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LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

DEGREE ATTAINMENT AMONG ADULT LEARNERS

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

PROGRAM IN HIGHER EDUCATION

BY

MAUREEN A. O'CONOR

CHICAGO, IL

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To my mother and father
Elizabeth and John O'Conor
and
Clare, Catherine and Quinlan
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The purpose of this study is to expand understanding and discover knowledge about degree attainment among adult learners. This qualitative inquiry explores what recent non-traditional-age bachelor’s degree recipients report contributes to attaining the degree. Professional research and expert material on demographics, motivation, challenges and barriers, learning preferences, and skills, form the foundation of the study. In addition, study participants discuss what attaining the degree means to them. This research utilizes data, reports and analyses by National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Census Bureau, and U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

To illuminate the experience of attaining a bachelor’s degree as an adult, this study employs phenomenological methodology. Data collection consists of in-depth interviews with 15 bachelor’s degree recipients who attained the degree at or after age 25 and within the past 5 years. The data analysis reveals the themes of initiative, mattering, perseverance, resourcefulness, and self-actualization.
CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

This study is about the experiences among adults who attained the bachelor’s degree at or after 25 years of age, and what these degree recipients feel contributed to their success. This is an exploration of the experience from older degree recipients’ perspectives. This study is important because bachelor’s degree attainment rates affect individuals and society, and yet attainment rates are low. The following section describes the foundation for the study, followed by the purpose and research questions.

Background for Study

A primary purpose of American higher education is to address both individual and societal needs. Students have turned to postsecondary education in increasingly larger numbers to improve their own opportunities and to enhance their role in modern society. Colleges and universities have responded to these needs by offering a diverse range of educational programs, including associate's and bachelor's degrees, specialized certification, as well as professional and graduate degrees. College graduates earn more income, have lower unemployment rates, rely less on public assistance, are incarcerated less, and, they volunteer, vote and participate in community activities more frequently than adults with less education in American society (Baum & Payea, 2004). Higher education is a vehicle that sustains and advances society by providing the training, scholarship and edification of citizens on a widespread basis (Brubacher & Rudy, 1997).
An increasingly diverse student population enrolls in American colleges and universities in a variety of academic programs seeking enlightenment, career preparation, achievement of personal goals, social opportunities, and serious scholarship. In Fall 2005, enrollment exceeded 14.9 million undergraduate students, and 31 percent of learners were 25 years of age and over (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2007, Table 178). The total number of undergraduate students has been on the rise, and, for nearly 20 years, one in three undergraduate students has been age 25 and over. From 1987 to 2005, an annual average of 34 percent of undergraduates were 25 years of age and over (NCES, 1991, 1993, 1995, 1998, 2000, 2002, 2004, 2006, 2008). As such, older learners constitute a significant segment among higher education student populations (Fairchild, 2003).

One measure of the extent to which higher education may be serving individuals and society is degree attainment (Adelman, 1999, 2006; Rooney et al. 2006; Wirt et al. 2002, 2003, 2004). Adelman (1999) calls degree attainment the "Dow Jones Industrial Average of U.S. higher education" (p. 3). This metaphor is appropriate because educational attainment is considered a gauge of economic health and a measure of investment in the future (Stoops, 2004; Wirt et al. 2002, 2003, 2004). For example, adults with higher levels of education take care of themselves and are productive members of society. College-educated adults tend to be healthier than their peers with less formal education (Baum & Payea, 2004; Wirt et al. 2004, p. vi). Americans who have academic degrees have higher median incomes and lower unemployment rates; they also participate in the labor force more than people who do not have degrees (Baum & Payea, 2004; Bradburn, Berger, Li, Peter, & Rooney, 2003; McCormick & Horn, 1996;
College graduates are active in their communities and tend to be more involved in civil affairs. “College graduates, more so than those with some college or those with high school or less, engage in political and social action activities such as participating in community, volunteer, and service organizations” (Merriam & Yang, 1996, p. 78). Wirt et al. (2003) report, "the more education people have, the more likely they are to vote in presidential and congressional elections" (p. vi). For example, Mortenson reports that 75 percent of adults with bachelor’s degrees voted in the 2000 election, versus 53 percent of high school graduates (as cited in The Pell Institute, 2004, p. 5).

Society thus gains from increasing the number of adults who earn a degree, since higher education graduates typically enjoy social and economic advancement, regardless of background, including gender, ethnicity and/or socioeconomic status (Baum & Payea, 2004; Malveaux, 2003; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, 2005). If education is an equalizer, and possessing a college degree is a measure of success, how well is higher education succeeding in fostering degree attainment?

The total number of bachelor’s degrees conferred by U.S. colleges and universities rose to 1,439,264 in 2004-05 (NCES, 2007). Postsecondary institutions, NCES projects, will confer more degrees in the coming years—up to 18 percent more by 2015-16 (NCES, 2007, Table 251). The rising number of bachelor’s degree conferrals is linked to projections of increasing participation in higher education through 2028 (Day & Bauman, 2000). Further, the proportion of adults attaining the bachelor’s degree after the age of 25 is significant. The NCES Baccalaureate and Beyond Longitudinal Study
(B&B) of bachelor’s degree recipients show approximately 30.7 percent of 1999-2000 graduates were age 25 and over (Bradburn et al. 2003).

While bachelor’s degree conferrals are rising, the majority of the adult population in the United States does not have a bachelor's degree. In 2006, 72 percent of the population 25 years of age and over did not have a baccalaureate or higher degree, just 18.3 percent held a bachelor’s degree and 9.7 percent held graduate or professional degrees (U.S. Census, 2007). While bachelor’s degree attainment among adults has risen in a decade, the bulk of the population does not hold a baccalaureate or higher degree. Analysts from the U.S. Census Bureau predict a four to five percentage point rise in bachelor’s degree attainment rates between the years 2003 and 2028 (Day & Bauman, 2000). As a result, by the end of the first quarter of the 21st century, less than one-quarter of the American adult population will have attained a minimum of a bachelor’s degree. Future projections show little change, perhaps indicating that degree attainment among older learners is a factor.

Even among adults with collegiate experience, only half have attained a bachelor’s or higher degree. In 2006, among adults 25 years of age and over, 54 percent had participated in postsecondary education, and, within this group, 47.9 percent had some college experience or an associate’s degree, and 52.1 had a bachelor’s degree or higher (U.S. Census, 2007). While more adults participate in higher education, the division between those who have not attained baccalaureate or higher degrees and those who have is even; perhaps indicating that attainment by older adults is unchanged.
In sum, degree attainment should be an important goal at the individual and societal levels. A vast and diverse undergraduate population enrolls in colleges and universities, including a significant number of older learners. The number of bachelor’s degree conferrals is rising, and yet the bachelor’s degree attainment rate in the general population is relatively unchanged, as is the division in bachelor’s degree attainment rates among adults who have participated in postsecondary education. Questions arise around why the degree attainment rate is low. Increasing degree attainment among adults age 25 and over may result in rising degree attainment rates in the general population.

Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to describe the experiences of learners who attain the baccalaureate degree at or after the age of 25. Jacobs and King (2002) assert that the chances of completing a baccalaureate degree hover at 7 to 9 percent for adults ages 22 to 44 who enroll part-time, and the odds rise to 20 percent for adults ages 25 to 40 who enroll full-time. Many adult learners participate in postsecondary education, and yet few attain the bachelor’s degree. From the perspective of older graduates, I seek to illuminate strategies employed by successful students, and to discover what they believe was critical to their success. This exploration will provide a fuller understanding of what it may take for an adult student to attain a bachelor's degree.

Little is known about adult student experiences and how they may impact degree attainment. This lack of knowledge has created a gap in effectively addressing the problem of low levels of degree attainment among adults.
With these purposes in mind, I explore the following questions:

1. What factors motivate adult learners to earn a baccalaureate degree?
2. What critical challenges and issues do adult learners report facing during their undergraduate experience?
3. How do adult learners effectively address the challenges they face?
4. What skills, competencies and specialized knowledge do adult learners believe contribute to their bachelor’s degree attainment?
5. What resources do adult learners report assist them with attaining a degree?
6. What recommendations do adult learners offer for enhancing the academic success of other adults?

To ground these questions, in the following sections of this chapter, I introduce and discuss the confluence of influences impacting the adult learner experience in higher education. I briefly introduce characteristics of adult learners and older graduates. I describe factors affecting motivation to learn and persist, challenges and barriers older students face, as well as adult learning in the higher education environment. The contexts in which these factors intersect provide the foundation of my exploratory study. The literature review in the following chapter contains a detailed discussion of expert views and major theoretical perspectives, which partially illuminates the complex phenomenon of degree attainment among adult learners. The third chapter lays out the research design I use to inquire about the phenomenon of degree attainment from graduates who have lived the experience. The subsequent chapters contain the analysis generated by
participant narratives in an effort to discover more about the degree attainment experience among non-traditional-age learners.

Adult Learners

Definition

Previous research demonstrates the complexity of developing a succinct definition of the adult learner and a lack of consensus over a precise definition of this population (Cross, 1981; Horn, 1996; Kasworm, 2003; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999; Schlossberg, Lynch, & Chickering, 1989; Wlodkowski, 1999). Researchers have defined adult learners by particular characteristics and variables suitable for the purpose of specific studies and analyses. The U.S. Department of Education uses age 16 as the minimum for adults in its statistics and reports of participation in adult education (Kim, Hagedorn, & Williamson, 2004). In their research of motives behind adult participation in educational activities, Aslanian and Brickell (1980) used a sample of adults 25 years of age and over. Sistrunk (1997) focused on women ages 30 and over in her analysis of older women’s needs in higher education. In their study of academic achievement in mixed-age classrooms, Darkenwald and Novak (1997) used age as a control variable, which “… was trichotomized into pre-adult (age 23 or younger), young adult (age 24 to 29) and mature adult (age 30 and over)” (p. 111). Johnson-Bailey and Cervero (1996) studied a sample of Black women, ages 34 to 54, because Black adults are the largest group of older students of color. They believed that women over 30 years old would “… provide a reflective aspect to their interviews” (p. 145). Knowles, Holton, and Swanson (1998) described adulthood, not by numbers, but in psychological terms: adulthood is the
cumulative effect of clarifying of self-concept and being responsible for one’s self through biological aging and life experience. Thus, a wide range of ages and different concepts are commonly used when defining adults in various studies, reports and frameworks of adult education.

For my study, adults are defined as 25 years of age and over. This age range is representative of adult learners because this age group has been a significant segment of the undergraduate population for several decades, and it represents emerging trends within the older adult student population. My definition includes all adults who are older than traditional-age students, since bachelor’s degree attainment figures appear to show that only a small portion of adults enrolled in higher education earn the bachelor’s degree after age 24 (Bradburn et al. 2003; Jacobs & King, 2002; McCormick & Horn, 1996; U.S. Census, 2004a). This age range also reflects the growing ethnic and racial diversity of the student population and among graduates (Bradburn et al. 2003; McCormick & Horn, 1996; NCES, 2004). In addition, this age range points to the growing number of women enrolling in and graduating from American colleges and universities (Kominski & Adams, 1994; Stoops, 2004; U.S. Census, 1996, 1998, 2004a).

Adults are sometimes referred to as non-traditional students, a broader and imprecise label which includes traits other than age (Choy, 2002). Horn (1996) defines non-traditional students by seven characteristics: delayed college enrollment, part-time attendance, financial independence, full-time employment, having dependents, being a single parent, or not obtaining a standard high school diploma. Many adult students have several of these traits, but not necessarily all of them. Other attributes that are considered
non-traditional include ethnicity, socioeconomic status, gender, sexual orientation and disability (Horn, 1996).

For clarity in my study, I use the term non-traditional-age student interchangeably with adult learner or adult student. Therefore, in the absence of a standard definition and in an effort to reflect the current demographic characteristics of adult students, age is the only defining characteristic of the group of learners in my study.

*Demographic Characteristics*

The demographic characteristics of adults who participate in postsecondary education and who have attained the bachelor’s degree are remarkably similar, and provide an enduring portrait of the typical adult learner.

*Age*

In Fall 2005, among the 4.7 million undergraduate learners 25 years of age and over, 35 percent were ages 25 to 29, 35 percent were ages 30 to 39, 20 percent were ages 40 to 49, and 10 percent were 50 years of age and over (NCES, 2007, Table 178). This distribution of enrollments by age group has been consistent for more than a decade; it was nearly the same between 1991 and 2005 (NCES, 1993, 2001, 2003, 2004, 2006, 2007). The patterns for bachelor’s degree recipients are similar. More adults earn the bachelor’s degree between ages 25 to 29 (12 percent in 1992-93; 14 percent in 1999-2000), as compared to adults ages 30 to 39 (10 percent in 1992-93; 9 percent in 1999-2000), or to those who are ages 40 and over (6 percent in 1992-93; 8 percent in 1999-2000) (Bradburn et al. 2003; McCormick & Horn, 1996). These data show that younger adults have the greatest propensity to enroll, and younger adults attain the bachelor’s degree proportionately more than older adults.
Gender

Women constitute the majority of enrolled non-traditional-age learners and bachelor’s degree recipients. More adult women than men are currently enrolled and NCES predicts this trend will continue (Wirt, et al. 2003, p. v). In Fall 1987, 2.3 million women and 1.6 million men 25 years of age and over enrolled at the undergraduate level (NCES, 1991, Table 160). In Fall 2005, 2.9 million women and 1.8 million men 25 years of age and over enrolled at the undergraduate level (NCES, 2007, Table 178). Rooney et al. (2006) predict that women’s enrollments will continue to outpace men’s between 2006 and 2015 (p. 36). Similarly, women have higher degree attainment rates than men. In 2005, more adult women 25 to 44 years of age had bachelor’s degrees than men in the same age range (U.S. Census, 2006a). The proportion of women age 25 and over with at least a bachelor's degree has grown rapidly from 1940 to 2005, from less than 5 percent to over 27 percent (U.S. Census, 2004b, 2006a). Experts predict degree attainment rates for women will continue to increase, outpacing those of men (Gerald & Hussar, 2003; Mortenson, 1998; Stoops, 2004; Wirt et al. 2004).

Parenthood and Significant Personal Relationships

Adults under the age of 30 who are enrolled in higher education tend to be childless. Among non-traditional-age students ages 24 to 29, 65 percent are childless (Horn, Peter, & Rooney, 2002, Table C). After the age of 30, parenthood is common among adult learners. For instance, 61 percent of students ages 30 to 39 and 55 percent of students ages 40 and over were parents (Horn et al. 2002, Table C). This same pattern appears in the adult graduate population. Among graduates in the 1999-2000 Baccalaureate and Beyond Longitudinal Study (B&B) cohort, 72 percent ages 25 to 29 at
the time of degree attainment were childless (Bradburn et al. 2003, Table 1.8). In the same cohort, approximately 60 percent who were 30 years of age and over when they attained the bachelor’s degree were parents (Bradburn et al. 2003, Table 1.8). The ages at which learners and graduates are parents coincide with the ages of involvement in significant personal relationships. Among graduates in the 1999-2000 B&B cohort, 51 percent who were ages 25 to 29 were single/never married, while 60 percent who were ages 30 to 39 and 66 percent who were ages 40 and over were married. In sum, among non-traditional-age learners and graduates, the younger adults under the age of 30 tend to be childless and unmarried, while older adults, ages 30 and over, tend to be parents and involved in significant personal relationships.

**Racial and Ethnic Characteristics**

White/Non-Hispanic students comprise the majority of non-traditional-age learners, but there is growing diversity, especially among Black/African-American/Non-Hispanic and Hispanic students (NCES, 2004). In 1999-2000, among students 24 years of age and over, 64.7 percent of students were White/Non-Hispanic, 14.6 percent were Black/African-American/Non-Hispanic, 11.9 percent were Hispanic or Latino, 5.1 percent were Asian, 1.2 percent were American Indian/Alaskan Native, 1.0 percent were Other and 1.5 percent were identified as more than one race (Horn et al. 2002, Tables 2, 3.3). Johnson-Bailey and Cervero (1996) find an older age among Black/African American/Non-Hispanic students, as compared to White/Non-Hispanic, Asian, and American Indian/Alaskan Native ethnic groups, and, Horn, Peter, and Rooney (2002) find that half of Black/African American/Non-Hispanic students of all ages were over the age of 24 in 1999-2000. Similarly, nearly half of Hispanic/Latino students of all ages are
non-traditional-age (Horn et al. 2002, Tables 2, 3.3). Although dominated by a White/Non-Hispanic majority, non-traditional-age learners as a population are characterized by significant segments of other ethnic and racial groups, contributing to a trend of growing diversity.

The racial and ethnic background of bachelor’s degree recipients ages 25 and over follows a similar pattern as the non-traditional-age students. From 1940 to 2003, more White adults than any other ethnic and racial group have earned bachelor’s degrees (U.S. Census, 2004b, Table 1). Among bachelor’s degree recipients 25 years of age and over in the 1999-2000 B&B cohort, 68.7 percent were White/Non-Hispanic, 10.5 percent were Black/African-American/Non-Hispanic, 10.8 percent were Hispanic or Latino, 5.3 percent were Asian, .9 percent were American Indian/Alaska Native, 1 percent were Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, 1.6 percent were Other and 1.2 percent were more than one racial and ethnic group designation (Bradburn et al. 2003, Tables 1.2, 1.6). Similar to enrolled adult students, Black/African-American/Non-Hispanic bachelor’s degree recipients are older, as is the case with Hispanic or Latino non-traditional-age graduates (Bradburn et al. 2003, Table 1.6). Resembling postsecondary participants, White/Non-Hispanic non-traditional-age adults earn more bachelor’s degrees than any other racial and ethnic group, but the ethnic and racial composition of the bachelor’s degree recipient population is becoming more diverse.

*Attendance Status*

Adult students tend to work full-time while attending college part-time (Horn et al. 2002; Horn & Premo, 1995; Jacobs & King, 2002). In Fall 2005, among the 4.7 million undergraduates 25 years of age and over, 54 percent were enrolled part-time
Similarly, among adult bachelor’s degree recipients, most enroll over an extended period of time, suggesting part-time attendance status over the course of the postsecondary education experience. For instance, in the 1999-2000 B&B cohort, among graduates over the age of 25, an average of nearly 14 years elapsed between initial postsecondary enrollment and bachelor’s degree attainment (Bradburn et al. 2003, Table II.12).

_Socioeconomic Status_

Many non-traditional-age students have low-to-moderate income levels. Among 1999-2000 undergraduates ages 24 and over, half had incomes of $29,000 or less, and nearly a quarter had incomes between $30,000 and $50,000 (Horn et al. 2002, Tables 3.3, 3.5C). Another indicator of income status is financial aid. Among adult undergraduates, approximately half received some financial aid in 1999-2000 (Horn et al. 2002, Table 4.2B). The socioeconomic status among adult graduates reveals a divergence in the similarities between students and graduates. In the NCES high school sophomore class of 1980 cohort study, ten years after completing high school, just 6 percent of participants from the lowest quartile, 19 percent from the middle quartile, and 41 percent from the highest quartile of socioeconomic status had attained the bachelor’s degree (NCES, 2004, Table 309). While low-to-moderate income students are participating in postsecondary education, the graduates come from middle-to-high socioeconomic quartiles, exposing one of the only differences between the participant and bachelor’s degree recipient populations.

In sum, this composite picture of non-traditional-age students and bachelor’s degree recipients shows remarkable similarities in both of the populations on a variety of
demographic characteristics. The adult learner population is large and heterogeneous, and it is becoming increasingly diverse. Non-traditional-age students and graduates have complex lives, including work and other responsibilities. The consistency in the demographic characteristics describes who enrolls and graduates, but offers little explanation about why so many participate and so few graduate. The only major difference in the two groups is socioeconomic status, suggesting an economic divide exists between adults who participate in postsecondary education and adults who attain the bachelor’s degree. Motivational aspects of the adult learner experience, challenges and barriers, preferences and theoretical dimensions of learning, in combination with skills and competencies may further illuminate other factors affecting attainment among non-traditional-age learners.

Factors Affecting Motivation and Persistence

Motivation is commonly associated with research about participation and persistence in postsecondary education. The concept of motivation has spawned numerous lines of inquiry, and current renowned models reveal increasingly complex abstractions. Persistence as a phenomenon among traditional-age students has been analyzed and several prominent models seek to explain various aspects of persistence. The adult learner’s experience in relationship to persistence has been shrouded by a dearth of research on the topic and the impracticalities of studying such a vast and diverse population. As a result, numerous perspectives and frameworks are associated with motivation and persistence, and they begin to illuminate complex and puzzling connections to attainment, especially among non-traditional-age learners.
Motivation

Internal and external events, family pressures and personal interests motivate adults to participate in formal education activities. Education often provides some of the tools and skills necessary to manage and overcome life events (Justice & Dornan, 2001). Kasworm (2003) suggests “adults were motivated to enroll in college and continue to be influenced in their participation by internal life developmental changes, external planning to create a different future life in their adult world, or a mixture of the two life-context motivators” (p. 6). Merriam and Brockett (1997) find the major reasons for participation are professional advancement, cognitive interest and social welfare (p. 132). Experts emphasize career-related issues most often trigger adults to participate in formal education (Aslanian & Brickell, 1980; Cross, 1981; Fairchild, 2003, Horn, 1996; Mortenson, 2001). Lastly, adults are motivated to engage in education to manage career changes when they have higher levels of income, experience rises in occupational status, and, have past enrollment in four-year colleges (Aslanian & Brickell, 1980, pp. 96-97; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999).

Several experts have studied the relationship between motivation and participation in postsecondary education among adults (Aslanian & Brickell, 1980, 1988; Cross, 1981; Henry & Basile, 1994; Pouchot, 1999; Thompson, 1992). Some of the enduring frameworks include Maslow’s (1943) humanistic perspective of hierarchical needs, as well as Skinner’s (1938) behaviorist perspective of stimulus and reinforcement. Still others have conducted research about adults and motivation that is not specifically focused on the experiences in the academic environment (Goleman, 1995, 1998; Reiss, 2000, 2004); even so, relevancy does exist, primarily in explaining the complex and

Motivation historically has been depicted as temporal in nature, influencing behaviors and attitudes about activities at a particular time (Pourchot, 1999). The nature of motivation is commonly conceived from one of four frames: as singular, of dichotomous forces, as having multiple motives, and as hierarchical (Gage & Berliner, 1998). More recently, experts believe motivation has extrinsic and intrinsic properties that are not dichotomous, and can operate simultaneously (Gage & Berliner, 1998; Goleman, 1995; Pourchot, 1999; Wlodkowski, 1999).

It is difficult to analyze the effect of the theoretical construct of motivation, especially in terms of adult learner’s experiences. The multiple roles of adult students (i.e., employee, parent, spouse, student) are intertwined and are difficult to disentangle. Because of this, motivation does not influence behaviors and attitudes in isolation; rather it is evident in varying degrees and in different forms in the responsibilities and demands of contemporary adulthood. Finally, even though motivation is an abstract concept, experts assert that it does play a role in participation and persistence in postsecondary education (Aslanian & Brickell, 1980, 1988; Gage & Berliner, 1998; Henry & Basile, 1994; Nelson & Low, 2003; Pourchot, 1999).
Persistence

Several preeminent models of retention and attrition frame most of the research about persistence in higher education. These include Astin’s (1988, 2005) theory of student involvement, Adelman’s (1999, 2006) perspective of the relationships between academic resources, momentum factors and degree completion rates, Tinto’s (1987, 1993) theory of individual departure, Braxton, Hirschy, and McClendon’s (2004) model of student departure in commuter colleges and universities, and, Bean and Metzner’s (1985) conceptual model of non-traditional student attrition. Astin’s, Adelman’s, and Tinto’s models are based on traditional-age student experiences, but each has some relevancy for non-traditional-age learners.

Astin’s (1988, 2005) theory of student involvement asserts that the greater the involvement in the collegiate milieu by the student, the better the chances are that the student will persist. Adelman’s (1996, 2006) major finding is that transferring among institutions, which results in a multi-institutional attendance pattern, is not correlated with failure to attain the degree. In addition, Adelman’s analyses reveal that academic momentum—the amassing of credits, achieving degree requirements, and meeting credit thresholds in particular time frames—is a key determinant of attainment. Tinto’s (1987, 1993) theory of student departure stresses the interaction of the student in the collegiate environment after enrollment. Tinto’s main conclusion is when students find a good “fit” between themselves and the institutions they are attending, they are less likely to depart. However, the relevancy of this theory in commuter and two-year institutional settings is problematic (Braxton et al. 2004, pp. 16-18).
Braxton et al. (2004) propose a multidimensional model of student departure in commuter colleges and universities, relating social, economic, psychological and organizational factors, and stressing the interaction of the student in the collegiate environment. Bean and Metzner (1985) present a conceptual model of nontraditional student attrition. This model features the effect of environmental support variables, positing adult learners are more affected by their environment than by other variables.

Although each of these models appears to be promising, further inquiry is warranted to assess their effectiveness and applicability to non-traditional-age students. This constellation of theories, analyses, and perspectives reveal the multidimensional and puzzling nature of persistence. Given the context of the complexities of modern adulthood, the heterogeneous adult student population, and the many different institutions and delivery models, no “one size fits all” framework exists to provide non-traditional-age learners with clear guidance on how to best pursue bachelor’s degree attainment.

Challenges and Barriers

A key component of the attainment puzzle is identifying and addressing critical challenges and barriers. Non-traditional-age students, with a diverse array of needs due to their multiple roles and complex adult lives, encounter challenges and barriers different than those faced by traditional-age learners. Cross’ (1981) classic framework of situational, institutional and dispositional barriers categorizes the types of perceived challenges to learning that adult students encounter. In addition, Cook and King (2004) suggest laws and regulations that impede adult participation and persistence constitute policy barriers. For adults balancing multiple roles and living full lives, these are critical challenges (Fairchild, 2003; Schlossberg et al. 1989).
To overcome these critical challenges and barriers, students employ a variety of strategies, including aiming for and working toward goals, making choices and sacrifices, and behaving in certain ways. Adelman (1999) found a strong linear relationship between degree completion and anticipation that one would attain the degree (p. 34). Horn (1996) reached a similar conclusion for non-traditional students. Student aspirations and expectations impact degree attainment (Tinto, 1993). Even for the significant numbers of students enrolled at two-year institutions, the degree objective does influence persistence and bachelor's degree attainment (Doyle, 2006). Those students whose goal is to attain the bachelor's degree often transfer to four-year institutions and make other choices that support their goals (Adelman, 1999, 2006; Doyle, 2006). Therefore, the strategies non-traditional-age learners may employ and their effectiveness in coping with and addressing these obstacles may make a difference in persistence and degree attainment.

*Learning Preferences and Theoretical Perspectives of Adult Learning*

Adult learners are a heterogeneous population, with diverse needs. The existing and evolving research provides perspectives about the nature of learning and education among non-traditional-age students. Andragogy, self-directed learning and transformational learning form the cornerstones upon which the understanding of adult learning has developed and expanded (Merriam, 2001a, 2001b). With this base, “a mosaic of theories, models, sets of principles, and explanations that, combined, compose the knowledge base of adult learning” (Merriam, 2001a, p. 3). Emerging research drawn from disciplines outside of adult education has expanded comprehensive perspectives, providing a view of the “phenomenon from different angles” (Merriam, 2001b, p. 96).
Since adult learning does not occur in isolation (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999), the conceptual frameworks depicting adult learning have shifted from a positivist perspective, where knowledge is “out there” and learning is the process of discovering it, to constructivist, critical or postmodern views that each individual has the power to determine what he or she knows and how that knowledge is meaningful (Kilgore, 2001). This change of perspective is reflective of social, cultural and political forces impacting learning and, adult educators’ efforts to listen to the voices of an increasingly diverse non-traditional-age student population (Kilgore, 2001).

*Andragogy and Self-Directed Learning*

Andragogy is one of the pioneering concepts of adult learning. Emerging in the 1960’s, andragogy posited that adult learning was distinct from children’s learning because adults are not simply receiving transmitted knowledge, but are active participants in the learning process within the context of adulthood (Knowles et al. 2005). This contextual dimension indicates that learning is developmental in nature. Adult educators commonly accept andragogy as a guide to practice (Merriam, 2001a).

Where andragogy is a guide to practice, self-directed learning is multifaceted, encompassing the goals and processes of learning, and, the attributes of the learner (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). The two frameworks are related because they both aim to move learners to more autonomy. Self-directed learning is widespread and systematic, and it occurs in everyday adult life without dependence on expert instruction or in formal educational settings (Merriam, 2001a, p. 8).
Transformative Learning

As an outgrowth of andragogy and self-directed learning, transformative learning emerged as a foundational concept in the 1970’s (Merriam, 2001b). Research and discussion of transformative learning eclipsed that of andragogy and self-directed learning in the 1990’s (Merriam, 2001b). While related to andragogy and self-directed learning with a goal of moving adult learners to more autonomy, transformative learning moves to a different realm by centering on meaning-making. Non-traditional-age learners have accumulated life experiences that shape their concepts about truths and beliefs. “Transformative learning refers to transforming a problematic frame of reference to make it more dependable in our adult life by generating opinions and interpretations that are more justified” (Mezirow, 2000, p. 20). Transformation begins with a disorienting dilemma, then self-examination and critical assessment, an exploration of alternatives, planning for and executing a plan for the altered perspective, and an integration of the new perspective in one’s life (Mezirow, 2000, p. 22). This process may include elements of emancipation and empowerment, it may be cognitive, intuitive, or contextually based, and it may be spiritual or extrarational (Baumgartner, 2001, pp. 16-18). Transformative learning may occur in formal and informal settings, depending on the nature of the disorienting dilemma.

The ethics of fostering transformative learning are considerable, including whether or not educators have the right to encourage it, and how it is managed without marginalizing students or the learning community (Baumgartner, 2001). Research and understanding of transformative learning focuses on “not what we know, but how we know it is important” (Baumgartner, 2001, p. 22, emphasis in the original). Current
topics of discussion and debate include the philosophical perspective, group and organizational transformation, as well as ethical issues (Baumgartner, 2001). Together with andragogy and self-directed learning, transformative learning adds even more structure to the understanding of the nature of adult learning.

*Contextual Learning*

Adult education experts assert that there is no “one size fits all” approach to adult learning, because to frame the phenomenon in such a way would diffuse the intricacies and render a singular explanation imprecise, impractical and meaningless (Merriam, 2001b; Pratt, 2002). One key force behind contemporary and emerging perspectives is the growing diversity among adult learners, especially in terms of gender (Kilgore, 2001).

Gender-based perspectives are a natural product of the growing number of women participating in higher education (Hayes, 2001). *Women’s Ways of Knowing* (1986, 1997) is the preeminent contemporary research on women’s perspectives on knowing (Hayes, 2001; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1997) group women’s cognitive development into five major categories, ranging from silence to constructed knowledge. The authors argue that educators can spur learners to develop authentic voices that emphasize connection over separation (Belenky et al. 1997, p. 229). Hayes (2001) asserts that the majority of the research that followed *Women’s Ways of Knowing* reinforces the premises that women seek relationships or connections and prefer to employ subjectivity in their learning. Even though gender affects context, Hayes cautions that over-simplification of gender preferences such as these leads to biases in learning situations, especially ones that require a high level of autonomy or are logical in nature (pp. 37-40).
Learning is social in nature, influenced by social and cultural forces, and the tools students use in the learning process (i.e., books, computers) (Hansman, 2001). Kilgore (2001) explains “knowledge is socially constructed and situated in a particular context” (p. 54). Kilgore analyzes the contemporary state of research about adult learning, and asserts theorists view adult learning through two lenses. One is critical and the other is postmodern. Critical theorists reflect on and challenge “what we know and how we know it” (p. 55). Learning stems from critical reflection and consciousness raising (p. 59). Postmodernists believe that knowledge is contextual, tentative and multifaceted (p. 56). Learning occurs through deconstruction, play and eclecticism (p. 56). Both critical and postmodern perspectives agree that individuals shape knowledge, which is influenced by the process and politics of learning (p. 60). These views reinforce the social and contextual nature of learning, and theoretically both perspectives give voice to adult learners, who are increasingly diverse and participate in an array of educational activities in a variety of settings (p. 60).

In sum, the three major foundational frames of reference, andragogy, self-directed learning and transformative learning, establish the knowledge base for adult learning. Over four decades of research, theory building and inquiry have yielded a multifaceted and still fluid understanding of adult learning. No one model or theoretical perspective fully explains adult learning, because of the variety of ways in which adults learn, the different types of settings and tools they use to learn, and, the growing diversity within the adult learner population, leading to a greater appreciation for the context, social, political and cultural aspects of the phenomenon.
Skills and Competencies

The complexities and multifaceted nature of learning are further influenced by adult student cognitive, practical and metacognitive competencies. In higher education, adults use their unique combination of skills, which impacts persistence and attainment.

Cognitive Abilities

Cognitive skills play a role in adult student success in higher education. One indicator of cognitive skills is the student’s academic record. The student who can handle abstractions, solve problems, critically analyze, synthesize information and learn shows proficiency in cognitive skills and can presumably manage college-level academic work (Gage & Berliner, 1998). Horn (1996) and Adelman (1999, 2006) contend the high school record is correlated to persistence in higher education. Bean and Metzner (1985) find otherwise, reporting that adult students with marginal secondary academic records perform well in postsecondary institutions. Adelman (1999, 2006) asserts that academic momentum, as in the number of credits amassed that are applicable to degree requirements, the grades received in courses, and the ratio of completed courses versus course withdrawals, is an indication of proficiency in the academic environment and a predictor of degree attainment. Doyle (2006) finds the greater number of transferable credits in a student’s record, the greater that student’s chances are of reaching degree attainment. Tinto (1993) adds that strong study skills and habits contribute to student success and mitigate attrition. These expert analyses indicate that cognitive skills are integral to student success and affect degree attainment.
Navigational and Practical Skills

Learning is not isolated to academic activities and classroom assignments. Students also employ navigational and practical skills to supplement their cognitive skills. Navigational and practical skills include the “common sense” knowledge, such as following the rules of the campus culture, including meeting with an advisor to plan the program of study, registering for classes on time, and utilizing library services. When a student fails to integrate into an institution because he or she has not inquired about or located necessary services, the student increases his or her chances of departure (Tinto, 1993). Organizational priorities may impinge student success as well. For instance, institutions that do not provide adequate information about expectations and services also thwart student efforts to access and acquire appropriate services, increasing the risk of attrition (Braxton et al. 2004). Thus, navigational and practical skills influence a student’s adjustment and operation in the collegiate environment, affecting attrition and persistence.

Metacognitive Competencies

Students possess an arsenal of cognitive, navigational and practical skills that are applicable to the collegiate environment and are linked to student success. In addition, metacognitive skills influence the experience. Metacognitive skills are higher order competencies that include self-awareness, high-level study strategies, motivation and social skills. Metacognitive skills supplement rational thinking, and when a student finds harmony between rational (for example, cognitive) and metacognitive skills (for example, high-level study strategies), this consonance enhances the chances for success (Goleman, 1995, 1998; Nelson & Low, 2003).
In sum, students possess varying levels of cognitive, practical and metacognitive skills that interact in academic work and the collegiate milieu, and each person’s unique combination of skills and use of strategies to succeed affect persistence and attainment. This ties together with a larger picture of the non-traditional-age learner population whose demographics influence degree attainment. In addition, the complexities of motivation and learning preferences are considerable, especially in an educational environment that often presents barriers and challenges for adults. Given the partially illuminated and multifaceted nature of the adult learner experience, puzzlements exist about the phenomenon of degree attainment among adults 25 years of age and over.

Significance of the Study

My study is important because bachelor's degree attainment rates are low, even among young adults. Adults can limit their potential in terms of lifetime earnings, career mobility and educational advancement without a degree. Modern American society has an ideological need for promoting democracy through equal opportunity; yet, a chasm exists between a small portion of the population who has earned the bachelor's degree and the large majority who have not. Furthermore, little is known about the enrollment experiences and degree attainment patterns of adult learners. The population is heterogeneous and difficult to track, yet the unmistakable fact remains that adult degree attainment rates are low. My study is important because it will illuminate part of the puzzle and provide valuable insights regarding degree attainment among adults.

Annual U.S. Department of Education and U.S. Census data show a large number of adult students are enrolled in various programs, but a small number attain the
bachelor's degree (NCES, 2007; U.S. Census, 2007). The retention literature provides limited insights about this trend. The experts in these areas have a lot to say about why students leave college, but little about how and why learners stay, drop out and then return, persist and attain a degree. In addition, most of the research is aimed at the younger, traditional student audience, with limited relevance to the myriad of issues facing the older adult population (Hossler & Bean, 1990; Moxley, Najor-Durack, & Dumbrigue, 2001; Tinto, 1987, 1993).

A literature base exists describing theoretical models that explain student enrollment patterns (Hossler & Bean, 1990; Moxley et al. 2001; Tinto, 1987, 1993). These models are focused on access, retention, attrition and persistence, primarily focusing on traditional students and often based on patterns within single institutions, rather than on students of all ages moving through the higher education system (Adelman, 1999; Horn, 1996; Hossler & Bean, 1990; Moxley et al. 2001; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, 2005; Tinto, 1987, 1993; Zucker, & Dawson, 2001).

Knowledge about adult student degree attainment is very limited presumably because the adult student population is unwieldy to track. Adult students typically enroll part-time, their enrollment extends well beyond four years, and, many attend several institutions over the course of their undergraduate careers. In addition, they stop in and out of postsecondary education for numerous reasons (Adelman, 1999; Aslanian & Brickell, 1980; 1988; Cross, 1981; Horn, 1996; McCormick & Horn, 1996; Wirt, et al. 2002; 2003). Data about the enrollment status, length of program, number of institutions attended and departure/re-entry patterns of adults are not readily available, nor easily obtainable, making it nearly impossible to discern the overall persistence and attainment
trends of adults (Adelman, 1999, 2006). With the difficulties of following the adult learner population as a whole, this study is an opportunity to discover what may contribute to the success of a select group of adults who attained the baccalaureate degree at or after 25 years of age.

The following chapter explains in detail the multifaceted factors that impact enrollment, persistence and attainment. Multiple sources of enrollment and census data provide a portrait of adult learners and graduates. Numerous experts from various disciplines illuminate the complex issues affecting the non-traditional age population. Combined, the literature provides a foundation upon which this study is based.
CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Adult learners in American colleges and universities have represented a significant segment of the undergraduate population for several decades, and they continue to contribute to increasing rates of student participation and degree attainment in higher education. The growing number of adult students is fueled by many interrelated factors. These include the increasing overall size of the adult population, an economy supported by jobs and occupations that require more training and formal education, and sociocultural aspects of modern American adulthood, especially gender, race and ethnicity. Surprisingly, growing accessibility to higher education and a greater number of participants of all ages have not resulted in a comparable rise in bachelor’s degree attainment rates among adults. Bachelor’s degree attainment rates among adults age 25 and over have grown slightly from 14.2 percent in 1992 to 18.3 percent in 2006 (Kominski & Adams, 1994; U.S. Census, 2007).

A patchwork of data primarily produced by the U.S. government, perspectives from adult education experts, and educational, psychological, cultural and sociological frameworks are helpful in framing my study of factors influencing degree attainment among adult students. The professional literature I review in this chapter is organized around several themes, which ground the research questions. These themes include: a) a
profile of the adult learner, b) factors affecting adult motivation to learn and persist, c) critical challenges and barriers faced by adult learners, d) learning preferences and theoretical perspectives of adult learning, and e) skills and competencies contributing to adult learner success. The outcomes or benefits of bachelor’s degree attainment are intertwined throughout the dominant topics, and each of the five sets of themes is reviewed in the sections that follow.

A Profile of Adult Learners in Higher Education

Current Students and Population Predictions

Demography, economic factors, and sociocultural influences of modern adult life affect the size and composition of the broad adult student population. This is a large and diverse group of learners. Several facets of adult learners’ background and life situation are interrelated and influence their educational experience. The following sections provide a synthesis of the forces and characteristics that shape the vast and diverse non-traditional-age student population in higher education.

Demographic Factors

Demographic characteristics have a strong impact on the size and age composition of the undergraduate non-traditional-age student population. In Fall 1987, there were 11 million students of all ages enrolled at the undergraduate level, and 3.8 million were 25 years of age and over (NCES, 1991, Table 160). In Fall 2005, the total number of all undergraduate students exceeded 14.9 million, and 4.7 million learners were age 25 and over (NCES, 2007, Table 178). The number of adult learners 25 years of age and over increased 21 percent between 1987 and 2005 (NCES, 1991, 2007),

Demographic characteristics are a key determinant of enrollment projections (Gerald & Hussar, 2003). The NCES (2008) predicts a 20 percent increase in adult students at all levels of higher education between the years 2006 and 2016 (Table 181). This prediction is based on the demographic surge resulting from the increasing number of “millennial generation” young adults in the U.S. population between the years of 2007 and 2013 (Howe & Strauss, 2000). The “millennial generation” represents approximately 100 million people born between 1982 and 2002 (Howe & Strauss, 2000).

Another factor contributing to the rise in enrollments, beyond the size of the non-traditional-age population, is that participation in undergraduate programs is more prevalent among younger, rather than older adults. For example, in Fall 2005, 4.7 million undergraduate students 25 years of age and over enrolled in degree-granting institutions (NCES, 2007, Table 178). Among these non-traditional-age students, 35 percent were ages 25 to 29, 35 percent were ages 30 to 39, 20 percent were ages 40 to 49, and 10 percent were 50 years old and over (NCES, 2007, Table 178). This distribution of enrollments by age group has been consistent for more than a decade; it was nearly the same between 1991 and 2005 (NCES, 1993, 2001, 2003, 2004, 2006, 2007). Thus, both the size of adult generations and the age at which most adults tend to participate in undergraduate programs factor into enrollment rates of non-traditional-age students.

Experts forecast growth in enrollments for some age groups among adult learners in the early 21st century (Gerald & Hussar, 2003; Hussar & Bailey, 2006; Rooney et al.


These predictions are based on the large “baby boom generation” growing older, the aging of the much smaller “generation X,” which preceded the “millennial generation,” and the surge of the “millennial generation” (Gerald & Hussar, 2003; Howe & Strauss, 2000). For instance, Hussar and Bailey (2008) predict the following between the years 2006 and 2016: an increase in the 25 to 29 and 30 to 34 age groups; and, a plateauing of the 35 and over age group (Table 11).

*Generational effect.* Howe and Strauss (2000) assert that the “millennial generation” eclipses both the “baby boom generation” and “generation X” in size by becoming the first 100-million-person generation (p. 15). In 2007, the oldest of the “millennial generation” of young adults reached 25 years of age. The size of this age group is a key factor contributing to the projection of the rising number of younger non-traditional-age learners. The population of adult learners ages 25 to 29 is expected to swell from 2.4 million in 2006 to 3 million in 2016 (Hussar & Bailey, 2008, Table 11).

The “millennial generation” is preceded by a smaller-sized generation, often referred to as “generation X” (Howe & Strauss, 2000; Neuborne & Kerwin, 1999). This birth cohort is comprised of approximately 17 million people born between 1965 and 1981 (Howe & Strauss, 2000; Neuborne & Kerwin, 1999). The slightly older adult students who are “generation X” will be in their 30’s and 40’s between the years 2000 and 2016. Because the size of the age group is small, enrollments of adults 30 to 34 years of age are expected to rise slightly from 1.4 million in 2006 to 1.8 million in 2016 (Hussar & Bailey, 2008, Table 11).

In 2000, the majority of adults 35 years of age and over were from the “baby boom generation” (Howe & Strauss, 2000; Office of Social and Economic Data Analysis,
The size of the “baby boom generation” is 76 million people (Gilmartin, 2003). Two overlapping demographic trends affect the number of adult students who are 35 years of age and over between the years of 2006 and 2016. The first is growing participation by aging adults among the “baby boom generation” and the second is the small number of “generation X” adults who reached 35 years of age in 2000. This combination of factors, experts predict, will result in an increase in enrollments of adults 35 years of age and over, from 3.1 million in 2006 to 3.3 million in 2016 (Hussar & Bailey, 2008, Table 11).

Demography plays a prominent role in determining the size of the adult learner population. The significant sizes of the “baby boom” and “millennial” generations have a strong effect on adult student enrollment trends and predictions. Coupled with the propensity of younger, rather than older, learners to participate in formal education, non-traditional-age enrollments of adults under the age of 30 are expected to rise. In addition, the diminutive “generation X,” which has grown up between these two enormous birth cohorts, factors into the smaller increases in the enrollment projections for older, non-traditional-age learners between the years 2006 and 2016 (NCES, 2008, Table 181).

Economic Factors

The size and age distribution of the adult learner population at the undergraduate level is further influenced by economic factors. Additional factors that impact enrollment rates and access to postsecondary education are unemployment rates, job and training requirements for the modern workforce, and socioeconomic status (SES) of adults.
Unemployment rates. Experts commonly assert that when the economy is bad, enrollments rise. This claim has been made consistently for more than 20 years (Apps, 1981; Aslanian & Brickell, 1980, 1988; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). Evidence supporting this claim appears to exist. For instance, in 1993, when the annual average unemployment rate among adults 16 years of age and over in the United States was 6.9 percent, the number of undergraduates age 25 and over rose 8.4 percent between 1991 and 1993 (NCES, 1993, 1995; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2005b). Between 1999 and 2001, the annual average unemployment rate rose to 4.7 percent and, enrollment of adult students 25 years of age and over rose 5.9 percent (NCES, 2003, 2004; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2005b). The unemployment rates continued to rise to 6.0 percent in 2003, and adult undergraduate enrollments also increased 7.0 percent between 2001 and 2003 (NCES, 2004, 2006; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2005b). "The premise is that a weak labor market increases the attractiveness of a college education" (Nontraditional students, 2001, p. 16). The inverse relationship appears to work both in good and bad economic times. For example, in 1997, the average annual unemployment rate was 4.9 percent, down 0.7 percent from 1995 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2005b). While the economy was improving, undergraduate enrollments of adults 25 years of age and over declined 2.2 percent between 1995 and 1997 (NCES, 1999, 2001).

While enrollments seem to have an inverse relationship to the labor market, exceptions exist. The economy improved in 1995 and enrollments also rose in the same year (NCES, 1999, U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2005b). Enrollment growth in this year may have been affected by an increase in the size of the adult population. Thus, the
state of the labor market seems influence enrollments, yet other factors appear to have an influence as well.

