
November 2018	• Contacted participant one and two via telephone to schedule first interviews.
December 03, 2018	• Conducted first interview with participant one (audio-recorded, informed consent explained, conducted in-person).
December 03-10, 2018	• Transcribed interview for participant one.

January 06, 2019	• Conducted first interview with participant two (audio-recorded, informed consent explained, conducted in-person).
January 06-13, 2019	• Transcribed interview for participant two.
May 2020	• Reviewed questionnaire responses in Qualtrics and used purposeful sample to select moderately and highly NALs ($N = 8$) as potential participants for interviews. • Contacted participant three via telephone to schedule first interview.
June 03, 2019	• Conducted first interview with participant three (audio-recorded, informed consent explained, conducted in-person).
June 03-10, 2019	• Transcribed interview for participant three.
September 2019	• Reviewed questionnaire responses in Qualtrics and used purposeful sample to select moderately and highly NALs ($N = 8$) as potential participants for interviews. • Contacted participants four and five via telephone to schedule first interview.
October 14, 2019	• Conducted first interview with participant four (audio-recorded, informed consent explained, conducted over the telephone).
October 14-21, 2019	• Transcribed interview for participant four.
October 20, 2019	• Conducted first interview with participant five (audio-recorded, informed consent explained, conducted over the telephone).
October 20-27, 2019	• Transcribed interview for participant five.
November 2019-December 2019	• Recorded analytic memos about how I interpretated data from participants one - five.
January 2020	• Conducted member-checks with participants one – five; each participant reviewed their first interview transcript and my analytical memos on themes and patterns I gleaned from the data. • Each participant verified that their transcript and my themes and patterns were accurate
March 2020	• Transitioned to telephone-only interviews due to COVID-19 pandemic.
April 2020	• Reviewed questionnaire responses in Qualtrics and used purposeful sample to select moderately and highly NALs ($N = 8$) as potential participants for interviews. • Contacted participants six, seven, and eight via telephone to schedule first interview.

May 11, 2020	• Conducted first interview with participant six (audio-recorded, informed consent explained, conducted over the telephone).
May 11-18, 2020	• Transcribed interview for participant six.
May 21, 2020	• Conducted first interview with participant seven (audio-recorded, informed consent explained, conducted over the telephone).
May 21-28, 2020	• Transcribed interview for participant seven.
May 2020	• Scheduled telephone interviews with participant eight.
June 2, 2020	• Conducted first interview with participant eight (audio-recorded, informed consent explained, conducted over the telephone).
June 2-9, 2020	• Transcribed interview for participant eight.
September 2020-December 2020	• Conducted member-checks with participants six, seven, and eight; each participant reviewed their first interview transcript and my analytical memos on themes and patterns I gleaned from the data. • Each participant verified that their transcript and my themes and patterns were accurate.
January 2020-May 2021	• Conducted research and began updating Chapter 2: Review of Literature.
June 2021	• Selected a new methodologist for dissertation committee (previous researcher retired).
July 2021	• New methodologist reviews dissertation proposal and chapters 1-3.
August 2021-November 2021	• Refined research question and updated methodology with new methodologist committee member. • Conducted research and continued updating Chapter 2: Review of Literature. • Revised Chapter 1. • Updated central thematic statement and subthemes. • Recorded additional analytic memos about how I interpretated their data.
August 2021	• Contacted participants one and two via email to requested follow-up interviews with participant
August 31, 2021	• Conducted follow-up interview via telephone with the participant one.
September 4, 2021	• Conducted follow-up interview via telephone with participant two.
September 5, 2021	• Transcribed follow-up interview with participant one.

September 2021	• Contacted participants three and four via email to requested follow-up interviews with participant
September 10, 2021	• Conducted follow-up interview via telephone with participant three.
September 11, 2021	• Transcribed follow-up interview with participant two.
September 12, 2021	• Transcribed follow-up interview with participant three.
September 19, 2021	• Conducted follow-up interview via telephone with participant four.
September 25-26, 2021	• Transcribed follow-up interview with participant four.
September 2021-October 2021	• Contacted participants five, six, seven, and eight via email to requested follow-up interviews with participant
October 2, 2021	• Conducted follow-up interview via telephone with participant five.
October 9, 2021	• Transcribed follow-up interview with participant five.
October 11, 2021	• Conducted follow-up interview via telephone with participant seven.
October 16, 2021	• Conducted follow-up interview via telephone with participant eight.
October 17, 2021	• Transcribed follow-up interview with participant seven.
October 22-23, 2021	• Transcribed follow-up interview with participant eight.
November 3, 2021	• Conducted follow-up interview with participant six.
November 6-7, 2021	• Transcribed follow-up interview with participant six.
November 10-30, 2021	• Conducted member checks: emailed each participant their second-interview transcript as well as any updated thematic categories/maps and/or new memos.
December 2021	• Reviewed chapters 1, 2, 3, and 4 with methodologist.
January 2022	• Revised chapters 1 and 3.
February 2022	• For follow-up interviews: conducted first-cycle of data analysis (In Vivo codes → Themeing the Data: Phenomenologically) • For follow-up interviews: conducted second-cycle of data analysis (Pattern Coding)

February 2022-March 2022	• Conducted member-checks with all participants; each participant reviewed their follow-up interview transcript and my analytical memos on themes and patterns I gleaned from the data. • Each participant verified that their transcript and my themes and patterns were accurate.
March 2022	• Reached data saturation ($N = 8$). • Revised chapters 1 and 4.
April 2022-May 2022	• Revised chapters 1, 2, 3, and 4. • Drafted chapter 5.