_Jobs and occupations._ While unemployment rates may affect enrollments to some extent, the nature of employment may also influence enrollments. The types of jobs available and expertise required in the broader labor market may drive the demand for job training and education, thus increasing adult student enrollments (Apps, 1981; Aslanian & Brickell, 1980, 1988; Horn, 1996; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). Labor experts predict professional occupations, including education, library services, healthcare, as well as computer and mathematical occupations, will grow rapidly between 2002 and 2012 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2004, Table 2). According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2004), many of these areas require specialized knowledge and education credentials for access to jobs in these occupational fields. For example, network systems analysts and physician assistants, two of the fastest growing occupations, each require a bachelor’s degree for training and preparation (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2004, Table 3b).

Shifts in the occupational mix have been occurring for a number of years. While the number of jobs in service-producing occupations, including those in healthcare and education, are expected to expand, the number of jobs related to production of goods, agriculture and administrative support services are expected to continue to contract between 2002 and 2012 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2004). These are not new trends. In 1995, the U.S. Department of Labor reported persistent erosion in the manufacturing sector and also asserted that technological advances would continue to decrease the demand for office support and goods-production jobs (U.S. Bureau of Labor
Furthermore, in 1995, the fastest-growing occupations required varied amounts of education and training; whereas, in 2004, 60 percent of the fastest-growing occupations required a college degree (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 1995, 2004). The rise in demand for postsecondary educational credentials for growing occupational areas has been swift and dramatic. Thus, it appears that changes in employment outlook and preparation for growing occupational fields will lead to a greater demand for postsecondary education, causing enrollments to rise.

**Socioeconomic status.** In addition to employment, other economic factors play a role in enrollment rates of adult learners. Income affects a student’s ability to afford higher education, thus impacting attendance patterns. Among 1992-93 undergraduates 24 years of age and over, 41 percent had incomes less than $20,000, 20 percent had incomes between $20,000 and $29,000, and 26 percent had incomes between $30,000 and $50,000 (Horn & Premo, 1995, Tables 4.2, 4.5b). Among 1999-2000 undergraduates ages 24 and over, 34 percent had incomes less than $20,000, 16 percent had incomes between $20,000 and $29,000, and 23 percent had incomes between $30,000 and $50,000 (Horn et al. 2002, Tables 3.3, 3.5c). Among adult students, low-to-moderate income levels may impact enrollment and attendance patterns, since students with few financial resources are most sensitive to issues related to affordability.

Financial assistance, available to non-traditional-age students, mitigates some of the effect of scarce resources. Need is determined through the traditional financial aid process (Hatfield, 2003). At the undergraduate level, qualified students may be eligible for scholarships, grants and loans (Free Application for Student Aid [FAFSA], 2005). Students with few financial resources are generally eligible for a combination of federal,
state and institutional funds. Among 1999-2000 undergraduates 24 years of age and over, approximately half received some financial aid (Horn et al. 2002, Table 4.2B). In addition, non-traditional-age students can seek resources to fund their education via adult-focused programs, scholarships, employee tuition programs, tax relief and withdrawals from personal and retirement savings (Hatfield, 2003). Other resources exist as well. Older students use credit card financing, conventional consumer loans and home equity lines of credit to finance postsecondary education (College Board, 2001). There are limits to borrowing funds to finance school, especially if the student has already incurred debts. In 1999-2000, among undergraduates 24 to 29 years of age, three quarters carry at least one credit card, more than half of the cardholders have an outstanding balance, and the average balance is over $3,000.00 (Horn et al. 2002, Table 4.3).

The majority of financial assistance resources are borrowed, which means students incur debt that must be repaid. “The federal government provides about 70 percent of direct aid to postsecondary students, and almost 60 percent of all aid is now in the form of loans” (College Board, 2001, p. 2). The proportion of federal loan aid as compared to other federal aid has risen to 70 percent in 2004-05 (Baum & Payea, 2005, Table 2). In 1999-2000, among adults ages 24 and over, the average total price of attendance for undergraduates at all types of postsecondary institutions was $6,666 (Berkner, Berker, Rooney, & Peter, 2002, Table 2.1-A). In the same year, among adult undergraduates ages 24 and over who had obtained loans from governmental, institutional, private commercial and other sources, about 14 percent borrowed less than $2,625, approximately 26 percent borrowed between $2,625 and $6,625, and, nearly 55
percent borrowed $6,625 or more (Clinedinst, Cunningham, & Merisotis, 2003, Table 1). The data on total attendance costs and the loan amounts seem to suggest that non-traditional learners rely on financial aid, and loans in particular to finance their studies. As a result, the potential debt burden may negatively impact enrollments, especially for low-income students.

Three key economic factors together influence adult learner enrollments: unemployment rates; the demand for selected occupations; and, student economic status. These are complex and multifaceted factors, and they may operate separately or in combination with one another to influence enrollments.

Attendance Status, Work Obligations and Institution Choice

The majority of adult learners at the undergraduate level enroll as part-time students while working full-time. More than half of adult learners attend part-time, and this proportion has been evident for more than a decade (NCES, 1991, 1993, 1995, 1999, 2003, 2004, 2006, 2007). In Fall 1987, there were 3.8 million non-traditional-age undergraduate students, and 74 percent were enrolled part-time (NCES, 1991, Table 160). In Fall 2005, among the 4.7 million adult undergraduate students, 54 percent were enrolled part-time (NCES, 2007, Table 178). Many adult learners who attend college part-time do so because of work obligations (Jacobs & King, 2002). In 1992-93, among non-traditional-age undergraduates, approximately 55 percent worked full-time (Horn & Premo, 1995, Table 10). Similarly, among adult undergraduate students in 1999-2000, 59 percent worked full-time (Horn et al. 2002, Table C).

Non-traditional-age learners enroll in a variety of institutions, including two-year colleges. These students find two-year colleges attractive because these institutions offer
programs ranging from language skills to occupational training to academic degrees (Culp, 1998). In Fall 2005, among adults 25 years of age and over who enrolled at both two- and four-year institutions, 40 percent attended two-year institutions (NCES, 2007, Table 179). This is not a new trend; the proportion of adults enrolled at two-year institutions has remained fairly constant for more than a decade. In 1987, among non-traditional age learners attending two- and four-year institutions, 46 percent enrolled at two-year colleges (NCES, 1991, Table 161). The U.S. Department of Education collects this enrollment information showing where students are enrolled, but does not provide details about student degree attainment aspirations.

Public community colleges dominate the two-year college sector, enrolling 95 percent of all the students who attend two-year colleges (NCES, 2007, Table 179). Because the public community colleges are situated in and designed to serve local communities, they are accessible, inexpensive as compared to four-year institutions, and often have schedules that accommodate working adults (Culp, 1998). In sum, adult students try to balance working and attending college while managing economic pressures and personal responsibilities. These interrelated factors influence both attendance status and institutional choice.

A Partially Painted Picture

This broad description of the adult student population is shaped by age and economic factors. These factors identify the size and shape of various groups of adult learners, from which experts analyze enrollment rates and make enrollment projections. However, this description only partially reveals the profile of the adult learner. More detail is necessary to paint a sharper image of contemporary college students 25 years of
age and over. The following section traces additional characteristics as well as sociocultural influences of this vast and diverse group of students.

**Gender**

Women represent the majority of adult learners, and the proportion of female learners age 25 and over has remained constant for more than a decade. In Fall 1987, there were 3.8 million non-traditional-age undergraduate students, and 59 percent were women (NCES, 1991, Table 160). In Fall 2005, among the 4.7 million non-traditional-age undergraduate students, 62 percent of adult learners were women (NCES, 2007, Table 178). At the undergraduate level, women’s participation outpaces that of men’s, especially after the age of 30 (NCES, 2007, Table 178). Rooney et al. (2006) predict that women’s enrollments will continue to grow faster than men’s between 2006 and 2015 (p. 36). This forecast is based on a pattern of women’s enrollments increasing faster than men’s at the undergraduate level between 1970 and 2005 (Rooney et al. 2006; Wirt et al. 2004). Horn et al. (2002) suggest that demography will influence the composition of the adult student population, predicting adult women’s enrollments will rise because women tend to enroll in undergraduate programs at a later age and in greater numbers than men. Horn (1996) posits “the increased participation of women in the workforce has increased the number of older women returning to complete an interrupted education or enrolling in postsecondary education for the first time” (p. 2). These data and predictions demonstrate that the state of the labor force and occupational demands are influencing the composition of the non-traditional-age student population, suggesting that economics are interrelated with gender.
Parenthood

Non-traditional-age learners enroll in postsecondary education while pursuing other activities and responsibilities in their lives, such as parenthood and caregiving. At the undergraduate level, among male and female students 24 to 29 years of age, 35 percent have children or other dependents; among learners who are 30 to 39 years of age, 61 percent have children or other dependents; and, among students who are 40 years of age and over, 55 percent have children or other dependents (Horn et al. 2002, Table C). In addition, at the undergraduate level, more female than male students are parents, and, approximately one in five adult learners is a single parent (Horn et al. 2002, Table C). These findings are consistent with several NCES studies, including analyses of the profile of undergraduate students in 1992-93 and in 1999-2000 (Horn et al. 2002; Horn & Premo, 1995), the findings of a study of gender differences in undergraduate education (Peter & Horn, 2005); as well as reports of nontraditional undergraduates in 1996 and 2002 (Choy, 2002; Horn, 1996). Thus, it is common for adult learners to be parents and women represent the majority of non-traditional-age learners with parental or other caregiving responsibilities.

Racial and Ethnic Characteristics

White/Non-Hispanic students dominate the ethnic and racial composition of the non-traditional-age student population. Among undergraduates of all ages enrolled in 1999-2000, the majority (65 percent) were White/Non-Hispanic students; and, among all undergraduates, 27 percent were White/Non-Hispanic adults 24 years of age and over (Horn et al. 2002, Table 2; NCES, 2003, Table 175). Even so, “the proportion of American college students who are minorities has been increasing” (NCES, 2004, p.
A sizeable proportion of students among other racial and ethnic groups are older learners. For instance, 51 percent of Black/African-American/Non-Hispanic undergraduate students (of all ages) in 1999-2000 were 24 years of age and over (Horn et al. 2002, Table 2). Similarly, 44 percent of Hispanic or Latino students, 42 percent of Asian students, 55 percent of American Indian/Alaskan Native students, 44 percent of Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander students, 38 percent of students indicating Other as their racial and ethnic designation, and 38 percent of students of more than one race were over the age of 24 (Horn et al. 2002, Table 2).

A Typical Adult Student?

What emerges from the profile of adult learners is a stable and enduring picture of the non-traditional-age student. Most students are concerned with optimizing future opportunities, including careers and financial resources. If there is a “typical” adult student, this person would enroll between the ages of 25 and 39, have a low-to-moderate income, and would anticipate changes in the labor market and occupational requirements that necessitate additional education and training. The price of postsecondary education would exceed personal resources, requiring financial assistance. The “typical” adult student would attend college as a part-time student while working full-time, and would just as likely enroll at a four-year institution as a two-year college. She would probably be a woman leading a complex life, including parenting and other caregiving responsibilities, such as elder care. Lastly, she would classify herself as White/Non-Hispanic. The classic characteristics include the age at enrollment, income level, attendance status, gender and multiple personal responsibilities.
The adult learner population in American colleges and universities is vast and diverse. Even though the characteristics listed above are commonly associated with non-traditional-age undergraduates, the modern demands of American adulthood, combined with powerful demographic and economic changes, are spawning a trend of growing diversity in the adult student population. For example, among adult learners, the racial and ethnic composition of the population is shifting away from the dominant White/Non-Hispanic majority. The rise in the number African-American adult learners is contributing to this trend, as is the increase in the number of older Hispanic learners. Adult student enrollments in the future will continue to be shaped by economic factors, competing demands for time and resources, and preparation for future careers. Together these factors drive enrollments and the composition of this vast student population.

Bachelor’s Degree Attainment

To assess progress, persistence and bachelor’s degree attainment of adult students, researchers stitch together a patchwork of data. There are limited resources, studies and analyses that provide details about degree attainment among non-traditional-age learners. Several key characteristics of the non-traditional-age student population intersect to reveal an emerging picture of bachelor’s degree attainment among adult learners.

Patchwork of Data

The U.S. Department of Education regularly collects an enormous amount of information from postsecondary institutions, and, from those data, NCES compiles annual reports about the system as a whole and other research on specific topics. Higher education experts commonly cite NCES data in relation to research on adult learners (Brookfield, 1986; Cook & King, 2004; Cross, 1981; Jacobs & King, 2002; Kasworm,
2003; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999; Tinto, 1993). Information is routinely shared among government agencies. For example, NCES utilizes U.S. Census data in its annual *Condition of Education* report (Rooney et al. 2006). The U.S. Census produces the results of the annual *Current Population Survey* and *American Community Survey*, which include degree attainment rates for the U.S. adult population. In 2006, the bachelor’s degree attainment rate among adults age 25 and over in the U.S. is 18.3 percent, up from 14.2 percent in 1992 (Kominski & Adams, 1994; U.S. Census, 2007). Moreover, the Census data reveal the proportion of the adult population that has college experience, and the attainment rates at various levels of postsecondary education. For instance, in 1996, among adults 25 years of age and over, 48.2 percent had college experience, and 15.8 percent had attained the bachelor’s degree (U.S. Census, 1997). Five years later, in 2001, 51.8 percent of adults over the age of 25 had college experience, and 17.5 percent had attained the bachelor’s degree (U.S. Census, 2003). In 2006, 53.7 percent of adults 25 years of age and over had college experience, and 18.3 percent had attained the bachelor’s degree (U.S. Census, 2007). The Census data show trends over time, but are not detailed enough to make specific conclusions about adult learners. For example, the annual survey reports the rate at which adults over the age of 25 have earned the bachelor’s degree, but not the actual age at which adults earned the bachelor’s degree.

In addition, researchers use other data for more specific analysis; for example, Jacobs and King (2002) use the *National Survey of Family Growth* to analyze the chances of degree attainment as adults age. This is the first study of its kind to “compare systematically the chances of completing a college degree for older and younger students” (Jacobs & King, 2002, p. 213). Jacobs and King conclude that age does not
hinder college completion (p. 225), but that part-time enrollment creates greater obstacles for adult students (p. 222). The results reveal that the completion rate for part-time students between the ages of 22 and 40 hovers around 7 to 9 percent, while the completion rate for full-time students between the ages of 25 and 40 is constant at over 20 percent (p. 218).

This analysis reveals stable completion rates during the age range when most non-traditional-age students enroll. There are some limitations to this study. Only women were included, and, the researchers did not conduct a transcript analysis to verify the self-reported educational careers of the study participants. Despite this, the findings are key to illuminating the rate of bachelor’s degree attainment among non-traditional-age learners without limiting age, as is common with other studies.

System-wide data. The annual NCES Digest of Education Statistics provides a snapshot of graduates and institutions with aggregate data on the number of postsecondary degrees earned by year, type of degree, gender, racial and ethnic group and institution type (NCES, 1991, 1993, 2004, 2006, 2007). The total number of bachelor’s degrees conferred by U.S. colleges and universities rose from 935,140 in 1980-81 to 1,485,242 in 2005-06 (NCES, 2008, Table 258). Similar to U.S. Census data, these reports show trends over time. The annual data are limited because they do not specify the age of the graduates, the average length of time to earn the degree, socioeconomic status of degree recipients, nor enrollment status of graduates. Furthermore, the report does not cross-reference these factors by racial and ethnic background, age, and gender.

Longitudinal studies. Longitudinal studies provide more detail because they are focused on one group over time. There are two NCES Baccalaureate and Beyond
Longitudinal Studies (B&B) of bachelor’s degree recipients of all ages. The first is the 1993 B&B study of 1992-93 bachelor’s degree recipients; and, the second is the 2000-01 B&B study of 1999-2000 bachelor’s degree recipients (Bradburn et al. 2003; McCormick & Horn, 1996). Among 1992-93 bachelor’s degree recipients, 28 percent were 25 years of age and over (McCormick & Horn, 1996, Table 3.) The proportion of non-traditional-age as compared to traditional-age students who finished the baccalaureate degree seven years later is slightly higher. Among 1999-2000 bachelor’s degree recipients, 31 percent were 25 years of age and over (Bradburn et al. 2003, Table 2). In addition, in an NCES report about debt burden, the participants from these two B&B cohorts were interviewed as part of the National Postsecondary Student Aid Studies, also produced by NCES (Choy & Li, 2005). These two B&B data sets provide specific detail about age and other characteristics of degree recipients that are not commonly available in other reports and research produced by NCES.

Two additional longitudinal studies provide more detail about degree attainment among adults. The NCES National Longitudinal Survey of the High School Class of 1972 (NLS-72) is the original longitudinal survey, and it is one of the most comprehensive studies of its kind (NCES, 2005). Nearly half (47 percent) of the NLS-72 cohort enrolled in postsecondary education immediately after finishing high school (Knepper, 1990, p. 11). Among those with no delay in college entry, 50 percent finished a bachelor’s degree within 12 years of completing high school (Knepper, 1990, p. 26).

This college credit production analysis produced using the NLS-72 cohort data excludes adults who did not enter postsecondary institutions immediately after finishing high school; therefore, attainment rates for the entire cohort, including those who delayed
enrolling in postsecondary education, are incomplete. Furthermore, the last data collection was conducted in 1986, when the participants were in their mid-30’s. As a result, attainment rates are unavailable for the entire span of ages during which non-traditional-age students tend to enroll in college.

Another study is Adelman’s (1999) attainment analysis utilizing data from the NCES 1980 High School and Beyond/Sophomore cohort. The analysis of this cohort spans from 1980 to 1993. The attainment analysis is the first of its kind to analyze student behavior in terms of persistence and attainment, rather than retention and graduation rates at individual institutions. Adelman separates the participants who had postsecondary experience by institutional type, analyzing only those students who had attended four-year institutions at some time, because only four-year institutions award bachelor’s degrees (p. 28). Among the students in this cohort who attended a four-year institution at some time during their postsecondary career, approximately 63 percent earned the bachelor’s degree by age 30 (p. viii).

To continue the framework set out in Adelman’s (1999) original attainment analysis and to verify the original conclusions, Adelman (2006) conducts an attainment analysis using data from the NCES National Educational Longitudinal Study of 1988 cohort. The analysis of the educational activities of this cohort spans from 1988 when the participants were in eighth grade to 2000. In this cohort, among high school graduates who had attended a four-year institution at any time, approximately 66 percent had attained a bachelor’s degree by age 27 (p. 3).

There are three key results of Adelman’s analyses: one, it is common for students to have multi-institutional attendance patterns; two, attending multiple institutions does
not impact attainment rates; and, three, the degree attainment rate has risen only slightly. This research is strong because it follows individual students rather than using the familiar framework of institutional retention and graduation rates to assess student progress, providing rare analyses of the postsecondary education system. These studies provide a comprehensive reference point for information about student enrollment patterns and attainment rates of young adult students up to age 27 or 30. What happens as the adults in these cohorts age is beyond the scope of Adelman’s analyses.

In sum, there are annual data collection studies across the postsecondary education system and several key studies that begin to illuminate a broad pattern of bachelor’s degree attainment among adult students. The system-wide data show an increasing number of bachelor’s degrees conferred each year. According to the Census data, there is a rise in bachelor’s degree attainment among adults. Results from a comprehensive national study show that part-time attendance is a major impediment for degree attainment among adults and challenges the notion that age is a factor in not attaining the bachelor’s degree as an adult.

Four major NCES longitudinal data sets provide details on bachelor’s degree graduates 25 years of age and over at the time of degree attainment. These four analyses show that approximately three to four times more traditional-age students attain the bachelor’s degree than non-traditional-age students. Delaying entry into postsecondary education after completing high school appears to have some impact on attainment, but the magnitude of this effect is unclear, since nearly half of adults who delay their entry do attain the degree. For example, in the 1999-2000 B&B cohort, among graduates who were between ages 30 to 39 at the time of degree attainment, 45 percent were 21 years of
age and over when they began their postsecondary education (Bradburn et al. 2003, Table 1.5). Among degree recipients age 25 and over, postsecondary education commonly involves attendance at multiple institutions, yet a multi-institutional attendance pattern is not an impediment to degree attainment.

The following section is more detail relating to degree attainment, including economic factors, attendance status, and institutional choice typical of adult learners. Additional non-traditional-age student characteristics, including gender and the racial and ethnic profile, sharpen the detail of the attainment picture among adult learners.

Economic Factors

Three prominent economic factors are commonly associated with postsecondary education. The first is educational levels of the adult population affect labor force participation. Higher education levels are directly related to higher levels of employment and less risk of unemployment. The second factor is socioeconomic status, which has a long-lasting impact on educational attainment. Low socioeconomic status increases the risk that an adult student will not attain the bachelor’s degree. The third factor is the level of debt incurred by graduates. A majority of adult undergraduate students borrow funds to cover the cost of their education. Combined, the three factors demonstrate that economics and degree attainment are interrelated.

Labor force participation. A positive relationship exists between degree attainment and labor force participation. The employment levels for adults with a college education appear to be greater than the levels for the adult population in general. In the 1992-93 B&B cohort of bachelor’s degree recipients, among graduates over the age of 25, an average of 87 percent were working a year after attaining the bachelor’s degree
(McCormick & Horn, 1996, Table III.1). Similarly, among the 1999-2000 B&B cohort of bachelor’s degree recipients over the age of 25, an average of 87 percent were working a year after attaining the bachelor’s degree (Bradburn et al. 2003, Table III.1). Among the total U.S. adult population over the age of 25 at all educational levels, 63 percent were employed in 1994 and 65 percent were employed in 2001 (U.S. Census, 1995, 2003; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2005a). These two cohort studies and the national employment data show adults with higher educational levels participate in the labor force proportionately more than the general population of adults at all educational levels.

Unemployment rates are affected as well. Between the years 1985 and 2004, the annual average unemployment rate among adults 16 years of age and over fluctuated between 4.0 and 7.5 percent (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2005b). It seems that college graduates fared better than the general adult population. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2005a), the 2001 annual unemployment rate among adults over the age of 25 who had a bachelor’s degree or higher was 2.3 percent, which was lower than the 3.7 percent annual unemployment rate among adults age 25 and over at all educational levels. When unemployment rose in the following two years, adults with bachelor’s degrees or higher continued to have lower unemployment rates than the general adult population. In 2003, among adults age 25 and over, the annual unemployment rate among adults who had a bachelor’s degree or higher was 3.1 percent, which was less than the 4.8 percent unemployment rate among adults at all educational levels (U.S. Census, 1995, 2003; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2005a). Even when the unemployment rate has fluctuated, the rate for adults who have a bachelor’s degree or higher is better than the rate for adults at all educational levels.
Socioeconomic status. While attaining the degree appears to increase the chances of participation in the labor force, and presumably, greater economic opportunities, some adults may not attain the bachelor’s degree because of their personal economic situation. Socioeconomic status appears to have long-term effects on bachelor’s degree attainment. For instance, ten years after completing high school, just a small proportion of 1980 high school sophomores who were in the lowest and middle two quartiles of socioeconomic status in 1980 had attained the bachelor’s degree. Only 6 percent from the lowest quartile and just 19 percent from the middle two quartiles had earned the bachelor’s degree, as compared to 41.2 percent from the highest quartile who had attained the bachelor’s degree (NCES, 2004, Table 309).

This connection between degree attainment and SES is established in young adults. Eight years after completing high school, the bachelor’s degree attainment rates among adults from the high school class of 1992 in the lower SES percentiles was proportionately lower than the attainment rates for adults in the higher SES percentiles (Adelman, 2004, Table 2.8; Baum & Payea, 2004, Figure 27). As a result, low-to-moderate SES has a long-term effect on degree attainment, and this effect has been consistently reported among different groups whose educational attainment was studied in different years. The risk of not attaining the degree is greatest for adults who need it the most—adults who are low-to-moderate SES (Cook & King, 2004). Without a degree, the economic opportunities via labor force participation are diminished, thus creating an economic gap (Cook & King, 2004; 2005).
Debt burden. Even though most adult students enroll part-time and work while participating in higher education, the costs associated with education exceed personal resources, resulting in debt at the time of degree attainment. This has become an important emerging issue (Choy & Li, 2005; Clinedinst et al. 2003; Miller, 2004; Walters, 2005; Wei, Nevill, & Berkner, 2005), and few studies contain data about debt burden among adult learners (Bradburn et al. 2003; Choy & Li, 2005; McCormick & Horn, 1996; Wirt et al. 2004).

Among non-traditional-age graduates who borrow to finance their education, younger adults borrow more than older adults. The proportion of non-traditional-age borrowers and the amount borrowed have risen dramatically in less than a decade. Among the adult learners in the 1992-93 B&B cohort, 63 percent of graduates ages 25 to 39 borrowed an average of $9,534.00, whereas 44 percent of graduates ages 40 and over borrowed $10,740.00 (McCormick & Horn, 1996, Table III.6). Several years later, among the 1999-2000 B&B cohort of graduates who were between the ages of 25 and 39 when they attained the bachelor’s degree, almost 70 percent borrowed an average of $19,278.00 to pay for their studies, as compared to 56 percent of graduates who were age 40 and over who borrowed an average of $17,121.00 (Bradburn et al. 2003, Table IV.1).

In the later cohort study, a greater proportion of graduates who were between the ages of 25 and 39 when they graduated borrowed greater amounts of money, as compared to graduates who were ages 40 and over when they attained the degree. The 1992-93 and 1999-2000 B&B cohort studies show that the ages during which adult students tend to enroll in higher education, and the ages during which most non-traditional age learners
attain the bachelor’s degree, are also the ages during which adults rely more heavily on borrowing funds and incur a large debt to finance postsecondary education.

It would appear that the general trend of greater reliance on loans and other borrowed funds to pay for educational costs may have a deleterious effect for adults with low-to-moderate income, as well as those who are unable to secure financing or who are averse to borrowing to pay for education (Cook & King, 2004, 2005; St. John, 2000). In addition, the potential debt burden is important to non-traditional-age students who are concerned with affordability and return on investment, and this may be a factor in the decision to participate and persist in postsecondary education (St. John, 2000).

In sum, economics play a role in degree attainment rates. Adults who have attained the bachelor’s degree participate in the labor force more and have less risk of unemployment than adults who do not have a bachelor’s degree. Through greater participation in the labor force and a greater chance of remaining employed, there are more career advancement and potential earnings opportunities. In addition, adults in the higher SES quartiles tend to attain the bachelor’s degree in greater numbers than adults in lower SES quartiles. As a result, long-term economic effects are associated with educational attainment, including a growing disparity between socioeconomic classes. Also, degree attainment comes at a cost. A significant proportion of non-traditional-age learners borrow funds to pay for their postsecondary education, even though most adult learners enroll part-time and work full-time. More than half of the adult graduates finish their degrees with large debts. This leads to additional economic pressures on the older graduate who already has other financial obligations, including those associated with housing, transportation, childcare, reducing other debt, retirement savings, and so forth.
As a result, these three key economic factors are far-reaching and are intertwined with both attainment and the complexity of modern adult life.

*Attendance and Enrollment Patterns*

In addition to economic factors, several attendance and enrollment patterns typify adult graduates. Many adults who graduate after the age of 25 attend more than one institution, stop out for periods of time, and attend school on a part-time basis. These three dominant patterns are consistent for both enrolled students and adults who attain the bachelor’s degree, and all impact the length of time that elapses between initial postsecondary enrollment and bachelor’s degree attainment.

Multi-institutional attendance is common among bachelor’s degree recipients (Adelman, 1999, 2006). One of the greatest effects of attending more than one institution is longer time-to-degree (Adelman, 1999; Choy, 2002). Evidence of this long horizon exists in the 1992-93 and 2000-01 B&B cohort studies (Bradburn et al. 2003; McCormick & Horn, 1996). Among the 1999-2000 B&B cohort of graduates who were over the age of 25 when they attained the bachelor’s degree, 85 percent took more than six years to complete their degrees (Bradburn et al. 2003, Tables I.6, II.1). In fact, for adult graduates, an average of nearly 14 years elapsed between the time of initial postsecondary entry and bachelor’s degree completion (the median was almost 15 years) (Bradburn et al. 2003, Table II.12).

Adelman (1999, 2006) finds strong multi-institutional attendance patterns among bachelor's degree recipients who are 30 years of age and under. Similarly, among 1999-2000 bachelor’s degree recipients ages 25 and over, 86 percent attended two or more institutions, and nearly half attended three or more institutions (Bradburn et al. 2003,
Tables I.6, II.6). Thus, the time that elapses between enrollment and attainment is extended for adults, and adult learners typically attend more than one institution to earn the bachelor’s degree.

Adult students may attend more than one institution due to interruptions in enrollment. Students of all ages stop in and out of the postsecondary system, which impacts persistence and attainment. Choy (2001) found that non-traditional-age learners who stop out do so for longer periods of time than traditional-age students (p. 25). Bradburn et al. (2003) found among 1999-2000 bachelor’s degree recipients between the ages of 30 and 39, more than two-thirds had stopped out of higher education for 36 or more months (Table II.5). Adult students are likely to turn to education at times of transition if they have had previous experience with postsecondary education (Kim et al. 2004, p. 16). Returning to postsecondary education has a positive effect on attaining the bachelor’s degree. Jacobs and King (2002) found that adult women with previous college experience increase their chances of finishing school each time they re-enter higher education.

The selection of the institution also affects degree attainment. As reported above, adult students are as likely to enroll in a two-year college as they are at a four-year institution at various times during their college careers, and a third or more begin their postsecondary education at community colleges. Among the 1992-93 B&B cohort of graduates who were over the age of 25 when they attained the degree, nearly one-third began their postsecondary studies at a public two-year institution (McCormick & Horn, 1996, Table I.4). The proportion of non-traditional-age graduates who began at public two-year institutions rose to 37 percent among the 2000-01 B&B cohort of graduates.
(Bradburn et al. 2003, Table II.4). This data indicates that to attain a bachelor’s degree, the adult learner must transfer to and finish the baccalaureate studies at a four-year college or university, contributing to patterns of multi-institutional attendance.

In addition to institutional choice, part-time or full-time enrollment status also impacts degree attainment. As reported above, most adult learners enroll in postsecondary education as part-time students. Part-time attendance extends time-to-degree completion. For example, among 1999-2000 B&B cohort graduates over the age of 25, an average of nearly 168 months elapsed between the time of postsecondary entry and bachelor’s degree completion (Bradburn et al. 2003, Table II.12). The extended period of attendance means that part-time students are subject to greater fluctuations in tuition costs over a longer period of time, as compared to full-time students. Moreover, part-time students may apply for and receive financial aid, but the number of hours in which part-time students enroll affects the type and amount of aid (FAFSA, 2005; Flint & Frey, 2003). Thus, the costs of attending college play a significant role in attainment.

In addition, Jacobs and King (2002) found that part-time attendance dramatically decreased adult learners’ chances of completing a bachelor’s degree. Part-time attendance may increase the risk of stopping or dropping out when the student is unable to integrate into the academic community. Integrating into the academic community within an institution is attributed to organizational, social and educational structures and priorities at an institution (Braxton, Hirschy, & McClendon, 2004; Tinto, 1987). On the organizational level, an institutional structure without accommodations for non-traditional-age students via course schedules and services demonstrates little commitment to adult and commuting students, increasing the risk of departure (Braxton et al. 2004).
Over time, institutions may shift their focus from one student group to another. Adult students enrolling part-time may experience a shift in organizational focus over an extended period of enrollment because of changing institutional priorities.

Socially, part-time students experience the competing demands of responsibilities external to their participation in postsecondary education, including work, family and other social obligations (Braxton et al. 2004; Fairchild, 2003; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). Adult students evaluate the allocation of time and energy devoted to collegiate participation and external demands numerous times over several years. Their activities, responsibilities, and priorities are likely to change, as in becoming parents or changing jobs. Thus, the changing nature of external responsibilities combined with the extended period of part-time enrollment affects persistence and attainment.

Lastly, the type of instruction and learning activities affects persistence for part-time students. Classroom communities form when faculty actively involve students in the process of learning, fostering academic integration (Braxton et al. 2004, pp. 48-49). This is especially important in the absence of other well-defined communities suitable and available to part-time, adult students. Academic integration mitigates the risk of student departure and affects persistence (Braxton et al. 2004; Tinto, 1987). Thus, the longer time-to-degree, the higher costs, the larger debt, and other related factors associated with part-time attendance may have a negative effect on degree attainment.

In sum, time-to-degree and attainment rates are influenced by the number of credits amassed toward the degree at each point of re-entry, enrollment patterns (attending multiple institutions and interruptions in enrollment), attendance status (part-
time or full-time), and, enrollment at type of institution (two-year or four-year) (Adelman, 1999, 2006; Choy, 2001; Horn, 1998).

**Gender**

Adult women are participating in postsecondary education in unprecedented numbers, giving rise to increasing numbers of women attaining the bachelor’s degree as older adults. The proportion of women between the ages of 25 to 29 years with at least a bachelor's degree has grown rapidly since 1940; degree attainment rates for women are expected to continue to increase, outpacing those of men (Gerald & Hussar, 2003; Hussar & Bailey, 2006; Mortenson, 1998). Between 1992 and 2005, among adults 25 to 29 years of age, more women than men attained the bachelor’s degree (Kominski & Adams, 1994; Stoops, 2004; U.S. Census, 1996, 1998, 2004a, 2005b). Among older non-traditional-age bachelor’s degree recipients, more women earn the degree after the age of 30 than men (Bradburn et al. 2003, Table I.6). The trend in the rising number of women attaining the bachelor’s degree is reflective of more participation in higher education among women.

**Parenthood and Significant Personal Relationships**

Parenthood appears to be a defining characteristic of certain age groups among adult bachelor’s degree recipients. Younger non-traditional-age graduates are more likely to be childless than older adult graduates. The 1999-2000 B&B cohort data show that 72 percent of graduates who were ages 25 to 29 at the time they received the degree were childless (Bradburn et al. 2003, Table I.8). This is congruent with Adelman’s (1999, 2006) assertion that parenthood decreases the chances of earning the bachelor’s degree among students who are under the age of 30. However, parenthood does not
impede degree attainment among graduates 30 years of age and over. For instance, in the 1999-2000 B&B cohort, approximately 60 percent of graduates who were ages 30 and over at the time of degree completion were parents of one or more children (Bradburn et al. 2003, Table I.8).

Marital status of bachelor’s degree recipients also seems to follow particular patterns by age groups. Among non-traditional-age graduates over the age of 25 when they received the degree, 51 percent of graduates ages 25 to 29 were single/never married, while 60 percent of graduates ages 30 to 39, and 66 percent of graduates 40 years of age and over, were married (Bradburn et al. 2003, Table I.8). The proportion of failed marriages rose among older graduates, as 17 percent of graduates ages 30 to 39 and 21 percent of graduates ages 40 and over were divorced or going through separations (Bradburn et al. 2003, Table I.7). Thus, adult graduates are more likely to be parents and married as they age, and neither status appears to impede bachelor’s degree attainment.

Racial and Ethnic Characteristics

White/Non-Hispanic adults 25 years of age and over earn more bachelor’s degrees than any other racial and ethnic group. However, among adults age 25 and over, there is a trend toward greater racial and ethnic diversity. For instance, Bradburn et al. (2003) found that eight percent of degree recipients (of all ages) in 1999-2000 were Black/African-American/Non-Hispanic. Among all Black/African-American/Non-Hispanic graduates, 40 percent earned the bachelor’s degree after the age of 25 (Bradburn et al. 2003, Table 2). Similarly, 8.6 percent of degree recipients (of all ages) were Hispanic or Latino; and, among Hispanic or Latino graduates, 39 percent earned the bachelor’s degree after the age of 25 (Bradburn et al. 2003, Table 2). These data show
trends, especially that among non-White racial and ethnic groups, a significant proportion of bachelor’s degree recipients are attaining the degree after the age of 25.

Bachelor’s Degree Attainment in the Future

Day and Bauman (2000) combine past census data with a sophisticated analysis of educational attainment levels of cohorts, shifts in the ethnic composition of the population, and high levels of immigration to project a four to five percentage point rise in bachelor’s degree attainment rates between the years of 2003 and 2028. Consistent with other U.S. Census reports, Day and Bauman conclude that the growth in the U.S. population will continue to fuel the trend of greater participation in postsecondary education; therefore educational attainment rates will rise.

A Typical Non-Traditional-Age Graduate

The typical non-traditional-age bachelor’s degree recipient is between 25 and 40 years of age, has moderate-to-high socioeconomic status, incurs debt to meet educational expenses, and enrolls as a part-time student in several institutions, assembling a portfolio of credits and academic experiences to eventually meet degree requirements. The graduate works while pursuing the degree. And, after attaining the degree, the typical graduate is employed. The graduate is married, has children, and is a White/Non-Hispanic woman, but her peers who will graduate in subsequent years will increasingly be racially diverse. With the exception of socioeconomic status, this profile is similar to the profile of the currently enrolled adult learners who have yet to attain the degree, and it provides a comprehensive description of the older graduates.
What Makes the Difference?

If the profile of adult students is comparable to that of adult graduates, what accounts for low attainment rates among adults? The unmistakable fact is that even with projected gains in attainment rates, nearly three quarters of the American population will not attain a minimum of a bachelor’s degree by the end of the first quarter of the 21st century (Day & Bauman, 2000). This plateauing of attainment rates may have political, social and economic implications, despite evidence suggesting a strong need for higher levels of education among adults in the U.S. population. Cook and King (2004) assert “… dramatic shifts in the U.S. labor market, incessant advancements in technology, and the globalization of the U.S. economy, the education of adult students has become vital to the future of 21st century America” (p. 1).

The following sections address this question by analyzing factors affecting motivation to learn and persist, as well as critical challenges faced by adult learners.

Factors Affecting Adult Motivation to Learn and Persist

Integration of Motivational Factors

Several complex socioeconomic and demographic factors shape the composition of the non-traditional age population and characterize adults who have attained the bachelor’s degree. These demographic and social characteristics describe the adult population and lead researchers to conclude that very compelling reasons exist regarding why participation in higher education is beneficial for non-traditional-age students. While these advantages include increased social and economic opportunities, higher education also provides a more inconspicuous benefit for adults—a developmental
process that has psychological, philosophical, and cultural dimensions. The integration of social, economic, psychological, and cultural factors illuminates adult student motives for enrollment, persistence and attainment, in concert with the demands and responsibilities of modern adult life.

_Socioeconomic Factors_

Adult students have several motives for participating in higher education. “Motives are reasons people hold for initiating and performing voluntary behavior” (Reiss, 2004, p. 179). As previously discussed, powerful economic forces influence enrollment decisions. A number of experts in adult education have analyzed research about adult participation in higher education. In addition, several well-known and often-cited studies exist. One prominent survey is the NCES *National Household Education Survey*, which has been conducted triennially since 1969 (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). Aslanian and Brickell (1980, 1988) conducted another frequently cited survey of adult participation in education (Cross, 1981; Kasworm, 2003; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). These surveys reveal socially-oriented motives. These surveys show adults enroll in postsecondary educational programs primarily to advance careers, presumably for financial gain and greater social status, and, to fulfill personal goals associated with professional occupations (Aslanian & Brickell, 1980, 1988; Courtney, 1992; Kim et al. 2004). Mortenson (2001) and Horn (1996) concur, finding career advancement potential is key to enrollment decisions. The focus on career advancement, social mobility, and economics suggests adults take a pragmatic approach to enrollment decisions. Moreover, social dimensions affect motives for pursuing, participating, and persisting in higher education.
Psychosocial Factors

The orientation toward social and personal development has been firmly established for nearly 40 years. Research about adult learning, conducted in the 1960’s and 1970’s, has focused on the social and psychological orientations of non-traditional-age participants in learning situations that include formal education, such as postsecondary studies, as well as informal education, such as mastering a new hobby. One renowned study on adult motivational factors is Houle’s (1961) three-way typology on the drive of active adult learners to constantly pursue learning activities (Pourchot, 1999, p. 41). Three types of adult learners include: a) goal-oriented learners, who seek concrete objectives, b) activity-oriented learners, who pursue the activity of learning, and c) learning-oriented learners who are focused on learning (Cross, 1981, pp. 82-83). This line of inquiry suggests interrelated psychological factors influence decisions related to enrollment. These types of learner motivations are layered onto social motivations for many adult learners. For example, an adult learner may seek a degree to fulfill the objective of meeting requirements for a new higher-paying job with managerial responsibilities, which would fulfill both the desire to provide (via financial stability) and to achieve greater social status (via professional position). In another instance, an adult student may have a strong desire to constantly learn, so the student aspires to a career in research, and, earning a degree will provide an entrée to such occupations. In both of these examples, a prominent career objective prevails, while psychological orientations to adult motives for learning also occur. Therefore, adult motivations are multifaceted.

Research by Tough (1968) and Penland (1979) feature the psychological dimensions of adult participation in higher education, with a focus on self-directed
learning in both formal and informal educational settings (Cross, 1981; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). Through a combination of Houle’s (1961) typology and studies of Boshier’s (1971) *Education Participation Scale*, Morstain and Smart (1974) identified six factors related to motives for adult participation: a) social relationships, b) external expectations, c) social welfare, d) professional advancement, e) escape/stimulation, and, f) cognitive interest (Cross, 1981). These factors represent a psychosocial dimension to participation in educational activities among adults, and suggest that internal and external motivational forces influence enrollment decisions.

Merriam and Caffarella (1999) summarize major findings from several studies and conclude that reasons for adult participation, including the profile of adults who participate in educational activities, had remained remarkably stable over three decades. Even with the added dimension of psychosocial factors, the top reasons for participation (i.e., economics and career development) remain the same. The lack of change may be due to the type of research conducted and results of the many surveys and data analyses.

After synthesizing and critiquing a substantial amount of research conducted on adult motivation to participate in educational activities, Cross (1981) concluded that the research described adult learning and learner motivations rather than explained them. This conclusion is congruent with details presented above about the demographic profiles of adult learners and graduates. The profile of the non-traditional-age learner that I assembled yields few clues about motives behind participation. This has been problematic for a number of years. Anderson and Darkenwald (1979) conducted a multiple regression analysis on a national database of adult learners (Thompson, 1992). The analysis did not reveal motives for participation. As a result, Anderson and
Darkenwald (1979) concluded “90 percent of whatever it is that leads adults to participate in and drop out from adult education has not been identified by this or other similar studies conducted in the past” (p. 5).

**Psychological, Social and Cultural Factors**

At the same time as research was being conducted on adult motives to participate in educational activities, a substantial amount of work was being done to shape the whole enterprise of adult education. One goal of this work was to illuminate distinctive characteristics of adult learners, including their motives for participation and their drive to persist. The emergence of two prominent models of adult education, andragogy and self-directed learning, in the 1960’s and 1970’s, provided key frameworks upon which new educational practices and critical reflections of non-traditional learners have been developed (Merriam, 2001a). The nature of motivation in adults is a key feature in both of these models and in subsequent research. Furthermore, these two models address motivation and explain the interplay of the adult learner in terms of psychological, sociological, educational and cultural contexts of the educational environment.

Knowles’ model of andragogy, based in humanistic psychology, emerged in 1975. It features the educational and psychological dimensions of learning among adults. Andragogy aims to show the developmental process of the learner as individually focused with the adult student in charge of his or her own learning (Knowles et al. 1998, 2005). The notion of independence is the pinnacle of development in a number of other related humanistic frameworks, including Maslow’s (1943) classic theory of human motivation (Boeree, 2004). In adults, the evolution toward self-actualized learning fuels motivation. From this perspective, a distinction occurs between internal and external motivation. The
andragogical model posits “adults are more responsive to internal motivators than external motivators” (Knowles et al. 2005, p. 72). Thus, the andragogical framework indicates that motivation is a developmental process for adults in educational settings.

Self-directed learning is grounded in humanistic philosophy, and one goal is to provide the learner with a catalyst to move toward self-direction (Merriam, 2001a, p. 9). Tough (1968) built upon Houle’s (1961) three motivational typologies to provide “the first comprehensive description of self-directed learning as a form of study” (Merriam, 2001a, p. 8). Self-directed learning aims to foster transformational learning and social action. From the self-directed learning perspective, motivation is internally oriented, while the catalyst for learning may come from both internal and external sources. Both of these pioneering lines of inquiry posit that different dimensions of motivation are interrelated to participation and persistence among adult learners.

The adult education perspective, with its focus on the development of the learner in social, psychological and cultural contexts, remains complex in scope and continues to evolve. This multidimensional approach has been observed in the literature regarding non-traditional-age learners (Caffarella & Clark, 1999). This trend toward multiplicity and integration of research traditions is a reflection of the current state of growing diversity among adult learners. As a result, no singular description of the motives for adult participation, or for motivation to persist in higher education and other learning activities exists, because of the heterogeneous nature of this population of learners.
Motivation

Given the heterogeneity of adult learners in higher education, numerous explanations arise for the driving forces behind participation and persistence, and motivation is commonly associated with this line of inquiry. Motivation is a “hypothetical construct, an invented definition that provides a possible concrete causal explanation of behavior” (Baldwin, 1967, as cited in Wlodkowski, 1999, p. 1). The difficulty in the use of a hypothetical concept is the variety of assumptions and terminologies associated with the definition and the fact that it is an undefined concept that cannot be observed or measured (Wlodkowski, 1999, pp. 1-3).

Motivation Described

Motivation may be an internalized cognitive and/or emotional process that “energizes, directs and maintains our behavior” (Gage & Berliner, 1998, p. 360). Four types of conceptions of motivation are featured in the educational psychology literature. The first is single motive, as in Freud’s assumption that the libido influences all human behavior; the second is the presence of two opposing forces that motivate behavior; the third is the existence of multiple motives; and, the fourth is that motives are formed in a hierarchy, as in Maslow’s theory of motivation (Gage & Berliner, 1998, pp. 360-361). In the realm of educational psychology, most research has focused on children’s academic motivation, and research on adults is scarce (Pourchot, 1999, p. 2).

A general consensus is emerging that extrinsic and intrinsic achievement orientations relate to motivation, and that these orientations are not dichotomous (Gage & Berliner, 1999; Goleman, 1995; Pourchot, 1999; Wlodkowski, 1999). Pourchot (1999) synthesizes research conducted in the 1980’s and 1990’s about adult development and
self-determination theory and posits that motivational orientations lie on a continuum (pp. 2-9). Internal drives, combined with external events and pressures, prompt adults to participate in adult education activities. “Intrinsic motivation is characterized by personal interest in the activity itself. Activity is extrinsically motivated when it is instrumental to some separable consequence and the locus of causality is primarily external” (Pourchot, 1999, p. 6). These are neither exclusive nor opposites, as elements of both orientations are common in situations faced by adults. For example, a company may require an employee to earn a degree for advancement, which would be an extrinsic motivator, and, simultaneously, the employee may want to pursue a degree to fulfill a long-held personal goal of achievement, which is an intrinsic motivator.

Motivation has generally been regarded as an influence upon an activity at a particular time, rather than a developmental, personal growth variable (Pourchot, 1999, p. 10). More recent lines of inquiry about motivation illuminate the interplay between adult development and achievement orientation, similar to the multidimensional perspective of motives to enroll. Pourchot (1999) conducted a study of adult students over the age of 25 to discover if motivation might be a developmental process in adults. While adults generally move toward a more intrinsic orientation with less emphasis on external pressures as they age, Pourchot found a curvilinear pattern of age and intrinsic motivation occurs in academic settings. To his surprise, among adult learners, Pourchot found that intrinsic motivation declined with age, after peaking in middle age (between ages 35 and 45), while extrinsic motivation steadily decreased with age. Thus, older adults (age 45 and over) display both low intrinsic and extrinsic motivational orientations in academic settings. This finding may explain why persistence to degree attainment among older
non-traditional-age learners decreases with age. Moreover, these results appear to show that motivation is a developmental variable and that the type and level of motivational orientations change with age. This line of inquiry is in its infancy and will likely be further developed with additional research (Pourchot, 1999, pp. 109-119).

Another emerging line of inquiry is the relationship between conscious and unconscious processes and behaviors, as exhibited in emotions. Motivation is a central theme of research involving emotions and success (Gage & Berliner, 1998, Goleman, 1995, 1998; Nelson & Low, 2003). Motivation is a combination of self-awareness, as in knowing one’s strengths and weaknesses, exhibiting self-control by suppressing impulses, remaining focused on tasks and activities, and managing distractions such as stress and other responsibilities in service of a goal (Goleman, 1995, 1998; Nelson & Low, 2003). Motivation is “the marshalling of feelings of enthusiasm, zeal and confidence in achievement” (Goleman, 1995, p. 79).

Nelson and Low (2003) set out an emotional learning system model to address the lifelong process of positive self-development and personal change. Emotional intelligence is the primary foundation of the model. “Emotional intelligence is a confluence of developed skills and abilities” (Nelson & Low, 2003, p. 23). According to Nelson and Low (2003), the four components of emotional intelligence are a) self-awareness and empathy, b) establishing and maintaining healthy and effective relationships, c) getting along with others, and, d) dealing effectively with everyday demands and pressures (p. 23). Emotions affect the brain’s working memory, and they can enhance or impair cognitive function, which is why mastering emotions is one key to success (Goleman, 1995). Motivation is common to Nelson and Low’s as well as other
prominent emotional intelligence models (Goleman, 1995, 1998; Nelson & Low, 2003; Salovey & Mayer, 1990). With the centrality of motivation in these models, the emergence of emotions as a component of cognitive processes and behaviors seems to suggest that motivation is developmental in nature, rather than a facet of a particular time or activity.

In another study, Henry and Basile (1994) used interest as a proxy for motivation. Motivation was determined by enrollment in or expressed interest in participating in a non-degree, non-credit course at an urban university by an adult learner. The goal of the study was to determine differences between participants and non-participants, assuming all had an initial interest and were motivated learners. Their results showed that meeting people and getting out of the house, having interest in a course, paying out-of-pocket, having a major life change in the past year, and institutional barriers increased the odds of non-participation, while receiving a brochure or promotional materials at work increased the odds of participation (p. 77). The finding that major life changes are detrimental to enrollment are in contrast to Aslanian and Brickell’s (1980, 1988) findings, yet Henry and Basile (1994) posit that the nature and extent of life changes, such as parenthood, divorce, and bereavement, may dominate decision-making and sway adults not to participate in educational programs while going through a transition. “As expected, the findings indicate that these reasons can spark an interest, perhaps even intent, but are not strong enough to sustain the impulse to enroll” (Henry & Basile, 1994, p. 78).

The enrollment and graduate data seem to affirm this conclusion. In fall 2005, among adult learners, one-third are ages 25 to 29 (NCES, 2007, Table 178). Further, Horn et al. (2002) find that 65 percent of adult students ages 25 to 29 are childless (Table
C). As such, many young adult students are childless, indicating that they are not making a transition to parenthood while involved with academic work.

In addition, the two B&B cohort analyses provide evidence of this same pattern, especially in relation to age, parenthood, and persistence. Most bachelor’s degree recipients are young and childless. In the 1999-2000 B&B cohort, among adult degree recipients, approximately half were ages 25 to 29, and 72 percent of graduates ages 25 to 29 are childless (Bradburn et al. 2003, Tables 1.8, 2). McCormick and Horn (1996) present similar findings among the 1992-93 B&B cohort (Table 3). This evidence seems to suggest a similar pattern among graduates as well as adults who are enrolled. These data may also suggest that adults who are under the age of 30 and are parents may not be interested in participating in formal education activities.

Furthermore, Henry and Basile (1994) surmise that adults may have other outlets available to satisfy their desire to meet new people and learn something new that may be more convenient, less time-consuming, more appropriate for their situation, or, less costly than the educational programs offered by colleges and universities. Henry and Basile’s (1994) conclusions seem to suggest a psychosocial dimension to motivation, interest, and participation in educational activities. These findings further underscore the multidimensional nature of more recent lines of inquiry of motivation.

In order to understand the motives behind participation in higher education for adults, Thompson (1992) explored “participation as an holistic phenomenon” (p. 95). Thompson analyzed relevant research conducted prior to her study and found that most studies resulted in an implication “that participation is synonymous with motivation” (p. 95). Thus, her purpose was to “add to existing models of participation and understanding
of persistence/dropout” (p. 103). As a result of her study, Thompson found motivation, participation, and persistence have many dimensions.

Thompson’s (1992) study participants were registered nurses who were enrolled in bachelor of science in nursing (BSN) degree programs, were contemplating pursuing the nursing degree, or had stopped (or dropped) out of a BSN program. Thompson’s findings revealed seven themes, including a) finding the right time, b) maintaining a balance, c) commitment, d) allocating time and energy, e) juggling, f) support, and g) non-support (p. 97). Commitment is the first determinant of participation, from there, finding the right time and reallocating time and energy follow. Further, Thompson found that thoughts of participation are first sparked by intrinsic factors, such as self-evaluation, and then they move to extrinsic conditions, such as opportunities and barriers (p. 99). These findings are similar to Pourchot’s conclusions in two main areas. First, a strong suggestion exists that motivation and participation are developmental processes. Second, intrinsic and extrinsic motivational orientations are integrated.

Among nurses in the study, Thompson (1992) found a strong theme of reslicing the pie. This term illustrates the finite sum of time and energy that adults allot to roles and responsibilities in their lives. Counselors working with adults often use the pie metaphor as an exercise to help clients assess and manage various roles and responsibilities (p. 100). When adults add participation in higher education to their activities and roles, a finite sum of time and energy needs to be reallocated and adjusted to accommodate the new activity or role, thus the pie is resliced.

Time and energy for roles and responsibilities are often externally controlled, including work hours, commuting time, and child-rearing activities. Thus, Thompson
(1992) found that an internal stimulus starts the process of exploring the feasibility of participation. When commitment is strong, then the adult can address the external factors related to roles and responsibilities, to reallocate time and energy demands. If reslicing the pie is successful, then participation is feasible (p. 98). Thompson’s study suggests that decisions related to participation in formal educational activities are multifaceted. This line of inquiry is in its infancy and future research may continue to refine the interrelated concepts of motivation and participation.

In addition to the frameworks I present above, a behaviorist perspective offers another point of view about motivation. Behaviorists believe that human desire stems from the force of stimuli and reinforcements (Simons, Irwin, & Drinnien, 2005). This perspective suggests a strong extrinsic component to motivation. In terms of participation in educational activities, this framework is often obvious in terms of requirements and rewards. For example, an employee’s motivation may be stimulated to earn a degree by the offer of a promotion and salary increase after attaining the degree. Skinner (1938) is a leading behaviorist who posits that motives are private and cannot be known with scientific certainty (Reiss, 2000, p.7). Therefore, the stimulus and reinforcement may or may not be effective, since the value each individual associates with them may not be strong enough to move a person to action or to behave in a particular manner. The level of effectiveness seems to suggest a philosophical dimension to motivation. In other words, there is a value (or meaning) associated with the baiting, rewarding and reinforcing of actions and activities to produce a particular outcome.

Reiss (2000, 2004) suggests a multifaceted sensitivity model with psychological and philosophical dimensions. The Reiss Profile (2000, 2004) is a model of 16 basic or
fundamental desires (intrinsic motivations or IMs) that guide voluntary human behavior, which are defined as end purposes, universal motivators, and, of psychological importance (Reiss, 2004, p. 185). The 16 basic desires include a) power, b) curiosity, c) independence, d) status, e) social contact, f) vengeance, g) honor, h) idealism, i) physical exercise, j) romance, k) family, l) order, m) eating, n) acceptance, o) tranquility, and, p) saving (p. 187). Reiss and associates have conducted factorial and other analyses to test the validity of the model (Havercamp & Reiss, 2003; Reiss & Havercamp, 1998). As a result, Reiss asserts that humans strive to fulfill these desires, and individuals have varying levels of preference for each of the desires, creating a unique and complex mix.

“The sensitivity model holds that 16 genetically distinct desires (IMs) combine to determine many psychologically significant motives” (Reiss, 2004, p. 191). This model is used as a determinant of voluntary behaviors and is applicable to discovering why adults participate and persist in formal educational programs. For example, an individual may have strong preferences for physical exercise and social contact, while also displaying tendencies for being curious, idealistic and wanting status, while not strongly preferring autonomy. A person with this combination of desires may strive to become a physical therapist, and attaining the appropriate educational credentials provides an entrée to that profession. The participation in educational activities and the attainment of appropriate credentials are neither primary nor intrinsic motivations, yet they serve as a means to practice in a profession that ultimately satisfies this person’s desires. Another individual may strongly prefer physical exercise, social contact and vengeance, and have little preference for idealism and independence. This combination may indicate a strong desire to participate in competitive athletic activities. Athletic activities are accessible in
a variety of settings, and, generally, formal education is not a prerequisite for participation. Therefore, this person would have little motivation to pursue educational activities to satiate this combination of desires. Since the combination of preferences is unique and individual, a complex perspective is warranted. Reiss argues that models ought to be multifaceted because “human individuality may be too diverse to be described adequately in terms of global categories such as IM and extrinsic motivation” (Reiss, 2004, p. 191).

Each of these studies’ results shows that the nature of motivation is complex. Several psychological perspectives exist, including humanistic and behaviorist frameworks, social considerations, such as roles and responsibilities, and philosophical dimensions, notably self-actualization, value, and relatedness. Similar to the complexity of describing why adults pursue educational activities, defining motivation and applying it to adult educational situations is challenging. An emerging idea is that motivation is interrelated to adult development. Given that no clear consensus prevails on the definition and nature of motivation, it is difficult to describe, observe and measure. Furthermore, since adults participate in educational activities while experiencing the pressures of modern adult life, there are many aspects of this conceptual framework to consider. Lastly, the increasing diversity of the adult population challenges experts to consider the multiplicities of social, cultural, and psychological aspects of motivation.

Persistence

Where motivation is complex, intangible, and difficult to measure, persistence in educational settings is a reliable measure of progress and a tangible result of the interaction of student effort and conditions that have psychological, social, cultural,
economic, and organizational dimensions. Several prominent frameworks, research studies, and models begin to explain the complexities of persistence and departure among adult college students, from both student and institutional perspectives. The major work in this area is briefly described below.

Involvement theory. Astin (1975) posits involvement affects persistence, and his theory of student involvement has a strong behavioral component. “Student involvement refers to the amount of physical and psychological energy that a student devotes to the academic experience” (Astin, 1988, p. 134). The academic experience encompasses the whole experience of being a college student, including academic and social activities, as well as developmental changes, such as identity formation, career choice and maturation. Astin’s focus is on learning and student development, and the ways in which students use their time, which results in particular behaviors in the collegiate environment. Accordingly, “the extent to which students are able to develop their talents in college is a direct function of the amount of time and effort they devote to activities designed to produce these gains” (Astin, 1988, p. 143).

The involvement theory was developed from a longitudinal study of college dropouts (Astin, 1988). The framework identifies factors in the college experience and environment that affect persistence (p. 144). This theory is most commonly associated with traditional-age undergraduate students at residential four-year colleges, because Astin posits residential status is the most important factor affecting attrition (p. 145). In addition, participation in Greek life, extracurricular activities, honors programs, faculty research, ROTC, collegiate sports and part-time on-campus employment positively influences involvement (p. 145). These are the types of activities to which full-time, in-
residence students generally have access, and may be beyond the resources, time, energy, and interests of part-time, commuting students as well as older learners.

According to Astin, student time and energy are institutional resources that need to be fully incorporated into institutional policies and practices to cultivate involvement (Astin, 1988, p. 157). Like Thompson’s (1992) findings from the research on motivation and persistence among older nursing students, the emphasis on the finite sum of time and energy resources is relevant to non-traditional-age learners. Astin (1988) posits that time and energy spent on college-related activities is but one demand on time and energy. Environmental factors, such as family and job responsibilities, also make demands. As a result of these varied demands, students allot time and energy to academic pursuits, including attending classes, studying, and meeting with faculty in concert with their other responsibilities, interests and obligations.

The manner in which students use their time and energy varies, and this results in different behaviors. Students who spend comparable amounts of time studying may display varying levels of involvement, depending on the effectiveness and goals of their study strategies, in relation to other obligations, commitments and priorities. For example, two busy adults complete an assigned reading for a class, employing two different approaches. One takes notes while reading and writes out clarifying questions to ask in class, to understand and use the material in an upcoming term paper. The other student scans the passage, picking out the main ideas to complete the assignment quickly, because she is facing work deadlines and pressures related to family responsibilities. In this example, the first student shows more involvement, takes longer to finish, comprehends the material well and simultaneously prepares for a term paper, ultimately
conserving time and energy over the course of the semester. The second student displays less involvement, finishes rapidly, has a summary of the main ideas, and completes the assignment without expending too much time and energy on this particular task, freeing her time up for other obligations. The behaviors reveal quantitative (hours spent studying) and qualitative (comprehension) dimensions of involvement, and show that the investment of time and energy results in different degrees of involvement (Astin, 1988, p. 136). This example also demonstrates that involvement is multidimensional, integrating external factors and behavioral, social, and environmental aspects of student experiences.

In sum, the college experience spurs developmental changes, some of which are linked to identity formation, solidifying career aspirations, and maturity. Involvement is associated with greater than average changes in the characteristics of entering freshmen, which is logical because this line of inquiry measures entering student characteristics and attitudes against the results of follow up surveys (Astin, 1988). Astin (1988) asserts “college attendance in general serves to strengthen students’ competence, self-esteem, artistic interests, liberalism, hedonism, and religious apostasy, and to weaken their business interests” (p. 147). These changes are the result of involvement, and Astin’s research shows the greater the involvement by a student, the greater the chances of a student persisting.

Astin (2005) extends the theory of involvement beyond persistence in his research on attainment. Among first-time, full-time freshmen, entering student characteristics prove to be a significant predictor of degree completion within six years (p. 7). The focus of the research Astin conducted in 2005 demonstrates that institutional degree completion rates can be predicted on the basis of a) entering student characteristics, b) environmental
characteristics, and, c) college characteristics (pp. 7-8). Briefly, the results show that the interaction of the student in the collegiate environment produces behaviors indicative of student involvement, increasing the accuracy of degree completion rates. Astin (2005) concludes that the greater the level of involvement, the greater the student’s chances of completing the degree (p. 12).

While Astin’s 2005 study seeks to more accurately predict degree completion rates among traditional-age students, the premise may be suitable for non-traditional-age students as well because it emphasizes the interaction of the student in the collegiate environment and changes that interaction produces, thus allowing for the evaluation of different types of students in a variety of collegiate environments.

Involvement theory consistently demonstrates that entering student characteristics are a primary component of the degree attainment puzzle, especially among traditional-age learners. While involvement theory is normally suitable for evaluating traditional-age populations, it may be applicable to non-traditional-age students. The emphasis on change and development appears to be the greatest strength of involvement theory, which is logical because of research design, the population, and the definition of persistence. Further inquiry is warranted to determine the applicability of this theory for the change and developmental processes that non-traditional-age students experience in the collegiate environment and their effect on attainment, possibly with an alternate research design (if longitudinal studies are impractical), expanding the definition of involvement beyond residence and activities, and/or an adjustment of the factors indicating change and development that are relevant to adult learners.
Academic resources, momentum and degree completion rates. Adelman (1999, 2006) presents an alternative frame of reference for analyzing attainment. In two studies, the original in 1999 and a follow-up replication in 2006, Adelman presents comprehensive analyses of national cohorts to identify and analyze the relationships between academic resources, momentum factors, and degree completion rates (Adelman, 2006, p. 3). The dependent variable is completion of the bachelor’s degree, and these two studies depart from the familiar framework of institutional retention. These studies follow the path of the student, not that of institutional performance, thus the focus is on persistence and attainment. In this context, the term persistence needs further clarification. Adelman re-frames the definition of persistence, moving away from the idea that persistence is enrollment in successive/subsequent terms and/or years, regardless of the cumulative academic record; rather, he focuses on the accumulation of credits and requirements necessary to attain the bachelor’s degree. As a result, Adelman analyzes collegiate GPA, withdrawal patterns and the number of credits amassed in specific time frames.

Following analyses of factors in both studies, Adelman (1999, 2006) concludes that five major factors affect degree attainment for adults ages 30 and under. The factors are a) the intensity and quality of the secondary curriculum, b) completion of high school mathematics courses beyond Algebra 2, c) enrollment and academic progress factors, including continuous enrollment in postsecondary education, community college to 4-year college transfer and cumulative grade point average, d) amassing credits, such as ratio of attempted to completed courses, including withdrawals, along with earning 20 credits in the first calendar year, and, f) parenthood (Adelman, 1999, p. 62, pp. 82-87;
Adelman, 2006, pp. 5-6). The efficacy of academic factors is reinforced in other research (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005, pp. 396-398). However, the 1999-2000 B&B cohort data suggests that parenthood is not a risk factor for degree recipients over the age of 30 (Bradburn et al. 2003). In the context of Adelman’s research about primarily traditional-age students, the focus is on the academic realm of the student experience with parenthood as the only external factor influencing attainment.

The bases for Adelman’s (1999, 2006) research were data from details in cohort participant transcripts, rather than self-reported details or studies of retention or persistence at a single institution. The original study, published in 1999, ends when the cohort participants reach age 30. The second study (2006) follows the cohort to age 27. Adelman clearly asserts that the results in both studies are aimed at mostly traditional-age students. The findings illuminate patterns and factors that may impinge persistence among traditional-age and young adult learners, resulting in longer time-to-degree or prolonged periods of absence from the postsecondary system. In addition, the findings are applicable to the majority of the population (of all ages) that attains the degree, since most bachelor’s degree graduates are under the age of 30 when they attain the degree. For example, in both the 1992-93 B&B and 1999-2000 B&B cohorts of bachelor’s degree recipients, five out of six graduates were 29 years of age and younger (Bradburn et al. 2003, Table 1.1; McCormick & Horn, 1996, Table 1.2).

Furthermore, these conclusions may be applicable to the current population of non-traditional-age learners, since adults who have had postsecondary educational experience are more likely to return to higher education than those without college experience (Kim et al. 2004, p. 16). Thus, the findings provide starting points for further
investigation. Adelman (2006) suggests that students take a proactive stance and approach institutions as partners in meeting their educational goals, and that institutions use these analyses to evaluate the effectiveness of policies and programs related to student persistence and departures (pp. 108-109). In other words, Adelman’s suggestions for students and conclusions aimed at institutional policies emphasize the interaction between student and institution is related to persistence.

*Transfer credits and attainment.* Related to Adelman’s (1996, 2006) findings about forward momentum, which is the accumulation of academic credits applicable toward degree requirements, Wiggam (2004) and Doyle (2006) find the higher the number of transfer credits accepted, the greater the student’s chances are of persisting and attaining a bachelor’s degree. Wiggam (2004) analyzes the persistence of adults in a baccalaureate degree program. Persistence is defined as continuing enrollment in the first three semesters of a baccalaureate degree program. Wiggam’s results show “students receiving transfer credits are 2.6 times as likely to persist as students not receiving transfer credits” (p. 86).

In addition to affecting persistence, transfer credits show a positive relationship between the number of credits accepted and attainment. Doyle (2006) uses data from the NCES 2001 Beginning Postsecondary Students survey to calculate the bachelor’s degree attainment rates of community college transfer students, six years after their initial enrollment in higher education. In this cohort, among students who began their postsecondary education career at a public two-year institution, 25 percent were 24 years of age and over (Berkner, He, & Cataldi, 2002, Table 1.1C). Doyle (2006) finds that approximately half of the transfer students of all ages received credit for all of their
coursework completed at the community college (p. 58). “Among those who had all of their transfer credits accepted, 82 percent had graduated within six years with a bachelor’s degree”, 7.2 percent remained enrolled, while 11 percent were not enrolled (p. 58). While Doyle’s study includes traditional and non-traditional-age students, it provides evidence that transfer credits positively affect attainment.

**Student departure theory.** Tinto (1987, 1993) presents another perspective in his framework depicting individual student experiences within an institution, rather than broad-based, aggregate, enrollment patterns across multiple institutions. Similar to Adelman and Astin, Tinto’s theory of individual departure from institutions of higher education stresses the interaction of the student in the collegiate environment after enrollment. Student departure decisions arise “out of a longitudinal process of interactions between an individual with given attributes, skills, financial resources, prior educational experiences, and dispositions (intentions and commitments) and other members of the academic and social systems of the institution” (Tinto, 1993, p. 113). Precisely, the interactions propel students through a series of stages, including separation, transition and integration in the collegiate environment (p. 98). The process of moving through these phases, and the student’s perception and assessment of these stages, spur involvement as well as engagement with the collegiate community and environment to varying degrees.

The extent to which students overcome the discomfort of entering a new community, put forth the effort to join the academic and social systems at the institution, turn attention to academic and social pursuits, and connect to the college community determine whether or not the student will continue enrollment at an institution. According
to Tinto (1993), students achieve harmony with the college milieu and assume membership in the social and academic spheres when they perceive congruence between their abilities and the demands of academic life, find a good fit in the intellectual life of the institution, and make social connections through group membership or affiliations (pp. 51-53). Finances are also related to departure. Utilizing a cost/benefit analysis, students are more likely to persist if they are willing to assume the costs to acquire the benefit of the collegiate experience (p. 67). Students are more likely to persist in enrollment when they are satisfied with their integration into the college community and the integration is congruent with their abilities, needs, resources and social preferences. Lower levels of integration are associated with a lack of fit and higher likelihood of departure (p. 50).

In Tinto’s model of departure (1993), student attributes that directly effect departure decisions include a) family and community backgrounds, b) demographics, c) skills, d) financial resources, e) dispositions, and, f) prior schooling experiences and achievements (pp. 113-115). These characteristics influence academic performance (p. 115). External responsibilities also impact the student’s experience. Indirectly, these attributes and outside commitments affect departure decisions by determining the amount of time, effort and interest the student puts into the academic and social systems of the college, which helps or hinders the process of integration. Integration, in turn, is a key component in the formulation and assessment of the student’s goals and commitments, leading to the departure or continuance decision (p. 114). In the cases of mismatches between academic performance and student abilities (as well as capabilities), involuntary dismissal may result, but Tinto estimates that less than a quarter of all departures are
involuntary dismissals for academic reasons (p. 49). Thus, most departures are voluntary and are a result of the interaction between the student and the college’s academic and social environment.

Tinto (1993) asserts that the academic and social systems in the college environment are separate domains and influence departure decisions in a variety of ways. Integration into one system is not a necessary condition for integration into the other (p. 107). For example, when the majority of the student population at an institution is residential, full-time and traditional-age, the academic and social systems are structured to suit the needs of the traditional population. Classes and faculty office hours are scheduled during the day, social activities revolve around the residence halls, and faculty and staff work Monday through Friday during the day. Commuting, part-time and adult students may find this type of environment acceptable on a social level because they are not interested in the social aspects of the college to meet their educational goals. However, they may find the academic environment is incongruent with their needs, especially if they have job and family obligations that constrict their on-campus time. As a result, they may elect to depart because the structure of the academic system, combined with the constrictions on the student’s time, impinges opportunities for involvement and integration in the academic sphere, as in finding class times suitable for their schedules, being available for group projects, accessing faculty, tutoring, and advising assistance, as well as co-curricular activities. In this case, the departure is more heavily influenced by the interaction in the academic sphere than the social sphere.

The college environment, consisting of academic and social domains, creates a dominant campus culture. These domains are structured and evolve according to
institutional goals and the needs of various populations and stakeholders. The academic and social spheres are not proportionate, “and the degree of asymmetry appears to vary from institution to institution” (Tinto, 1993, p. 107). These are fluid systems that change according to the composition of the student body, market pressures to maintain a certain reputation or to meet enrollment targets, faculty work and research goals, along with overall mission and vision of the institution. Thus, Tinto’s model allows for unlimited forms and combinations of academic and social systems, ultimately influencing student departure decisions as a result of the interaction between the student and the systems.

Tinto (1993) posits that the departure model accounts for the experiences of non-traditional-age students, because the effect of external pressures is not limited or specified. A complete separation from communities external to the collegiate environment is not a necessary condition for full integration, because membership in the college community is temporary (pp. 105-106). As a result, the model does allow for a range of changes in developmental processes, appropriate for mature and older students, and it gives consideration to the reality of the pressures stemming from career, personal, financial, and family responsibilities.

Student departure at commuter institutions. Braxton et al. (2004) evaluate the efficacy of Tinto’s (1987, 1993) interaction model of student departure, acknowledging the paradigmatic status of Tinto’s theory while noting that empirical tests of the theory show mixed results (p. 7). The validity of the theory hinges on social and academic integration; social integration has strong empirical backing, while academic integration has only modest empirical support (pp. 10-18). Furthermore, the theory is problematic as applied in commuter and two-year institutional settings (pp. 16-18). This is key for
applicability to non-traditional-age populations, as adult student populations are concentrated at these types of institutions. With this analysis, Braxton et al. set out new propositions for evaluating the puzzling phenomenon of student departure.

Economic, organizational, psychological and sociological orientations provide the foundation for a conceptual model of student departure in commuter colleges and universities (Braxton et al. 2004, p. 35). Student entry characteristics, external environment, campus environment and academic communities comprise the major elements of the model of student departure from commuter colleges and universities (Braxton et al. 2004, pp. 42-43).

According to the model of student departure in commuter colleges and universities (Braxton et al. 2004), student entry characteristics directly affect persistence; these include motivation, control, self-efficacy, empathy, affiliation needs, parental education and anticipatory socialization (p. 43). Commuter institutions can be chaotic, with students, faculty and staff constantly coming and going. This lack of order can be unsettling for students who have a strong need for order and control, increasing the risk of departure (p. 45). Students who believe that they can achieve particular outcomes through their own efforts, instead of by luck or chance exhibit self-efficacy, and, they have a greater propensity to persist (p. 39). Students who are empathetic are more likely to depart, because they are influenced by how the responsibilities of student life affect others and are more apt to experience role conflicts (p. 39). Students who have a strong need to join groups and participate in extracurricular activities find the lack of formal social structures at commuter institutions unsatisfying, thus they are more likely to depart (p. 39).
Family background, support and attitudes impact persistence. According to Braxton et al. (2004) parental education affects students in two ways: one is the support they receive from immediate family members which has a positive affect on persistence, and two, the higher the level of parental education, the greater the likelihood of departure from a commuter institution (pp. 40-47). Evidence exists showing the effect on persistence is attributed to parental education level and is interrelated to socioeconomic status, support and expectations of the commuter institution’s environment. Students attending commuter institutions are more likely to depart when they are from high socioeconomic levels (p. 40). Students whose parents have attended college may form an impression of the collegiate experience, commonly characterized as a time of maturation, intense intellectual activity, as well as identity and career formation while living away from home in a residential setting. The institutional environment, student attendance patterns (full- and part-time), and the lack of residentiality, which characterize commuter institutions, are wholly different than these pre-conceived ideas of the collegiate experience, and it is this incongruence that is linked to departure (pp. 46-47). Moreover, the process of preparing to enter the collegiate environment increases the odds that a student will depart from a commuter institution. This is linked to the mismatch between the reality of the commuter institution’s milieu and the student’s expectations of the college experience (p. 41). These factors are multifarious, and the complex relationships between these variables demonstrate that entry characteristics directly impact initial institutional commitment, which influences subsequent institutional commitment, impacting persistence.
In Braxton et al.’s (2004) model of departure from commuter institutions, persistence is also affected by organizational factors. The internal campus environment, including academic communities and institutional environment, such as cost and commitment to student welfare, affects subsequent institutional commitment (pp. 43-49). At commuter institutions, academic communities form around classroom experiences (pp. 48-49). The degree to which faculty and campus culture cultivate community through classrooms and learning activities affect the development and support of these communities. For instance, commuter institutions that have block scheduling offer students the opportunity to connect with one another because they attend several classes with the same group of students (pp. 48-49). In addition, faculty who use active learning techniques, such as debates, small group assignments, and role-playing create opportunities for students to get to know one another and form ties (p. 48). In the absence of well-defined social structures, commuter institutions foster community through the academic activities, and these communities spur academic integration (p. 48). When a student has a greater level of academic integration, the student’s commitment to the institution grows, increasing the chances of persistence (p. 48). The student’s adeptness at negotiating the collegiate and external environments results in a departure or continuance decision (pp. 43-45).

In sum, Braxton et al. (2004) propose a new model of departure among students attending commuter institutions. The model is multidimensional, relating social, economic, psychological and organizational factors. The model stresses the interaction of the student in the collegiate environment. The applicability to non-traditional-age students is implied, as a large number of students who attend commuter colleges and
universities are 25 years of age and over. The model does not distinguish between traditional-age and non-traditional-age students. The model does not define departure in such a way that would account for students with enrollment lapses and returns, as is typical of non-traditional-age students. Further research is warranted to determine if this model is suitable for adult students, possibly incorporating socioeconomic status, social expectations, such as parenthood, and support from significant others in terms relevant to older, independent adults. Finally, this line of inquiry could be expanded to link the model of departure to degree attainment, underscoring Adelman’s (1999, 2006) assertion that persistence be measured by progress toward attainment and credit accumulation, regardless of institution, not simply enrollment in one term to the next at the same institution.

**Non-traditional student attrition.** My review thus far has focused on student involvement, development, and interaction in the collegiate environment. To further illuminate the complexity of persistence and attainment, it is important to include a focus on institutional perspectives of persistence, attrition and retention. Bean and Metzner (1985) present a conceptual model of nontraditional student attrition (p. 491). The model posits four sets of variables related to student drop-out decisions, a) background and defining factors, including age and educational goals, b) academic variables, including course availability, advising, and study habits, c) environmental variables, such as finances, family responsibilities, and opportunity to transfer, and, d) social integration variables (pp. 490-491). The model depicts the direct and indirect effects of these multifaceted factors, as well as compensatory interaction effects (p. 491).
One major distinction of this model, as compared to others, is the prominence of environmental support variables. Briefly, Bean and Metzner (1985) posit that non-traditional-age students are more affected by their environment than by other variables. Environmental support is defined as hours of employment, finances, outside encouragement, family responsibilities, and opportunity to transfer. The effect is felt directly and as an interaction between variables. For example, if an adult learner has environmental support that is conducive to higher education (such as adequate child care, hours of employment that do not conflict with class hours, encouragement from significant others) the environmental support factors will compensate for other factors, such as lower academic support (i.e., poor advising, uncertainty of major, and lack of course availability). At the same time, this compensatory effect does not work in both directions. When a student is unable to reconcile work hours with class hours, the student will likely depart (pp. 491-492). Thus, the environmental support factors are key because they so strongly impact and shape the adult learner’s experience and decisions related to departure (p. 502). Although environmental factors are normally outside the control of the institution, the institution that understands the impact of these factors may be able to develop policies and delivery systems that can mediate the effect of environmental constraints. For example, online courses may eliminate the conflict between work and class hours, and financial aid counseling aimed at adults as well as tuition payment plans may alleviate the financial burden. It is the acknowledgement that these factors exist and have an affect on retention that may push institutions to address these environmental concerns.
Bean and Metzner (1985) focus on academic performance by non-traditional students in terms of persistence. Poor academic performance that fails to meet minimum standards results in involuntary departure, and this is the case for traditional and non-traditional students (p. 520). The students who voluntarily depart have a range of beginning and cumulative academic records, and, in relation to departure, no consistent finding emerges. In a synthesis of several studies, the researchers found that older students tend to have poor secondary academic records, yet the older students’ college academic records surpass those of younger students (p. 521). In addition, older learners may depart even though they have an above-average record (p. 521). Bean and Metzner’s (1985) findings show a much weaker association between academic record and persistence, as compared to the stronger effect found by Adelman (1999, 2006). The difference may lie in the populations—Adelman’s studies are a combination of both traditional-age and non-traditional-age students, whereas Bean and Metzner focused on non-traditional students.

Finally, Bean and Metzner (1985) analyze several studies and conclude that “social integration is rarely a major factor in attrition decisions” for non-traditional students, students from commuter institutions, and students from two-year institutions (pp. 507-520). Given their analysis, Bean and Metzner (1985) omit social integration as a primary component of their conceptual model (p. 520).

In sum, Bean and Metzner (1985) assert that their conceptual model requires further research and testing. For future research about attrition among adult learners, they suggest de-emphasizing collegiate social integration when studying departures from a single institution. This conceptual framework emphasizes a multifaceted approach to
student departure, and it attempts to frame attrition through the lens of the heterogeneous non-traditional student population in a diverse array of postsecondary institutions.

**Institutional strategies and resources.** From the perspective of institutional effectiveness and enrollment growth, Hadfield (2003) asserts, “customer satisfaction is the key to attracting and retaining adult students” (p. 19). The strategies for cultivating and sustaining optimal customer service, and thus improving retention among adult students include: a) access to services and facilities when adults are on campus, b) engagement of non-traditional-age learners in curricular and program delivery discussions, c) opportunities for prior learning credit, d) identification of emerging learning/training needs, and strategies for serving them promptly, e) employment of qualified and effective teachers, f) meaningful learning experiences, g) avoidance of indifference to student needs in action and deeds, h) effectiveness measurements, and, i) administrative support from institutional leaders (pp. 20-24).

These strategies address the unique needs of non-traditional learners and couple student needs with appropriate resources and strategies. Involving non-traditional-age learners in academic policies and programs is congruent with the principles of andragogy and self-directed learning, both of which are based on the active involvement by the learner in learning activities. Credit for prior learning is a vehicle to legitimize adult experiences that can be equated with formal learning, eliminating the need to require course work and content which have already been mastered or are redundant (Fairchild, 2003). Institutional and administrative support, along with assessment, is fundamental to effective program delivery. According to Hadfield (2003), institutions will prosper with these principles and practices through enrollment growth and retention of adult learners.
Summary. In sum, the existing models and research on attrition, institutional retention, individual departure decisions, and persistence indicate that enrollment patterns leading to bachelor’s degree attainment are puzzling and complex. Several different approaches have been taken by prominent researchers to disentangle the social, psychological, economic and organizational factors that affect persistence. While some relevance to non-traditional-age learners is evident in these works, further inquiry is warranted to test these theories, models and propositions on adult students. The heterogeneous nature of the non-traditional-age population, their enrollment patterns, the types of institutions at which they enroll, and, their needs make the process of assessing persistence cumbersome and unwieldy, perhaps explaining the dearth of research specifically addressing the adult student population.

Despite the challenges regarding research about the adult learner population and persistence, the unmistakable fact is that roughly half of the adult population with college experience has a bachelor’s degree or higher. According to the U.S. Census (2007), 54 percent of adults over the age of 25 have some college or a postsecondary degree, including associate’s, bachelor’s, graduate and professional degrees; within this group, just 28 percent have a bachelor’s degree or higher. While persistence and attainment are puzzling, and research is difficult to conduct, the modern economy depends on an educated workforce, and therefore the relationship between persistence and attainment has become a critically important issue (Adelman, 2006). Without clear information, institutions may not be in a position to implement effective strategies for addressing the problem and increasing the odds for non-traditional-age learners to persist and reach
degree attainment. Furthermore, the paucity of information leaves adult learners without “tried and true” strategies to reduce the chance of departure before attaining the degree.

Challenges and Barriers

The demographic profiles of enrolled non-traditional-age students and adult graduates set the stage for identifying challenges and barriers that typify the modern adult experience in higher education. Research on adult motivation to participate and persist in the academic environment illuminates the complexities of understanding the experience and overcoming demands and trials to sustain the drive to succeed to degree attainment. The retention and persistence research provides multifaceted social, psychological, cultural and organizational perspectives that further identify challenges and barriers that adult students face during their higher education experiences.

Cross’ (1981) seminal work on adult learners is useful for organizing challenges and barriers that adult students encounter during their postsecondary education experiences. Cross analyzed data from a national survey and uncovered adult perceptions of the top challenges to learning, which she characterized as situational, institutional and dispositional barriers (p. 99). Situational barriers are the most often-cited impediments, followed by institutional, and then dispositional barriers (pp. 98-108). In addition, Cook and King (2004) suggest that public policies favoring employment over education constitute policy barriers (pp. 3-4). For adults balancing multiple roles and living full lives, these barriers present critical challenges (Fairchild, 2003; Schlossberg, et al. 1989). Identifying the barriers and strategies for overcoming these obstacles may provide insight
into the perplexing question of why some adult learners are successful in attaining the bachelor’s degree after the age of 25 and why so many more are not.

*Situational Barriers*

The complexities and responsibilities of modern adult life affect situational barriers. This type of barrier stems from a student's situation in life at a given time. Situational barriers include cost, lack of time, personal and familial duties, and job responsibilities (Cross, 1981). Fairchild (2003) adds civic commitments to these challenges (p. 12). These types of situational barriers are linked to a point in time, possibly implying that age may be a related barrier. However, Jacobs and King (2002) assert that age itself is not an impediment to persisting in higher education, even though the responsibilities and expectations associated with age, such as an adult’s career, family, education, and income, can impact the non-traditional-age student’s experience in postsecondary education. According to Fairchild (2003), parental responsibilities, and financial and job obligations are the most prominent situational barriers (pp. 12-13).

In order to address these barriers, adult learners employ a variety of strategies. For example, after meeting basic needs for housing, food, clothing and transportation, the student considers how to pay for education, where costs often exceed personal income, assets and resources (Clinedinst et al. 2003). “Although other variables can be negotiated, income levels cannot. The basic needs of the family, like food and rent or mortgage, take priority over educational outlays” (Fairchild, 2003, p. 12). This situation is a challenge for most non-traditional-age students (Hatfield, 2003; Kasworm, 2003). To overcome financial barriers, adult learners may: a) seek information about financing education from appropriate experts, b) figure out a budget that includes educational
expenses and opportunity costs associated with educational activities, c) apply for financial aid and employer reimbursement benefits, d) sign up for payment plans, e) utilize Web-based, library, and community resources to identify additional funding sources, f) compare costs among several institutions, and, g) consider lower-cost alternatives, such as community and public institutions (Berkner et al. 2002; Hatfield, 2003; Helfgot, 1998). Finances may be an insurmountable barrier for adult learners who are unaware of these processes, who are unable to amass enough funding, or who are unwilling to consider how to pay for the costs associated with education (Cook & King, 2004; Hatfield, 2003; Hossler, 2000; Kasworm, 2003; St. John, 2000). Moreover, the students’ plans for financing their education can derail without information about eligibility, deadlines, application processes, or inadequate funding (Culp, 1998; Hossler, 2000).

The debt levels among bachelor’s degree graduates over the age of 25 suggest that financing higher education is a critical issue. The enrollment patterns depicted above show that most adult students attend part-time while working full-time, a majority are parents after the age of 30, and, most have low-to-moderate income levels (Horn et al. 2002; Jacobs & King, 2002; NCES, 2004). These common characteristics create challenges that can thwart students’ efforts to secure financial assistance (Kasworm, 2003). For instance, students who can only attend part-time may be ineligible for financial aid when they do not meet the minimum credit hour standards for governmental support (Cook & King, 2004; FAFSA, 2005). The failure to reach a particular credit threshold may be a consequence of a lack of time stemming from childcare and work responsibilities, thus creating a situational barrier (Cook & King, 2004; Fairchild, 2003).
Situational barriers are multidimensional, and students who are able to overcome these obstacles display a level of adeptness in addressing these overlapping matters.

Institutions reduce the impact of situational barriers for non-traditional-age learners by proactively addressing the needs of this population, especially by providing information about or access to resources (Hossler, 2000). Institutional assistance may include access to financial aid professionals throughout the student’s career, disclosure of tuition, fees and payment options, helping students develop budgets, providing information about alternative resources, such as private loans and scholarship programs, and, offering institutional need-based aid to part-time students who are ineligible for government support because they do not meet minimum credit hour requirements (Cook & King, 2005; Fairchild, 2003; Hatfield, 2003; Hossler, 2000; St. John, 2000).

While financing education poses a significant challenge, institutions can help adult students with other situational barriers that they encounter, including parental and work obligations. Simple solutions, such as offering classes on weekends, online, and in the evenings, may address time and scheduling conflicts (Cook & King, 2005; Fairchild, 2003; Lefor, Benke & Ting, 2003). Another institutional effort may be to address childcare. On-campus childcare facilities are not commonly found at postsecondary institutions. Cook and King (2005) found “fewer than 30 percent of postsecondary institutions offer on-campus childcare. The dearth of on-campus childcare is likely due to the high cost of providing this service” (p. 25). Cook and King’s (2005) finding about the lack of on-campus childcare facilities suggests alternatives are necessary to address this issue. Thus, institutions may direct students to childcare facilities within the vicinity of campus that can supervise children while parents are in class (Fairchild, 2003).
Caring for children, and its impact on time and finances, is a critical challenge for adult students, the majority of whom are moderate-to-low income women with young children, and many are single parents (Horn et al. 2002, Table C; NCES, 2004, Table 177). Among adult students, “54 percent of low-income adult students with dependent children are single … Additionally, more low-income adult students have children under the age of 12 than do other adult students” (Cook & King, 2004, p. 12). This is a multifaceted issue because it involves access to childcare facilities, as well as affordability. In addition to addressing accessibility, institutions need to consider cost. Institutions can reduce fees for institutional childcare services for low-income students (Cook & King, 2005). Or, to alleviate some of that burden, institutions can incorporate childcare expenses in the calculation of student financial aid budgets (Hatfield, 2003).

Transportation and parking are additional barriers adult students encounter, especially with the majority of non-traditional-age students attending part-time and commuting to campus. These issues are indicative of access and convenience. Cook and King (2005) suggest that proximity to public transportation plays a role in institutional selection, especially among low-income students. In addition, Cook and King (2005) find 77 percent of institutions are accessible via public transportation. Another simple solution for colleges and universities serving adults is to provide information about access to public transportation. For students who drive, institutions may set aside adequate, safe and close parking areas for adult students (Fairchild, 2003). In order to help students with their financial burden, institutions can assist students by reducing parking fees, or by subsidizing travel expenses on public transportation (Cook & King, 2005).
In sum, these challenges can impede a student’s ability to participate and persist without institutional support and intervention. Thus, regularly assessing student needs in areas that typically cause challenges for students will identify problems and help the institution to address the needs within the context of its resources.

Institutional Barriers

Institutional barriers are the programs, policies, practices and procedures that discourage adults from participating at a particular institution. These barriers include lack of information about offerings, restrictions on extended time-to-degree, transfer credit policies, and courses that are scheduled when the student is unavailable. The course scheduling and publicizing of available programs are straightforward issues that are not difficult to address, if an institution is interested in attracting and retaining adult students (Flint & Frey, 2003; Hadfield, 2003; Rice, 2003).

At the same time, the nature of adult student enrollment patterns, and the extended period of time graduates have taken to complete the bachelor’s degree, reveal more complex institutional barriers. Multi-institutional attendance patterns, especially among adult learners, create the need for transfer credit policies that permit the student to receive credit for academic work already satisfactorily completed (American Association of Collegiate Registrar’s and Admission Officers, American Council on Education, & Council for Higher Education Accreditation, 2002; Hadfield, 2003). Transfer credits affect persistence among adult learners, as the greater the number of transfer credits applied toward degree requirements, the higher the chances of persisting to attainment. (Wiggam, 2004; Wlodkowski, Mauldin, & Gahn, 2001).
In addition, given the extended period of time elapsed between initial postsecondary enrollment and bachelor’s degree attainment among adult degree recipients (Bradburn et al. 2003), credit for academic competencies mastered in the past is another complicated matter. Institutions may address the issue of past work and competencies through College Board College Level Exams (CLEP), American Council on Education evaluations, prior learning assessments, such as those offered by Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL), and, institutional competency measurements (Flint & Frey, 2003). These options may help adult learners overcome barriers that can impede accumulation of credits (Johnstone, Ewell, & Paulson, 2002). With 86 percent of adult graduates attending two or more institutions during their baccalaureate studies, it is common for older learners to assemble academic records from multiple institutions over an extended period of time (Bradburn et al. 2003, Tables I.6, II.6). Thus, policies that are too restrictive may create insurmountable institutional barriers (Doyle, 2006).

Dispositional Barriers

Dispositional barriers include the attitudes and self-perceptions of the adult learner. These barriers may include lack of confidence in one’s ability, and poor academic performance in the past. Role conflict is another common dispositional barrier, which is understandable because adult learners are typically juggling work, family and academic responsibilities. The challenges associated with confidence in study skills and strategies may be addressed by faculty in the classroom, in study groups, in tutoring, and, through other academic support systems, such as intervention programs aimed at under-
performing students. As is the case for overcoming other obstacles, adults need access to these services in order to utilize them.

Older students often have feelings of incompetence, yet Siebert and Gilpin (1989) assert that adult learners are capable of acquiring and mastering effective study skills. Bean and Metzner (1985) provide evidence that poor secondary preparation does not correlate to poor academic performance in the collegiate environment among adult students. Therefore, students’ skills and abilities to succeed in the academic environment are not the impediments; rather it is the non-traditional-age student’s perception of his or her abilities that creates the barrier (Ross-Gordon, 2003). Institutions can help build student confidence by offering block scheduling or cohort programs to foster a sense of community among adult learners (Braxton et al. 2004; Flint & Frey, 2003). Within these learning communities, students can learn from each other. In addition, faculty can teach students how to refine study skills and strategically employ a variety of learning styles and strategies (Ross-Gordon, 2003; Wlodkowski, 1999). From a behavioral-motivation perspective, institutions can reward academic performance with merit-based scholarships, honors programs or societies, or offer adult learners opportunities to participate in faculty research. Essentially, an institution can create an environment that is conducive to building student confidence, teaches students effective learning skills, and provides rewards and incentives for mastering these competencies.

Confidence levels of students in the academic realm are related to dispositional barriers, along with the challenges related to the multiple roles in adult lives. Non-traditional-age students experience varying levels of strain associated with role conflict (incompatible and simultaneous demands), role overload (insufficient time to meet all
demands) and role contagion (preoccupation with one role while performing another) (Fairchild, 2003). Support from the parties involved in the multiple roles, and/or professional help from institutional support services may help mitigate the impact of these challenges (Rice, 2003). In addition, strain from these multiple roles can erode a student’s self-confidence, creating even larger obstacles to overcome (Fairchild, 2003).

**Policy Barriers**

In addition to the situational, institutional and dispositional barriers, policy barriers present another set of challenges for non-traditional-age students. As described above, transfer and experiential credit procedures as well as financial aid eligibility requirements are institutional and situational barriers. At the same time, they are related to policies established by accreditation and consortium bodies, as well as federal and state regulations, creating another overlapping barrier (Doyle, 2006). Policy barriers especially affect low-income students, a sizable group among non-traditional age learners. Approximately one-third of undergraduates ages 24 and over have annual incomes less than $20,000 (Horn et al. 2002, Tables 3.3, 3.5c).

One key policy barrier arises from the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, a federal law that favors employment over education for welfare recipients (Hatfield, 2003). “Work first policies ensured that those most qualified for career-enhancing postsecondary education and training were the least likely to receive it because they also were the most employable, thus the first to move directly from dependency to work, skipping postsecondary education altogether” (Carnevale & Desrochers, 2004, p. 41). As a result, adults who are dependent on welfare may find postsecondary education inaccessible because of these policies. Moreover, low-income
students are most sensitive to affordability of postsecondary education in relation to their other living expenses, impacting participation. For example, in 2003, among independent undergraduates ages 24 and over with annual incomes less than $12,000, 63 percent paid $1,700 in average net tuition, after financial aid was subtracted (Berkner & Wei, 2006, Table 1.4). Budgeting more than $140 a month for tuition may exceed the personal resources of low-income students, with the expected payoff of higher earnings coming after attaining the bachelor’s degree, which can take many years.

Socioeconomic status affects persistence, as demonstrated in two NCES cohort studies. Less than one third of high school sophomores who were in the lowest and middle two quartiles of socioeconomic status in 1980 and 1990 had attained a bachelor’s degree eight years after finishing high school (NCES 2004, Table 309; NCES 2006, Table 306). The welfare to work policies which favor employment—even in low-wage jobs—over education and training for access to high-paying occupational fields create a major challenge for low-income adults (Carnevale & Desrochers, 2004). As such, the impoverished population finds access to higher education impeded by policies, including welfare and financial aid, along with issues related to affordability.

In sum, non-traditional-age students face numerous challenges and barriers as a result of interacting in the academic environment while leading a complex life with multiple roles and responsibilities. To overcome these barriers, students employ a variety of strategies and call on many different skills and resources. With accessible services and programs, students can enlist institutions to help them address the challenges they encounter, and advocate for assistance from governments and organizations to adjust
policies to remove barriers. Together, students and institutions can partner to effectively help non-traditional-age students succeed and persist to degree attainment.

Adults as Learners

The demographics describing the non-traditional-age population suggest that adults have learning styles and preferences distinct from children and adolescents. The complexities of modern adulthood intersect with the academic environment, affecting economic factors, independence and significant relationships. Non-traditional-age students encounter biases related to age, ethnicity and culture, and they experience varying degrees of motivation, and different stages of development, while encountering challenges and barriers in higher education. In postsecondary education institutions, adult development and learning styles are related to interactions in the academic environment and the external world in which this heterogeneous population lives.

Learning Preferences and Theoretical Perspectives of Adult Learning

All students, regardless of age, have a complex array of needs based on age, maturity, development, educational requirements, life stages and roles (Schlossberg, et al. 1989). Even though adult learners coexist with younger students in higher education, the life experience and maturity of each group are different, as are the social and educational needs of each group (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999; Schlossberg, et al. 1989; Wlodkowski, 1999). Diversity among adult students, as well as their reasons for seeking education, create disharmony between the classic undergraduate models of pedagogy, formative education, and student services, as well as the interests and needs of non-traditional-age learners (Schlossberg, et al. 1989).


Learning styles and preferences

Andragogy. Educators may feel that traditional approaches to pedagogy serve traditional-age students well, but they are inadequate to address the complexities of the adult learner experience in postsecondary education (Knowles et al. 1998; 2005). According to Knowles et al. (2005), pedagogy is teacher-directed education, where student experience is irrelevant, motivation is externally driven, and the learner’s self-concept is derived from the teacher’s point of view (pp. 61-63). The main context of pedagogy is to transmit knowledge to a receptive audience, with the teacher as the main decision-maker on issues of content, delivery and evaluation.

In the mid-1960’s, a pioneering adult learner perspective, based on Malcolm Knowles' conceptual framework of andragogy, and rooted in humanistic psychology, advanced the concept that adults and children learn in different ways (Knowles et al. 1998, 2005; Merriam, 2001a). With its major focus on learning, andragogy is “a transactional model that speaks to those characteristics of the learning situation” (Knowles et al. 2005, p. 72). The andragogy model is “based on the following precepts: adults need to know why they need to learn something; adults maintain the concept of responsibility for their own decisions, their own lives; adults enter the educational activity with a greater volume and more varied experiences than do children; adults have a readiness to learn those things they need to know in order to cope effectively with real-life situations; adults are life-centered in their orientations to learning; and adults are more responsive to internal motivators than external motivators” (p. 72). The main thrust of andragogy is that adults become increasingly self-directed as they mature (Brookfield, 1986; Cross, 1981; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999).
As a major foundational model in adult learning, andragogy aims to show learning is a developmental process that occurs within the context of adulthood. While learning itself is complex and there are many definitions of learning, Knowles et al. (2005) define learning in terms of change, need fulfillment, a product, process, and/or function, natural growth, developing competencies, personal involvement, self-initiated, and learner-evaluated (p. 17). In sum, learning is “the process of gaining knowledge and/or expertise” (p. 17). Given the diversity of adult learners, the andragogical perspective avoids prescribing a specific teaching style and/or a particular delivery model; instead, it focuses on a process of moving learners toward greater autonomy (Knowles et al. 2005). Learning may occur in any number of venues and situations, so the andragogical perspective is applicable across a wide array of formal and informal educational programs. After several decades and a substantial amount of critical analysis, the relevance of andragogy is undeniable in education’s shift to the focus of learners in context of their lives (Brookfield, 1986; Cross, 1981; Merriam, 2001a; Merriam & Brockett, 1997; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999).

Self-directed learning. In another effort to distinguish adult learners from children, self-directed learning emerged in the same era as andragogogy, and its conceptual framework continues to evolve. Similar to andragogy, self-directed learning is multifaceted and grounded in humanistic philosophy. Merriam and Caffarella (1999) posit that self-directed learning has numerous conceptions, which they organize into three major categories: the goals of self-directed learning, self-directed learning as a process, and, self-directedness as a personal attribute of the learner (p. 290).
The goals of self-directed learning are “1) to enhance the ability of adult learners to be self-directed in their learning, 2) to foster transformational learning as central to self-directed learning, and 3) to promote emancipatory learning and social action as an integral part of self-directed learning” (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999, p. 290). The first goal is based on the humanistic philosophical view that personal growth is the aim of adult learning (p. 290). Through transformational learning, adults need to critically reflect on their own experiences and those in their world in order to achieve the second goal of autonomy in self-directed learning (p. 291). “Transformational learning refers to the process by which we transform our taken-for-granted frames of reference (meaning perspectives, habits of mind, mind-sets) to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change, and reflective so that they may generate beliefs and opinions that will prove more true or justified to guide action” (Mezirow, 2000, pp. 7-8).

To achieve the third goal, learners gain control over the learning process by scrutinizing the assumptions under which they learn, and that critical reflection and greater control will spawn reflection to evaluate self-directed and adult learning (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999, pp. 291-292).

As a process, self-directed learning is the “primary initiative for planning, carrying out, and evaluating … learning experiences” (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999, p. 293). Merriam and Caffarella (1999) identify three types of models to describe self-directed learning as a process; they are linear, interactive and instructional. Linear models represent steps toward self-directed learning (pp. 293-295). The interactive models emphasize several factors in self-directed learning, including environment, cognitive processes, context of learning, and learner characteristics (p. 295).
Instructional models are “frameworks that instructors in formal settings could use to integrate self-directed methods of learning into their programs and activities” (p. 302).

The focus on the self-directedness as a personal attribute of the learner assumes that adults engage in learning with the goal of becoming more self-directed and autonomous (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999, p. 305). Merriam and Caffarella (1999) find that the most frequently studied context of this line of inquiry is about readiness and autonomy (pp. 306-307). According to Guglielmino (1977), readiness “consists of a complex of attitudes, values and abilities that create the likelihood that an individual is capable of self-directed learning” (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999, p. 307). Persistence is one of the psychological qualities involved in readiness for learning (Guglielmino, 1977).

At the conceptual level, autonomy is related to self-directness in learning. “Four major variables appear to have the most influence on whether individual adult learners exhibit autonomous behavior in learning situations: their technical skills related to the learning process, their familiarity with the subject matter, their sense of personal competence as learners, and their commitment to learning at this point in time” (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999, p. 310). Learning is contextual, it varies from one situation to the next, has a socially constructed element, and adults may need guidance and services to facilitate the movement toward self-directed learning (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999, p. 310). Lastly, new perspectives are challenging the primacy of the achievement and conquest motivations for autonomy, positing that interdependence in the learning process is motivation for connection (Boucouvalas, 1988; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999).

Research on self-directed learning continues to evolve; yet supporters and critics have reached a crossroads in the research agenda, slowing down theory building and
furthering of the knowledge base (Merriam, 2001b). At the same time, the multiplicities of the philosophical, psychological, sociological, cultural and educational perspectives, combined with the heterogeneous adult learner population, offer a rich opportunity to continue the work of understanding adult learning (Merriam, 2001b).

In sum, andragogy and self-directed learning have heavily influenced the field of adult education and furthered the knowledge base of adult learning and developmental processes. Merriam (2001a) asserts that both andragogy and self-directed learning are “pillars” of adult learning theory and the work of understanding adult learning will evolve and continue (p. 11).

Transformative learning. One major line of inquiry spawned by andragogy and self-directed learning is transformative learning. One chief aim of transformative learning is autonomy. “Transformative learning refers to transforming a problematic frame of reference to make it more dependable in our adult life by generating opinions and interpretations that are more justified” (Mezirow, 2000, p. 20). Mezirow’s (2000) model of transformational learning is linear and contextually based, with emotional, social, cultural, spiritual, and psychological dimensions. In brief, transformations flow from a disorienting dilemma, followed by self-examination, critical assessment of assumptions, recognition of the connection between discontent and transformation, exploration of options for new roles, planning a course of action, acquiring new skills and knowledge to execute the new plan, trying out new roles, building competence and self-confidence and, on the conditions of the new perspective, reintegrating into one’s life (Mezirow, 2000, p. 22).
One prime example of transformational learning is an adult with multiple roles, including worker, spouse, parent, and community participant, who enrolls in higher education, adding a new role to her busy life. In all of her roles, the adult has to assess her time and resources, and “reslice the pie” to accommodate the additional role (Thompson, 1992). In doing so, she may transform her thinking about the meaning and expectations of being an ambitious worker, an involved parent, a giving community participant, and an excellent student. Over the course of this transformation, the student critically reflects on the value and context of her responsibilities, contemplating the interpersonal, social, and cultural aspects of her roles, and integrating this new interpretation of her life into her multiple roles. “Transformative learning, which can occur gradually or from a sudden, powerful experience, changes the way people see themselves and their world” (Clark, 1993, as quoted in Baumgartner, 2001).

Baumgartner (2001) summarizes the major perspectives of transformational learning. The first perspective is emancipatory education. Rooted in Freire’s (2000) social justice work with poor, illiterate Brazilians, transformation is conscious raising, spurring new views of one’s self in one’s world, empowerment through a new perspective, and strength to change one’s world (Baumgartner, 2001, p. 16). The second perspective is rational and reflective; it is constructivist, featuring a process of interpreting and re-interpreting knowledge in the context of new experiences (p. 16). The third perspective is the developmental approach, where the “learning process is intuitive, holistic, and contextually based” (p. 17). Daloz (1986, 1999), one of the prominent authors on the developmental aspects of transformational learning, uses the narrative approach to “demonstrate how students negotiate developmental transitions and are
changed in the process” (p. 17). The fourth perspective is the emergence of the link between spirituality and learning. This view incorporates imagination, feelings and images. From this frame of reference, transformational learning is extrarational—it goes beyond ego-based learning by going through the soul (p. 18). These frames of reference underscore the contextual and multifaceted nature of transformative learning as liberating, cognitive, critically reflective, meaningful and spiritual (p. 18). While the understanding of transformational learning continues to expand, “the importance of relationships, feelings and context” continues to be explored by contemporary research (p. 22). It is through these relationships that adults find meaningful learning, and transform social, cultural, philosophical and psychological beliefs.

The heterogeneous adult population, which is becoming increasingly diverse, has inspired even more research to understand the nature of adult learning. From the conceptual foundation of andragogical and self-directed learning, along with the emergence and acceptance of the transformative learning perspective, other ideas of adults as learners have evolved.

**Connected knowing and learning.** One popular and compelling line of inquiry is related to gender, where men and women have different developmental goals, and they move toward these goals by learning in different ways. Challenging the notion that independence is the goal of adult learning is the perspective that interdependence is the developmental goal of female learners. Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, Tarule (1986), advanced the idea of connectedness among female learners. “We believe that conceptions of knowledge and truth that are accepted and articulated today have been shaped throughout history by the male-dominated majority culture” (Belenky et al. 1986,
To counter the hegemonic views of development and learning, Belenky et al. (1986) examine “epistemological perspectives from which women know and view the world” (p. 15). The researchers find that “connected knowing comes more easily to many women than does separate knowing” (p. 229). This work is one of the major contributions to the growing body of research on contextually-based aspects of adult learning. Hayes (2001) posits that female preferences for collaborative and empathetic learning are the first step in acknowledging that gender is a crucial aspect of learning (p. 36). However, Hayes (2001) cautions that an overly simplistic view that females prefer collaboration, may fuel biases that women are not competitive or strive for autonomy (p. 37). Learning is contextual, with social, situational, and historical dimensions, and none of those aspects is fixed, thus the learning process is fluid and adaptable to changing circumstances (p. 39). This is comparable to transformative learning, with the assessment and employment of learning strategies stemming from an examination of beliefs. Hayes (2001) argues for guiding students to explore their gender belief systems to assess their affect on learning and challenge those beliefs that limit learning (p. 41). In a sense, these emerging lines of inquiry indicate that independence and interdependence are not “either-or propositions,” rather students from a myriad of backgrounds will exhibit preferences based on contextual and situational circumstances. With this emerging research on context and the manifold dynamics affecting learning, including student background and beliefs, learner preferences, the educational environment and educator efforts to integrate these concepts, further empirical research on the application of these theories in learning situations will contribute to the understanding of adult learning.
Development and learning are inextricably woven in the theories, assumptions and lines of inquiry about non-traditional-age learners. In a vast and diverse system of postsecondary education and a heterogeneous population of adult students, no single program, plan or method of education emerges as the best example of fostering development and learning. After several decades of study and analysis, experts find divergent goals for learning and development, including autonomy and connectedness. In addition, perhaps the most common conclusion from several lines of inquiry (i.e., transformational learning, women’s way of knowing) is that learning is contextual. Moreover, intertwined with learning and development are adult skills and competencies that affect growth, development and success in the postsecondary environment.

Skills and Competencies for Success

Students have varying levels of competencies that contribute to their movement through postsecondary education toward degree attainment. They possess cognitive skills that aid them with learning. They also have "common sense " knowledge, including emotional sagacity, helping them figure out how the institutions with which they are associated are organized and how that structure pertains to their program of study. For college students, part of their education is learning and part is learning their way around campus. The levels of competencies in both realms can support or weigh down student progress toward finishing the degree.

Student competencies influence issues that adult learners face in postsecondary education. Competencies can include scholastic and cognitive abilities, navigational skills, and metacognitive abilities. Cognitive competencies and abilities are the innate
and acquired knowledge and skills applicable to academic work (Gage & Berliner, 1998; Goleman, 1995). The intelligence quotient (IQ) relates to handling abstractions, problem solving and the ability to learn (Gage & Berliner, 1998). Academic preparation, as in completing a rigorous high school curriculum, is also an indicator of cognitive abilities. Solid preparation through a challenging high school curriculum is a strong predictor of persistence and degree attainment—among both traditional and non-traditional college students (Adelman, 1999, 2006; Horn, 1996).

Advanced cognitive skills include the ability to acquire knowledge, think critically and analyze, as well as to synthesize information. Awareness of one’s own abilities and the employment of appropriate learning strategies affect how well a student performs (Justice & Dornan, 2001; Rasnak, 1995). The baccalaureate curriculum, steeped in the liberal arts tradition, calls on students to use a range of cognitive abilities. Deficiencies, under-developed skills, and a lack of awareness of one’s strengths and limitations can impede progress toward degree completion.

Good study skills and habits, combined with solid emotional and navigational skills, are key components to successful academic performance in college. Tinto (1993) reports the stronger the study skills and habits, the more likely the student will be successful (p. 52). Even though memory abilities are similar in younger and older students, adult perception of memory ability may affect performance (Justice & Dornan, 2001). Adult students often feel their study skills are rusty, because they have not been in school for some time (Schlossberg et al. 1989). "There is no evidence that older students can't learn and remember as well as younger students" (Siebert & Gilpin, 1989, p. 8). Study skills and habits involve high-level competencies of self-control, motivation and
persistence, as well as social adeptness. Social skills come into play when students form study groups, seek out advising and ask for learning assistance. Study skills can be learned; habits can be picked up, and adult students are capable of mastering them.

Navigational and practical skills include those that can be called upon to guide the student through the postsecondary system. They include becoming familiar with the physical campus and its resources to enlisting a mentor or advisor to serve as a guide through the academic, social and cultural realities of college. Practical skills include being prepared with books, materials and supplies, as well as understanding course requirements in a syllabus. Practical intelligence, a concept extensively studied by Robert Sternberg (1995), is “the ability to adapt to new surroundings and solve problems” (Nelson & Low, 2003, p. 30). The extent to which adult learners acquire, refine and apply their own competencies to cope with the learning environment may affect their persistence and degree attainment.

The typical adult student, with a tendency to attend multiple institutions, uses navigational skills and common sense know-how to move in, through, and around the institutional and system-wide levels of postsecondary education. For instance, students learn how to transfer from two-year to four-year institutions in a variety of ways. Some plan to transfer from the outset, because the original institution was not the school of first choice. Others decide to transfer after finishing the associate's degree. To prepare for the transfer, students may talk to their professors about transferring, seek out transfer advising services, consult appropriate Web pages, and contact the receiving institution about transfer admission policies. Students tap into a variety of resources to assist them with their plans. The degree to which they utilize the services and resources of the
institutions and broader system to achieve goals is indicative of the level of their navigational skills. These guiding competencies work in concert with self-awareness, persistence toward a long-range goal, motivation and social skills.

At the other end of the scale, students who are not engaging in and acclimating to the college environment may have poorly developed navigational, self-concept and social skills, putting them at risk for attrition (Tinto, 1993). Moxley, Najor-Durack and Dumbrigue (2001) make a strong argument for connecting students and advisors for improvement in these areas. "Some students simply do not know how to utilize resources, especially at large universities. It is here that advisors may serve their most important function, that is, in helping students to get an understanding of how to navigate the institution, take advantage of opportunities, sustain themselves during periods of stress, cope with being students and perform successfully as students" (p. 101). Astin (1988) advocates involvement by students, faculty and administrators to integrate each student into the institution. Tinto (1987, 1993) concurs, finding students who are disengaged from the social and intellectual life of the institution are more likely to depart.

Fostering the development of navigational skills, be it through the student's own initiative or through institutional outreach, leads to a more positive experience of acclimation and integration. In his research on retention and attrition, Tinto (1987) found that students who are more connected to the institution are more likely to persist until degree completion. Thus, strengthening navigational skills as well as bolstering self-concept and social competencies may mitigate the risk of attrition.

Metacognitive skills include higher order competencies, such as self-awareness, managing emotions, motivation, empathy and social skills. These particular
metacognitive skills comprise an emotional intelligence framework constructed by Daniel Goleman (1995, 1998). Self-awareness is acuity of one's own talents, preferences, strengths and limitations. Regulation of one's emotions is a full, but appropriate, expression of a range of emotions, including happiness, sadness, fear and anger. Motivation is the drive to persist in an activity despite setbacks or frustrations to accomplish a goal. Empathy is an awareness and acknowledgment of another's feelings, needs and emotions. Social skills include the ability to communicate, to enlist the help of others and to share the human experience with others (Goleman, 1995, 1998; Nelson & Low, 2003).

This arsenal of metacognitive emotional skills may be valuable in many arenas. These abilities stem from an area of the brain that permits them to be acquired and refined. They do not supplant rational thinking; rather they work in concert with scholastic, practical, and navigational abilities, affecting the manner in which the adult learner moves through and around higher education. When working together with other competencies, they may enhance one's ability to succeed (Goleman, 1995, 1998; Nelson & Low, 2003).

Other metacognitive skills include high-level study strategies. Justice and Dornan (2001) completed an exploratory study to examine adult student metacognition and motivation to achieve. They compared a set of related metacognitive skills employed by traditional-age and non-traditional-age students to determine if differences exist between the age groups. Their results showed that non-traditional-age students employ higher-level strategies more frequently than traditional learners. For example, adult learners frequently use study strategies aimed at comprehension and assessment of knowledge, or
generation of constructive information. The traditional students prefer lower-level strategies, including simple memorization and recitation. Furthermore, older students use hyperprocessing, or extra processing of complex or challenging materials, more frequently than younger ones.

Self-regulation of cognitive activities emerges as a key factor in Justice and Dornan’s (2001) work. "This aspect of cognition involves selecting an appropriate strategic intervention, monitoring the execution of the strategy and evaluating its effectiveness" (Justice & Dornan, 2001, p. 237). Justice and Dornan (2001) hypothesize that older learners may need assistance with assessment of their cognitive and management abilities. This stems from non-traditional students reporting less confidence in the effectiveness of their study strategies and chances of success, even though grades show non-traditional students outperform traditional students. Through an analysis of the findings, Justice and Dornan (2001) concluded, "developmental changes in metacognitive awareness of study strategies appear to continue into adulthood. Mature students reported increased use of two higher level strategies; however, use of these strategies did not relate to course performance" (p. 245).

To summarize, in addition to refining cognitive competencies, students employ metacognitive skills in formal education. The research suggests that development and mastery of high-level skills continue into adulthood. Further, the emotional intelligence framework posits that personal excellence and success can be achieved through mental harmony. Mental harmony is achieved when thoughts and feelings are in tune (Nelson & Low, 2003). In addition, non-traditional-age learners face issues related to optimizing self-confidence and matching strategies to learning situations. As such, each individual
student’s unique combination of competencies and mastery of metacognition related to high-level study skills ultimately impacts participation, persistence, and attainment.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I present the professional literature related to the dominant themes that ground the research questions I am investigating in this study. The comprehensive profiles of adult learners and graduates paint a picture of the non-traditional-age population. The synthesis of literature about motivation, critical challenges, learning preferences, and competencies contributing to adult learner success are set in the context of participation, persistence and bachelor’s degree attainment among adult learners. The following chapters discuss the methodology I employ in this study, followed by an analysis of the data.
CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

In this study, I investigate factors that adult bachelor’s degree recipients identify as contributing to their degree attainment. Although a patchwork of data exists describing bachelor’s degree recipients of all ages (Adelman, 1999, 2006; Bradburn et al. 2003; Doyle, 2006; Horn et al. 2002; Jacobs & King, 2002; NCES, 2008; U.S. Census, 2008), and several prominent frameworks, research studies, and models illuminate the complexities of persistence and departure among college students of all ages (Adelman, 1999, 2006; Astin, 1975, 1988, 2005; Bean & Metzner, 1985; Braxton et al. 2004; Doyle, 2006; Tinto, 1987, 1993; Wiggam, 2004; Zucker & Dawson, 2001), I found no published research on what bachelor’s degree recipients 25 years of age and over believe led to attainment. Furthermore, a dearth of research exists on persistence and attainment among adult learners, making this population and the phenomenon of bachelor’s degree attainment among adults very under-studied. The purpose of this study is to expand understanding and to discover knowledge about degree attainment among non-traditional-age learners, which has practical and policy implications (Shulman, 1997).

My inquiry focuses on postsecondary educational experiences of adult graduates. Given the gap in research on this topic, and my goal of exploring attainment from the perspective of the adult graduate, this study is an exploration situated in the naturalistic
paradigm, employing phenomenological research methods (Creswell, 1998; Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993; Marshall & Rossman, 2006; Moustakas, 1994).

In the next section, I define the naturalistic inquiry paradigm and describe major assumptions and implications for use in this study. The section provides the basis for the rationale for framing my study in the naturalistic paradigm.

Rationale for Naturalistic Inquiry Paradigm

*Definition, Assumptions, and Implications for Use*

Traditional research methods, including quantitative inquiry, have insufficiently explained complex processes in higher education and experiences of its participants, spawning an increasing interest in different forms of inquiry (Whitt, 1991, p. 406). The subjective, constructivist, or naturalistic paradigm, which occurs in natural settings, and is holistic, interpretive, contextual, inductive, and, value-laden, is an alternative to the conventional or objective positivist paradigm (Creswell, 1998; Guba, 1993; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Marshall & Rossman, 2006; Whitt, 1991). This non-quantitative research framework is commonly referred to as qualitative inquiry (Boyd, 1993b).

In this paradigm, naturalists postulate multiple realities exist in human interactions, and this supposition of interrelated realities frames research questions holistically, rather than in separable components or variables (Erlandson, et al. 1993). This ontological view emerges from the integration of matter, life and consciousness in complex organizational structures, “but because the various realms are characterized by a peculiar system of organization, no single knowledge system is capable of encompassing the full range of the strata of human experience” (Polkinghorne, 1988, p. 3).
In constructivism, naturalists hold an epistemological assumption that humans form knowledge by experiencing the world and interpreting the lived experience; and, inquiry and analysis include the researcher’s interpretation of the study participants’ representation of their experiences (Creswell, 1998; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 1991; Rossiter, 1999; Whitt, 1991). As such, the researcher is an instrument of data collection (Creswell, 1998). “Knowledge of the world and its objects” is indirect and “we know the physical world only through an act of mind on the phenomena the world presents to us” (Patton, 1991, pp. 390-391). Humans form knowledge both about objects in the material world, and about intangible realities within humans, such as emotions and feelings, through the interplay of consciousness, experience and reflective revision; therefore, the non-material internal intangibles are unquestionably real (Moustakas, 1994).

In addition, constructivists believe temporal and physical aspects of human experiences are naturally variant and contextual, so generalization across time and settings is impossible (Erlandson, et al. 1993; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The goal of naturalistic inquiry “is the development of shared constructions … among members of a particular group, society, or culture” (Guba, 1993, p. xi). Moreover, human actions, reactions, and situational circumstances mutually influence one another, blurring specific causes and effects. Lincoln and Guba (1985) assert that these interactions constitute mutual simultaneous shaping, where everything shapes everything (p. 38).

The multiple-realities, nature of knowledge formation, and context drive the design and execution of inquiry in the naturalistic paradigm. Since humans construct meaning from lived experiences in natural settings, and these realities may unfold in many different ways, naturalistic researchers refrain from confining study participants to a
contrived or laboratory setting, a preordained set of causes and effects, or specific answers when recollecting experiences. Thus, the inquiry is conducted “in the field,” questions are open-ended, and the design is flexible and emergent as data collection proceeds (Creswell, 1998; Marshall & Rossman, 2006; Whitt, 1991). One of the hallmarks of the constructivist paradigm is giving “voice” to study participants, especially under-studied groups, such as adult college students (Creswell, 1998; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Moreover, the researcher is involved in the inquiry, utilizing her mind as an instrument to adapt analysis at various levels of abstraction (Creswell, 1998; Erlandson, et al. 1993; Marshall & Rossman, 2006).

Naturalistic inquiry is value-bound because it is influenced by a) topic selection, framing the research questions, and employing a method for pursuing data collection and analysis, b) paradigm choice, c) prior related research and the values inherent in substantive theory guiding inquiry procedures and interpretations, d) context, and, e) resonance or dissonance of values in the research process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 38). In the naturalistic paradigm, values exist in inquiry, because values are ordinarily part of human experiences and interpretations of lived experiences. In addition, the research process maintains its integrity by achieving harmony with values through topic selection, articulation of purpose, methodology, and context. Finally, naturalistic inquiry expands knowledge and is not focused on trying to affirm or refute previous findings (Creswell, 1998; Erlandson, et al. 1993; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Marshall & Rossman, 2006).
**Rationale for Using the Naturalistic Paradigm**

The fundamental beliefs of the naturalistic paradigm shape the approach and execution of inquiry. I believe that my inquiry is congruent with the naturalistic paradigm. First, as my literature review reveals, adult learner experiences in higher education are influenced by many interrelated factors, some of which include enrolling in multiple institutions, attendance status, economics, and motivation (Adelman, 1999, 2006; Horn et al. 2002; NCES, 2004, 2006, 2008; Thompson, 1992). These multiple influences affect each individual student’s participation in a unique manner. For example, income level may influence institutional choice because of cost. Choice of institution affects the selection of academic programs, availability of services such as advising, tutoring and childcare, as well as commuting time and associated expenses. Income level may impact attendance status (part- or full-time) because of the demands of a job and/or the number of hours a student may need to work to pay for tuition. Income level and the number of credit hours in which a student enrolls determine eligibility for financial aid. Lastly, working may affect motivation, because of the demands associated with professional, educational and personal commitments, and the finite amount of time and energy a student has for various responsibilities. This example illustrates the mutual simultaneous shaping of a number of factors and it highlights the interrelated realities of the adult learner experience. As such, my inquiry focuses on the holistic perspective of the experience because the adult student does not participate in postsecondary education in isolation; higher education is one of many activities and responsibilities in her life.

Second, the U.S. Census and Department of Education data and analyses provide detailed descriptions of students and graduates, but unveil little about what takes place
that contributes to persistence and degree attainment among the adult population (Kominski & Adams, 1994; NCES, 2008; U.S. Census, 2008). This reveals shortcomings in knowledge about how adult learners attain undergraduate degrees. Third, the graduate’s perspective on the experience of attaining a degree is absent from published research, data and analysis. From a graduate’s perspective, I am seeking to understand what transpired during his or her higher education experiences, contributed to successfully attaining a bachelor’s degree, and the meaning attached to the experience.

Fourth, the postsecondary education system has been ineffective at raising attainment rates among the adult population (Rooney et al. 2006; U.S. Census, 2008). This may be a result of the dominant frame of reference constraining the definition of students by a) enrollment patterns (at single or multiple institutions, without gaps), b) attendance patterns (full- or part-time), c) persistence (based on a six-year period), d) attrition (at single institutions), and e) attainment (by the age of 24) (Adelman, 1999, 2006; Choy, 2002; Horn, 1996; Tinto, 1987, 1993). Analyzing the problem through this principal lens overlooks the realities of the adult student population. In my study, the population of interest is not defined by these measures.

In sum, the gap between what has been established by experts about attainment and the unmistakable reality that attainment rates among adults are low provides an opportunity to approach this inquiry from the naturalistic perspective. I believe the experience of attaining the bachelor’s degree as an older graduate is a multifaceted phenomenon. This is because adult learners are a heterogeneous population enrolled at a variety of institutions, whose participation may span many years, and may include spells of stopping out, all while experiencing the responsibilities and complexities of modern
adulthood. Employing phenomenological methodology seems particularly appropriate for this complex puzzlement.

In the following section, I discuss the phenomenological research method, including its themes, sampling and participant selection, data collection procedures, analysis techniques, trustworthiness, ethical considerations and limitations to this study.

Phenomenological Research Method

Phenomenological research methods share epistemological and ontological foundations with the naturalistic paradigm (Boyd, 1993a). The distinctive characteristics of phenomenology are its description, bracketing, and phenomenological reduction to identify essences of human experiences (Boyd, 1993a; Creswell, 1998; Moustakas, 1994). “A phenomenological study describes the meaning of the lived experiences for several individuals about a concept or the phenomenon” (Creswell, 1998, p. 51).

The nature of phenomenology ordinarily leads to abstract discussions about philosophical issues. This is appropriate, according to Boyd (1993a) because “in order to know what phenomenology is, one must know the themes that constitute the philosophy” (p. 101). Creswell (1998) describes four major themes of phenomenology. First is an emphasis on traditional philosophy as a “search for wisdom” (p. 52). Second, the discovery of knowledge proceeds without presuppositions. In this method, researchers reserve all judgments about what is real, until the researcher can ascertain reality. This suspension is commonly referred to as bracketing or epoche (Boyd, 1993a; Creswell, 1998; Moustakas, 1994). According to Boyd (1993a), the researcher goes through a process of recognizing, reflecting upon, and setting aside the “natural attitude toward the
world that our biography has given us” to raise her awareness of these perceptions, attitudes, and sensibilities (p. 106). With these suspensions, a new system of meaningful relationships can emerge, clearing the path for the researcher to be astonished by the links between meaning, knowledge and interpretation (pp. 106-108). These links constitute phenomenological reduction, where “each experience is considered in its singularity, in and for itself” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 34). For example, I have to set aside the meanings I attach to my experience as a bachelor’s degree recipient at the age of 21, after four years of full-time enrollment at a university. If I prejudge or evaluate the participant experiences through the lens of my own experience, then I will miss the opportunity to be open to new perspectives and discoveries about the complex reality of non-traditional-age student experiences. Third, reality exists in a person’s mind or consciousness once the person becomes aware of it. Fourth, “the reality of an object is only perceived within the meaning of the experience of an individual” (p. 53). Moustakas (1994) summarizes:

The object that appears in consciousness mingles with the object in nature so that a meaning is created, and knowledge is extended. Thus, a relationship exists between what exists in conscious awareness and what exists in the world. What appears in consciousness is an absolute reality while what appears in the world is a product of learning. (p. 27)

Reality for older bachelor’s degree recipients stems from their subjective understanding of their own lived experiences, through reflection, interpretation and explanation.

These themes are “an approach to studying the problem that includes entering the field of perception of the participants; seeing how they experience, live, and display the phenomenon; and looking for the meaning of the participants’ experience” (Creswell,
1998, p. 31). In sum, the search for wisdom, the discovery of knowledge without presuppositions, the conscious existence of reality and meaningfulness form the foundation for phenomenological methodology (Boyd, 1993a; Creswell, 1998; Moustakas, 1994).

According to Moustakas (1994), the core processes of deriving knowledge through the phenomenological method are epoche, phenomenological reduction and imaginative variation (p. 33). With epoche, I set aside my everyday understandings and opinions to analyze the phenomena with a fresh perspective, or “from the vantage point of a pure or transcendental ego” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 33). To achieve this, I identify my conscious reality and the meanings I attach to it. By acknowledging its existence and by tracings its contours, I understand what I have to set aside in order to transcend to a new level of understanding through participant narratives (Boyd, 1993a; Creswell, 1998; Moustakas, 1994). For example, my parents were heavily involved in my bachelor’s degree attainment experience. In this study, I set aside my experience and opinions about parental involvement. Acknowledging that I believe parental involvement influenced my experience permits me to see, distinguish and describe its effect. After this revelation and understanding, I set it aside when analyzing experiences of participants, who may or may not have had similar influences in their degree attainment experience. By setting aside judgment, I am open to perceiving the phenomenon in novel ways.

Phenomenological reduction follows epoche. Moustakas (1994) explains phenomenological reduction as the process that transforms the perception of reality back to the base meanings and existence of an experience (p. 34). The purpose of reduction is to “derive a textural description of the meanings and essences of the phenomenon, the
constituents that comprise the experience in consciousness, from the vantage point of an open self” (p. 34). With these fundamental understandings identified, I can begin to construct a new reality.

Once I identify rich descriptions of meanings and essences, I begin to reveal the structure through the interplay of my imagination, sense and memory. From this imaginative variation, the “structural description of the essences of the experience is derived, presenting a picture of the conditions that precipitate an experience and connect with it” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 35).

In sum, the phenomenological method employs epoche, reduction and imaginative variation to create essential structures that represent the meaning of the experience. According to Moustakas (1994), phenomenological inquiry aims “to determine what an experience means for the persons who have had the experience and are able to provide a comprehensive description of it” (p. 13).

Research Design

Interviewing

In order to make sense of the experiences of adults who attained the bachelor’s degree, I conducted a single 90-minute in-depth interview with each informant, which I recorded on an audiotape. In addition, I used e-mail, telephone calls and other conversations with the participants to expand my own understanding of salient points and to gather more detail. To ensure the accuracy of the participants’ accounts, I shared and verified the content of the interview after its conclusion. The following is a description of the process.
I interviewed 15 bachelor’s degree recipients who attained the degree at or after 25 years of age, and who received the bachelor’s degree within the past five years. The interviews supported my effort to “understand the meaning people involved in education make of their experience” (Seidman, 1998, p. 4). I used open-ended questions (see Appendix D). The goal of the interviews was “to have the participant reconstruct his or her experience within the topic” (Seidman, 1998, p. 9). The open-ended questions allowed participants to tell their own stories in their own words, without prejudging where the narrative would go.

“It is in the constitutive details of experience, reflecting on them, giving them order, and thereby making sense of them that makes telling stories a meaning-making experience” (Seidman, 1998, p. 1). Stories provide participant interpretation and meaningfulness of an experience. Narrative is constructivist and interpretive; the narrative is a story that provides the structure for human meaning-making, time is constitutive of meaning, it is retrospective, and it is shaped by culture (Rossiter, 1999). Moreover, narrative is an individual account that is highly personal, and yet the participant’s story is connected to a greater social and cultural reality (Siedman, 1998).

Exploring the realities of postsecondary education experiences culminating in attaining the bachelor’s degree has social dimensions extending beyond the graduates themselves, because higher education experiences are common among nearly half of the adult population, and yet only a quarter of the population has attained the degree (U.S. Census, 2008). Therefore, social experiences differ between adults who have participated and adults who have attained the degree. And, attainment affects various social outcomes, such as the optimization of economic opportunities. Culturally, the focus on
being a bachelor’s degree recipient at 25 years of age or older is counter to the more common understanding of the traditional-age student degree attainment experience. As such, while the interviews were individual accounts of the experience, attaining a degree is connected to widespread social and cultural issues.

By conducting in-depth interviews with a number of older graduates, I made connections among individual narratives and built a structure of essences across the stories (Creswell, 1998; Siedman, 1998). By using the participant’s own words, I gave voice to a seldom heard group of graduates, with the meanings of their experiences emerging from their own accounts. Because the postsecondary experiences of older graduates span many years and occur at the same time as other activities and responsibilities in their lives, I expected the reconstruction of the experience to be detailed and complex, and it was. I felt my topic was focused and it did generate thick, rich and germane descriptions about the phenomenon.

I audiotaped and transcribed each interview. After the interview, and following the transcription, I provided the participant a copy of the interview transcript to check its accuracy and clarify the content. This measure of quality control is commonly referred to as a member check, whereby the study participants verify that the transcription is an adequate representation of the interview (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, pp. 314-316).

**Demographic Survey**

In order to collect basic demographic information, I asked each participant to complete a brief survey that I collected at the interview (see Appendix E). The questions were about demographics, the institution from which the interviewee received a bachelor’s degree, the date of degree conferral, number of months and/or years in higher
education, number of institutions attended, and time between high school graduation and initial postsecondary enrollment. This allowed me to construct a sample profile to compare to the one I compiled in the previous chapters. My analysis of the two profiles revealed the level of consistency existing between the more broad adult graduate population profile and a select group of older graduates. Rather than asking these questions during the interview, I used this paper and pencil survey to alleviate some time pressure during the meeting.

In sum, the interview, using an in-depth, open question format, and the survey, combined with quality control measures, allowed me to obtain rich data from a select group of informants, which forms the basis for analysis of the phenomenon in this study.

**Sampling Approach**

I used purposeful sampling techniques to select information-rich cases (Patton, 1991). “Information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research” (Patton, 1991, p. 169). Purposeful sampling is congruent with the naturalistic paradigm because it is directed at in-depth study of the phenomenon in question (Patton, 1991).

**Cooperating Organizations**

As discussed previously, bachelor’s degree recipients tend to be employed and active in their communities (Baum & Payea, 2004; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2005a, 2005b). As such, older graduates are interspersed in work, community, and professional organizations. Thus, I sought referrals from well-situated sources within particular organizations. This constituted the source of recruiting informants.
I sought cooperation from two four-year colleges and one community organization to identify interviewees from their alumni and volunteer populations. Each of the colleges has non-traditional-age student academic programs. The community organization has extensive faith-based outreach programs for adults in a large urban area. To protect the identity of these organizations, I disguised the name and identifiable information when referring to each one by assigning aliases and making up location names. To ensure anonymity, I kept the identifiable information about each organization in a locked cabinet in my home that is separate from other materials I use for this study, and I will retain these materials for no more than two years. With cooperation from these organizations, I believed I would achieve a sample large enough to yield a sufficient number of information-rich cases, and I did. The following is a brief description of each organization, with details demonstrating each organization’s constituents were suitable for sampling.

**Big City University.** A public university located in a major metropolitan area, Big City University (Big City) is focused on serving the needs of a large, diverse urban community through access, community, and excellence. Big City offers two degree programs specifically for non-traditional-age students. One of the degree programs, the Adult Liberal Studies Program (ALS) consists of requirements that students can meet through Big City courses, transfer credits, college level proficiency exams, and experiential learning occurring outside of the classroom. The other degree is an individually designed curriculum, which is competency-based. Big City confers bachelor’s degrees to approximately 150 adult students a year.
Christian College. Located in a midwestern state, Christian College is a small, private, liberal arts college. At Christian, 530 adult learners are pursuing undergraduate programs. These adult learners have several options for pursuing the bachelor’s degree, including an accelerated program, with a selection of four majors that is offered in the evening, a program in liberal studies, with opportunities to customize the curriculum, or, traditional programs, with a selection of more than 50 majors. Students meet the degree requirements through proficiency exams (e.g. CLEP), experiential learning, transfer and in-residence coursework.

St. Fiacre. Located in a major city, participants in St. Fiacre’s church-based program for adults in their 20’s and 30’s are involved in faith exploration and reflection, community-building, service, and social activities. These young adults perform volunteer work with impoverished and under-served communities in the city. St. Fiacre has a strong regional reputation for outreach to young working adults, a cornerstone of its revitalization plan initiated 25 years ago. The adult outreach activities have fueled growth in church membership and activity participation. With a church membership of over 3,000 families, and a location in the heart of a downtown area, this church has a loyal following in a diverse community of worshipers and a solid reputation for service in the community. Presently, about 1,300 people ages 25 to 39 participate in the adult outreach activities.

These three organizations provided me access to a liaison at each organization in order to identify prospective informants. The role of the liaison was to contact prospective interviewees to invite them to participate in my study. Any one of the
organization’s constituents who had questions or who was interested in participating contacted me. I describe this procedure in detail in the following section.

Because alumni or volunteers from each of these organizations are adults, it was likely sufficient numbers of prospective informants existed who met my criteria, and thus these organizations were appropriate for sampling. I had more than enough qualified respondents as a result of this sampling method.

I proposed a secondary method of sampling if it was necessary to supplement the above sampling approach, but I had sufficient numbers of prospective interviewees respond to the invitations, so I did not need to utilize the secondary method of sampling.

**Participant Selection**

I selected, on a first-come, first-served basis, 15 participants. I focused on a small sample to elicit in-depth data, in accordance with qualitative inquiry. I used broad criteria to determine the population from which I sampled participants for my study. I selected participants who attained the bachelor’s degree within the past five years and who were at or over the age of 25 when they became degree recipients. I excluded adults so far removed in time from their educational experience that they would have been likely to forget details of their experience, or have altered, more moderate views of their experience. The purpose of setting this limit was to ensure the richness and currency of the information derived from the participants.

In addition, I excluded graduates whom I knew, have worked with or advised in the past, to allow for depth and credibility in the narrative. Close associations or past advisor-advisee relationships may have impinged on the quality of the information, because participants such as these may have felt they needed to present an interpretation
they thought I wanted to hear, or they may have felt reluctant to share particular details about aspects of their experiences because of our relationship to one another.

These criteria support the fundamental purpose of the inquiry by including participants who have the distinctive experience of recently attaining the bachelor’s degree at or after 25 years of age. According to Patton (1991), these predetermined standards of importance constitute criterion sampling, which are commonly used as quality assurance measures.

With low degree attainment rates among adults 25 years of age and over in the general population, I did not narrow the sample with any additional criteria, such as demographics. The size of the older graduate population is small and many possible combinations of characteristics may exist (NCES, 2008; U.S. Census, 2008). Thus, setting more limits on who could have participated may not have yielded enough information-rich cases.

**Data Collection**

A fundamental feature of qualitative inquiry is that the researcher is an instrument of data collection (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). As such, the technical and interpersonal considerations of the study, along with the evaluation by review boards and issues related to informed consent are important components of the research design and execution (Marshall & Rossman, 2006).

**Gaining Access**

I worked with a liaison at each organization who helped me gain access to potential participants. The liaisons serve in roles that provide contact with and access to adult constituents. At Big City University, the liaison is the Director of Nontraditional
Degree Programs, and she sent the materials out via postal mail. The Senior Development Officer is the liaison at Christian College and she distributed the materials via a listserv. St. Fiacre’s Director of Young Adult Ministry is the liaison, and she personally contacted individuals in the organization.

I worked with the liaison to ensure that the organization was aware of and explicitly approved the activities associated with the study. To achieve this, I presented an organizational invitation letter (see Appendix A), synopsis of the study (see Appendix B), consent of the cooperating institution form (see Appendix C), interview protocol (see Appendix D), and, demographic survey (see Appendix E) to each liaison to obtain permission to proceed from authorities at the organization. The Institutional Review Boards at Big City and Christian College approved the study. St. Fiacre affirmed its approval by signing the consent of the cooperating institution form (see Appendix C). Once each cooperating organization notified me of their approval, I worked with the liaison to identify study participants.

The liaison at Big City sent, via postal mail, the invitation to participate (see Appendix F), synopsis of the study (see Appendix B), and consent to participate in research (see Appendix G) to 384 alumni. The liaison at Christian College contacted 50 alumni via a listserv, sending the invitation to participate (see Appendix F), synopsis of the study (see Appendix B), and consent to participate in research (see Appendix G). The liaison at St. Fiacre gave the invitation to participate (see Appendix F), synopsis of the study (see Appendix B) and consent to participate in research (see Appendix G) to each person she contacted about participating in the study. This distribution occurred without my knowledge of who was in the pool of prospective participants, which signaled to the
organization members a measure of quality assurance, and it created a distance between
the researcher and the pool, avoiding the appearance of coercion to participate. The
materials encouraged prospective interviewees to contact me with questions for
clarification, and/or to indicate a willingness to participate in the study, without the
liaison knowing who responded, so the organization members did not feel any pressure to
participate related to alumni benefits or organizational perquisites.

The respondents who were willing to participate in the study or who had
questions about the study contacted me via e-mail or phone. For the respondents who
had questions, I provided the answers via e-mail or phone, and I reiterated the invitation
to participate in the study (see Appendix F). Among the respondents willing to
participate, I discussed the study and verified that each one met the study criteria (see
Appendix J). Following verification, I selected each eligible participant on a first-come,
first-served basis, as stated above. With each organization contacting its constituents at
roughly the same time as the other organizations, each constituent had an equal
opportunity to respond to me. As a result, the first-come, first-served selection was
equitable. Thirty-five people responded to the invitations. I selected 15 to interview.

Since more eligible constituents responded than I needed to satisfy the purpose of
this study, I initially responded by asking if each one would be willing to wait a few
weeks before I could tell each one for certain if I had enough participants or not (see
Appendix K). Once that interval of a few weeks passed, I followed up with a definitive
answer. Each person with whom I made interview arrangements showed up for his or her
interview, and everyone completed the demographic survey. Once I conducted 15
interviews over the span of five weeks, I sent a letter declining the offer to participate to
each of the remaining respondents (see Appendix H). I also contacted each of the liaisons to inform them that I had collected sufficient data and would not be conducting any additional interviews. In sum, by following the primary method of identifying study participants, specifically by enlisting the assistance of liaisons at cooperating organizations, I engaged enough adult graduates to achieve saturation of data. I had a provision for a secondary sampling method, which I did not need to employ, as well as a system of managing offers to participate after I had collected enough data to satisfy the purpose of the study.

*Interviews*

In the phenomenological method, interviews provide the basis for understanding the degree attainment experience among adult learners. “In accordance with phenomenological principles, scientific investigation is valid when the knowledge sought is arrived at through descriptions that make possible an understanding of meanings and essences of experience” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 84). The description is a result of me asking open-ended questions about the postsecondary experience that culminated in degree attainment. In the interview, each participant provided a narrative situating the experience holistically and within the context of his or her life. In other words, the narrative was about the overall experience, and it was a subjective reflection of each participant’s reality. With the variety of characteristics, motivation, skills, learning preferences, challenges, and individual circumstances affecting the adult learner population, the interviews illuminated more clearly the multifaceted nature of the degree attainment experience. This is congruent with the naturalistic ontological view that
multiple realities exist (Creswell, 1998). In sum, the interview was a personal account of lived experience illuminating and forming knowledge about this experience.

Interview Procedures

I conducted a single 90-minute in-depth interview with each graduate, focusing on his or her recollections and interpretations of his or her experiences, in an appropriate setting. I asked open-ended questions to allow the interviewee to reconstruct the experience in his or her own words (see Appendix D). I did not anticipate meeting a study informant at the educational institution where the experience occurred, nor in a home or non-public setting. I met participants at public libraries, college and park district facilities, workplace conference rooms, and in their offices. My goal was to find a convenient and quiet space where the participant felt comfortable and safe. This allowed the informant to speak freely about his or her experience without being overheard or feeling self-conscious about others listening in, and was conducive to audiotape recording. I made the arrangements for the meeting location and met the participant in a place that was convenient for him or her.

I fully disclosed the purpose of my study to participants (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Siedman (1998) strongly suggests this level of disclosure for three reasons. First, inquiring about the experience of attaining a baccalaureate degree is within the context of an informant’s life story, and sensitive issues may have arisen during the interview. Some of these matters might have included conflicts arising from multiple responsibilities, finances, relationships, career, and feelings about the experience. Second, by audiotape-recording the interview and discussing the experience at length, and even with measures in place to disguise the interviewee’s identity, I could not
completely promise that someone who knows the participant would not recognize him or her. Third, I could not calculate the potential of informant vulnerability ahead of time (p. 50). Thus, I described the nature of my inquiry when recruiting informants, then, before beginning the interview, reiterated the purpose and sought informed written consent from each participant (see Appendix G).

To protect the interviewee from any unexpected vulnerabilities, I maintained each informant’s anonymity by assigning a pseudonym and disguising personally identifiable information. Only I know the identity of each participant. I will keep the names of participants in a locked cabinet at my home separate from other study materials for no more than two years. Moreover, each adult graduate in this study was free to discontinue his or her participation at any time, for any reason. I explicitly stated this on the consent to participate in research form (see Appendix G) and reiterated it at the start of the interview.

After the interview, I transcribed each interview verbatim. I employed a transcriber, and I did everything I could to mask the name of the participant from the audiotape, without altering the content or context of the recording. The transcriber signed a confidentiality agreement (see Appendix I). To conceal interviewee names, the transcriber inserted initials in place of full names in the transcript (Siedman, 1998).

After transcription was complete, I provided each informant with a complete transcript of his or her interview. This is a measure of quality assurance that permitted each participant to react to the interview transcription, assess if the intentions he or she expressed in the interview were accurate, clarify or correct any details, add new information, and ensure I had fairly represented the content and context of the narrative
(Lincoln & Guba, 1985, pp. 314-316). This member check is a record of the participant agreeing he or she understands and agrees to the transcription, which guards against later claims of researcher errors or misunderstandings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Member checking is congruent with the naturalistic paradigm’s characteristics of multiple realities unfolding in individual ways and giving voice to participants. Each individual participant’s critical assessment of the transcription is important to guard against interpretations that are so general or typical, diffusing or suppressing the participants’ individual reality and silencing voice (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, pp. 314-316).

The data analysis section of my research study contains lengthy passages of personal accounts directly quoted from the interview data, because the study is centered on the participants’ experiences. To set context, I developed profiles describing individual informants from details contained in their interview transcripts.

I will retain the study materials related to each participant in a locked cabinet in my home, separate from the materials identifying the participants, for no more than two years. The interview notes and any other contacts with participants contain only the pseudonym, and the interview transcript contains initials not full names, to ensure anonymity. I devise a key listing the participants’ real names and the assigned pseudonyms in a separate locked cabinet in my home for the same period of time.

The interview and member checking constituted a small amount of time, yet I collected rich data. As such, I was “minimally intrusive and present for a short period of time, [and] building trusting relations must proceed in conjunction with gathering good data” (Marshall & Rossman, 2006, p. 73). As a college administrator with more than 15 years of experience in direct contact with adult students, I have refined my interpersonal
skills to enable people to feel comfortable and create an atmosphere conducive to sharing information about collegiate experiences within a set amount of time, such as an advising meeting. I have learned how to quickly and efficiently elicit information relevant to planning courses of study, evaluating academic histories, and overcoming barriers. Furthermore, I have experience with maintaining confidentiality and protecting identity to mitigate the chance of injuring dignity. As a result, I feel confident I can build trust and good rapport, while eliciting relevant and comprehensive data from study participants and protecting their identities.

Lastly, Marshall and Rossman (2006) suggest one other technical consideration involving the specificity of the focus of the study. I have developed questions concentrating on the attainment experience (see Appendix D). These questions are directed at motivation, challenges, skills that contribute to attaining the degree, resources, recommendations for enhancing academic success for other non-traditional-age learners, and articulating meaning, impact of attainment and return on investment. My goal is to identify what happened, how it happened and construct a description of the meaning and essence of the experience (Creswell, 1998, p. 150). Within the naturalistic paradigm and using the phenomenological method, data collection and analysis occur simultaneously. As I conducted the interviews and analysis, I remained open to new perspectives, and I used my mind as an instrument to abstract meanings and essences, allowing understandings and structure to emerge. My questions provided structure and direction, while permitting me to follow compelling leads or clarify puzzlements (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). For instance, I detected a trend of enrolling in or completing graduate school among the first participants, so I inquired about graduate school plans in
subsequent interviews. At the same time, my over-arching goal was to complete this inquiry, so I gathered sufficient data, but once I reached a point of redundancy or saturation and interviewees were not adding new understandings about the phenomenon, I finished interviewing and data collection (Siedman, 1998).

**Data Analysis**

**Interview Analysis**

After each interview, I listened to the audiotape recording, transcribed the material, made notes about my impressions and reactions, and wrote theoretical memos for myself (Wengraf, 2001). The purpose of doing all of these activities at the same time was to generate creative connections with the material that ultimately contributed to answering the central research question (Wengraf, 2001). This process is also congruent with naturalistic research, where the researcher uses her mind as an instrument of data collection (Creswell, 1998). Moreover, a key feature of the phenomenological method is imaginative variation (Moustakas, 1994).

The approach of simultaneously transcribing and writing notes supported my efforts to code the data. Coding identified emergent themes and revealed the invariant structure of the degree attainment experience among informants. This approach was important to gaining a clearer understanding of the degree attainment experience among adult learners. By utilizing the interplay of the interview data, my imagination, and systematic coding, I began to see the structure of the essences constituting the experience (Creswell, 1998; Wengraf, 2001). Throughout this process, I guarded against suppositions and frames of reference from my own higher education experience by scrutinizing my notes and reviewing the transcripts of the interviews to be sure I elicited
each interviewee’s story. Through this constant attention to my own biases, I recognized them, traced their shape and dimension, and set them aside to hear and understand the participant’s voice with a fresh understanding. In phenomenology, this “process of setting aside predilections, prejudices, predispositions, and allowing things, events and people to enter anew into consciousness, and to look and see them again, as if for the first time” is called epoche (Moustakas, 1994, p. 85). Epoche “requires that we allow a phenomenon or experience to be just what it is and to come to know it as it presents itself” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 85). Through this interconnected and looped process, I worked toward answering research questions, identifying themes, and analyzing data through reconstructions of the participant experiences.

Survey Analysis

To analyze the data from the demographic survey, I created a matrix with the questions and filled in the answers to tabulate the material. This process allowed me to compare the survey results with U.S. Census Bureau and National Center for Education Statistics analyses, showing to what extent the data from the select group of participants reflected the profile of graduates that I compiled in the previous chapters.

Trustworthiness

Credibility

I established credibility in this study through several different activities. They included: first, identifying gaps in research; second, establishing context; third, producing an audit trail; fourth, taking measures to uphold trust; fifth, engaging in peer debriefing; and, sixth, conducting member checks. Below I describe each activity in more detail.
As I state above, I have found no previous research about what transpires during
the postsecondary experience and culminates in degree attainment from the perspective
of older learners. As an unexplored area of study, I believe that constructing my study in
a way that explores and discovers the nature of the question is appropriate. Furthermore,
adult learners are an under-studied population, and the dearth of information and sound
research about adults and attainment has created a gap in knowledge and understanding
about the phenomenon. Moreover, the dominance of traditional-age student models,
theories, and research pertaining to persistence, retention, and attainment overlooks the
complexity of the experience among non-traditional-age learners. As a result, the
established knowledge base inadequately addresses low degree attainment rates among
all adults. This study gives attention and voice to this particular group of learners.

In this study, I identify the scope of the problem of low degree attainment rates
among adults by using U.S. Census Bureau and National Center for Education Statistics
data. Furthermore, I discuss the implications from multiple perspectives, including
economic and social factors, on an individual and national scale. Moreover, I address
components of the experience affecting persistence and attainment by critically analyzing
and synthesizing expert research about adult learners, including motivation, challenges,
learning styles, and skills. By following established lines of thinking, this study extends
the knowledge base, contributing to credibility.

By producing an audit trail of notes and theoretical memos, I can test my
interpretations and analysis against the literature review and my own understandings to
ensure that I am aware of and setting aside my own preconceptions, letting the participant
narratives guide me to discovery, and illuminating a fuller picture of multifaceted aspects
of the degree attainment experience. Note-taking, coding and memo-writing demonstrate my thinking and how I identify emerging relevant issues and multiple realities, and these activities show imaginative interpretation of the material (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Moustakas, 1994; Wengraf, 2001). This check and audit trail establish credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). “To satisfy this criterion for trustworthiness, the naturalist must be able to describe in detail just how this process of tentative identification and detailed exploration was carried out” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 304).

The nature of constructivist research also allows me to follow compelling leads without prejudging where the inquiry will go, thus making analysis from narratives authentic. Inherent in discovery and exploration is the possibility that I may uncover new knowledge contributing to overall understanding of the phenomenon. Thus, this study can be judged on the soundness of the literature upon which it is grounded, on the conceptual framework, and on the constructivist research design that accommodates multiple realities, stems from the perspective of the participants, and allows for emergent ideas (Marshall & Rossman, 2006).

In addition to establishing credibility with soundness of review of literature and research design and execution, trust is paramount in obtaining information that is authentic. I establish trust with participants through a series of activities, including promising not to betray confidences, using aliases and disguising personally identifiable information, fully disclosing the nature and purpose of the study, obtaining informed consent, and giving participants a say in the outcome of the study by member-checking and through follow-up contacts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, pp. 302-303). Trust between the
informants and me grows as I engage in these activities, and the trust supports credibility in the study because it entails authentic and active participation by all involved parties.

An additional form of establishing credibility is employing peer debriefing. Peer debriefing is a technique of engaging colleagues who have substantive knowledge about non-traditional-age learners to review and constructively critique my analyses and interpretations of data. Lincoln and Guba (1985) describe the peer debriefing process as keeping the researcher honest, an opportunity to test working hypotheses, establishing next steps in the design, and providing constructive support (pp. 308-309).

I enlist two peer debriefers for this study. One is the registrar at a community college who attained a doctoral degree three years ago. Her research focused on adult learners. The second is an administrative director at a community college. She is conducting her own doctoral research and has extensive professional experience working with adult learners. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), the role of these two colleagues is to ask clarifying questions about my interpretations, challenge me to defend positions I take, and go over any other relevant matters related to the study. Moreover, each is a sounding board for testing out new ideas and a support to keep in check emotions that hinder the work. By keeping written records of meetings and contacts during debriefing, I have a reference for establishing the trail of emerging ideas and eventual conclusions for the study. By discussing and analyzing the data and my own conclusions with peers, I establish credibility by having two professionals who have experience with adult learners critically examine my work (pp. 308-309).

Lastly, I discuss above the member-checking procedure, which also supports credibility. Through member-checking, I verify that the narrative account fairly
represents the content and context of the narrative, which makes it authentic (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, pp. 314-316). This combination of activities supports my efforts to craft a genuinely credible study.

Transferability

By clearly describing the time and context of data through the thick descriptions I generate from the participants and their narratives, I establish the database from which other researchers can determine if my hypotheses and interpretations are sufficiently close or similar to transfer to another study, context or time. For instance, the working hypothesis I generate from this study may include skills and strategies that adult learners employ to attain the bachelor’s degree. These findings may transfer to studies about learners pursuing graduate degrees. The key concept about transferability is that the richness of the material provides other researchers an opportunity to determine if transferability is appropriate and it is my responsibility to be as explicit and thorough in presenting the temporal and contextual aspects of the material to make that determination (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 316; Marshall & Rossman, 2006, pp. 201-202).

Dependability

The activities involved in establishing credibility are related to dependability. By executing and documenting the associated functions, I create an audit trail containing the specific details about the study, which are open to examination. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), the audit trail includes raw data, field notes, theoretical memos, notes including hypotheses, inclinations, and concepts, data reconstruction and synthesis products, coding, themes, as well as interpretations. It also involves final report, process notes, and, material about intentions, bracketing, epoche and dispositions. In addition, it
contains instrument materials comprised of interview protocol and informed consent forms (pp. 319-320). By organizing and documenting the entire procedure, accounting for the emergent findings, creating the final report, and following the guidelines for credibility discussed above, the whole research process is subject to outside scrutiny and each component can be verified, thus making the process and my conclusions dependable (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Marshall & Rossman, 2006; Whitt, 1991).

**Confirmability**

By establishing credibility, following a design that is conducive to transferability and creating an audit trail to measure dependability, the confirmability of the study rests on the question of whether my findings can be confirmed by another (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Marshall & Rossman, 2006). As such, by keeping a reflexive journal, with my own personal account of my thinking and the method, I have a record of the unfolding of essential structures that constitute the phenomenological method, along with my reasons for making decisions throughout the process (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). This reflexive journal, for example, contains a record of my presuppositions, as I define them and set them aside to transcend to the level of a participant’s reconstruction of his or her experience and the analyses that flow from participant perspectives. By keeping this personal account, I make the process of my logic and interpretations more transparent to others, thus allowing for confirmability.

In sum, the trustworthiness of the study rests on the credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability built into the design and executed by me in an organized and detailed fashion.
Researcher Positionality

I have been a higher education administrator for many years, and I have primarily worked with non-traditional-age students. At this time, I do not work with undergraduate students, nor do I have professional contact with any groups of bachelor’s degree recipients. I am passionate about the subject matter after having the privilege to support and witness adult student journeys of perseverance to bachelor’s degree attainment, and appreciate the joy and pride of degree recipient accomplishments. At the same time, I have always been concerned by the steady participation among adults in postsecondary education, the proportionately smaller number of graduates, and the indifference about this disparity on institutional and system-wide levels, despite evidence suggesting that degree attainment is such an important goal for individuals and society.

Given my experience and interests, I hold assumptions about factors that contribute to successfully attaining the bachelor’s degree at or after the age of 25, but I believe I can make every attempt to dispel concerns about my biases because I truly do not know what the data will yield. Because of the gap in information about this population and the puzzling phenomenon of persistence to attainment, I cannot help but be open to the unfolding data and emergent process.

Ethical Considerations

Respect

I take the utmost care and measures to protect the identity and dignity of my research participants. As discussed above, I assign aliases and disguise personally identifiable information. Even with the organizations with which I am working, I take care to mask their identities and locations. This study is not an evaluation or judgment
about non-traditional-age learners or specific institutions. The purpose is to discover new knowledge that may be helpful in aiding older learners who want to attain a bachelor’s degree. I employ various measures ensuring the ethical treatment of human subjects and of organizations.

Among participants, I obtain each person’s signature on the informed consent document (see Appendix G). I assign a pseudonym, disguise personally identifiable information, and protect any confidences shared during the interview and follow up. Furthermore, I fully disclose the purpose of the study and I ensure that each person understands that he or she may discontinue his or her participation at any time, for any reason. In addition, I share the interview transcript with each informant to verify the content, intent and fair portrayal of his or her reconstructed narrative. These measures are in place to ensure I am treating the interviewees with fairness, respect, and in an ethical manner.

For each organization, I follow protocol for ensuring that I am proceeding in an ethical manner during the period in which we are cooperating. I obtain consent, and formal approval if necessary, of the organization to cooperate with it in the recruitment of informants. I share the profile of the organization with each respective liaison to ensure that I have fairly and accurately represented the organization, by assigning an alias and hiding identifying information, such as location and actual name. When I complete the final report, I agree to share my results with any and all of the cooperating organizations that request to see them.

Lastly, by making myself accountable for the process from which I derive the final report, I make the decision-making and methodology processes transparent and
subject to review. By treating the participants and organization in such a manner, and by following the protocol outlined above, I believe I meet ethical standards.

Dignity

Protecting the dignity and reputation of the participants and organizations is paramount to this study. Measures to protect identity guard against potential problems, but I cannot anticipate nor can I ensure that someone who knows the informant or the organization would not be recognized by someone he or she knows well. By disclosing the profiles to the organizations and asking for their critical assessment and explicit approval for use, I believe that I have built in a solid measure of protection and alleviate concerns about being recognized. Moreover, the interviewees may share potentially sensitive information, and during the member-check they can discuss with me whether or not they want to permit confidential material to be disclosed in the final report. By partnering with the participants, and by making an effort to elicit their feedback, I believe I am protecting dignity.

Limitations of the Study

Inherent in Methodology

This study, similar to any other, has limitations. Situating the study in the naturalistic paradigm and employing phenomenological research methods confine the study in several ways (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). First, from the ontological perspective that multiple realities exist, the realities cannot be broken down into separable parts that can be manipulated and/or controlled. As such, establishing causality is not a goal. Second, the researcher is an instrument of analysis, which does not separate the observer from the observed. Both are partners in this study and human interaction is part of the
process. Third, time and context are variable, making it virtually impossible to exactly replicate individual narratives in subsequent research. Fourth, values are ordinarily part of human experience; as a result, the data and analysis in this study are value-bound (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, pp. 28-38). Within these constraints, adherence to principles of the constructivist paradigm, coupled with specific processes and quality control measures appropriate within the phenomenological framework ensures the soundness and appropriateness of addressing the research problem in this manner.

Sample Size

The sample size is a limitation. I select information-rich cases to provide breadth and depth to the data and to generate thick detailed descriptions of the phenomenon, rather than selecting a statistically representative sample to depict all adult learners in a probabilistic manner (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). The goal in this study is to begin to illuminate what transpires during the bachelor’s degree attainment experience. From the detailed and rich participant narratives of a select group of people who have lived the experience, my conclusions may produce working hypotheses from which further questions can be investigated, explored, analyzed and reported (Marshall & Rossman, 2006; Patton, 1991). Thus, while generalizations are not the goal of this study, the findings may be transferable (Marshall & Rossman, 2006).

Reliance on Subjective Reflection

Narratives are subjective reflections, or stories. By recounting separate instances and isolated events in story form and stemming from lived experiences, the narrator creates a cohesion and sequence that provide temporal and contextual dimension, as well as meaning and reality. “Narrative is the fundamental scheme for linking individual
human actions and events into interrelated aspects of an understandable composite” (Polkinghorne, 1988, p. 13). As such, narratives are interpretive and unpredictable, because the retelling of events and experiences can change to create a satisfactory and coherent story at the time of telling (Rossiter, 1999). Temporality influences narratives because it takes into account the past, present and future in a fluid and multidirectional manner. “Narrative suggests a flow of time that accommodates the confluence of past, present, and future in the process of meaning making” (Rossiter, 1999, p. 8). As such, narrators discussing past experiences may not tell a story the same way every time. However, this variation is offset by the holistic account of the interplay of many factors, providing richness, texture, and meaning instead of an account of discrete events or separate influences.

Geographic Limitations

The geographic reach may be limited with purposeful sampling of constituents from three organizations in the same metropolitan area. However, the literature review, especially Adelman’s (1999, 2006) findings, suggests adult graduates attend more than one institution during their undergraduate experience. As such, the actual number of institutions participants have attended may have a larger geographical reach because of the propensity of bachelor’s degree recipients to enroll in multiple institutions over the course of an undergraduate career. Furthermore, the community organization volunteers who participate in the study presumably have had postsecondary education experiences at a variety of institutions. The demographic survey results allow me to support or refute the multi institutional enrollment tendencies among bachelor’s degree recipients (Adelman, 1999, 2006; Bradburn et al. 2003).
In sum, this chapter explains the research methodology for this study. I am situating the complex puzzlement of degree attainment among adult learners in the naturalistic paradigm and employing phenomenological methodology. I detail the research design, including interview and survey procedures. I explain sampling approaches and data collection. I address trustworthiness, and I explain my own researcher positionality. I describe ethical considerations, and last, limitations to this study. Together, these various aspects constitute the methods for collecting and analyzing data. The following chapters contain an analysis of the data.
CHAPTER IV

THE PATH TO DEGREE ATTAINMENT:

MOTIVATION AND CHALLENGES

Introduction

I interviewed 15 graduates for this study to better understand what bachelor’s degree recipients 25 years of age and over believe led to their degree attainment. From an analysis of interview data, several themes emerged which illuminated the degree attainment experience among this select group of adult graduates. In this chapter, I discuss the themes and explain what they mean through the voices of study participants.

I begin by introducing and describing the interviewees. Next, I present the themes. Through an analysis of the informant narratives, I identify the core and structure of the experience, and provide details of participant accounts to illuminate a more exact and complete description of what attaining a bachelor’s degree as an adult entails (Jones, Torres & Arminio, 2006, pp. 46-52). I categorize the data according to the research questions, because the themes span across the answers to the research questions. The first question pertains to factors that motivate adults to earn a bachelor’s degree. The second question asks about the critical challenges participants report facing during the undergraduate experience, and how the informants addressed these issues.
Study Participants

Fifteen adult graduates participated in this study, and, with each one, I conducted a personal, in-depth interview. The following describes the group of study informants. All interviewees attained the bachelor’s degree within the past five years, and each one received a bachelor’s degree from Big City University. One study participant had received a second bachelor’s degree from another institution. Two informants exclusively attended Big City. Nearly half of the study participants attended three or fewer undergraduate institutions, with the remainder attending four or more institutions.

The majority of informants in this study began their postsecondary education careers as traditional-age students. Nine interviewees began college within a year of completing high school; among this group, eight were 18 years of age or younger at the time of initial enrollment. One participant attained her General Education Development (GED) certificate at age 40 and began her post-secondary education in the same year. One interviewee attained his GED, served in the armed forces, and began his college career after being discharged from the service. Another informant became a mother at a young age, so she had a gap between finishing high school and beginning college.

Each of the interviewees had work experience, and all but two combined work and education during the last enrollment interval that led to attaining the bachelor’s degree. Two participants enrolled full-time. The remaining 13 adult graduates had various full- and part-time jobs in occupations such as nursing, real estate, building management, park district administration, and, office support and administrative services.

In order to benchmark the study informants group against national data sets, I use data from the NCES 1992-93 B&B and 1999-2000 B&B Cohorts (Bradburn et al. 2003;
McCormick & Horn, 1996). Table 1 details the path to degree attainment among the two cohort and study participant groups.

Table 1

Path to degree data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>1992-93</th>
<th>1999-2000</th>
<th>Study</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>B&amp;B Cohort&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>B&amp;B Cohort&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Participants&lt;sup&gt;c&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time elapsed between finishing high school/GED and initial enrollment&lt;sup&gt;d&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than 1 year</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 to 2 years</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 to 5 years</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 or more years</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time elapsed between finishing high school/GED and bachelor’s degree attainment&lt;sup&gt;e&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Within 4 years</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 to 5 years</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 to 6 years</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 to 10 years</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 or more years</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>87%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Demographic differences exist between the informant group and the two B&B cohorts. Among the 15 interviewees, 14 were 40 years of age and over when they received their bachelor’s degrees. This is older than the majority of adult bachelor’s degree recipients, when comparing the participant group to NCES 1992-93 and 2000-01 B&B cohort studies’ data on adult graduates (Bradburn et al. 2003; McCormick & Horn, 1996). Twelve women and three men participated in this study, which represent more women than men as compared to national data (Bradburn et al. 2003; McCormick & Horn, 1996). Twelve informants are parents, which is a higher proportion than the 1999-2000 B&B cohort (Bradburn et al. 2003). The racial and ethnic profile is similar to that of graduates in the two NCES B&B cohorts (Bradburn et al. 2003; McCormick & Horn,
Table 2

**Demographic data**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>1992-93</th>
<th>1999-2000</th>
<th>Study</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age at initial post-secondary enrollment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18 or younger</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>73%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19 to 20</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21 to 24</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25 and over</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age at bachelor’s degree receipt</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25 to 29</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30 to 39</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40 and over</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>93%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parenthood</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Childless</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Racial and Ethnic Characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1992-93 B&amp;B Cohort</th>
<th>1999-2000 B&amp;B Cohort</th>
<th>Note</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>White/</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Hispanic</td>
<td>81%</td>
<td>69%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black/African American/</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Hispanic</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic or</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Indian/</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alaskan Native</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native Hawaiian/</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pacific Islander</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiracial</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* ¹Among NCES 1992-93 B&B Cohort who were 25 years of age and over at the time of degree receipt. This subset is 28% of the entire cohort. ²Among NCES 1999-2000 B&B Cohort who were 25 years of age and over at the time of degree receipt. This subset is 31% of the entire cohort. ³Study participants n=15. Not all of the participants answered each question, so totals may not sum to 100.

⁴The age groupings in the 1992-93 cohort did not allow for detailed comparison. ⁵Parenthood was not a reported measure in the 1992-93 B&B study. ⁶Some of the racial and ethnic background categories did not exist in the 1992-93 B&B study.
This broad overview and comparison to the national data sets situate the study informants in context with non-traditional-age bachelor’s degree recipients. The following is a brief description of each interviewee, which adds depth to each adult graduate’s perspective on the bachelor’s degree attainment experience.

Profiles of Study Participants

Susan Roberts graduated from high school in 1974 and enrolled in a local community college. However, her family and other priorities influenced her, and she stopped out because she wanted to get married and buy a house. To afford this lifestyle, she worked full-time. She returned to school in 1988, but performing poorly in one class led to frustration, and she stopped out. Then she enrolled at another college, and used her employee benefits to pay for tuition. After leaving that job and without tuition benefits, she stopped out again. Later, she was consulting for her job, which provided some flexibility with her time, at which point she decided to enroll once again to finish her bachelor’s degree. She enrolled at Big City and received her bachelor’s degree. Susan is working full-time and is now pursuing a graduate program.

Fran Santana and her sister grew up in a blue-collar family. Her parents considered Fran the smarter of the two sisters, so they expected her to go to college, but they could not afford to pay for it. After finishing high school in the late 1960’s, Fran enrolled in a two-year college with free tuition. Then she transferred to a large public university. Finding the commute grueling and the academics overwhelming at the public university, Fran decided to transfer back to the two-year college at which she began her studies. As a condition of re-entry, the college required her to take a math assessment exam. Fran did not want to take the test, so she could not enroll and she stopped out.
After working for 15 years and becoming a full-time parent, Fran returned to a community college, taking classes to become a physical therapy assistant. She was unable to continue because of the demands on her time for childcare responsibilities for her young daughter. In the meantime, she worked part-time and later full-time. Fran’s schedule became more flexible once her daughter was older, at which time she enrolled at a community college and then transferred to Big City University, from where she received her bachelor’s degree in 2006. While she is contemplating graduate school, Fran is focused on making a major life change by moving to another part of the state and having her father move in with her family in their new home.

Angela Homer always wanted to be a nurse from the time she was a young girl. After finishing high school, she attained her nursing diploma through a three-year nursing program. Angela worked 27 years as a registered nurse (RN) at a well-known hospital in the city, and she was quite satisfied with the opportunities available to her in the nursing profession. Accomplished in her career, and an author on the side, she always wanted a bachelor’s degree, so she left her job at the hospital for a part-time position as an RN at a clinic and to take care of her mother, who was in failing health. Angela found a good balance by working part-time and taking three classes a term. Angela received her degree from Big City University, fulfilling her desire for the credential. Angela continues her work as an RN in the clinic, writes, and volunteers in disaster relief programs. Angela is confident about her chances if she wants to change jobs because she had both the professional experience as an RN and the bachelor’s degree.

Carla Friedman began her college career right out of high school on an athletic scholarship at Big City University. When her sport was cut from the athletic program,
her funding was gone and she tried to combine work and school to pay tuition. However, she struggled with the demands in both roles and stopped out of school to work full-time. Over time, she took a class here and there, and then she got married and had children. She had been working for the same company for many years, but it had been in a declining industry, so she wanted to attain a bachelor’s degree to compete in the marketplace, in case she would lose her job. She returned to school, and 20 years after her initial enrollment, Carla received her bachelor’s degree from Big City after two hectic years of working at two jobs, raising two kids and juggling responsibilities for her home. Carla is considering graduate school to start a new career in teaching and coaching.

Jeannie Taylor got married and had children right after graduating from high school, which kept her from starting college for a few years. As her children got older, Jeannie wanted an outlet from parenting, so she enrolled in a two-year college. In her first period of enrollment, she did not do well and stopped out. Then she moved to a Western state, and returned to school after a break of several years. Jeannie enjoyed her classes, until she took an acting class, in which she had a bout of stage fright, and that led her to stop out again. Many years went by and Jeannie again yearned for an activity that would provide her with interactions with other adults. She moved back to the Midwest to take care of her ill parents. Her desire to return to school intensified after her mother died of dementia and Jeannie began experiencing problems with short-term memory loss. She felt that going to school would help her sharpen her mental skills and keep her brain active. After both of her parents died, she enrolled at Big City while also working at a children’s daycare center. She graduated with her bachelor’s degree and quit her job to pursue better career opportunities.
Patrick Callahan went to Big City right out of high school. When he first enrolled, he was more interested in the social aspects of school than the academics, and he soon found himself on probation and then dismissed for academic reasons. Shortly thereafter, he got married and had children. Patrick found a technical job and his employer offered to pay for tuition, so he returned to school and earned an associate’s degree. Ten years later, while going through marital problems, Patrick decided to return to school to attain his bachelor’s degree. School provided a constructive outlet for him, and he flourished, earning good grades and enjoying the work. While in school, Patrick worked full-time, went to school part-time and volunteered for some political activities. Since earning his bachelor’s degree from Big City, he continues his political activities and works at the same company. Patrick is considering enrolling in law school, after which he may change careers by practicing law.

Nancy McLean graduated from high school in 1979 and enrolled at Big City, like many of her friends. She had a part-time job and she took classes for about two years, and then diverted her attention to parenthood, so she stopped out. She was busy raising her two kids and working. Over the years, Nancy thought about returning to school, especially after a serious illness, which gave her a new perspective on her life and what she wanted for her future. Then a marital problem in 2002 became the catalyst for action. She returned to Big City for her own personal project, to finish her degree. She enjoyed her classes, and found reading, studying and thinking stimulating. She immersed herself in her studies, and on a cold Mother’s Day, Nancy graduated with academic honors. Then Nancy enrolled in a master’s program at a university. Once she completes her graduate degree, she may consider her career options.
Chris Casals enrolled in college after finishing high school. During the time that she was a young student, Chris worked in an organization in which she had held a job since high school. She was content with work because her original job in high school became a career. At the same time, she experienced other struggles. Due to finances, Chris had to switch schools. Between the two schools, she had been a student for about three and one half years, but she stopped out to focus exclusively on her career. Then in her early 30’s, Chris began to seek new opportunities in her career and found that her options were limited without a degree, so she decided to return to school to finish her degree. She enrolled at Big City. At the same time, she moved up within her organization, so she decided to remain at her employer because she was satisfied in her new role. She plans to retire from the organization and then possibly consider a move into another career. Since graduation, Chris has considered going to graduate school, but is holding off until she decides on her next career move.

Joel Spitz was bored in high school and discouraged from going to college by his high school counselors, so he quit high school. Then he got his GED and joined the military. When he was discharged from service at age 21, he found career choices to be limited without a college credential. He explored various options and went to school in a pre-medical program, but could not afford to continue as a full-time student so he stopped out. At that point, he decided to pursue other career avenues in health care and attained his associate’s degree. Joel worked for a number of years in several jobs and then decided to pursue his bachelor’s degree full-time. That meant stopping out of the workforce, but he was able to do this with a combination of veteran’s benefits and financial aid. Joel graduated in December 2006. Since then, he has been working as a
licensed health care administrator, paying down his student loan debt, and mapping out
his career plan for the next 20 years.

With the encouragement of her parents and teachers, after finishing high school,
Lydia Simon started taking college classes. For several years, Lydia worked full-time
and went to night school, then she enrolled in a full-time nursing diploma school to
become an RN. She worked as a nurse, though she did not really care for it, so after
many years, Lydia left nursing and worked in other jobs. At the same time, Lydia was
always taking courses here and there at local colleges, an activity she enjoyed a great
deal. Eventually, an advisor at a community college tallied up the credits she had
accumulated over the years and with just one more course, she earned her associate’s
degree. After that milestone, she continued to take classes at different schools, and in
2004, she enrolled at Big City. At that point, she was no longer working. An advisor
assessed Lydia’s past college credits and gave her a plan to earn her degree. Lydia
enjoyed her classes so much that she took more than were required for the degree because
she wanted to take classes in certain subjects and with particular faculty. In August of
2006, she graduated with a bachelor’s degree. Still hungry for more learning, Lydia has
taken more classes and is considering her options for enrolling in graduate school.

Abbey Harden started college at a small, suburban liberal arts college on an
academic and athletic scholarship. Having been raised in an urban environment and
exposed to a lot of different cultures, Abbey found the college’s environment unfamiliar
and uncomfortable, and she struggled in her sport. Because of these problems, she
transferred from the liberal arts college to a community college in the city and did well,
completing her associate’s degree. Then she enrolled at a four-year university in an
urban setting to pursue her bachelor’s degree. The university provided her with substantial scholarship funding when she began, but her scholarship was reduced by a considerable amount, so she worked full-time and went to school part-time. The program that she was in was moved to another campus location, which was out of reach with Abbey’s work schedule and commuting range, so she stopped out. After a couple of years, Abbey searched for a school that could accommodate her work schedule and would be affordable. She found Big City and received a scholarship, so she enrolled. Abbey found a way to manage her work and school responsibilities and she did well. She even made time to partner with faculty as a student researcher. After graduating, Abbey received a promotion at work and now she is considering graduate school.

When Mary Sanchez’s children started college, she felt that she could not keep up with adult conversations about history, politics, art and so forth, even though she had been a successful businesswoman for many years. Because of this feeling of inadequacy, Mary decided that she ought to pursue higher education, so she began to make plans to finance her education in addition to that of her three children. Within a couple of years, she was ready to begin. Mary quietly enrolled at a community college, quickly earned her GED and went right on to taking general education courses. She earned her associate’s degree and transferred to Big City to pursue her bachelor’s degree. Despite her original self-assessment of inadequacy, Mary was a good student and had good grades. She succeeded in college and got great pleasure from the subjects she was studying. With a downturn in her industry, Mary realized that she might not see a change in her career or earnings, and, in the end, the market negatively affected her income.
However, since she graduated, Mary has considered other options including switching her career path. She is also thinking about graduate school at some point in her future.

Robert Carey had a high IQ, but became directionless after his parents died when he was an adolescent. He enrolled in a university in an architecture program, but stopped out after a little more than a year because he was disillusioned with school and had too many questions about his future. He got married, had children and decided he needed to find a career to support his family. Robert went to electronics school, earned a degree and got a job in the technology field. He did quite well in his career, moving up the ranks and becoming a distinguished staff member at a renowned company. When the company was retrenching due to a downturn in the industry, Robert took an early retirement package, which prompted him to think about a new career as a licensed clinical social worker. In order to pursue that line of work, Robert knew he needed a master’s degree, which meant he had to complete a bachelor’s degree first. In addition, Robert set a time line for himself—he wanted to have his master’s by age 60 so he would have more than a decade to practice. To accomplish this, Robert enrolled at Big City. Robert overcame obstacles related to his health and finished his bachelor’s degree. Immediately he went into a master’s program to fulfill his goal, and he recently graduated from that program, at age 60. He is now preparing for licensure and looking forward to a new career.

Diane Pepin graduated from high school in 1976, went to college for two years and stopped out after getting married and having children. When she divorced 17 years later, Diane wanted to finish her bachelor’s degree because she was the primary supporter of her children. Diane was concerned that if she lost her job, she would not be able to find another without a degree. In addition, her children were reaching college age, and
Diane wanted to be a role model for them, by having a college degree. At age 40, Diane started at Big City to earn her bachelor’s degree. Diane juggled full-time work with a couple of classes each semester while looking after her aging mother and children. She is a good planner and organized her time effectively to meet all of her responsibilities, and she enjoyed her classes. Diane graduated in 2005 and she remains very proud of her accomplishment. Still at the same job she had when she began her studies again, Diane has received neither a raise nor a promotion. She is currently saving for her retirement and helping her children pay off their student loans.

In 1972, Julia Aler enrolled in two-year college at age 19 to figure out what she wanted to do for her life. After a year, she was engaged, then she married and had two children. Julia and her husband thought it was more important for him to get a degree, so she stopped out while he finished school. Over many years, she worked full-time, raised her children and took a few classes. Then, after working 30 years in the same industry, Julia was laid off and told by recruiters that she would have a hard time finding employment without a degree. She always wanted to be a nurse. She explored her options and found a fast-track nursing degree program that required a college degree, so Julia enrolled at Big City to finish her first bachelor’s degree. While at Big City, she was a full-time student and she worked full-time. She wanted to move quickly because she was anxious to establish herself in the nursing profession, for which she still had a few more years of schooling after she finished the first degree. Julia, who was at this point supporting herself, faced several challenges with funding both degrees, but managed to cobble together enough financial aid and financing to pay for both. She graduated from Big City and entered the nursing program, and she recently finished her bachelor’s degree.
in nursing. Now she is looking for work and preparing to take the nursing board examination. After she gains some experience working as an RN, Julia is thinking about pursuing a graduate program in public health or a related area. She aspires to be in quality control or work with a health care regulatory agency focused on safety.

While each of the participants has a unique story about his or her path to attaining the bachelor’s degree, the common factor is that each one was over the age of 25 when he or she attained the bachelor’s degree. All together, the informants provide a comprehensive perspective of the experience of attaining a bachelor’s degree as an adult. The details of their personal stories and what they felt contributed to attaining the degree follow in the next section.

The Experience of Attaining a Degree as an Adult

*Themes*

This study is situated in the naturalistic paradigm employing phenomenological methodology because it is designed to illuminate the experience of attaining the bachelor’s degree as an adult learner. The central goal of this exploratory research is to identify the essential structure of the experience through a thematic analysis of the informant narratives (Moustakas, 1994). To accomplish this, I analyze informant accounts individually, and then scrutinize the data as a whole set (Moustakas, 1994). I identify significant statements and discuss what happened through verbatim examples from the interviews (Jones et al. 2006; Marshall & Rossman, 2006). By organizing according to the responses to the research questions, I categorize the findings, from which I generate themes (Creswell, 1998). These themes span the data and are
interconnected to the individual interviewee narratives. In this study, the themes are initiative, mattering, perseverance, resourcefulness, and self-actualization.

Adults who participate in higher education do so for numerous reasons, as illustrated in the above descriptions of informant experiences throughout the entire span of the undergraduate experience. This section discusses the following research questions:

1. What factors motivate adult learners to earn a baccalaureate degree?
2. What critical challenges and issues do adult learners report facing during their undergraduate experience?
3. How do adult learners effectively address the challenges they face?

Motivation

Various factors motivated informants to pursue attaining a bachelor’s degree. Factors existed for motivation to return to higher education after stopping out. Another factor was level of motivation, including varying levels of motivation contributing to or detracting from persisting in school. The final factor was motivation to finish the degree.

Return to Higher Education

For all interviewees, the original enrollment spell did not culminate in a bachelor’s degree. Instead, the interval ended due to stopping out. During the period of time in which they were not enrolled, all informants were working, and all but two were raising children. The motives for returning to school included bolstering experience for career mobility and changes, completing unfinished business or reaching the long-held goal of attaining the bachelor’s degree, and, providing an outlet.

Career connection. Participants were either in established careers or looking to change into new careers. For those who were experienced in particular fields, they
wanted a degree to be more competitive, in case they lost their jobs or were looking for new opportunities. They wanted the security of having a degree, which they felt would augment their work experience. Carla Friedman talked about her concerns for her future:

I’m in the automotive industry, which is dwindling in the United States, um and if I were to lose my position in automotive, that’s really all the experience I have. And I don’t have a college degree so, I thought I better get back to school and get a college degree if I’m going to be able to compete in the marketplace, if I were to lose my job.

Similarly, Joel Spitz talked about how a degree would help him achieve his career goals of job stability, increases in income and upward mobility within the health care administration field.

For two participants, loss of jobs spurred them to consider new directions in their careers. Julia Aler lost her publishing job of 30 years and was motivated to finish her bachelor’s degree to pursue a career in nursing. After taking early retirement from a 32-year career in technology, Robert Carey returned to school to make a career change:

I wasn’t really ready to retire per se and I spent some time thinking about what I wanted to do with my life. I interviewed some social workers and counselors and it came out that clinical social work really would be a place where I could help people which was very important to me.

Nancy McLean articulated a less prominent perspective, relating her involvement in higher education and learning as a valuable activity in and of itself. “And that helps me to look at my time in school as something that’s intrinsically valuable, that may or may not pan out into some sort of career…” In sum, most interviewees were considering
their options for the future, in terms of careers and making a living, and they were motivated to return to post-secondary education to complete the bachelor’s degree to expand opportunities for themselves, in case they wanted or needed to find work.

*Long-held desire.* The participants pursued attaining the bachelor’s degree because they wanted to complete unfinished business. And, their motivation was stoked by changes in their personal lives and regret. Fran Santana sought the satisfaction of completing her degree. “So when I went back all these years later, I wasn’t looking for a new career, I was just doing it for the sake of doing it and saying I did it.” For Robert Carey, possessing the degree was related to his self-image:

> I wanted to feel more credentialed, since I’d never had a college degree. I always like felt bad when I’d fill out a survey and somebody would say: level of education, and I couldn’t say college graduate. So it was kind of part of my self-image, I guess.

Patrick Callahan expressed similar sentiments. And, for Angela Homer, completing her degree was related to self-satisfaction. “So you decide that this is an unfinished project in my life. I don’t like the fact that I have this unfinished thing.”

For Diane Pepin, divorce jolted her into action:

> But then the main motivation had to be getting divorced and thinking what if I lose my job; how am I going to support myself the rest of my life, so I thought I’d better go back and finish something.

When she decided to return to school, Chris Casals expressed regret for stopping out at a younger age, which increased her determination to finish. These perspectives show that motivation was affected by a desire to complete unfinished business, bolster
self-image, and increase self-satisfaction. Moreover, significant life changes affected motivation. Finally, emotions, such as regret, influenced motivation.

*Education as an outlet.* Patrick Callahan was experiencing marital problems when he returned to school and his motivation is characteristic of participants who were experiencing difficulties in other areas of their lives. [Going back to school] “would help me focus and do something positive instead of just sitting there seething, and, you know, it would give me something constructive to do.” Fran Santana desired an outlet from her full-time child-rearing activities. “Once I was home for a year, I started to get a little bit bored.” And, Nancy McLean experienced changes in two spheres in her life, including her marriage and role as a parent, so she turned to education. About this, Nancy said:

My career, my mothering career, which of course never ends, um, but it was sort of waning, in the immediate needs department, and so, I thought, gosh I’m going to do this for myself. And, it was sort of an escape thing at the time. Um, I wanted to be immersed in something that wasn’t, um, directly related to my marriage, and um, family life. Here is something that I could, that can just be mine.

In sum, participants returned to post-secondary education because of concerns about career mobility and changes, as well as job security. Most also wanted to complete the degree that they had started earlier in their lives. Further, they were motivated to return to finish their degrees because education was a productive outlet for them at times of change in their personal lives. While these various motives influenced the informants’ decisions to return to higher education, once enrolled, they experienced changes in motivation.
Changes in Motivation Once Enrolled

When talking about their experiences in higher education, the interviewees described how their motivation varied. Carla Friedman experienced an increase in her motivation:

I would say the motivation um increased while I was in school. Um, part of it was due to my success. It seemed to come easier as an adult than it did at age 18, 19. Because obviously, you know, social life seemed to be more important at that age.

Carla attributed her increasing motivation to achievement as well, “when you have the success of, of one class, you know, really pushes you into the confidence of getting through the next class.” Thus, being focused on education supported motivation, and academic achievement fueled motivation.

Financial issues impacted motivation. Joel Spitz linked changes in his motivation to financial issues and determination:

My motivation increased over time because I found a way to afford college even though I incurred debt in it with several student loans; a wife I met that I married while in college who assisted me; and my own striving ability to want to get that degree, that piece of paper. So my motivation increased.

Similarly, Angela Homer said that the scholarship funding from the Honors Program increased her motivation:

The minute that I heard from Honors, I went, oh my goodness this is just, this is just going to speed it up because the scholarship is wonderful but you know, and I also had to be realistic about what I, what I could do.
Julia Aler also talked about how her motivation increased as she got closer to her goal of attaining the degree:

In the beginning it seemed liked an insurmountable task and at the end it just went by so quickly that I don’t know. … It increased over time. It just went up more and more. The closer I got, the more motivated I became.

In addition, Julia began to see how her education would pay off in terms of applying the nursing skills she had learned in school to real-life situations, and her achievements during her clinical rotations boosted her:

Well, the patients really motivated me, quite a few. Just to see them get better was a motivating factor. I mean, you work as hard as you can, especially in the geriatric population or the psychiatric population when you know there may not be much hope, you work as hard as you can and that’s definitely a motivating factor to see them turn a corner and get better.

For some of the informants, motivation decreased and contributed to their decisions to stop out, especially as young students. Abbey Harden experienced fluctuations in her motivation during her undergraduate experiences. Early in her college experience, Abbey Harden experienced a dip in her motivation, because her top priorities diverted her attention from school and she was struggling with funding her education:

I was so fed up and frustrated with it and I was more interested too with finding, you know… I had found a romantic relationship and I was infatuated with this person and I was developing that and then finding a place to live, starting my own life, not being a burden to my parents, being independent, helping my family out as much as I could.
In the same vein, Susan Roberts said that her motivation decreased as a young student because she wanted to get married, buy a house and start a family.

Instead of being dissuaded from persisting, one participant found a solution for addressing dwindling motivation. Diane Pepin reported that her motivation decreased when she dropped the only class she was taking one semester. So she re-grouped and used a different strategy to sustain her motivation from that point forward:

But I just you know got my motivation back up for the next semester and said I better just go back and try something else and maybe register for a couple of classes so if this happens again I can just drop one thing and keep the other one.

Another participant, Nancy McLean, found her motivation varied because of conflicts she felt about her responsibilities. “I think it fluctuated a lot. Um, part of that was guilt, over not working, so I’m spending money, not making money.” Even so, she persisted in spite of her varying levels of motivation.

On the other hand, increasing motivation provided a boost to the participants. College policies and personnel created the conditions in which participants’ motivation increased. After attaining her associate’s degree, Abbey Harden struggled to find an institution at which she could finish her bachelor’s degree. She dropped out of one institution and eventually found Big City. The reception she received and the support at Big City increased her motivation. “Right from the initial step through the door, that support. And then I saw the opportunity there. I said, ‘Oh, I want to do this.’ It just…my motivation peaked at that point.” Susan Roberts also spoke about the program at Big City and its transfer credit policies providing her with motivation, “what I realized is that they took every class that I ever took in the other schools as credit and that was
really motivating because I wasn’t going to have to retake anything.” Angela Homer agreed, saying the transfer policies boosted her motivation. Furthermore, Susan also spoke about how the dedication of faculty pushed her to give her best effort. “They were so dedicated that it was easy to give them everything that you had all the time.”

Chris Casals found that her motivation was affected by a problem she encountered, but she turned that into a positive force. The problem was that Big City had implied she had enough credits to finish her degree, and this miscommunication led Chris to stop out, thinking she was done. However, she did not have enough credits to finish her degree and by stopping out, she lengthened the amount of time it took to complete the degree. While this was disappointing to Chris, the situation sparked her determination to finish, thereby increasing her motivation. “I was even more determined to sort of finish it up and I wasn’t going to let that deter me, you know.”

Other participants provided a different perspective on variances in motivation. Patrick Callahan recounted his motivation was always high because he was determined:

The most critical was just my desire and my drive to get that piece of paper. I’d made up my mind and it was going to get done and that was the end of it and wasn’t taking no for an answer and I’m going to get that piece of paper. That was first and foremost.

Similarly, Mary Sanchez and Robert Carey said their motivation was consistently high. Fran Santana related her steady motivation to favorable circumstances in terms of finances, family responsibilities and work obligations saying, “once I went back this last time, I, I knew I would finish this time. Because I had no, nothing holding me back any
more.” Angela Homer attributed her steady motivation to accountability to the organizations that provided her with financial support:

I think along the way you realize you’re accountable because you have taken money and from whom you’ve taken that money. And if it’s a public awarding of the money, even if it’s not a huge group, if somebody’s publicly awarded you a scholarship, I think definitely you’re more responsible. You feel more responsible.

In sum, for most informants, motivation levels varied. As young students, decreased motivation impacted enrollment decisions. As adult students, even though motivation levels fluctuated, the interviewees persisted, using various strategies to continue pursuing the degree. Finally, several participants reported consistently high motivation during the enrollment period that culminated in the degree.

*Motivation Fuels Finishing the Degree*

Nearly all informants reported motivation provided an extra boost to finish the degree. Julia Aler described the momentum as:

The closer I got it was like oh, my God. When is this going to be over? It almost felt like torture at the end. You know, like am I ever going to be through with this and just seeing the finish line, it just made me want to get there quicker.

Participants said they reached a point at which they were motivated to finish and they would not let anything stand in the way of achieving the goal. Chris Casals dealt with miscommunication about the number of credits she had amassed and how close she was to graduation. Despite this problem, she was motivated to finish. “I just wanted to wrap it up. Yeah. Because you’re like I’ve been doing this enough or you can see the
light at the end of the tunnel.” In sum, when the interviewees were close to attaining the degree, they felt motivation fueled momentum and a greater determination to finish.

Summary

In conclusion, motivation influenced the participants’ experience attaining the degree, and reveals the themes in several ways. Each interviewee took the initiative to plan for his or her future. As this select group of adult learners returned to school, a major motive was acquiring education credentials for career shifts or job security. This motivation was layered with a desire to complete the previously unfinished degree and to gain the satisfaction of possessing a degree, which are facets of perseverance and self-actualization. Several informants said they were motivated because education provided an outlet from other areas of their lives, which demonstrates resourcefulness and that education was an activity that mattered to them.

Motivation also varied, increasing with achievement and decreasing when the participants encountered challenging problems. On the other hand, several informants reported motivation was consistently high throughout the last enrollment interval that culminated in attaining the degree. Finally, most participants saw their motivation increase as they moved closer to their goal of attaining the degree, and this fueled their determination to finish the remaining requirements, even when encountering problems, which provides strong evidence of perseverance.

Challenges

Each of the participants encountered challenges throughout their post-secondary education experiences. For about half of the interview time, informants discussed difficulties. The most prominent challenges were study strategies, support, program,
grades, family, faculty, staff, re-entering higher education, juggling time, age, career, and finances. When describing their problems, interviewees talked about how they addressed these issues. In the material below, I present both the challenges and strategies for addressing the obstacles, in answer to the research questions about challenges.

**Study Strategies**

Studying posed a number of problems for informants, especially time management and study skills. A number of interviewees discussed their initial anxiety about having rusty skills because they had not been performing academic work for some time, and several called upon previously learned lessons on study skills to do their work. For instance, Jeannie Taylor said that one of the first professors from whom she had taken a class provided her with the most important skills for her success: study strategies. Jeannie carried that knowledge with her throughout her experience. Participants talked about their difficulties with writing, math, and strategies they employed for reading and studying. They also discussed computer skills, research and managing group projects. When addressing these issues, these adult graduates described not only the challenges, but also learning opportunities and their creative solutions.

Several interviewees commented about giving their assignments high priority and planning their time accordingly. Diane Pepin talked about organizing her time in order to do well:

I’m the planner. I have to be. I have no choice because how else am I going to get things done. I can’t have something due or a test to do the next [day] and sit the night before and do it. I’m the type who has it done two weeks ahead of time because otherwise it’s impossible to get everything done and do it well.
Robert Carey related time management to keeping his focus:
I needed to know which assignments were more, probably more important to do now. And that’s something that I think maybe has always been a challenge for me. For one thing, I really liked to… I like to learn stuff: Oh, that’s interesting. I’ll look at that. And I’ll look at this too. And, oh, look at this. This is something else that I can find out. If you couple that with kind of a tendency toward perfectionism, you can get bogged down really quickly. But I learned to in the words of Nancy Reagan: Just say no sometimes.

Fran Santana talked about her strategy from the perspective of her past:
I couldn’t put anything off because I didn’t have time to delay something, a project. If we got assigned a project in class, I started it right away, even if it wasn’t due until the end of the semester. And I wouldn’t have done that in my younger days. I would’ve just waited till the end and said I ain’t got time.

The participants attributed prioritization as a necessity to manage their busy lives, to maintain focus to complete assignments on time, and to maturity. Several informants said they could not imagine themselves working in this manner when they were younger students. Fran Santana recounted this story to emphasize this point:

And I turned it in at the end, and on the last day of class, we got our papers back and I was walking out of class and there was um, a girl who was, you know, just a normal college age, maybe 20 or so. And she was talking with another student, and she had her paper in her hand. And she was so mad at the grade she got on her paper. And, I don’t know what it was, but she had told me but I’ve forgotten. But anyway, she said, I worked 2 weeks on this paper! And, um, she said, what
did you get on yours. And I, hadn’t even looked at it, I just put it in my bag and I pulled it out and I went to the last page and I said, well I got an A on it. But I didn’t want to say I worked on mine the whole semester. Um, you know, and I would’ve been just like her in the old days. And, you know, it was just, being young that, that was her approach because she was young. You know, by the time I went back to school, I just took it much more seriously than I did in the old days. Moreover, informants discussed how they knew themselves and their own preferences and limitations in relation to study habits. Susan Roberts said:

Well, I think when you go into it you have to be very realistic because I think that it’s easy to start and it’s tough to stay with it. So you have to be really organized, you know, like set aside the time. If you know you do better early before everybody gets up, you get up early. If you know you do better after everybody goes to bed, you stay up late.

Diane Pepin agreed, suggesting environment influenced productivity:

If you’re at home too it’s hard to sit there and stay there and do that when you think I’ve got this to do and I’ve got that to do. But if I’m here [at the library] you could only focus on the one thing and I got things done quicker too once I focused and did it and said I want to be done by this time and that’s what I did.

Angela Homer extended that strategy into the classroom:

And I found if I sat in the front row, I would ask questions. You know, I wasn’t even thinking how much stuff is behind me but it’s not 50 people, which it is. And you develop a better relationship with the professor.
In sum, participants gave a high priority to organizing their time to complete assignments, they maintained focus, and they took the work seriously. Further, they recognized their own preferences and limitations and addressed those issues with strategies that supported their efforts.

Writing. Several interviewees talked about challenges they faced with their writing skills and how they addressed that particular problem by using the writing lab and academic assistance services. Patrick Callahan was concerned about his writing skills and felt he needed help with style and presentation in his written work, so he went to the writing lab for assistance:

Things like going to the writing lab I did that. That helped me get comfortable because there was one or two pretty challenging papers that I had to do and the teacher was tough, fair but very tough and I felt like I needed an edge. And, it was something that was another benefit that was there, you might as well make use of it.

Math. Big City required participants to complete math at a particular level in order to attain the bachelor’s degree. This was problematic for many participants because of fear or lack of math skills. To address this issue, participants faced their anxiety by enrolling in math classes, enlisting tutors, spending time working out math problems, and taking particular classes that satisfied the graduation requirement. The stakes were high, because this was an unavoidable requirement. Angela Homer summed up the perception of many of the participants when describing her attitude about math:

I was so intimidated. I really thought, if I don’t make it, this is going to be the ruin, I’ll never make it. I hadn’t had math in years and years and years. I was,
how in the world can I ever get through algebra again. And then you get started, and you, it doesn’t seem so hard.

Jeanne Taylor talked about her struggles with math:

I had a hard problem with statistics and that class I got a D in statistics and you can’t graduate with a D in it. But I had never taken algebra or geometry; I had just taken basic math skills, so I had a very, very hard time.

Mary Sanchez enlisted a tutor to help her with math. “I went to the tutor twice a week during the fall semester. During that whole semester for math.” Fran Santana said that she needed to practice to master math:

I would go and say I need help with this. Or can you give me more problems.

And he said, boy I don’t have students asking me for additional problems, but I, but I said that’s what it’s going to take. It’s going to take me doing a lot of practice at this to get this. Um, and, and now when you buy a textbook too, a lot of times it comes with a CD. Or you can access additional resources through that textbook company online. They didn’t have that in the old days. And, and I used, boy I used that CD-ROM in algebra all the time. Um, or I would go online and I’d look up additional algebra problems. So, um, the new technology really helped me a lot.

Angela Homer used another resource to aid her with math exercises:

And the fact that the answer was in the book so that you knew from those exercises that you were right or wrong right then. Which I don’t remember it being that way when I was younger. It seems to me you had to show up in class and find out. We need to find out right away if you’re on the wrong path. Right.
So you could self-correct. So that was a huge boon to me. Because the more right answers I was getting, the better I felt. Okay this is not so intimidating.

Susan Roberts told one of her professors she felt she would not graduate because the math requirements were so daunting. The professor found several students facing the same problem and offered to help them out:

[The professor said] I would do this private session for you and a group of people that are in the same place. We were all seniors. We all ran into this problem with math. There were like four of us, I think. And he said: I will do this tutoring. You come to class. And the name of the class was called sociological statistical analysis and lo and behold that wiped out all of those previous pre-reqs. So if you passed statistical analysis in sociology or whatever it was called, then you would be able to graduate and it was painful. But we met at school; we met in coffee shops; once we met in a hookah bar. And he wanted to make it fun and because of him I graduated; otherwise, I don’t think I would have stayed with the program.

In sum, the informants had a lot of anxiety about the math requirements, because of lack of skills or fear of the subject. And, they had to pass a certain level of math in order to graduate, so this was an important challenge that they had to address. To do so, they took the classes, enlisted tutors, practiced by completing problem sets and worked with faculty to overcome this challenge and satisfy the graduation requirement.

Reading and studying. Interviewees found reading and studying difficult because they feared not comprehending or remembering the material, or, not having enough time to complete the assignments. As a result, they developed various strategies to address this issue. Angela Homer outlined her reading material:
I developed a system because I am a writer and I kind of like typing no matter what. So I’d sit there and outline sometimes, this helped me, this did it for me. Because I sit in there and just read it and mindlessly type something out of that. I just went through and then I turn it all out, walk out the door. I had not absorbed it, particularly, but I had an outline now.

Nancy McLean took notes while reading:
I read a lot. I don’t retain a lot but I retain more from my writing than I did from my reading. I’m always taking notes when I read, and my husband says you could read that a lot faster if you didn’t write everything down. I don’t remember anything. So, it’s just the way I do it, I don’t care.

Patrick Callahan related managing his time with his study strategies:
You know, they get like an hour for lunch. You know you could eat your lunch in 10 minutes. You can go sit on a bench outside of work, open your book, and do 40 minutes of reading and get a couple of chapters done in the 40 minutes.

Similarly, to give himself time to read, Robert Carey read during his commute. “I took public transportation. So I would get some of my reading done, as much as possible on the trains and buses.”

Carla Friedman used the Internet to better understand her reading assignments. “If I read a book, then, you know, I would kind of look up, you know, I might blog about it. Go into a chat room about it. Some, um, I guess that was different.” Abbey Harden used her commute time to listen to books on tape. Angela Homer used other media to comprehend the material, “I knew Shakespeare and I would, I would come to the library get the tape and watch the tape while I followed the play.”
Robert Carey, whose vision is impaired, described his strategy for reading assignments, particularly those in his upper-level classes, because reading took a lot of time as a result of his eyesight problem:

So as my coursework went on, it got more challenging. So I started just doing triage I guess. As for reading, I would look at things and if it was recommended reading, I wouldn’t do it. If it was required reading, I would do it. I also learned to skim more.

Last, Angela Homer discussed tedium and working through it to keep on persisting. She said, “Um, boredom is a big thing, but once you’re aware that there are boring subjects, um, you need to fill it out, you need the credit. Life is just not, you know, it’s not all entertainment.”

Thus the informants had concerns about comprehending and remembering material, so they took notes and outlined while reading. Still others used time management to find time to complete assignments. To better understand material, interviewees used technology and other media to augment reading. And, one participant with a health issue used prioritization to ensure he completed the required work.

**Computer skills.** In addition to studying, coping with math requirements and reading, informants reported that they had to use computers to do assignments. Proficiency with computers and technology posed problems for the adult graduates. For interviewees with few technology skills, the computer lab at Big City, as well as family and friends, provided assistance. Mary Sanchez said:

Some of the knowledge that I really needed was, uh, the technology. And, and, that was another thing too. I used to go to the computer lab. And, some of it was
just taught to me by playing around because, you need to really practice so you can get good at, just at the technical things, you know.

Once they began using computers regularly, most informants reported their skill levels increased enough to comfortably complete assignments. Chris Casals described her computer skills and strategy for learning technology:

I had a computer at home because we had kids in college and stuff like that so I had access to it and stuff like that. I knew a little bit but that was a challenge. They were pretty good about that though. You know like…pretty encouraging about that. It wasn’t they didn’t make it seem like it was so hard of a task that you couldn’t do it. You know, they tried to, you know. And then I would get a student or somebody to help me, you know, to so that they would be able to help. You know like if somebody from class would go to the computer lab with me just for a minute to show me, you know, and once I played around with it I could get the hang of it.

Even with assistance from the computer lab and her son at home, Jeannie Taylor found her pace too slow to be efficient, so she came up with another solution. “I wasn’t good on the computer and so I had to have someone type up my papers.” Thus, computer skills were necessary, and informants reported they received help from the computer lab as well as family and friends. They said their skills improved with practice, but for one interviewee, her pace was not quick enough, so she outsourced typing.

Research. Closely related to computer abilities are research skills, because of the interconnectedness of reference materials, the Internet and information management. As such, informants discussed challenges they encountered in this area. Fran Santana said:
Learning to do research in a whole new way was a challenge too because um the last time I did research you just went and you pulled books off the library shelf and um, you looked in catalogs for um journals that you might need and now everything’s on the computer. So, luckily I had a sociology professor that made the whole class go down to the library and get instruction on how to do research online. And, um, get materials from the other universities, that was a big help.

Reference personnel were helpful to Lydia Simon when she was working on her assignments. “I’d go to the reference desk and talk to the people there and they would help me find some books or tell me where to find stuff.”

Jeannie Taylor talked about a creative way of utilizing different resources:

I would have to say when I would go out to different community organizations that…like if I was working on a project about Native American Indians, I went to the Native American Community Center and I saw movies. They had a fair, so I would get information from different things. With different projects that I was working on, I would relate to what activity was going on in the community which was about that project. So that would help.

Angela Homer talked about utilizing a variety of resources:

I would just go straight to the library, maybe type something on the Internet, and follow a trail here and there. You know, and, because I’m a big reader and I get, you know, *Time* magazine and the paper, and I’m aware of other sources, I’m sort of aware of, of how to find more and different sources.

In addition to locating material, an adult graduate talked about managing the information. Joel Spitz said, “actually it’s hunting and reading and finding the right
information and making notes to yourself neatly, so you can understand it when you write the paper because there is nothing frustrating than making 100 note cards, putting it away a week, and can’t read your writing.”

In sum, informants reported that research skills were important, and the way in which students conducted research changed from solely using physical materials in the library to a combination of reference material in libraries and other organizations, on the Internet and in periodicals and the press. The complexities of locating and using the vast amount of information now available in so many forms posed a challenge for participants, but they overcame this by utilizing the reference services and materials at Big City, and being resourceful about acquiring information from other sources. In addition, because of the accessibility to such a volume of information, informants were mindful about being organized.

*Group projects.* The logistics of managing group work posed challenges for most interviewees. Making time to get the group together for meetings, negotiating assignments within the group, and working together to satisfactorily complete assignments were complex issues. Informants reported they used a number of different strategies to overcome these issues. Mary Sanchez invited her groups to her home:

I would invite the groups over to my house so we could have these big study sessions and put the paper together and all that stuff. My computer was available and lots of things were available. And it worked out really good, because, you know, some of the people in the group, you know, with 7 or 8 people, and it was just impossible to have, you know, like a sit-down. So I got a lot out of it, they got a lot out of it I think. We all worked of course for the As.
Carla Friedman offered another strategy for managing group work:

Any type of group project was a challenge. Um, there were, you know obviously being in my 30s, there were, I had a very different lifestyle than some of the other people in class. And, for them to be able to meet during the day, there’s, there’s no way that, you know, I could do that, working and having a family. So, I actually ended up doing some of the group projects on my own.

Abbey Harden used technology to manage group work while not impinging on her work responsibilities:

And my company, they said if you can be in the office and don’t have to leave, all you need to do is be on an hour-long conference call during your lunch, go, use the number. I was able to do conference calls, able to do webinars, share our computer screens; something like learning how to use the tracking feature of Word and be able to teach people in my class who were older who wanted to learn technology how to use that. We don’t have to sit and talk about the paper. Put your comments in here, send it to me, and we can all see what we’re thinking. So technology, just getting really creative, when people could be understanding or not.

Group assignments posed problems for informants and they used various strategies to manage the work assignments. One solution was to gather the group at home, another to complete the work assignments alone, and a third was to use technology to manage the collaborative process between the group members.

In conclusion, an array of challenges arose related to study strategies. The most problematic areas focused on study skills and time management. Informants talked about
difficulties they encountered with writing, math, as well as reading and studying. They also discussed computer skills and research. In addition, managing group assignments was challenging. In describing the challenges, interviewees not only discussed difficulties, but also described learning opportunities and creative solutions that helped them address the problems and persist in their studies.

Support

Interviewees reported using academic support services and counseling to assist them with academic skills and issues they faced as a result of having busy lives.

Tutoring. When informants encountered challenges in their academic skills, they enlisted the help available in academic support services, especially tutoring. Mary Sanchez found support at Big City. “Some of the savvy came like I understood where the tutor was, I used the tutor, you know, I re-used and re-used every facility that I could.” Angela Homer agreed, but talked about having some initial anxiety about tutoring:

There was tutoring available. You just have to, and once you sneak up there you say I really can’t do this. Oh you know, someone sits down and they show you. You have to get over that. You have to get over the fact that you have to ask for help. Everybody needs help. I think everybody needs help.

Participants turned to academic support services when they needed help with their academic skills, even though they acknowledged some initial trepidation about using those services.

Counseling. Going to school was not the only pursuit in the participants’ lives. They were busy with work, family and other significant responsibilities. Counseling services help students with challenges associated with managing their busy lives. Robert
Carey explained why counseling is important to non-traditional-age learners:

I would say to make sure that there is counseling available that’s socialized with returning adult students and that’s aimed at or is sensitive to returning adult students. Because they are for example such as a stress thing can come up. As you mentioned, there are people who are juggling a lot of responsibilities and school is just one more stressor. It would be good to make them know up front that it’s okay and maybe unexpected that they take advantage of that resource.

Lydia Simon had mixed results when she utilized counseling services, recounting:

I went to the counseling office when I first came here and…for a brief time. And then I inquired about group counseling. They said they didn’t have a group. Then they had a group that had met once or twice and then they didn’t have a group. Then they said it was only for new students. So there really wasn’t much support in the counseling department.

Adult graduates found tutoring helpful in supporting their studies, and Big City provided several types of tutoring including math, computer and writing assistance. Interviewees used these services and found them beneficial. In addition to academic support services, Big City also provided counseling. While important to helping students cope with managing their busy lives, the services available at Big City, according to a few informants, posed a challenge because they were not really geared to meet the needs of adult students.
Program

Most of the participants received a bachelor’s degree from Big City’s Adult Liberal Studies Program (ALS). These adult graduates encountered challenges regarding the program in a number of different areas including reputation, entrance requirements and transfer credits, structure, advising, major, and, bias.

Reputation. Even though Big City is accredited and ALS is a bona fide program, informants were suspicious about the reputation and legitimacy of the ALS degree. Before he started the program at Big City, Patrick Callahan questioned how the program might impact his future:

A lot of people didn’t hear about the ALS Program. I was even skeptical about it, so I thought okay if I go to this, is it really a really good degree? Suppose I want to go back and get a master’s, you know, I want to let’s just say [an accredited school], you know, are they going to accept it? Big City’s like oh yeah it’s a real deal, it’s a bachelor’s degree. Okay. So, I called [an accredited and nationally ranked] Law School and I had asked, without hesitation, they said yeah that it’s accepted. I was like whoa, this is, this is it. That’s when I went in.

Robert Carey followed the same process, checking with the graduate schools to which he planned to apply about the ALS degree. The graduate schools assured him the ALS degree would meet their admission standards.

Informants were attracted to Big City because the program was flexible and it would accept previously earned credits. When compared to other institutions, these policies seemed to be out of the ordinary, making them a cause for concern. However, after checking around, they found Big City’s ALS Program not only legitimate, but also
well suited to the needs of adult students.

*Entrance requirements and transfer credit policies.* Each institution sets its own standards for accepting students and applying transfer credits toward degree programs. As such, interviewees talked about evaluating entrance requirements and transfer credit policies to determine the institution in which they would enroll. When he weighed his options, Patrick Callahan chose not to enroll in one institution’s program because of its policies. Patrick said:

They are telling me I have 16 when I know gen eds like 30, you know, I may be wrong, uh, but they don’t accept a lot of them for whatever ridiculous reason. It’s like, I’m not going to start at square, A square, when I can go somewhere else and start at like L to get to Z.

In addition to its transfer credit policies, the institution about which Patrick recounted this incident had foreign language and other entrance requirements, and these issues became insurmountable obstacles, so he chose Big City instead. Patrick said:

If you’ve got somebody, a returning adult, or an adult coming in the door, and you’re going to hit them with, you know, have to have foreign language or certain prerequisites and that, or you don’t accept the CLEP test, or you get credit for life experiences, I mean the test is not easy, you have to prove that you have reasonable amount of knowledge about the subject. I think it just defeats the purpose of education, you have to take everything into consideration.

On the other hand, Big City’s ALS Program accommodated transfer credits well, which was attractive for adults with credits earned elsewhere. During her search process, Susan Roberts looked at several schools, and she became aware of and selected the ALS
Program because, “When I went to see them, I realized that they would take every class that I ever took.” As such, transfer credit policies at Big City were an attractive feature and strongly influenced enrollment decisions, as reported by most of the informants.

Structure. The structure of the ALS Program permitted participants to select from a variety of courses to fulfill requirements. Most interviewees found this framework attractive, and they derived unexpected benefits from the flexibility and choice. Susan Roberts said, “I got to do a lot of things that I wouldn’t have gotten to do being, you know, in a very vertical degree program.” Nancy McLean described her reaction upon learning about the program, “this is exactly it. This is, this is what I want. Because I don’t want to be narrowed in. I want to go this way. I want to broaden out.”

Fran Santana agreed, saying:

The program was good in that you could pursue a college degree by just taking whatever classes you wanted to. You didn’t have to declare a major. And that helped a lot because I didn’t want to declare a major. I wasn’t doing this, um, to pursue a whole new career, um, for myself. So I took a variety of classes that just sounded interesting to me when I would read the college catalog.

For some of the adult graduates, however, the ALS Program structure and process for fulfilling requirements were problematic. Julia Aler said:

So I just went through and did all the classes and trying to find a class that would fit into a specific part of that program was really difficult because a lot of them require pre-requisite after pre-requisite after pre-requisite and I didn’t have time to spend doing all the pre-requisites. So that was kind of a challenge.

Choosing from a variety of courses because they did not have a major was a
positive aspect of the program for informants. On the other hand, interviewees were challenged with finding courses that fulfilled requirements and were without prerequisites, because they felt slowed down by courses with too many qualifiers.

*Advising.* Another problem stemmed from having so many choices. Mary Sanchez said, “So I’m like looking, looking, and I go oh yes, I would love to do this. And I would love to do this other thing and I would love to do that.” To overcome this problem, interviewees relied on advising and information they learned about the program. Carla Friedman said:

> There was a process um to enter the program. And the process included um a snapshot of where you were and what you had to do to finish. Um, and it was, it was as clear-cut as this paper in front of us. These are the hours you have finished, these are the hours you have left, these are the type of courses that would fit in the remaining hours. So it was just a matter of waiting for the catalog to come out each semester to see what would fit in the remaining hours.

*Major.* The flexibility and abundant choices were attractive features of the ALS Program, yet because the informants were not required to have a major, they expressed unease about being in a program without a particular specialty. On this subject, Mary Sanchez described her conversation with an advisor in the ALS Program:

> And I said you know, this is really sad. I said because luckily I took enough Spanish courses that I can have a Spanish minor, but now because I’ve been floating around and you guys are telling me to take this and that and this other thing, because they have no requirements, I’ve got a certain amount of credits but no major. I am not allowed a major. That’s a sin.
Susan Roberts saw the problem from the perspective of career relevance:

If you don’t already have a career path and you’re just coming out of school with [an] ALS Program, you’re not going to get a job that would be based on that degree. I think there should be a specific major.

From another angle, Fran Santana described her discomfort from not having a major, saying, “I tend to devalue um the degree that I got from Big City, because I didn’t have to pick a major, I didn’t have four years of studying one subject.”

The adult graduates expressed unease about not having a major from several perspectives including the desire to have a major, career preparation and the value of specializing in an academic area.

_Bias._ Another problem related to the program was a bias expressed by faculty and participants themselves. Robert Carey described an encounter:

I was approached by one professor who said, ‘Are you with the ALS Program?’ I said, ‘Yes.’ She said, ‘Do you really want that?’ I answered, ‘Well, what do you mean?’ She said, ‘Well, you know, if you go to a good school, they’re going to look at that and it’s going to be an ALS degree.’ I said, ‘Well, you know, I’ve already explored this because I’m always trying to be one step ahead and I talked to the two grad schools that I wanted to go to a year before I was ready to go there. They assured me that they didn’t see a problem with it.’ And I said, ‘You know, I’m really comfortable with this.’ She said, ‘Okay, it’s your career.’ I talked to a couple of other students who were in the ALS program and she actually discouraged one of them from participating on the basis of kind of academic elitism which is too bad.
In addition, several interviewees described their own bias against the program. Mary Sanchez said, “What it’s geared for is people who have maybe Ds or Cs. And really just want to graduate. You know, I know I have no right to criticize the program, but that’s what it is. In black and white.” Mary went on to say, “But the thing is, is that the quality, the quantity is there the quality is missing.”

However, bias was not universal. In fact, some faculty members encouraged participants to enroll in the program. Nancy McLean was one of them:

I remembered liking psychology from my AP courses, so, I take this course. The teacher is completely fascinating, I talked to her afterwards. I said, ‘will you be my advisor, now I’m going to be a psychology major.’ And she looks at me and she’s like, ‘so you’re just starting back in school, and you’ve decided after this point that you want to be a psychology major?’ ‘Yes, yep, that’s what I’m going to do.’ And she said, ‘have you heard about the ALS Program?’ I said, ‘no, I had no idea.’ And so she explained to me. ‘You should look into it,’ she said. So, I kind of, yeah, okay.

The adult graduates encountered or held their own ideas of bias against the program, and this was problematic. However, this bias was not universal, and some informants chose to enroll in the program after being encouraged by faculty.

In sum, the participants gave mixed reviews about the ALS program, because various aspects of the program were challenging. They had concerns about the program’s reputation, since it was geared for non-traditional students. They were undeterred at Big City by the entrance requirements and accommodation of transfer credits. They enjoyed having a range of choices when selecting classes each term.
However, the flexibility made some informants uncomfortable, for which they needed advising. Several interviewees did not fully embrace the program because it did not include a major. Finally, participants encountered bias against the program.

*Grades and Achievement*

Participants talked about how they were challenged by the way they felt about grades they received. Performing poorly led to lower levels of enthusiasm and motivation to continue. An informant described how frustrated she became with her grades because she felt she deserved better evaluations than she received. Despite feeling discouraged or ill-treated, the adult graduates did not allow grades to deter them from achieving their goal of attaining the degree.

Angela Homer talked about the impact of grades on persistence:

> Then when you get the bad grade, there’s your interest, there is your goal is gone. You know, you get a couple of those Cs, icky Cs, on an exam, maybe you’re just starting to look the whole thing up, why am I bothering. So you didn’t want to it to get to this. And I didn’t want to get discouraged. And I used tricks, you use tricks with yourself.

Julia Aler also discussed how discouraged she became when she felt her instructors were not giving her grades that reflected the level and quality of her work:

> I’m just going to do what I do; if they don’t like it, tough. That’s when I gave up on hoping that I would get a 3.5 grade point average because nobody was giving me what I thought was worth the grade because my tests were always good. I always did really well on tests and just my papers and if you couldn’t…I mean I thought….you can read them. Everybody thought I was the best writer in the
class and yet nobody gave me any grades worthwhile.

Informants were challenged when they performed poorly or received lower grades than they felt they deserved, but they were not hindered in their pursuit of finishing the bachelor’s degree.

*Family*

Family attitude and criticism toward education challenged the participants. At the same time, support from family aided the informants as they pursued the bachelor’s degree. Jeannie Taylor talked about her mother’s attitude toward school and how it impacted her decisions. “And my mother told me, she said: ‘You’re too old to be going back to school’…since I had children. So that kind of stopped me, you know. The encouragement wasn’t there…” Likewise, Diane Pepin said:

The one challenge I think was my mother because you know she’s kind of like the attitude of her generation, you know, women didn’t go to college; they’d didn’t go to work. What do you need this for? And after I was divorced and got married again the second time and you know it was her belief you know I should just be at home; go to work and then come home.

Mary Sanchez spoke about the importance of family support and the strains on relationships while in school:

So, why people don’t finish? Well maybe they don’t have that support system. You know, they just get so tired of coming home late and hungry. While I was in school I met other people like me that, whose marriages were falling apart. You know, because of the fallout. Anyways, mega falling apart. Like in court. By the time they were in the next, you know, the next semester, and I would go oh my
God, you know, and they would talk about it. And it’s because the spouses get really mad, they get jealous. Whether it’s a male or female, it doesn’t matter. You know, some of the guys had their phones ringing all the time. You know, because their significant others or spouses or whatever would say, where the hell are you? You know, it’s like, so many marriages fall apart.

Abbey Harden had a similar experience, saying:

I would say the challenges and support systems are one in the same. Yeah, the people as much as they were supportive, they were also a challenge. My boyfriend, my parents, everybody was gung ho about you got in and a full-tuition scholarship, you’ve got to do it this time. Awesome. But in the same way, they were complaining when I had to work all night on a paper.

Later Abbey found a solution to her problem by arranging her work schedule to allow for some time to visit with her parents on the nights she attended school:

So I would come in like at 7:00 and I could leave at like 3:00 and then I have like a 5:00 class at school. It was also kind of cool at Big City. It’s right by my parents’ house. So it was another one of those things that fell into place. So I was able to stop by mom’s house, get a wonderful warm meal. If it was a hot yucky summer day, I could even maybe take a shower to freshen up for class; be able to see my mom and visit; sometimes my dad could be there or not; even walk her dog. They were so happy and I got around that challenge.

In sum, family challenged and supported the adult graduates with their attitudes toward higher education, criticism, trust in relationships, and support.
Faculty

Participants experienced challenges with faculty, from coping with expectations and workload, uneven assessments of student work, and, assertiveness. Fran Santana talked about expectations adult students might have for the way in which faculty treat older students. She said:

The professors um can’t make it any less challenging for us simply because you know we got a lot of work to do. Um, you know, or that we have other obligations. That’s just the breaks you have, you have to do the work that everybody else is doing.

However, Abbey Harden suggested talking to the professors when encountering problems getting work done:

I saw other adult students who couldn’t get their papers in or couldn’t do some of the work because of schedules and the teachers always told them: I have to hold you at the same standards as the others. I thought: My gosh, if you just went and talked to them or if you worked out a negotiation. But I saw that and it did happen.

Lydia Simon talked to her professors when she struggled in classes. Lydia said, “it seemed that if I established some communication and rapport with the teacher, you know, that helped things settle down and helped me improve and do better in the class and complete the class successfully.”

Julie Aler ran into a different problem with faculty using different standards to assess students. Julia described the following situation to illustrate her point:

So she graded all my papers much more harshly than the other…than these girls
who couldn’t even write. They didn’t know punctuation, grammar, or anything and they would come out with a sparkling A and here I was with a B. I mean like, ‘Are you kidding me?’ And I’d go in and have arguments with her. I’d go, ‘You have to be kidding me? This is not a B paper. You gave somebody who can barely speak English an A and you gave me a B?’ She goes, ‘Well, I just expected more from you.’ What are you talking about? You know? There was a definite prejudice for anything that I wrote throughout the whole program and I mean it wasn’t just this teacher. It was person after person after person and I don’t know what I could have done any better. I mean I had people read…six people for my final paper in this class. I had six people read it including three faculty members and they all thought: Holy crap. It was fantastic. It was the best paper they’d ever read. B. And I protested the grade because I ended up with a B in the class which I didn’t think was fair and that got me absolutely nowhere. So I just gave up at that point. I’m just like I’m not going to even try anymore. There is no need for me to try. I put out an effort and I get this bullshit back.

As a result of her problems with faculty grading students inconsistently, Julia Aler said that it was important to be assertive. She said:

You have to stand up for yourself. If I hadn’t said things to certain people, I would probably have dropped out a long time ago. Yeah, you have to…you have to be willing to take, you know, criticism and give it as well. I mean if you don’t think you’re being treated fairly, say something. Don’t take it because there’s no reason to. You paid your money. You’re in this class. You deserve as much respect as you give to the teacher, so they should respect you as well.
In relation to interactions with faculty, informants talked about challenges with expectations and workload, uneven assessments and being assertive.

Staff

The way in which personnel treated participants created additional challenges. Personnel gave inaccurate information which affected the date on which two of the informants could receive their degrees, displayed negative attitudes about age, and did not follow up with an interviewee who had problems with harassment and safety. In addition, participants were frustrated about bureaucracy and a perception about staff indifference to accommodating students, especially non-traditional-age learners.

Fran Santana, like Chris Casals, received inaccurate information about the number of credits she had left before she would graduate. She was planning on having a family graduation party because she and her daughter were to graduate at the same time:

We’ll both graduate in May and we’ll have a party together, we’ll have a graduation party together. And then my advisor’s telling me no, I need three more credits of something else. And, it turned out that I ended up being over what I needed. And I, so I didn’t graduate until December. And my daughter was real disappointed in that. But um, you know, I’m, I finished up anyway. So, you know, those are the sort of things that in the old days when I was young would have just gotten me mad and said oh forget it these people don’t know what they’re doing, I’m quitting. And um, you know by this point I was mature enough to know that, okay, this is a set back, but it’s not a big deal and, you know, I’ll, so I won’t finish when I thought I would, not a problem.
Diane Pepin encountered a problem with attitude about her age:

We had to go in and update the files or something and one of the questions was: What year did you graduate from high school? And I said: 1976. She looked at me and she was an older woman, she said: 1976! And I said: Yep. Seems like yesterday. She said: Are you sure this program is for you? So she was…she was nasty.

Lydia Simon experienced problems with harassment and safety, reported the incidents, and was never sure if anything was done about her situation. I asked her about the details and she recounted several incidents, such as students taking her notes, stealing her car keys, pushing her in the hallways, and theater equipment falling on her while other students stood by and watched. In each case, she spoke to the faculty member in charge of the class, or when her keys were stolen, public safety officers. About reporting the incidents, she said, “I did, but you know…it doesn’t…you know, I don’t know if anything ever happens. I don’t know if anything ever became of it.” Lydia became discouraged as a result of these problems, but she managed to persist because she otherwise enjoyed school.

Further, interviewees talked about the frustration with processes at the university. Susan Roberts suggested the system structure was problematic for adult students:

The bureaucracy is horrible. Most adults aren’t used to it. They go through this process and you know it’s not like you’re treated any differently than the rest of the students, but you just don’t have the patience for it.

And Susan went on to say, “They don’t make it easy to get through the registration process.” Abbey Harden was hindered, reporting that she was required each
semester to commute to campus to complete her registration, which otherwise was done on the phone, because Abbey had a scholarship and she had to be present in order for school officials to process her registration and payment.

Staff indifference posed a problem as well. Mary Sanchez was frustrated when she attempted to meet with an advisor to help select her classes, recounting, “And I tried going to a counselor. And, waited there for an hour and half or something like that. And I was told I wasn’t allowed any counseling because I was in the adult program.”

Staff treatment of students created challenges for the informants, particularly when they provided inaccurate information about graduation requirements, expressed ageism, and, did not follow up on reports of harassment and safety. Furthermore, interviewees found the bureaucracy difficult and insensitive to the needs of adults.

Re-Entry

Informants talked about a hesitation to return to higher education. The adult graduates were challenged by feelings of doubt about their ability to succeed and fear of not finishing. Patrick Callahan recounted his feelings about starting back to school saying, “You know, that was it, I just, my thing was is I didn’t want people to know I was going back and what if something happened where I couldn’t finish, you know.” Chris Casals talked about her anxiety before she enrolled at Big City:

Yeah, just sort of nervous and you know could I really do it? Was I going to be successful? Could I write a paper? Could I you know…were they going to look at me weird being the oldest one? Or you know like I didn’t know. I knew that the…I didn’t really know how the classes were going to be set up the first day, you know, if there were going to be some people my age or you know so. It was
just sort of like and different like you know you’re sort of set in your ways and you’re doing your work and everything and it’s just a totally new environment and totally new experience. And you know it’s something you want to do but you, you know, it’s just hard. You know, that first day was hard but once I got going and you know. Now I kind of miss it.

Carla Friedman described her uncertainty as well:

And it is, it is scary going back, um, with the way technology has changed and, and this was a school I was familiar with, and a campus I was familiar with. Um, it is, um, it is scary going back. You don’t want to fail. You don’t want to, you know, it’s one of those, it’s one of those things you don’t want to shout from the rooftops that you’re going back to school, and then have people say, well how’d you do?

In sum, informants found re-entering higher education was stressful and challenging. They were uncertain about their ability to do the work, fit in, and finish their degrees, and they feared embarrassment if they did not succeed.

*Juggling Time*

Participants talked about the interconnectedness of managing time demands for school, family, and work. Carla Friedman felt that time management was the most critical challenge:

I’m um telling you it was really, time management was just, that was, that was key to the success. Um, finding the class that would fit into what I needed to finish, um, and being able to find study time, homework time, research time, um, that was, I would say time management was probably just was, was the biggest
Fran Santana’s plans of pursuing a physical therapy (PT) program were derailed because she could not reconcile her child-rearing time demands with the requirements for the program. She said:

I got accepted into the PT program, but then I ran into a brick wall with my husband who was against the whole idea and I wasn’t going to get any help from him, um, with child care. Um, during the summer I would have to do an internship, and, there was no way, he, you know, he was going to be able to watch my, our, daughter. So I ended up dropping out of that program.

At work, informants found juggling work schedules and responsibilities was challenging while in school. Susan Roberts reported she had stopped out several times when she switched jobs, so she could concentrate on her work. Chris Casals and Abbey Harden commuted significant distances, but they persisted. Patrick Callahan went without overtime and made arrangements to complete certain work assignments, saying:

Nobody wants to walk away from a little extra in their check, but I, once I made up my commitment, I just put in my 40, did my work and if there was overtime, I’d show the guys what had to be done, and I’d go to my class. Or my boss, if it was really something in my area at work, he’d try and schedule it. You know, what day can you do it? And I’d tell him, and he’d say okay, then that’s the day it’s going to get done.

Several challenges arose because of the complexities of fitting everything in and meeting the graduation requirements. Carla Friedman said:

I think, 300-level courses, and they’re, they’re not offered very often. You know,
it's one class per semester, as opposed to a 100-level history course that’s offered 12 times a day. Um, that was one of the, the challenges I had was trying to fit the one or two classes I was looking to get, um, into my schedule, to work the rest of my life around that class because I had to take a class to finish. Um, that was a challenge.

In sum, interviewees had busy lives and they juggled responsibilities for school, family and work. As a result, time management was a critical challenge. For some, the competing time demands impacted enrollment decisions, and others found a way by making adjustments. One additional challenge related to juggling and attaining the degree was figuring out how to locate and enroll in courses required for graduation.

Age

An additional challenge the participants faced was related to age. Nearly all of the interviewees had originally been traditional-age students, making them aware that returning to higher education as an adult made them non-traditional-age students. Abbey Harden sought a program with a lot of adult learners because, “I was willing to take classes with adult learners, older age people because they were more focused, knew what they were doing, less silliness, less junk.” At Big City, students of all ages were in classes together, which was challenging. For example, Nancy McLean said, “I would say one drawback, and this possibly is to with the age difference of students, was group projects were difficult.” Robert Carey provided another perspective:

I’m quite a bit older than my colleagues. It’s like I’m older than their parents.
And what’s the social fabric of the classroom and how will I fit into that? You know? Like I like to think I’m not an old fuddy-duddy, but then on the other hand
I’m really not in the loop either. And you know I found I would watch my colleagues interacting and socializing as they would being 17; well, no, like say 18, 19, 20, or 22 years old and I felt kind of like out of the loop, like I’m really not… I’m from a different tribe here and they’re tolerating me.

While informants experienced difficulties interacting with classmates, Chris Casals found some professors discounted real-life adult experience in favor of other forms of knowledge. Chris said, “I didn’t think that some of them appreciate the life experiences as much as their college experience answers.” Patrick Callahan provided an example of classroom situation, saying this about the faculty member, “I had absolutely no idea where she was coming from. It seemed like she treated people like we were in high school, so it’s like hey, you know, lighten up lady, you know. It was a woman my age.” And Julia Aler talked about faculty grading her assignments differently than those of younger classmates. Julie said, “as an adult they expected far more from me than they did from, you know, the 20-year-old sitting next to me and it was really disappointing, frankly, that I got treated that way.”

In sum, interviewees encountered challenges because of their age. While they were focused on the goal of finishing their degree, the adult graduates found younger classmates less serious about their work. As such, group projects were difficult. Moreover, informants talked about feeling like outsiders and having younger students tolerate their presence in the classroom. In addition, participants felt that faculty discounted their life experience and one interviewee talked about faculty having different expectations for her as compared to her younger classmates.
Participants experienced challenges related to their careers and education in several forms. One was related to feelings of inadequacy, and another to concerns about career growth and mobility. Moreover, demands of responsibilities and time for work were burdensome for some informants. Managing work and school schedules was challenging for interviewees. And another challenge related to career was acclimating to the academic environment after being accustomed to the corporate world, in terms of process and expectations for doing work.

Prior to attaining her degree, Mary Sanchez found her feelings of inadequacies were a challenge, especially in her professional work:

In my work, um, as a realtor, I would go into people’s homes and they would talk about their jobs. You know, somebody was an engineer, somebody else was a teacher, somebody else was something else, but I really didn’t know how to converse with people.

Carla Friedman talked about her concerns for her future and the challenges she faced because she did not have a degree:

My main reason was because the industry that I worked, that I am working in, was seeing a decline, a downturn. Um, and that was my, my fear, was losing my job and not, and because I had been in the same industry for so many years, I kind of feel like that’s all I know. Um, that I wouldn’t be, that I would be able to compete with 22 and 23 year olds that have a degree and are willing to work for less money.

While most interviewees felt possessing a degree would bolster their backgrounds
and create more professional opportunities, once enrolled, participants were challenged with focusing their attention and energy on work activities, or finding a balance to accommodate both work and school. Susan Roberts attributed her earlier experiences of stopping out to the demands of starting a new job, saying, “And every time I changed jobs, I had to throw myself into my new job so I, you know, kind of put school on hold.”

Abbey Harden found her work schedule caused a challenge for her, saying “I mean I was also trying to balance this out with work. I worked absolutely full-time; 40 plus hours per week throughout the last two years of my 2 or 3 years of my degree.” Abbey also traded travel assignments with co-workers to ensure she attended her classes. Similarly, Jeannie Taylor was challenged with trying to meet her responsibilities at work and school, despite an ever-changing work schedule and an inflexible boss.

While interviewees focused their time and energy on professional activities, or arranged their schedules to accommodate work, they also had to adjust to the academic environment, as well as teaching and learning styles because they were accustomed to work climate, where processes varied from the classroom culture. Fran Santana related one of her frustrations in the classroom with her professional work experience, saying:

And another point was that I’d been in the business world for so long that um to be sitting in a class that was just presenting abstract ideas about a plot line or something like that, um, would kind of drive me nuts because it’s like oh my God let’s get to the point. You know, when you’re in the business world you go okay we got time. We got an hour meeting we’re going to get done what we need to get done but in a classroom you’re just going to sit for three hours and talk in abstract circles about something. And, and that would drive me nuts at times.
In sum, informants faced challenges in several realms related to their careers, including emotions and self-image, as well as mobility and future opportunities. These adult graduates also experienced difficulties focusing time and effort on work activities and managing the balance between work and school. Last, because they all had professional experience, interviewees were at times frustrated by the atmosphere and culture at school because it was different than the work environment.

**Finances**

The adult graduates experienced a variety of problems and stresses related to financing their education, both as young and older students. In her first enrollment interval, Carla Friedman discussed the impact of scholarship funding:

I had a scholarship to attend Big City, um, and so I started at Big City and um the scholarship that I had ended after 2 years. They cancelled the program. Um, and of course I hadn’t, it was an athletic scholarship. So I hadn’t worked for 2 years, they were paying everything, books, um tuition, um, some transportation, some meals and so after 2 years when the program ended, um, I was, you know, broke. I couldn’t pay for school; I had to go get a job.

Joel Spitz talked about utilizing tuition benefits to be able to afford school:

Umm…money meaning I didn’t have a lot…I had money for books, but I didn’t have money for tuition. So in the State of Illinois with me being a veteran because the State of Illinois treats their veterans so well and they’ll pay for your tuition at any state school which is a wonderful benefit.

Julia Aler discussed not only the struggle to pay for tuition, but supplies as well, saying “I didn’t have $300 or $400 left over to buy the books for the semester.” Abbey
Harden identified finances as her most critical challenge, saying, “And also throughout all of this, the finances were one of the hugest concerns.” Julia Aler concurred, describing her situation:

Well, money was a big challenge, trying to get the money to keep going.

Undergrad—it was pretty easy. I got a lot of grants from scholarships and they were just throwing money at me then, but for my second degree—my nursing degree—no money at all. I had to take out all loans. I got some work programs, money through my work. It wasn’t much and it wasn’t nearly as much as I needed. My last semester, this last semester was a big challenge. I had to get a personal loan which you know money is not so easy to get nowadays. It took me a really long time and I wasn’t even sure that I was going to be able to finish this last semester. But I finally found a bank that would support me and that was it. I had to cash in my entire 401K plan to get the whole thing started and to try and save my house. So, yeah, money was probably my biggest challenge.

Joel Spitz also offered this advice about addressing financial challenges, “I tell them how to navigate the financial aid maize, ask the right questions, keep your expenses low, and just make the decision to do it even if you have to work 20 hours.” In sum, financing education and affordability issues were critical challenges for informants. Scholarships, particularly when reduced or discontinued, impacted enrollment decisions. Grant, loan, veteran’s benefit, and scholarship aid supported interviewees, but enrollment still posed a challenge as well because of the expense.
Summary

Challenges dominated the conversation and were a major issue for interviewees. Participants faced difficulties in numerous realms including study strategies, support, program, grades, family, faculty, staff, re-entering higher education, juggling time, age, career, and finances. As they addressed these key challenges, informants spoke about their strategies and creative solutions to obstacles. Facing difficulties and finding solutions to problems is indicative of initiative and resourcefulness. In addition, interviewees talked about how challenges also provided learning opportunities. Making use of opportunities for new learning is a facet of self-actualization. Fortunately, for each adult graduate in this study, no challenge was insurmountable and each one did achieve their goal of finishing the bachelor’s degree. Degree attainment shows the achievement is worthwhile and matters. Moreover, meeting the objective is the result of perseverance.

Thus, the themes of initiative, resourcefulness, self-actualization, mattering, and perseverance are intertwined in the detailed first-hand informant descriptions of the experience. The participant accounts, in response to the research questions about motivation and challenges, provide detail fully illustrating these themes (Creswell, 1998, pp. 147-150; Jones et al. 2006, pp. 46-52).

In the next chapter, I present the informants’ accounts of skills, competencies, and specialized knowledge acquired and employed. Then I present a discussion about resources and support participants enlisted. A section containing recommendations participants have for other non-traditional-age students, faculty who teach non-traditional-age learners, and administrators who oversee programs for adults follows. The chapter concludes with unexpected findings.
CHAPTER V

THE PATH TO DEGREE ATTAINMENT:

SKILLS, RESOURCES AND ADVICE

The Experience of Attaining a Degree as an Adult

In the previous chapter, I presented the themes, and, through informant discussion about motivation and challenges, began to reveal the structure of the phenomenon of attaining a bachelor’s degree as an adult learner. In this chapter, I continue this illumination by weaving together additional facets on the degree attainment experience. I begin the elucidation by presenting skills and knowledge interviewees utilized to support completion of the degree. This is to answer the research question: What skills, competencies and specialized knowledge do adult learners believe contribute to their bachelor’s degree attainment? The next section sheds more light by providing details about resources and support in response to the research question: What resources do adult learners report assist them with attaining a degree?

In the section that follows, I further clarify the experience by presenting interviewee advice to faculty, program administrators, and other adult learners, in response to the research question: What recommendations do adult learners offer for enhancing the academic success of other adults? Last, I enlighten understanding about the phenomenon by discussing unexpected findings.
In each of these areas, the themes of initiative, mattering, perseverance, resourcefulness, and self-actualization exist, creating a sharper picture of what it takes to attain a bachelor’s degree as an adult learner.

*Skills, Competencies and Specialized Knowledge*

The interviewees talked about skills, competencies and specialized knowledge essential to their efforts to attain the degree. Participants spoke about academic skills employed to address various academic situations. They also discussed the importance of proficiency with technology, since it is so pervasive in educational activities. Further, the informants spoke about utilizing practical skills to bolster their efforts.

*Academic Skills*

Informants discussed competencies related to academic activities such as writing, reading, studying, research and math, and they identified these as critical skills. They also spoke about different learning styles and their preferences for mastering material, along with strategies for understanding and acquiring new knowledge.

*Writing.* When I asked about the skills she most relied on to attain her bachelor’s degree, Julia Aler said, “Writing. There’s nothing but writing. I don’t care what school you go to, you’re going to have to learn how to write.” Julia’s emphasis on writing as an essential skill was reiterated by other participants as well, because they had writing assignments in each class. Further, the writing skills required in academic work vary from those used in other activities, so participants had to learn mechanics and style appropriate for their assignments. Julia explained, “I learned even more so than before how to write a complete sentence; how to write a paragraph that’s a paragraph; how to
quote somebody properly; how to use a source properly.”

Reading and studying. For the adult graduates, reading and studying constituted a significant portion of their time and required skill to complete on time, comprehend, be prepared for class, and, use for assignments. Carla Friedman said:

I do have to say the reading, reading probably, obviously still takes the most time, unless you’re a speed-reader, which I’m not. But it was um, I guess it wasn’t a surprise that you still have to read, you know, so much, your, your 300-page textbook that you still have to go through.

While managing workload, participants found that their skills improved while in the program. About this, Fran Santana commented:

Just my study skills in general. Just improved. When I was younger I just thought I don’t even need to look at this book. I’ll just go to class, listen to the professor and take the test. Um, and now this time I was just more serious, and you know, doing, I was always right on time with all my tasks and my reading assignments. You know, if we had so many pages assigned, I read them and was ready for each class.

Research. Interviewees reported they acquired and refined research skills, and faculty and library staff were instrumental in helping them develop research skills. These skills took time to develop because they are used frequently in academic settings but rarely outside of education. Robert Carey said:

Research I learned from my teachers because they told me about the different types of data bases that were available for social science research. They showed
me how to use online research, how to use paper research, what the standards were for doing social science research, and how to write a research report and why it was important to have a standard format for a research report and why the APA standards were important and so forth. So that was knowledge that I really don’t think I would have picked up as well on my own.

Joel Spitz talked about how he learned and sharpened his research skills:

I think through my college career I think they usually or colleges have little handouts on how to prepare for, you know, little handouts or little notes on how to write a term paper or papers and how to break things down into small manageable bits, you know, text, you know, little things in the hallway.

Math. While math presented a number of challenges for participants, as I described in the previous section, math skills were another area of competencies interviewees described as important to supporting their efforts to attain the degree. One reason was because many of the informants had to take several math courses to satisfy graduation requirements, so mastering math was an issue that persisted for some time. Susan Roberts said, “So I started and I started taking the 00 class and the professor was really over my head. After the first two days of class, I knew. I was getting Fs, you know, on the pretests.” Susan continued, saying:

I knew that that was probably going to be it and I wasn’t going to be able to finish and there was not a school that I could find that doesn’t have a math pre req. So I thought there for a while that I wasn’t going to make it.
Similarly, Jeannie Taylor described her experience:

I had a hard problem with statistics and that class I got a D in statistics and you can’t graduate with a D in it. But I had never taken algebra or geometry; I had just taken basic math skills, so I had a very, very hard time.

While participants felt pressure to improve their math skills, succeeding at math boosted their confidence to make it to their goal of attaining the degree. Abbey Harden recounted, “And then I went on and I think when I passed calculus I was like: Well, I could get any degree I want.” Fran Santana said:

I took two classes that didn’t even count for any college credit whatsoever, and then, um, I took college algebra and I got an A in it. I got an A all, every math class that I, that I took. So, once I mastered the math, then, um, I was more confident about the whole program because I thought that’s going to be the hardest thing that I’m going to have to do.

In sum, informants had to acquire and refine academic skills, such as writing, reading and studying, research and math. These skills were important to complete assignments and succeed at meeting graduation requirements.

Technological Competencies

The informants were in agreement that technological skills were critical to their success in attaining the bachelor’s degree. This is because computer usage permeates nearly every aspect of the academic environment. Carla Friedman explained why technology is such a major influence in academic work:

I guess the biggest difference from going to school in the 80’s to going to school
within the last five years is obviously the Internet. Um, doing assignments 20 years ago really meant a lot of footwork, I think you know it meant a lot of paging through things, um, maybe interviewing people, um, you know now it seems to all be at your fingertips on the Internet. Um, so to me, going back to school and doing assignments seemed a lot easier than it was 20 years ago. Um, there’s just so much more information, available, readily available than there was. Um, so it, to me it felt easy, doing the assignments, as opposed to what it used to be like.

Abbey Harden expanded on that idea when she spoke about using technology to do research. Abbey said, “We were even able to use our call-up librarian, the reference librarian, and ask for help with my online search.”

In order to learn the computer skills necessary to complete assignments, interviewees talked about different ways in which they acquired these critical competencies. Some adult graduates went to the computer lab for assistance or took computer classes as part of the degree program. Others had learned computers and received training at work. And, students helped one another. Robert Carey said this about a fellow student:

So we would go down and would sort of tutor him on how to use the computer. Then he would start picking it up. But I saw on a number of occasions how he was sort of stopping himself because of that barrier. He said, ‘I never would.’ So I said, ‘Let’s go down in the lab and work on it.’ And then eventually about after a year or so, he was charging ahead but he needed a little help getting over that. Even among informants who were proficient in a variety of computer skills, the
academic environment required them to learn even more. About this, Susan Roberts said:

So the technology actually wasn’t daunting. It was the first time that I had used Blackboard. So that was… At the beginning of every semester getting yourself hooked up to Blackboard can be a, you know, little bump in the road, but other than that I was fine.

In addition, faculty had students use technology in other ways. Chris Casals said:

One class had online testing, you know, how to do that. But once you did it the first time, he was very patient about explaining how to do it. A lot of the people in the class hadn’t done it before. But once we got the hang of it, it was very, very easy.

Interviewees reported that basic computer skills were critical to success. Angela Homer asserted, “I would say that anybody who’s used a, which is almost everybody who have used computer something, if you have rudimentary skills, you can do it.” However, as a practical matter, Jeannie Taylor pointed out that although she had basic computer skills, she outsourced her work because her typing speed was slow.

Finally, because computer use is so pervasive, participants talked about the added benefit of applying their technological skills in other areas of their lives. Diane Pepin discussed how acquiring more computer skills helped her in her job:

I just took a course on basic computer skills. I had Word, Excel; maybe it was just those two. And I found different things you could do with Excel that I was doing at work with a typewriter. This was a while ago. And then I thought well I could do this in Excel. So then I took more Excel classes and I learned different
things I could do on that that made my job much, much easier.

In sum, computer technology is ubiquitous in the academic environment, and technological skills are critical for success. The adult graduates attributed the importance of possessing these skills to the rise of the Internet and how online access to information plays a role in doing academic work. Moreover, interviewees talked about how they and their classmates acquired these important skills. They utilized lab resources, relied on past experience and training, helped classmates, and were open to expanding their skills in new areas, such as online course delivery systems. While these skills are important to functioning in the academic environment, one informant discussed enlisting help because her skills were weak. Last, participants discussed how they applied the technological skills they had acquired to other areas of their lives.

Practical Knowledge

Interviewees discussed practical skills that supported their efforts as they pursued the bachelor’s degree. Useful competencies included problem solving, study strategies, time management, resources, and finances.

Problem solving. When the adult graduates discussed their strategies for addressing challenges in the previous chapter, problem solving was a common theme throughout the interviews. The informants could identify or anticipate a problem and find a solution for addressing it in a way that made sense to them and was congruent with achieving the goal of finishing the degree. Robert Carey pursued a bachelor’s degree as an intermediate step toward attaining his goal of a master’s degree. He needed the degrees to change careers. About making his plans and succeeding, Robert said:
I really had a roadmap and maybe this is my engineering background because a lot of the work that I was doing in my technology career was designing and quality assurance and stuff. So I drew a roadmap. I said, ‘Well what information do I need to find out?’ So I found the information out. And what steps are there that I need to achieve and what’s my timeline for achieving them? So I kind of set it out as an engineering problem really and maintained my motivation, followed my roadmap.

Not only did informants consider all that they had to do for the degree, they calculated the workload each term. Angela Homer said, “I also had to be realistic about what I, what I could do. How many subjects could I really handle in a semester?” In the same vein, Patrick Callahan tried to anticipate the amount of work in specific courses to figure out which combinations of classes he would take each term. Patrick said:

If it was a course where it was something like, um, third world economies, where I didn’t know anything about it, and there were two or three papers that had to be written, well then I wouldn’t take three heavy courses, I’d take, you know, a heavy, a medium and maybe a light one.

Similarly, most participants had other responsibilities outside of academic work, so they considered all of their activities in relation to one another. Nancy McLean said:

There were certain semesters that I didn’t go full-time because I had other stuff going on. I, I am involved in church, kids school, that kind of stuff. So when there was like a big project in those three months, I sort of backed off school.
While managing demands of multiple responsibilities may be intimidating to some students, being busy produced a benefit for study informants. Fran Santana said:

I learned to um budget my time better because I had to. And, um, it seems like when you’re on a tight schedule, you end up getting more done than you would if you knew you had, you know, um, a whole lot of time.

Knowing the goals that they wanted to achieve and understanding the demands of school in concert with other responsibilities in their lives, the adult graduates used problem solving strategies to identify issues that might cause trouble and found solutions that suited their own situations.

*Study strategies.* Participants approached their academic work pragmatically to gain confidence and perform well. Chris Casals wanted to start off on a positive note when she re-entered higher education to complete her degree. Chris was practical about choosing her class:

The first class I took when I went back was, you know, I didn’t want it to be too shocking I guess, so I took a writing…it was a creative writing class. So I kind of eased my way in.

To do her assignments, Fran Santana planned ahead and started without delay:

My history class I took, there was a big research paper that we had to work on, and I started as soon as I found out about it. I emailed the professor and told him, you know, what topic I was going to work on. As soon as he approved it, I started ordering books from the various libraries and reading them. And, the whole semester, I worked on my paper.
Informants used practical skills to give themselves opportunities to succeed. These skills included making choices that built confidence and completing tasks that were part of assignments and projects.

**Time management.** Closely related to problem solving and study strategies is the practical skill of managing time. Robert Carey talked about being organized:

The organizing that I refined in school was more oriented toward getting me through school in an orderly fashion and it ties into the prioritization skills of what I really need to do most, when does it need to be done, and more importantly what could I avoid doing to allow time for the more important things.

Carla Friedman had a similar perspective on the importance of this skill, saying:

I have to go back to time management as far as acquiring skills. Um, and not just for the busy lifestyle I had, I think any student. Um, once you have that syllabus, really, you know what, you know what it’s all about, and to be able to manage that, so it all fits into one, one semester.

Time management is a key practical skill, as interviewees reported they had to juggle numerous responsibilities and multiple roles in their lives, and when they decided to return to school to complete the bachelor’s degree, they had to find a way to fit academic responsibilities in with other activities in their lives.

**Resources.** In terms of practical skills, interviewees talked about identifying, locating and utilizing resources to support their efforts in school. About this, Chris Casals said, “Just ask as many questions as you can, like use the resources that are there. They don’t hunt you down; you have to hunt them down. You’re not hunted down, but
you have to use those resources.” Mary Sanchez agreed, suggesting familiarization with these practical matters was important:

Take a tour of the school. Um, I think that should be a requirement for the school to give you a tour and to actually say, this is the lounge, this is the lunchroom, this is the health room, this is, you know, you don’t want to wait till you get a cut to find out where the nurse is. This is the library. These are your tools that you have access to.

According to informants, as a practical matter, knowledge about resources is useful because resources exist to support success by addressing various student needs.

*Finances.* Another realm of practical skills entailed managing finances. Interviewees commonly discussed issues about affordability. Joel Spitz factored the opportunity cost of being a full-time student. Joel said:

I navigated the money issue. There was a tradeoff. Do I work at $12 an hour, $13 an hour, $15 an hour and go to school at night and take another decade or 15 years or do I navigate on how to find the money to get it done now?

Not knowing financial aid regulations nearly stopped Julia Aler from continuing her education to earn a second bachelor’s degree in nursing. Julia described her conversation about scholarships and grants with financial aid officers at the nursing school. Julia recounted, “[The financial aid officer said,] ‘You already have a bachelor’s degree, so you don’t qualify for any of that.’ I’m like, ‘What?’ My mouth kind of went—what? I didn’t know that.”
The interviewees also talked about smaller but no less significant and practical matters related to finances. Angela Homer described how she saved money:

I would go to bookstores and used bookstores. I would go immediately to the bookstore. Right away when I knew that the professor had put the books there on the shelf, what was required. I would write down all of the titles, I would go to the computer, to the [town name] Public Library, and if I could get them, I would get them there. If I couldn’t, I would start going to used bookstores. And I would go through the shelves. I found a couple of used books for peanuts, and um, and that makes you feel good because you had saved yourself.

In sum, the adult graduates employed practical skills in numerous ways to manage situations they encountered while pursuing the bachelor’s degree. They talked about useful competencies in areas including problem solving, study strategies, time management, resources, and finances.

Summary

In conclusion, informants described a range of skills, competencies and specialized knowledge they needed to succeed in the academic environment. In their narratives, the adult graduates provided solid evidence of the existence of the themes, further revealing the essential structure of the degree attainment experience.

The themes of initiative and resourcefulness are interrelated to identifying critical skills and taking steps to master them. The adult graduates believed the competencies discussed above contributed to their ability to successfully attain the bachelor’s degree. This point is related to the theme of perseverance, which is intertwined with possessing
the tools to persist and succeed in the academic environment. Interviewees discussed an added benefit when I asked if it was valuable to pick up or enhance these types of skills. Lydia Simon responded positively, saying, “I’ve learned new things that I didn’t realize I could do before.” Confidence and pride from succeeding in challenging situations indicates informants value the experience, and it matters. Moreover, expanding the repertoire of skills to include ones necessary to succeed is a manifestation of self-actualization, or striving to reach one’s potential (Knowles et al. 2005; Maslow, 1943).

Resources and Support

Interviewees discussed the resources and support they relied upon as they pursued the bachelor’s degree. These two areas are closely related. However, by discussing them separately, I uncover critical factors the informants felt aided them. This level of detail demonstrates what resources adult learners reported assisted them with attaining a degree, which provides more structure to the description of the themes (Creswell, 1998).

Resources

The participants utilized a variety of resources, especially the academic assistance labs, library and advising. In addition, interviewees reported receiving support from faculty and advisors.

Academic support services. According to the informants, Big City had writing, computer and math labs. As reported above and in the previous chapter, the adult graduates discussed using these services and facilities in order to succeed in their work. When I asked how she learned about these resources, Lydia Simon replied, “Oh, there were probably fliers posted around here and maybe during orientation at the beginning of
starting here.” Even though they were publicized, interviewees remarked about feeling hesitant about using them. Mary Sanchez summed up a common perception about tutoring. Mary said, “Well, you know, only dumb people go to the tutoring place. Only, they think, people think that there’s a perception that only dumbos go for tutoring. And that is so untrue.” Participants talked about how they had changed their minds. Angela Homer said, “I mean I think tutoring always had kind of a bad reputation, but when you really want something, I am there. If somebody will help me figure this out, you know.” Not only out of a desire to do well on their work, but through encouragement did informants use the lab and tutoring resources. Patrick Callahan explained:

Just make sure that they, that certain adults know that they have a learning lab, and a couple of my professors were good about that. I think going there and say something about some apprehension, and he says, ‘There’s a writing lab right over there, why don’t we even walk over there and show me. It’s right around the corner.’

Once in the program, interviewees reported they felt more comfortable seeking assistance, and this was true not only in regard to the labs, but the library as well. The adult graduates talked about faculty encouragement and using various reference services. Nancy McLean said, “The professor told us where to go. And we had library orientation. Um, in her class, actually. So she used one class to take us to the library to show us how to do this stuff.” Fran Santana talked about using interlibrary loans to access materials she needed for assignments. Susan Roberts discussed using a combination of online and physical resources to do her work. Susan said, “I actually went to the library, you know,
and got the book. That was kind of a novel idea for some of my classmates. They were kind of like: You went to the library?” And Abbey Harden reported the online resources were key due to accessibility. Abbey said, “So any hour during the day, almost 24 hours, somebody can get access to the resources.” In sum, informants identified library resources as critical to successfully completing their work, and they used a combination of print and online materials.

**Advising.** When talking about critical resources, interviewees described their interactions with advising services. Participants relied on faculty and advisors to guide them through the program. When Patrick Callahan had questions, he recounted:

I went and saw the department head, and they’d say well, you know what, you don’t really need to take this course, why don’t you take this one? You know, and they were helpful. And they got to know you too.

With the structure of the ALS program being so flexible, Angela Homer said:

It is so important to keep up with your advisor and every now and then I think I read it somewhere, and I thought, that’s right, I haven’t gone and talked to her. Why does it seem intimidating? Why do I think she’s going to go, ‘Oh, you’re way, you know.’ You always feel like you’re going to be on the defensive, you know, you have to go and, how’s everything, and you feel like they’re going to, and, they went, ‘Okay, you’re okay, you need three more things here.’ You need that. I think that that is a big push because you forget the advisor is in your corner. And, um, I remember reading in the paper something about maybe it was about college students and, keep up with your advisor. And I went to myself,
'You know what, you haven’t done that. You haven’t gone over there. You’re just willy nilly going on a little aimless here right now.’ And so I made an appointment, walked in, then okay she pulls it up, ‘You’re doing fine here, you need to add this and this.’ Well, oh, I think that’s a very important thing.

Robert Carey took another tack, saying:

And then when I got into the program, then I interviewed my advisors as soon as I got an advisor. A lot of students don’t. They don’t see their advisor for a year and then they say, ‘I’ve never even met with my advisor.’ So I wanted to get her perspective and advice.

As a resource, informants gave advising mixed reviews. Fran Santana said she commonly heard complaints about advising from her classmates, and she attributed the problem to large caseloads. Mary Sanchez was dissatisfied because her advisors were unhelpful finding classes that suited her interests and desire to have a major. Carla Friedman expressed similar sentiments, but she found a solution to her problem, saying:

Um, it’s kind of different I guess if you, if I had declared a major like economics. I would have a department to go to, you know what I mean, as resources. Um, seeking people that might be a couple classes ahead of me to understand what I might be heading into. Um, I didn’t, I didn’t feel that, I didn’t, I didn’t have that, um, so, but I had my professors and I think knowing that um, gained the knowledge that, you can go to them and use them as a resource.

Last, Nancy McLean illustrated her conflicted feelings about advising:

I had to go in at one point and say, ‘Okay what do I have left? This is my math,
on my, you know, what’s yours? Because I know yours is the one that counts.’

So, um, and I made an appointment to go in and do that. But it would have been

nice to have somebody, ‘So how’s the program working for you, what are you
taking this semester?’ You know having somebody show interest in that, um, it’s

a big program, a lot of people in it. They probably don’t have the staff or the
budget, you know, you do that kind of thing. But it just seems to me that it

would’ve been, it would have made me feel like I belonged a little more, to have

that.

This example demonstrates that despite these uneven reviews, and hesitation

about using advising services, participants emphasized advising was a critical resource.

Summary. Informants identified resources essential to their success in achieving

the goal of attaining the bachelor’s degree. The most crucial resources included

academic support services, such as the computer, writing and math labs, tutoring and
advising. Faculty provided key support that connected students to these services by

specifically addressing them in class, taking students on facility tours during class and
giving students advice about course selections. In addition, the adult graduates reported

using advising services, somewhat reluctantly, but finding them important to ensuring

that they were fulfilling degree requirements. These critical facilities and services helped
each of the participants succeed in attaining the degree.

Support

Each of the interviewees said they had critical support while finishing the

bachelor’s degree. The informants received backing from family and faculty. They also
found the program helpful, and received encouragement from coworkers and employers.

*Family.* When I asked about crucial support contributing to successfully attaining the degree, informants most frequently identified family. Robert Carey said:

> My partner’s emotional and intellectual support was really the most critical resource for me in my success. I would have made it through school anyway but I made it through. I gained much more knowledge. I was more successful in terms of grades I believe and in terms of just feeling like I was getting a good education because of her. And that was because of her reinforcement, her encouragement; she reinforced my learning; because of our ability to talk about it together, she encouraged me as part of the emotional support. And then she gave me the tangible support when I needed it.

Susan Roberts talked about her experience in similar fashion:

> I think when it says which resources were critically important, I would say it was really my husband who was able to make the money part work and just the emotional/psychological support of knowing that he believed in what I was doing and really wanted to see me graduate.

While family support for emotional, material and financial needs was critically important to most participants, some attained their degrees without this help. Diane Pepin described her family’s ambivalence. Diane said, “Support, you know, from family; they weren’t discouraging, they weren’t encouraging, so that really wasn’t…that didn’t really have an impact so much, as long as they didn’t discourage me.” Fran Santana’s husband displayed his displeasure with his wife’s pursuit. Fran recounted:
I was still fixing challenges from my husband, who, you know, still thought it was ridiculous. Because what was I going to do with this. What do you doing this for? When are you going to finish? When are going to finally finish this? And, um, I, I don’t think he ever understood why I wanted to do it. Um, you, and I, and, it might have almost been insulting to him on some level you know like you know um, you don’t have to work, I can provide for us. You don’t need to do this. But, I always faced that anyway. So um I just ignored that at that point. I reached a point where I didn’t need, got around to me so much, um really what he thought about it.

While most informants characterized family support as important, for the ones whose families were less than supportive, they found a way to persevere.

Friends. Interviewees described several similarities about their relationships with family and friends. The adult graduates reported on varying levels of interest and involvement from their friends while pursuing the degree. Mary Sanchez and Joel Spitz both told of receiving no support from friends. Other participants depicted their situation differently. Angela Homer said:

I think it’s my style anyway because everybody’s in their own world and they’ve got their own stuff, you know. Um, so it’s not like people are thinking about me all the time, and, although I have friends that were definitely keeping an eye on it. Um, curious. I think they kept expecting me to drop out or something.

Patrick Callahan proceeded otherwise, saying “I kept it quiet, I didn’t tell a lot of people I was going back to school.” Similarly, Carla Friedman spoke little to her friends
about going to school, because, like Patrick, she felt that it would be difficult or embarrassing if she did not finish her degree. For these two participants, they deliberately did not seek support from friends.

Julia Aler initially tried to engage her friends, but stopped when she could not invest time and effort in those relationships, two jobs and a full-time course load:

Well, they never even…they stopped asking me after a while because initially I’d say, ‘I can’t do this. I can’t do this anymore.’ And they’d be just like, ‘Okay, we don’t want to hear it anymore.’ So I stopped telling them what was going on.

The other adult graduates, however, reported receiving support from friends, and felt it was positive and important to their success. Nancy McLean said:

And, I would say in addition to that, critical was, um, this, the support and the nod that I got from my family and my immediate friends. That, um, nobody said to me, ‘Oh what are you doing that for?’ Everybody was like, ‘Great! Oh that’s so great!’ You know, they were really, really encouraging, really positive.

Thus, when they received it, support from friends was a positive and influential part of the experience for many informants. However, all interviewees did not identify this type of support as being absolutely necessary to succeed. This is because some adult graduates kept quiet about their pursuit and did not try to engage friends, while another had difficulties with her friends because she was overloaded with responsibilities.

Further, a few informants did not receive support from friends. In sum, despite varying levels of support from friends, each of the participants succeeded in attaining the degree.
Faculty. Faculty provided support to the adult graduates, who described situations when faculty were accommodating, encouraging and accessible. Interviewees talked about support they received through the actions and efforts of faculty.

Faculty were accommodating, especially when participants needed to take certain classes and scheduling was complicated. Carla Friedman explained:

It was a summer course and it was short, six weeks. It met once a week, plus assignments. Um, and the one night that it met, let’s say it was a two-hour course, I knew that I, I couldn’t get there on time. Um, so I went to the first class and I, I spoke with the instructor, and, and just laid it out. I said you know, this, I know this isn’t your issue, this is my issue, but I’m this close to graduating, it’s been a 20 year process, and if you would allow me to start class a half an hour after, you know, um, I was willing to take on an extra assignment, um, and, and she did. Actually she assigned me a couple of films that I needed to watch in addition to what the rest of the class was doing and that allowed me to come in [late]. So, I, this was the class I needed, I, it didn’t fit within my time frame, but I kind of just worked around it.

In addition, faculty encouraged the informants. Joel Spitz discussed how one of his professors wanted him to improve his writing skills, recounting this conversation:

I’m going to push you on your writing ability for research writing because you may need it for your master’s program if you decide to go and I’m going to require that of you. By, you know, so get your APA manual out and run your rough drafts by me. I’ll critique ‘em and we’re going to keep running and running
and running and running with it until the last minute to turn it in.

Lydia Simon talked about her professors being helpful. Lydia said:

When I had classes where something was completely new and different to me, I had a great deal of trouble with it. I mean, it was frightening and overwhelming and I didn’t know if I’d finish or how well I would do in the class. So whenever that happened I usually met with the teacher, went to the teacher for help.

In addition to being accommodating and helpful, informants reported faculty were accessible and prompt about giving feedback on assignments. Diane Pepin said:

They were all pretty prompt in returning assignments. Like I said I liked all the professors here. They were all very professional. They had their office hours that they stuck to if you had to talk to somebody. I never had a problem talking to someone or e-mailing. They all responded.

Last, some participants talked about connecting with faculty, and relying on them for advice and counsel as they proceeded with attaining their degree. Abbey Harden worked on a research project with a faculty member, whose guidance she sought:

So having an insider and this was my major department. Also I was able to ask about other professors. If I wanted to take a class in anthropology, I didn’t know any of those people. I don’t have friends who are anthropology majors. Oh, that teacher is terrible. I didn’t have that connection during the day, so I would to able to ask her.

In sum, adult graduates found faculty helpful and supportive of their efforts in several ways because they were accommodating, encouraging, accessible and helpful.
Program. In addition to being buoyed by encouragement from family, friends, and faculty, participants talked about the program at Big City as being supportive. They framed their remarks by talking about the structure and how it met their needs, and, the helpfulness of the staff. By meeting their needs and being welcoming, the program helped to create a smooth path to the degree. Jeannie Taylor said, “And I also got that feeling when I started at Big City. They also wanted your success and that’s why I stayed at Big City.” About the ALS program at Big City, Robert Carey explained:

They were also more liberal in transfer credits. So for example, they would allow me to transfer some math credits that I had gotten along the way in lieu of science credits. So I had to take fewer courses which saved me time and money. They were also really empathetic, I think, toward returning adult students. They were just there. I didn’t really tap into them for emotional support or guidance so much. But the fact that they were there and the fact they gave me a streamlined way through the program was great.

Patrick Callahan expanded on the idea of support, saying, “Then they told me this is what you need to focus on and they laid it out. And, I guess, each semester I checked off what was available that fit my schedule and pounded away at it.” On the other hand, Chris Casals described difficulties she faced seemingly without help. Chris conveyed:

[I was] concerned that it wasn’t going to count or concerned that it wasn’t the right class or the right humanities or science or you know what I mean like… Some of it was pretty clear and then it just seemed…that seemed to be the hardest part for me.
Likewise, Mary Sanchez talked about misunderstanding when she sought help:
I didn’t understand. I kept thinking well you know it’s just me, you know. I don’t know what college is about so it’s, it’s, just go do this thing, you know. And the reason why they suggest certain programs like or certain courses like for example communications, is because communication will let you in without any requirement. Okay. But I didn’t really know these kind of things. What does that mean to go into a course without any requirements?

Thus, most informants reported on the program structure and services provided support to them as they pursued the bachelor’s degree. However, the level of support, in some cases, was uneven, as in the area of course selections.

Employers and co-workers. While enrolled in the program at Big City, all but one of the participants were working, and that also influenced their experience. As they talked about finishing the bachelor’s degree, interviewees discussed backing they received from employers and co-workers. Fran Santana’s supervisors were supportive:

They just were, um, real pleased that I was doing this. That, even though I wasn’t taking anything that was actually going to help me at my job, I wasn’t taking accounting classes at that point, I was taking some earlier, but, um, they just thought it was great that I was doing it and, um, they were very supportive.

Jeannie Taylor’s co-workers supported her by typing her papers, and Abbey Harden’s boss let her use office conferencing equipment to do group work. Julia Aler’s co-workers assisted her as she sharpened her clinical skills by practicing various techniques. Carla Friedman’s supervisor was supportive of her plans and helped her in
several ways:

The support of the flexibility of my work schedule, and, and I actually had my supervisor’s support. I mean he, when I had talked to him at one point, about going back to school, you know, he was all for it, 100 percent, do it, do it do it. Um, so that was good.

In contrast, earlier in her career and before she enrolled at Big City, Lydia Simon’s employer was unsupportive about her schooling. Lydia said, “And my boss told me that you don’t need a college degree or a college education to go further at work.”

While most employers and supervisors were encouraging and helpful, some were even more supportive by providing financial help. Carla Friedman told of her benefits:

I had a financial resource. Um, they were willing to, like I said, pay for grades. So there was motivation there. If I had an A, they would pay for the course, 100 percent. A B was 90 percent, so um, so there was the motivation there.

Summary. In conclusion, participants received critical support as they pursued the bachelor’s degree. The areas in which informants identified the most significant support included family, friends and faculty. The program at Big City was also helpful. Furthermore, interviewees talked about the assistance and encouragement they received from co-workers and employers. In most cases, the support adult graduates received from various relationships and facets in their lives was significant and helpful in reaching their goal of attaining the bachelor’s degree.

The theme of mattering is conspicuous throughout the descriptions of support from family, friends, co-workers, employers, and the institution. For instance,
interviewees’ explanations about institutional resources are an indication that the school valued the presence of adult learners and made an effort to provide services and resources to help them succeed. Further, the adult graduates were able to enlist help to succeed in the academic environment, and, manage time constraints, class selections and assignments, which are reflective of the perseverance, initiative, and resourcefulness themes. The program’s structure, and transfer credit policies in particular, are interrelated to the perseverance theme, as they gave the informants a head start in amassing the credits necessary for graduation. Last, in the form of self-realization, interviewees desired support, no matter where it came from, and this concept of meeting one’s needs is intertwined with the theme of self-actualization.

Participant Advice

Informants provided a variety of suggestions for faculty, program administrators and other adult learners in regard to issues that support non-traditional-age learners’ efforts to succeed in attaining the bachelor’s degree.

For Faculty

Interviewees had several recommendations for faculty who teach non-traditional-age learners. These suggestions included areas such as teaching style and techniques, treatment of adult learners and program delivery matters.

In the previous chapter and the preceding sections, I provided informant accounts of numerous interactions with faculty. As they talked about what they underwent, the adult graduates proposed several areas for faculty to consider when teaching classes. Carla Friedman suggested tapping into older students’ experiences:
Whether it’s in assignments, um, I don’t know, to kind of draw on those people to share their experience with the class as it pertains to the subject. Um, I would say to the professor to use that as your, as an advantage. Use it as a teaching method, to have, you know, ‘cause you, you ask people to share their experiences as part of the course.

Jeannie Taylor extended that idea by advocating for faculty sharing. Jeannie said, “I think that the professors should open themselves up, talk about their past experiences to the students.” Joel Spitz agreed, saying, “A lot of the professors came from careers prior to becoming professors, so they had life experience that they can throw in from career and personal.” Julia Aler favored faculty who try to understand adult learners:

I’ve been older than just about every professor I’ve had, so I just think they need to look at them in a different light. I think older learners want to be there. They’re not…their parent isn’t standing there telling them you have to go to college. They really want to be there and you should be there for them.

Participants desired faculty who understood them and appreciated their experience. In addition, informants wanted relevant and interesting teaching. Lydia Simon suggested, “New techniques, creativity, less rigidity in some cases; more flexibility in the classroom, in the classroom structure, in the classroom content, course content.” Lydia went on to provide a specific example:

They’ve got a lot of these old classics and all these old plays. They’re terribly boring and stifling. I mean, I mean give me six terms in rock and roll. What do I care about some Victorian…I don’t know what, there was some like Wuthering
Heights and well, that’s just an example. They didn’t do Wuthering Heights, but what do I care about that? I want something I can relate to; something new and fresh and current for me.

Angela Homer agreed, expanding this concept to the course offerings:

To come up with even, even subjects that are going to interest somebody who’s been working for 20 years, say. Somebody who has worked for 20 years but really needs that degree, to advance, um, you go through this catalog here, what in the world am I going to take that’s going to be interesting.

While suggesting faculty should be mindful of currency and offering interesting courses, informants also had specific suggestions about other matters for faculty to address. For example, Jeannie Taylor talked about skills, saying, “Always kind of let the students know about the study skills.” Jeannie continued:

Always have maybe synopses of what you’re going to be talking about so that the student can go over the vital things that you discussed and when you have those tests don’t throw something out that you haven’t even discussed or that you went over so lightly and that’s 90 percent of your test score.

Another major area of discussion involved group projects. Nearly every interviewee discussed various aspects of their experiences with group projects and wanted to propose some considerations for faculty. Susan Roberts suggested:

The time is really limited for these group project things if you’re working all day or you have kids to take care of. So, you know, the group projects although they’re interactive and they’re really interesting, they should provide time in class
for groups to meet because it’s really important, you know. As you know if you’ve ever worked on a group project, there is always one person that makes you really nervous because they’re going to wait to the last minute and there’s one person that’s really anal that keeps tracking everything. So those people need to get together and it’s not always possible. So my advice to teaching staff is to watch the quantity of work for people that are in school part-time, to watch how the group is going to be working together, you know, like, ‘We’re going to take a half an hour break so the groups can get together and figure out what they’re doing.’

While informants acknowledged the benefits of doing group projects, the practicalities of coordinating schedules, as well as assigning and completing specific tasks were problematic. Logistics in a broader sense were complicated for interviewees. As such, Carla Friedman offered the following suggestion about flexibility:

Whether it be assignment alternatives or class time alternatives, you know, obviously we’ve the um, different universities use different terms, um, university without walls, or, online learning, or, that type of thing. Even though you’re signed up to participate for 50 minutes Tuesdays and Thursdays, in a classroom setting, really to allow some flexibility.

In addition to being flexible and creative about class time and logistics, participants proposed faculty overtly encourage students to ask for help. Robert Carey talked about how faculty could assist students with asking for help:
It would be good if there was a way that somebody could just see that because sometimes they don’t want to ask for the help. But if somebody could see it and say, ‘You know, could I help you?’ It would be nice if that were the instructor or it would be nice if as I mentioned earlier the integrated returning adult student program would make those opportunities maybe more available somehow. Make it more acceptable to ask for the help. Make it, you know, normalize it.

Providing support and offering to help links students and faculty. Angela Homer explained the importance of the faculty-student connection:

If you feel a little bit connected, especially to professors who, you feel appreciate you, you know, kind of remember who you are, when they see you, hi how are you, um, I know the personal touch is always important in everything.

Informants felt communication and connections were important aspects of student and faculty relations. Furthermore, the adult graduates had several other suggestions for faculty. Diane Pepin ran into a problem with scheduling conflicts when she was pursuing a degree that required fieldwork. Because of this, Diane urged faculty to consider fully disclosing all of the requirements for the program. Diane recounted:

I would have liked to know ahead of time that that was required. I didn’t know that, that you had to be in the field and take the classes at the same time because I asked them, ‘Can I just be in the field and then take the two classes the next semester?’ I wasn’t in any hurry to finish. And they said, ‘You can’t; you can’t do it like that.’ So they wouldn’t waiver on that. So if I had known that ahead of time, I wouldn’t have had such a struggle later on. So if you’re in something
specific, a specific major, if the advisors could tell you everything that’s involved with that, so you’ll know if that’s something that you want to commit yourself to.

Despite struggling with the fieldwork requirement, Diane praised the job faculty were doing. Likewise, most interviewees commented favorably about faculty. Last, Julia Aler wanted to encourage dedication and quality in faculty work. Julia recommended, “So I think they really need to re-evaluate their staff and make sure that the teachers are there all for the right reasons and that they are available as a resource.”

In sum, interviewees had a number of recommendations for faculty who teach non-traditional-age learners. The informants encouraged faculty to consider tapping into life experience, employing innovative teaching techniques and using current material, addressing student skills, utilizing class time for group work, and, employing technology. Participants also recommend that faculty reach out to students, because, as they discussed in their accounts of faculty support, the informants felt faculty help was important to attaining the degree. Interviewees also recommend faculty fully disclose all requirements for programs, and be accountable for the job that they are performing.

For Program Administrators

Interviewees had suggestions for administrators of adult programs, based on their experiences and observations. I organize these recommendations according to when students enter a program, while they are enrolled, and, as they are finishing. Because two participants attended only one institution, these suggestions arise out of the entire experience of attaining the degree, which, for most informants, involved enrollments at a number of institutions.
At entrance. When adults decide to participate in higher education, they consider such factors as when, where and how they will proceed. To make adults aware of opportunities institutions offer, Carla Friedman suggested advertising. About that point, I asked how she learned about Big City, and Carla recalled:

I heard through a friend, I never, I didn’t see it on TV or you know, um, and I never got a mailing on it, never, you know, it was just through a friend. I, I think that the universities could, could get out there and say, hey, we have these programs for, for the full-time worker, for the family person, or, I guess the person who might have a couple of years under their belt.

Once adults know about opportunities available to them, the interviewees said they would need to know what the program entailed and how to get started. Nancy McLean recommended having one application for all programs at an institution, because she did not know about the ALS program, from which she eventually graduated:

It probably would’ve been a good idea if I had been on my initial application and interview been presented with that option of the ALS program. I was clueless about it. And I’m, you know, maybe they should take people who have been away from school, because they’re going to know when you apply what your deal is, and just say, hey we have this track, do you want to try it out, if you want, this is how it works, you know, you might have more fun with it this way, unless, you know, or do you have a specific idea of what you want to do or the direction you want to take? I didn’t have any idea like that.
Abbey Harden extended that idea by suggesting institutions offer several evening options for non-traditional-age students. Abbey told of the options she would have liked offered to her, saying, “a career program. They’ll tell people pick three of the above.”

In terms of entrance requirements, Patrick Callahan recommended programs consider non-traditional-age learners’ backgrounds and not impose excessive requirements for entry. Patrick illustrated his point by describing his past experience:

If you’re looking to get 40 year olds in and you’re gonna tell them that we’re only going to take a sliver of your college credits and you have to do foreign language and, you know, it made you feel like they didn’t want you. And they were, you know, they are quick to grab your money. Then I’m getting letters, you know, we haven’t heard from you. It’s like, you’re not gonna hear from me. It was just ridiculous.

Similarly, participants recommended that programs accept transfer credits and not require adult learners to re-take courses for which they have received credit elsewhere. Susan Roberts considered enrollment at three other institutions before selecting Big City, chiefly because of the transfer credit policies. Susan explained her feelings about this:

My biggest complaint is they sit down with somebody that they know is in a hurry to finish, that their employer might be backing them, and they say, ‘Oh, you know, you took biology five years ago, but it’s been five years so you have to take it again.’

Carla Friedman explained how this affects program selection. Carla said, “I did not shop around, only because they had what I needed. If, if it came down to, they
weren’t going to be able to take my hours, I probably would’ve gone a different route.”

And, when presenting their institution’s options to adult learners, interviewees suggested that administrators consider their approach. Diane Pepin said:

Just to keep an open mind because everybody comes from different situations and try not to be judgmental and to be helpful but not tell people what to do, just give suggestions and let people make up their own minds.

In sum, informants recommended institutions advertise their programs, administrators offer all institutional programs to learners when they apply, and, consider offering career and other degree completion options for adults. To enroll adults, the adult graduates recommended optimizing opportunities for transferring previously earned college credits and avoiding imposing foreign language requirements on applicants. College administrators should also explain the options available at their institution, but allow the adult to decide for him- or herself what he or she will do. Once an adult enters a program, informants made a number of suggestions about how administrators could help non-traditional-age learners make a smooth transition.

*During enrollment.* Interviewees suggested giving non-traditional-age learners an orientation to become familiar with campus, learn about the program in which they are enrolling, and provide a forum for adult students. Fran Santana explained:

They could have an orientation, um, and, give a guided campus tour to the returning adults. Because, um, you know, all the time I was there I never stepped foot in the science building until I had to meet one of the professors there. And I wasn’t sure where to go. Um, you know, that might be a nice little idea, just to,
you know, if they could do it in the evening when the adults can be there. Um, give them a whole campus tour. I never set foot in the physical education building. Um, and they offered, you could take exercise classes there, and I thought, well I’ve never even been in that building, so I guess I’m not going to even look into that. Um, so you, you didn’t really feel all that comfortable on campus. Because I only went into the buildings I needed to go into. And, that was it.

Susan Roberts agreed, saying:

Like maybe a roadmap. Hey, you’re returning to school. Here’s where you get your books, here’s where you talk to people about a loan, and here’s where you talk to people about the billing, you know, and any special needs that you might have.

Informants encouraged administrators to have meetings describing the program and what it entails. Diane Pepin learned about the ALS program at a meeting. Diane said, “Before I came here too I went to an information meeting about ALS.”

To give non-traditional-age learners an opportunity to connect to their program and one another, participants suggested offering forums. Lydia Simon gave her perspective on the importance of forums, especially in programs for commuting students. Lydia said, “But I mean they have no brainstorming or spoken forums with the ALS adult learners. You have no communication that connects you with the adult learners. That’s a major problem here in any area. Let’s say…commuter school.”
Beyond acclimating students to the facilities and campus resources, having meetings to explain the program, and, offering forums to facilitate communication between students and administrators, interviewees made several suggestions tending to the needs of non-traditional-age students who were enrolled. These suggestions covered areas including advising, outreach, academic support services, counseling, class schedules, and financial assistance and honors programs.

The adult graduates wanted advisors to cultivate relationships with students through outreach, connections and learning about student capabilities. Angela Homer suggested advisors reach out to adult learners. Angela explained:

Yeah, maybe if they just send an e-mail, I’ll be your advisor, come and drop by, you know, there’s always coffee here, um, or you know, just that the door is open, I really, I really want to see that you get through school. I think that would be huge for an adult. Probably huge for anybody.

Susan Roberts extended the idea of reaching out to students, and encouraged advisors to make an effort to connect to adult learners, saying:

I think that when you have returning adults to school, the people that deal with them better be pretty sharp because we’re in the work world already and we’re really looking for real specific, practical knowledge and if there is a counselor that can’t give that to you, you can see right through that.

Abbey Harden expanded the concepts of outreach and connectedness to understanding student skills and using that information for guidance. Abbey suggested using advising to address student competencies and preparedness for academic work:
There should be more tests to determine deficit in academic coverage (academic experience rather than aptitude) and strength no matter what a student’s background might appear to be. Students should be encouraged to pursue their strengths and develop what they are already good at into a professional level of expertise.

In sum, participants recommended that advising services make an effort to personally reach out to students, connect with students by providing appropriate information, and, assess and guide students according to their abilities.

Informants urged administrators to reach out and connect to students in areas beyond advising. In terms of student persistence, Chris Casals suggested:

They probably need to reach out to them more you know like… I know the resources are there, but it’s you know if someone doesn’t come back for a second class or something maybe they could reach out and be like, ‘Why did you quit or why did you stop or is there anything we do?’ I know that’s time consuming and money for them, but if they’re willing to communicate that, like to find out why somebody didn’t go to that second class or why they didn’t you know continue with the first class or they never made it through that first day. Maybe people sign up and never actually go to the first day or something, you know. Why don’t they?

Interviewees talked about how they felt about administrators reaching out to them and what it meant. Nancy McLean said, “I would’ve liked a little more contact.” Nancy continued, “They weren’t, um, calling me asking me how I was doing. And, maybe it’s
because they were dealing with adults and, you know, if you have a problem, then you should come in there.”

Likewise, Angela Homer described her experience:

I think the personal contact is huge. Um, I don’t know, perhaps if they, um, assign an advisor, maybe they do, I can’t remember that anybody said, ‘This will be your personal advisor’, but once I was in Honors I understood I had humans who knew me, my background, and I could go to them.

In addition to outreach, informants recommended that administrators explicitly discuss and provide learning assistance, such as tutoring, to non-traditional-age students. Robert Carey explained why it was important:

If you have difficulties along the way or if you’d like to boost your skills, here’s something on studying, studying habits, here’s something on writing, here’s something on English language competency, here’s something on constitutional tests; whatever you need to get going.

Further, interviewees suggested offering counseling services for non-traditional-age learners. Robert Carey urged:

I would say to make sure that there is counseling available that’s socialized with returning adult students and that’s aimed at or is sensitive to returning adult students. Because they are for example such as a stress thing can come up. As you mentioned, there are people who are juggling a lot of responsibilities and school is just one more stressor. It would be good to make them know up front that it’s okay and maybe unexpected that they take advantage of that resource.
From the perspective of the participants, offering academic and other support services was key, plus a substantial selection of evening courses. Fran Santana wanted to take French classes, but they were only offered during the day, which conflicted with Fran’s schedule, therefore she could not take those courses. At an institution Abbey Harden attended before enrolling at Big City, the program in which she was enrolled was changed. That institution was relocating Abbey’s program to another campus and only offering it during the day. As a result, Abbey said, “I completely dropped out of there.” Having gone through this experience, Abbey recommended, “You have to be able to offer, look at the adult learner, and be able to offer something that is humanly possible where they don’t have to come during the day at all.” Abbey also lobbied for weekend classes to accommodate non-traditional-age learners, saying, “Weekend classes. They’re awesome but most universities don’t have them.” Thus, informants encouraged program administrators to consider class schedules and try to offer programs in the evenings to accommodate adult learners.

As I reported in the previous chapter and prior sections in this chapter, adult learners face numerous financial concerns. In that vein, interviewees suggested administrators provide more substantial information about financial aid and not make abrupt changes to financial aid awards. Susan Roberts, who received her bachelor’s degree from Big City and then enrolled in a graduate program, urged:

I would recommend, highly recommend that for those people that don’t have tuition reimbursement, all I heard for all the years I was at Big City and the beginning of the [graduate school name] was, ‘Oh, there’s so many scholarships
out there for returning adults to school.’ I never saw one. And they would be like, ‘Go on the Internet.’ I never found one. I never saw… It would be so helpful and I think that they would definitely get more adult students if they talked about the scholarships, you know, because people as they get older they have mortgage payments and they have kids and not everybody’s employer is willing to come up with the money for tuition reimbursement. And they don’t make it easy to borrow money.

Susan added:

The student process is just like crawling through ground glass to get loans approved. It’s very bureaucratic, you know. Take somebody, you know. Either have training where, you know, it’s like how to get your student loans at 7:00 o’clock on Wednesday and bring these people in here.

While completing the applications may have been difficult, some informants received financial assistance, and one made a suggestion about awards. Joel Spitz urged:

Maybe grants and scholarships and stipends for superior school performance might be nice. Like say for instance you make the dean’s list twice in a row, they might come up with $300 toward your book purchase. That might be a neat reward.

Some interviewees received awards. Abbey Harden received funding from an institution she previously attended, and described her experience:

Got almost a full tuition scholarship again. And there they, the second year, said, ‘We apologize.’ And I spoke with my friends. They got the same letter. ‘We are
under financial strain. We’re cutting your scholarships to a third of their original value.’

Abbey found this situation very frustrating, and it impacted her enrollment, as she struggled with finances as a result of the scholarship reduction and eventually stopped out. As such, she recommended that institutions avoid changing scholarship awards.

Some participants received financial support from the Honors Program at Big City, which was a positive influence on those recipients. After submitting an application for a different scholarship, Angela Homer was approached by the Honors Program:

And then after that I got a letter from the Honors Department that said well you’ve come to our attention through the scholarship application and we think that you’re a candidate for Honors, the Honors Program. And, what else did she say, I mean, what the scholarship didn’t pick up, Honors picked up.

Angela considered this a nice bonus, and she was touched the program reached out to her. Other informants had different experiences trying to join the Honors Program. Mary Sanchez’s advisor encouraged her to apply to the program:

I went to the office, you know, the honors office. And they said, oh you will certainly be a candidate for the honors because you’re a straight A student. But, you’d have to go to school for an extra year.

Mary decided not to pursue it because being an Honors student would have delayed her graduation. Abbey Harden wanted to be in the Honors program, but could not because of her schedule. Abbey described her disappointment:
I was not able to participate in the honors program as a night student. Although the honors program accepted me neither their office nor their classes were available in the evenings or weekends. In this way my education was explicitly limited due to the nature of being an adult learner. This is one of the only areas I was not able to effectively overcome to achieve the same level of education that I might have during the day in a traditional timeframe.

Lydia Simon also wanted to apply for the Honors Program, but decided against it after she was told that she could not apply with an incomplete grade in a class. Lydia recalled, “I didn’t bother to apply after that. I mean, do you know what I mean? I mean I graduated with honors. I had a high GPA, but I was never in the honors program here.”

Interviewees expressed a desire to participate in the Honors Program, suggesting that it is a valuable resource and source of support at an institution. While the Honors Program was attractive to informants and some did participate in it, others did not because it would have meant additional time to graduate and/or needing to be available for day classes. Further, one adult graduate was discouraged from applying for the program. Thus, informants recommended having an option to be in the Honors Program, especially if it is accommodating to non-traditional-age learner needs.

In sum, interviewees provided numerous recommendations for administrators at institutions serving non-traditional-age learners. Once adult students are enrolled, informants suggested providing advising and outreach, arranging academic support services and counseling so they are accessible to adults. Moreover, participants recommended that administrators devise class schedules with evening and weekend
offerings, assist students with identifying and securing financial assistance, avoid changing financial aid awards, and, offer access to honors programs in the evenings.

**Nearing completion.** As older learners near completion of their programs, the adult graduates had further suggestions to help non-traditional-age learners attain their degrees. Informants suggested minimizing bureaucracy, having a clear graduation audit procedure, sticking to graduation requirements, conducting exit surveys, and, providing a graduation reception.

When she spoke about her undergraduate and graduate experiences, Susan Roberts discussed her frustration with systems such as registration and obtaining books. She felt hindered and concerned about other adults being challenged by processes that seemed to be set up to accommodate traditional students, which made them difficult to use as non-traditional-age students. When she discussed those situations, she advocated:

So the bureaucracy is horrible. Most adults aren’t used to it. They go through this process and you know it’s not like you’re treated any differently than the rest of the students, but you just don’t have the patience for it.

Chris Casals encountered a problem that validated Susan’s concerns. In Chris’s case, the graduation office and her advisor were unable to reconcile how many credits she had left before she would graduate. Because the two offices approached the calculation in different ways, Chris ended up understanding she had sufficient credits to finish, but then found out otherwise. As a result, Chris did not graduate as soon as she could have, had the two offices synched their processes. To that, Chris suggested that administrators coordinate better and reduce processes that cause confusion. Chris said:
I think that’s what threw me off the most was they’re separate entities so then your counselor’s telling you this and it’s an e-mail that’s what’s tracking you around and it’s not going to be a for awhile. But the graduation people because you have to apply for graduation there, I guess I just didn’t realize how many times you really had to apply if you’re only taking one class at a time. Do you know what I mean? So that kind of...I think that was the problem there. It wasn’t him so much; we were on the right track together. It was the graduation committee or people that need to check your credits each time.

Fortunately, even with this misfire between the offices and procedures, Chris did graduate. However, for another participant, her graduation was nearly derailed by another institution’s administration imposing a new rule on the students who were finishing the program. Julia Aler described the situation:

Now this last semester that we had because they were going to be put on probation, the school was going to be put on probation because their [nursing board exam] pass rate was so low, they decided that this graduating class was going to be the example. So if you didn’t pass the ATI test [nursing skills assessment] for that particular class, you were going to have to take the class over and you weren’t going to be graduating. So they changed the rules in the middle of the game after we had all signed off on graduation. You know how you have to file that paper for graduation—intent to graduate. So we’d all filed our intent and then they changed this rule. So we actually had to go to the administration and get an outside agency involved—a lawyer.
To avoid such serious problems that may impede students from graduating, and are complicated to resolve, Julia suggested administrators avoid changing graduation requirements that seriously impact students about to finish their programs, and for which the students are given little notice. In Julia’s case, the students and institution resolved the complicated problems and Julia graduated.

To assess program effectiveness and satisfaction among graduates, several participants recommended administrators survey adult graduates. Carla Friedman said:

One of the recommendations I would make is maybe to do a type of exit interview, for the adult learners. Um, because there are so few of us, it probably wouldn’t take much to do a survey, do you know what I mean. After graduation.

Last, Joel Spitz suggested administrators consider the style and tone of the graduation reception, making it a fitting celebration. Joel said:

Although it would have been nice…they did have a little cookies and punch in the lunchroom, but it was kind of cheaply done but it was alright. [A community college] put out a real fancier spread on the AA degree graduation. Real, real fancy with some finger food and hors d’oeuvres and you know hot finger hors d’oeuvres and coffee, tea, and punch. They did a fantastic job.

In sum, the adult graduates had a number of suggestions for administrators regarding program-related matters that affect adult students, especially as they are finishing their programs. Interviewees suggested minimizing bureaucracy, clarifying graduation audit procedures and making them suitable for non-traditional-age students, and, avoiding changing graduation requirement rules when students are about to finish.
Further, informants urged administrators to conduct exit interviews among graduates and provide a graduation reception that befits the accomplishment of the adult graduates.

Thus, participants provided numerous suggestions and recommendations for administrators pertaining to various aspects of the student experience. They addressed situations that students may encounter from the time they initially consider enrolling through graduation. They urged administrators to consider their perspective, and devise programs, policies and procedures in ways that are attuned to their needs. These recommendations stem from informants’ experiences at numerous institutions and are intended to be universal, rather than specifically aimed at one institution.

For Other Adult Learners

Having gone through the experience themselves of being students who eventually attained their degrees as adults, participants offered a number of recommendations for other adult learners. Informants suggested other adult learners seek advice, understand why they want to pursue a degree, and, have a strong desire and commitment to attaining the bachelor’s degree. Once they decide to go for it, adult learners should try to find balance in their lives by managing time, understand the requirements of the program in which they have enrolled, and, prioritize. Interviewees wanted other non-traditional-age learners to know this is an individual undertaking for which they should try to be organized. Participants also urged other adult learners to ask a lot of questions and not give up on themselves. Further, the adult graduates stressed utilizing resources was critical, as in financial aid and academic support services.
When an adult is deciding about attaining the bachelor’s degree, Robert Carey suggested, “Talk to people that have gotten to where you want to be.” Robert continued, “At every opportunity where I thought somebody had gotten somewhere where I wanted to go, I would just try to engage them in conversation about what they thought was important and I think that was really helpful.” Patrick Callahan told of the conversation he had with friends who approached him about his experience:

[His friend said,] ‘Maybe I should go back and get mine.’ And I just tell them, ‘You know, where I went and where to go.’ I don’t push them what degree to get into, but what program I went into to get it.

By asking others about their experiences as non-traditional-age learners who have attained their degrees, informants posited an adult would be able to understand why he or she wants to seek the bachelor’s degree. Susan Roberts suggested a self-assessment, asking, “What does this do for me in the workplace? What does this do for me as a person?” Robert Carey asserted that understanding why an adult would want to pursue attaining a bachelor’s degree is part of a process of goal-setting. Robert said, “There is one more piece to the goals. It’s actually clarifying goals and purpose. So know where you’re going and know why you’re going there.”

Once an adult has the desire to pursue attaining a bachelor’s degree, has sought advice and understands what the experience entails, and, clarifies why he or she wants to do it, according to the interviewees, he or she can determine how much he or she wants the degree. This process solidifies a commitment to pursuing it. Commitment to attaining the bachelor’s degree is necessary because it is a long process and entails hard
work. Diane Pepin provided this perspective:

Because for me if I make the decision to do something and then I would fail or I wouldn’t complete it that would make me feel, you know, I’d get depressed about it; because if you make a commitment, you want to keep and fulfill that commitment. I don’t know how other people feel about that but for me it’s that strong of a feeling.

Once an adult is at the point of making an informed and committed decision to try to attain the bachelor’s degree, participants recommended that he or she go for it and get started. Jeannie Taylor said higher education was to her liking and suggested:

I think they should pursue it. It doesn’t matter how old you are because it’s so refreshing to sit with a group of adults and hear different ideas and to really understand that people have different opinions and to listen to different opinions.

Even though Jeannie was positive and encouraging, other interviewees talked about being reluctant to get going. Carla Friedman suggested not letting fear stand in the way. Carla said, “It is scary going back. You don’t want to fail.” Further, Angela Homer felt that an adult should not be discouraged by the time it may take to attain the degree. Angela provided this perspective, “I did do it. And in a lifetime, what does 4 or 5 years really matter out of life? It doesn’t matter at all. At the time it seems like a big deal.” Patrick Callahan wanted to urge an adult to avoid regretting putting off his or her education. Patrick recounted a conversation about his son saying, “And if he blows it, then he can learn the hard way like his dad did. Keep warning him he doesn’t want to be 40 and going back to school at night. A lot of missed opportunities if he had that piece of
paper.” Last, Joel Spitz assured, “They can do it because I did it.”

Time management and striking a balance with all of the responsibilities in one’s life are important matters to address, according to the informants. Fran Santana suggested, “You’re going to have time challenges, and um, um, you know, there’s going to be times when it’s going to be really stressful. But, um, you know, you just have to stick with it.” Susan Roberts added:

I think that from a practical point of view, the advice I would give is you need to get organized and you need to really figure out what it’s going to take to stay with it. You know, can you get there after work? Can you maintain work and home and school? Is there something that you could do even if it is just as simple as setting up a private area to study?

Participants stressed the importance of figuring out how to keep up with responsibilities. Joel Spitz said, “Balance. Balance school with work if you choose to work and work hard and set a timeframe.” Joel continued:

And when you’re tired, do not work. But when you’re super awake and alert, burn that oil, do your work. If you’re motivated, awake, and alert and motivated to do it, you’ll do five times as much work. If you’re tired, take your break, take a nap, go see a movie. Put it away even if it’s two days or a day and a half. And even if you wake up at 3:00 in the morning and you’re motivated to work two hours, do it.

Interviewees talked about finding the balance that worked for them, and suggested knowing what was involved in the program they were in was an important element to
striking the balance. Robert Carey urged:

The first would be in charge of your own learning. Don’t assume that anybody else is going to do anything for you to get you to your goal. I mean, obviously they are but I saw so many students who just kind of drifted through. They didn’t really understand the requirements of the program that they were in. They didn’t proactively go out and find out what they needed to do to complete their degree on time and they would find themselves like a year behind in some cases. So take charge.

Not only does understanding the program and being accountable for requirements save time, money and energy, it also forces an adult to determine the process by which he or she will achieve the goal. To break down the steps, Robert Carey continued:

I would suggest people draw a roadmap and maintain it. So they know what the goal is, whatever the steps to that goal; how will you know when they’re completed; what timeframe do you want them completed in; and then periodically like revisit your roadmap. For a student of course it’s probably every semester they should be looking at the roadmap saying, ‘Yep, I’m still on track or things look a little foggy here.’ Or maybe even, ‘Gee, I’m not so sure I want to do this exactly this way anymore.’

In addition to urging other adults to manage their time and be responsible for meeting the requirements of the program, interviewees spoke about making sacrifices and prioritizing to meet their own goals. Angela Homer posed these questions, “It’s something that you, are you willing to sacrifice to really get it? And if you are and you
really want it, you can get it.” About expectations, Angela continued, saying, “It’s a lot of reading. Um, it should be a lot of writing. You know, I guess a lot of hours of writing. It’s reading and writing. Um, and it just has to be a priority.” And Joel Spitz pointed out the benefit of focusing on doing the academic work, asserting:

I’ve been suggesting and motivating people that want to go to school in midlife, I say the only thing that keeps the willies away, the depression away, and self-doubt is to have some goals, a career, and some education that you can use to navigate life with.

Even though the decision to pursue attaining a bachelor’s degree may affect others, informants pointed out the experience was an individual one. Carla Friedman said, “Um, honestly this is sad to say, but um, one of, I guess knowledge of the fact that you have to rely on yourself. It’s not, you know, getting your undergrad is not a group effort. It’s you.” Joel Spitz concurred, saying, “I think it’s all self-motivation; to learn, one has to want to learn and strive and complete it.” And, Angela Homer added, “Even with subjects that I hate the heck out of but they’re part of it, you have to do it, you do it.”

To make the most of an adult’s time and effort, interviewees suggested being organized. Robert Carey was systematic:

I got to the point where I roadmap each semester because the assignments were getting so heavy by my senior year. I would make a table which showed like the four or five classes I had, by week, what assignments were due.
Similarly, Abbey Harden recommended:

I had to put my papers in order because especially when you’re studying all through the night, I had to mark down the homework assignments to this and that because I was running out the door at school. Otherwise, I would totally forget it. In addition to prioritizing, recognizing attaining the degree requires individual work and being organized, participants urged an adult ask a lot of questions and press on. The adult graduates suggested it is important to ask a lot of questions. When she was considering finishing her degree, Diane Pepin sought information about how other students were proceeding. Diane said:

When I was at the ALS Program meeting before I started, they had a student there who was in it and you could ask questions to that student who was actually in the program and I liked that because she was the one actually experiencing it. And I remember I asked her, she had two kids, I asked her did she have a full-time job and she said no. So she just came back to school, but having the kids, small kids. As he was determining how he would reach his goal of changing his career,

Robert Carey also asked a lot of questions. Robert described the process:

I inquired to people who had gotten to where I think I wanted to go before I entered school. So I interviewed three licensed clinical social workers that I, you know, from across the country and a licensed professional counselor. I interviewed the chair of the social work department at the undergrad school. I did that and got information from them. And then when I got into the program, then I interviewed my advisors.
Asking questions to guide decision-making worked for interviewees, not only when they were investigating their enrollment options, but also once they were underway with their studies. Angela Homer sat in the front row in her classes and was not afraid to ask questions if she did not understand material presented in class. Angela said, “I would ask questions I knew they needed to know but didn’t have the nerve to know to ask.”

Joel Spitz carried that strategy over into other matters, like financial aid, recommending:

Ask questions. How do you do it? Is there anything else I need? Analyze the amount of money they can get for loans. Go to night school to get your AA degree or a one-year program. Find a way to do it. Get the loans and do it. Ask your family for help for financial support or ask for loans, but if they don’t give it, don’t fret. There’s ways to do it.

Informants recommended these various strategies because they worked to bolster their efforts to attain the degree. While emphasizing these actions and strategies, the adult graduates were vocal about making sure an adult persists, perseveres and does not give up on him or herself. When I asked about how she managed, Lydia Simon said, “Persistence. That’s what worked for me. Being persistent and being determined and sticking to it. Don’t give up. It’s a long haul.” Likewise, Julia Aler urged, “Don’t give up. Don’t give up. I wanted to give up so many times. You can do it. You can do it.”

The other major pieces of advice the participants would pass along to other adults who are interested in pursuing a bachelor’s degree included utilizing resources such as financial aid and academic support services. Chris Casals said, “Just ask as many questions as you can, like use the resources that are there.” Carla Friedman agreed:
I would have to say use your resources. Whether it is the professors, um, outside help, family and friends, that type of thing, um, and one thing that we, that I didn’t need, but I’m sure other people need, um, financial assistance.

Abbey Harden suggested seeking funding, saying, “There is assistance and aid out there for it. There are scholarships. There are programs.” Angela Homer agreed, recommending, “I told many people don’t be intimidated about the scholarships. You don’t have to be an A student to apply for scholarships. You might be very, very pleasantly surprised. I was, because I wasn’t an A student.”

In addition to encouraging other adults to pursue financial assistance opportunities, interviewees suggested using academic support services. Fran Santana stressed this point, saying, “I mean in certain classes, depending on what type of class you’re taking, I think the adult student is going to need some extra help.” And Mary Sanchez reiterated, “taking advantage of the tutorials, you know, because I believe that, that a good student will immediately do that, will immediately go to the tutoring center.”

In sum, informants felt adults who are considering pursuing a bachelor’s degree need to utilize resources, especially financial assistance and academic support services.

Thus, interviewees recommended the following to other adults who are considering attaining a bachelor’s degree: seek advice, discern why they want to do this, make a commitment and get started. The adult graduates encouraged others to seek balance and manage time, understand what the program entails, prioritize, and, recognize attaining the degree requires significant individual effort. Others can accomplish attaining the degree by being organized, asking questions and persevering. Participants
also suggested making use of resources, especially financial aid and learning assistance.

Summary

In conclusion, informants offered wide-ranging advice to faculty, administrators and other adults who are involved with bachelor’s degree programs serving non-traditional-age learners. These suggestions were responses to the research question about recommendations adult graduates offer for enhancing the academic success of other adults. Moreover, from the perspective of adult bachelor’s degree recipients, these tips would facilitate entry, continued enrollment and degree completion among non-traditional-age adult learners.

The predominant theme in these three areas of recommendations is mattering, and it is displayed in various forms, from caring, concern and outreach by faculty, to programs and services designed for and accessible to adult learners, to the suggestion that adult learners give priority to higher education because it is worthwhile. Resourcefulness is evident in several facets, as in faculty using innovative teaching techniques to connect to adult learners, and in advice to adult learners to address the responsibilities and difficulties they encounter as students. Further, initiative shows up in the suggestions to other learners to get started, take ownership of learning and solving problems. Degree recipients’ advice for succeeding in the academic environment is reflective of perseverance. Last, by encouraging others to strive for their goals and showing by example that other adults are capable of completing the bachelor’s degree, the informants show they are willing to help others aim for their full potential, which is a facet of self-actualization. In sum, the five themes are interrelated to many aspects of the adult learner
experience and are evident in the suggestions about succeeding in the academic environment as a non-traditional-age learner.

Reflections on the Adult Learner Experience

Unexpected findings

Over the course of each interview, I sought to understand the experience of attaining a degree as an adult learner, and explicitly discuss what it meant to the informants. I did this to identify their feelings about this achievement, and some of the discussion surprised me. In addition, I asked about payoffs from receiving the degree, and most interviewees framed their responses around career and work issues, and yet this discussion revealed unexpected emotions. Moreover, I did not anticipate learning about the informants’ plans for graduate school. These unlikely pieces of information further add to the emerging understanding of what attaining a bachelor’s degree as a non-traditional student entails, and provide even more explication of the themes.

Value

I probed the participants for information about value, and if attaining the bachelor’s degree as a non-traditional-age learner was worthwhile. The responses were positive, and most of the interviewees felt the experience was an important achievement. Since I always thought of attaining the degree as important in and of itself, I had not considered why it would be important from other perspectives. The informants filled in this gap in my understanding. Jeannie Taylor explained, “It makes you feel that you can achieve anything that you want to achieve.” Jeannie continued, “It shows that you have
stick-to-it-ness.” Nancy McLean concurred, saying, “I do consider it a big deal, and I did work very hard to get it, so that’s a sense of accomplishment for me.” Likewise, Mary Sanchez said, “it was so fulfilling because it, it made me aware that I could, I could make a goal and reach a goal at whatever age I want.” Julia Aler expanded this conception by relating it to her self-image:

I feel some worth, finally. And I’ll be able to dig my way out of this hole that I’ve been in for the past six years and finally, finally I feel respect for myself. I mean I can hold my head high. I don’t have to feel like I’m a failure to my children. I’m just…I couldn’t be prouder of myself. I want to cry. It’s just an accomplishment that I can’t believe I hung in there and did, and it’s something, you know, that I can say the rest of my life that I’m a college graduate twice over. So it makes me feel really like I’m somebody.

In addition to the sense of fulfillment and improved self-image, the informants spoke about the value of gaining or enhancing cognitive skills as a result of attaining the degree. I did not envision these responses, primarily because I had not considered the concept of gaining satisfaction from enhancing or acquiring these types of skills. Lydia Simon enlightened me, saying, “I think I’m a better person. I’m more educated. I’m more aware. Better thinking skills. I’m more analytical, more creative. I’ve learned new things that I didn’t realize I could do before.” Jeannie Taylor said, “I understand how people feel and I’m open to…I’m open to why they feel different ways. I don’t look at things at…on just one perspective.”
In addition to the emphasis on cognitive and academic skills, interviewees also discussed picking up or honing technological competencies. This was a surprise to me, because I presumed students of all ages were proficient with computers, and they would apply those skills to the academic environment. Instead, the informants clarified they gained technological skills while pursuing their degree and they applied that knowledge to other areas of their lives. Mary Sanchez explained:

You know, what happens with the technology and learning these wonderful competencies and stuff is that when you walk out, you’re like, wow, you know I can do this. So then, um, you know, you take it home with you. And, it made me not so afraid to learn the next step, so. It’s very exciting.

In sum, the adult graduates in this study expanded my understanding about the degree attainment experience for non-traditional-age learners by discussing why attaining the degree was meaningful, as well as, how and why they developed and refined important cognitive and technological skills.

*Emotions*

The informants expressed a range of emotions when we discussed how they felt about attaining the bachelor’s degree. The predominant feeling was pride, especially because challenges were an inescapable part of the degree attainment experience. Angela Homer captured this spirit, saying, “and in the end when it’s all done, it’s a huge feeling of satisfaction that you faced down something.” Susan Roberts summarized:
Graduation and the finishing of something is maybe a knowledge about yourself that you were tenacious enough. You know what I mean? You’re really proud of yourself. I mean it’s just like: Wow. It took me, okay, 30 years, but I did it.

Carla Friedman, who originally began her college career right out of high school on an athletic scholarship, and then stopped out because the athletic program was discontinued, described her pride differently:

I kind of feel like, the university had slighted me, 20 years ago. Um, so on a personal level, I kind of feel like, you know, um, take that. I, you know, I came back and I finished even though you threw me this huge hurdle 20 years ago.

The adult graduates in this study also expressed gratitude for the help and support they received from relationships and associations in their lives. Mary Sanchez explained, “I would’ve done it no matter what. But certainly my husband, my family made it enjoyable. They gave the joy to the ride.”

During the course of our conversations about attaining the degree as an adult learner, the informants described pride and satisfaction stemming from the achievement, yet I was not expecting their descriptions to be qualified by past experiences in higher education. Moreover, I did not anticipate the connection between enjoying the experience and receiving support, as it was expressed when we talked about gratitude.

Feelings about Graduating

Even though they felt such a sense of pride and expressed to me that pursuing the bachelor’s degree was worthwhile, some of the adult graduates tempered their remarks by talking about their mixed feelings. I did not foresee this discussion. Fran Santana
explained, “I thought man, you know, I should’ve done this 35 years ago but at least I did it.” Abbey Harden expressed a similar sentiment, saying, “I’m still at this point up until my graduation getting over the stigma of it. I didn’t do it in the allotted time.” Diane Pepin concurred, saying, “It means I finished what I should have finished 20 years ago.”

Another unexpected emotion surfaced as well. Jeannie Taylor had feelings of guilt. Jeannie explained, “I feel that it was worth it, but I still feel a little guilty about not being there as a mother to give for my son, a little bit more, to give him more…more time. I couldn’t give him as much time because of my studies, so I feel guilty about that but I still feel good about it.”

**Inspiration**

I also had not considered the idea of inspiration, and this topic came out of the discussion about the value and meaning of the degree for the graduates, especially for the ones who are parents. Carla Friedman wanted to set an example for her children:

And then also just, not just for me but for my kids, so they, this is a college graduation. This is what you do. Kind of give them that heads up experience.

And that it is a big pomp and circumstance. It is a big deal, you know.

**Summary**

By asking the participants about the value of seeking a bachelor’s degree as an adult learner, and if it was a worthy pursuit, I deepened my understanding of the experience, because I did not foresee the informants’ responses. The adult graduates felt the experience was valuable and they were proud of their accomplishments. At the same time, they felt vindicated by succeeding where they had been hindered in the past. The
interviewees also expressed mixed emotions about attaining the degree as non-traditional-age learners, displaying feelings of regret for not earning the degree at a younger age, and guilt over sacrificing time with family while pursuing the degree. Moreover, the informants talked about inspiring others, especially their children, through their example.

Pay Off

Career

I asked the participants if attaining the degree paid off. Jeannie Taylor was hopeful that having her degree would pay off. Jeannie said:

I believe that I can go on successfully to get a bigger salary and I have the confidence because I have a degree to know that I can apply for different positions that I might not have been able to apply for because I didn’t have a degree.

Chris Casals was optimistic about her career opportunities:

I’m proud of myself. I feel like I accomplished something I wanted to accomplish. I took advantage of a tough time at work or in my career to make the best of it and to try to make my career…make my career better and my options better for myself. I feel like you know even though it didn’t quite work out the way I originally planned, I still feel like it was a very important accomplishment for me to get that done and you know that it will still help me. It’s helped me. It’s helped me in this career and then I think it will help me down the road too in my second career or third career.
In her situation, Chris expected a future pay off in her career, although she remained in the job she held while in school. Similarly, among the group of 15 study participants, 8 remained in the jobs they had when they graduated. In addition, Abbey Harden was employed by the same company but was promoted after receiving her degree. Mary Sanchez experienced a downturn in her industry and earnings, so she was actively looking for a new job while remaining employed. Robert Carey and Julia Aler were both embarking on new careers as a result of attaining their degrees and professional certifications. Jeannie Taylor was searching for a new job, since she left her employer after receiving her degree. Last, Nancy McLean was in graduate school and Lydia Simon was not working.

Because expert opinion and research literature about adult learner motives suggest careers weigh heavily in the decision to pursue the bachelor’s degree (Aslanian & Brickell, 1980; Cross, 1981; Fairchild, 2003; Horn 1996; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999; Mortenson, 2001), I was surprised that so few of the study participants were actively looking for work or seeking to change into new career areas.

Graduate School

When I inquired about pay offs for attaining the degree, I did not anticipate the informants’ discussions about plans to enroll in or complete graduate school. I think I had been so focused on low bachelor’s degree attainment rates and the focus of this study, that pursuing a graduate degree did not occur to me. However, the study participants enlightened me. Among the 15 interviewees, 2 are in graduate programs and
1 has finished a master’s degree, 6 are considering enrolling in a graduate program, and 2 are contemplating the possibility in the distant future.

The informants who enrolled in or are considering entering a graduate program in the near future felt buoyed by the self-confidence they gained by finishing the bachelor’s degree, and they enjoyed the experience. Nancy McLean, who is a graduate student, explained, “I didn’t want to stop once I graduated.”

Summary

Through questions about what attaining the bachelor’s degree as a non-traditional-age student meant and if it was a worthwhile pursuit, the study participants enlightened me in several important areas. This unexpected information reveals even more detail about the experience and displays the themes. The discussions about value and meaning are indicative of mattering. The informants parlayed their feelings of pride and fulfillment into aspirations for reaching new goals, such as career advancement and graduate school. This is reflective of the self-actualization theme. In addition, the theme of perseverance is evident in the discussions about the satisfaction the interviewees felt about receiving the degree, especially when it took a number of years and involved overcoming challenges to succeed. Inherent in the accomplishment, especially given that challenges are inescapable, are the themes of initiative and resourcefulness.

Summary of Participant Perspectives

In this chapter, I continued to illuminate the phenomenon of degree attainment among non-traditional-age learners by discussing the themes from numerous
perspectives. From the details of the participant replies to the remaining research questions, a sharper picture of the experience emerges.

The informant narratives display the scope of what transpired in the experiences of this select group of graduates. The themes explicate the essential meaning of the central research question, because they are evident in the interviewee responses to all of the research questions. The themes are initiative, mattering, perseverance, resourcefulness and self-actualization. In the following chapter, I summarize the study, draw conclusions and present a discussion about them. I conclude the study by making recommendations for stakeholders and future research, and, remarking on what this study means to me.
CHAPTER VI
SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, DISCUSSION, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In the previous two chapters, I provided a comprehensive portrait of the experience of attaining a bachelor’s degree as an adult from the perspective of 15 study participants by presenting themes and findings from my informant narratives. This select group of graduates described what they felt it takes for a non-traditional-age learner to attain the bachelor’s degree, which is the central research focus of this study. In this chapter, I summarize this research study, explaining the context, purpose, research questions and methodology. I identify major themes and present conclusions arising from these themes. I discuss these conclusions in light of expert opinion and data from other research studies. In later sections, I provide recommendations for major stakeholders and future research. Last, I conclude with an explanation of what this study has meant to me.

Summary

Degree attainment is especially important at both social and individual levels. In modern society, adults with degrees tend to earn more money, have lower unemployment rates, participate in community and civil affairs, and be more prepared for changes in the marketplace than those who do not have degrees (Baum & Payea, 2004; Merriam & Yang, 1996; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2005a). Among individuals, degree

Given the benefits, it is surprising U.S. degree attainment rates are low. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, among adults 25 years of age and over, about half have some college experience, while only 19 percent have attained a bachelor’s degree (U.S. Census, 2008). This fact indicates consistent participation in higher education but low degree attainment rates among learners of all ages.

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) shows steady participation by non-traditional-age learners over the past 30 years. Adults who are 25 years of age and over consistently represent about one third of undergraduates (NCES, 2008). Even so, experts estimate that the chances of completing a bachelor’s degree after age 25 hovers at 7 to 9 percent for part-time and 20 percent for full-time learners (Jacobs & King, 2002). Unexplained is why, with steady college enrollment rates among adult learners, the chances of bachelor’s degree attainment among adults are so low.

Typically, experts study aspects of the degree attainment experience among traditional-age learners, who are ages 18 to 24 (Adelman, 1999, 2006; Astin, 2005; Bradburn et al. 2003; Horn et al. 2002; McCormick & Horn, 1996; NCES 2005). As a result, non-traditional-age learners are under-studied, especially in the area of degree attainment. To better understand the degree attainment experience, and the puzzlement about slight chances of receiving the bachelor’s degree among non-traditional-age
learners, my study is focused on factors contributing to attaining the bachelor’s degree at or after the age of 25.

To illuminate the degree attainment experience among adult learners, I sought rich descriptions and detailed information through in-depth interviews with 15 respondents. I explored the experience through research questions focused on factors that motivated these adults to pursue a bachelor’s degree, challenges encountered and how they addressed those obstacles, resources utilized to support degree completion, and, skills and knowledge participants felt contributed to degree attainment. I also asked for recommendations for faculty who teach, administrators who oversee programs for non-traditional-age students, and advice for other adult learners. Finally, I probed the research participants for an account of what attaining the degree meant to them.

Very little research exists about non-traditional-age bachelor’s degree recipients and their attainment experiences, making this population and the phenomenon of bachelor’s degree attainment among adults under-studied. Most research studies about retention, persistence, success, and bachelor’s degree attainment are focused on traditional-age students, creating a comprehension gap about the adult learner experience (Adelman, 1999, 2006; Astin, 1975, 1988, 2005; Horn, 1998; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, 2005; Tinto, 1987, 2003; Zucker & Dawson, 2001). The purpose of this study is to expand understanding and discover knowledge about degree attainment among non-traditional-age learners.

I employ phenomenological research methods in this study, presenting rich descriptions of 15 study participants’ accounts of their experience (Creswell, 1998; Erlandson et al. 1993; Marshall & Rossman, 2006; Moustakas, 1994). Five themes arise
from the in-depth analysis. The themes are initiative, mattering, perseverance, resourcefulness and self-actualization, forming the basis of the conceptual framework that converges at degree attainment among adults.

The experience of attaining a bachelor’s degree as a non-traditional-age learner is largely unexplored, and this study provides comprehensive accounts and essential details of the experience, from the perspective of a select group of adult bachelor’s degree recipients. In the following sections, I summarize major themes derived from interviewee narratives, as well as present conclusions and the conceptual framework emerging from these themes. I trace the course of these conclusions through the lens of expert opinion and data from other research studies. Moreover, I make recommendations for major stakeholders and recommend further research. These conclusions confirm attaining the bachelor’s degree is beneficial and meaningful for adult learners.

Conclusions

Through analysis of informant narratives, I identify five themes arising from the data. The themes are initiative, mattering, perseverance, resourcefulness and self-actualization, and they are intertwined in the responses to the research questions. From these themes I construct the textural and structural descriptions of the experience, which constitute the conceptual framework converging at adult degree attainment (Moustakas, 1994). The abstract structure is a significant, critical, real and truthful representation of the experience, as conveyed to me by my study informants.

The concepts of action, purpose, responsibility, value and support form the core of the experience, and point to success. On the surface, these concepts may appear to be
abstract and stark, but, upon examination of their breadth and depth, I unveil them as complex, multifaceted and linked to one another. Further, these concepts illustrate Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) idea of mutual simultaneous shaping, where everything shapes everything (p. 85). Moreover, the multiplicities of these concepts highlight the interrelated realities of the experience among the study participants.

Below, I offer conclusions, from the manifold influences of the interconnected themes and concepts. I discuss different dimensions, including those of adult learners, organizations and faculty. These intricacies illuminate a more exact and complete description of what and how attaining a bachelor’s degree as an adult entails, and I relate these conclusions to expert opinion and research literature (Creswell, 1998; Jones et al. 2006, pp. 46-52; Moustakas, 1994).

**Adult Learner Action, Purpose and Responsibility**

In order to attain a bachelor’s degree, adult learners take action, are purposeful and assume responsibility, characterizing initiative, perseverance, resourcefulness, mattering and self-actualization. Action is an attribute of these themes, as graduates demonstrate being successful requires intentional decision-making, enacting plans and sorting out how to keep progressing toward the goal of finishing the degree. Adult bachelor’s degree recipients frame their decisions and actions around purpose and meaning in their lives (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). This assertion is evident in the informant descriptions of motivation and meaning.

Study participants deliberately pursued finishing the bachelor’s degree because of changes they were anticipating or undergoing. For example, several informants described a perceptual shift in their roles as parents, because their children were
becoming more independent. As their children matured, these parents began to consider their own futures. Experts provide evidence through research studies and analysis that adults turn to higher education to manage personal transitions and changes, as well as to proactively plan for the future (Aslanian & Brickell, 1980, 1988; Fairchild, 2003; Kasworm, 2003).

Furthermore, adults are likely to turn to education at times of transition if they have had previous experience with higher education (Kim et al. 2004). This is the case with my informants, as all but one had prior enrollment spells before re-entering higher education to earn the degree. Thus, the recognition of changes causes adults to consider the future, and they turn to education to address these transitions and expand possibilities.

To be ready to take action and sustain effort as a result of these influences, adults need to be in a position to commit the time, energy and resources to the endeavor (Thompson, 1992). Pursuing a degree is an intentional activity, and it normally requires a long-term commitment, spanning many years (Bradburn et al. 2003). My study informants described the planning and reallocation of resources to enable them to pursue the degree. This included saving money, investigating career options and requirements, and, arranging work and family schedules to accommodate the endeavor. Robert Carey, for example, assessed his interests and determined he would like to be a licensed clinical social worker after retiring early from a technology career. Once he made that determination, he interviewed professionals in the field, and learned about education and certification requirements for professional practice. Robert mapped out how long it would take him to begin practicing, and, he investigated which schools would serve his needs. Then he enrolled, attained his bachelor’s degree, earned his master’s degree in
social work and was preparing for the exam to obtain a professional license at the time of
our interview. Thus, Robert, like the other interviewees, decided on a plan of action,
made arrangements to act upon it, allocated his time and resources accordingly, and, he
got started and earned his degrees, all within the time frame he set out in his plan.

By making this commitment to attain the bachelor’s degree, non-traditional-age
students demonstrate taking responsibility for employing strategies to succeed. My
interviewees discussed these processes at length and expert literature confirms their
importance. These actions include 1) understanding and meeting graduation
requirements, 2) using abilities and skills to complete academic work, 3) identifying
critical skills and taking steps to master them, 4) enlisting assistance for enhancing or
acquiring skills necessary to succeed in the environment, and, 5) managing school
obligations within the context of modern adult responsibilities (Fairchild, 2003; Flint &
Frey, 2003; Kuh et al. 2005; Nelson & Low, 2003; Rice, 2003; Siebert & Gilpin, 1989;
Wallace, 2009).

Moreover, adult graduates assume an active role in their own learning, which is
indicative of independence and self-direction, and are features of andragogy and self-
directed learning (Brookfield, 1986; Knowles et al. 2005; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999;
Mezirow, 2000). For example, my interviewees discussed at length their study strategies,
writing techniques, classroom demeanor, and project selections. The adult graduates in
this study talked about being prepared for class, starting early on major writing projects,
sitting in the front of the room and asking questions, and, choosing assignments to
expand their understanding of an issue within the context of the class. For instance,
Angela Homer wrote a paper on the conflict in Darfur for a political science course, because she wanted to expand her understanding of that situation.

Challenges are inescapable and adults seek opportunities to learn or enhance skills they need to overcome difficulties (Cross, 1981; Goleman, 1995, 1998; Nelson & Low, 2003; Siebert & Gilpin, 1989). Participants in this study provided numerous examples of using tutoring, computer labs, library reference services and advising. As long as the services and resources are accessible, the results of this study indicate adult learners will seek and use these resources.

My study participants provided ample evidence of effectively addressing challenges, particularly in their accounts of satisfying math requirements, which they needed to complete in order to graduate. The informants talked about lack of skills, fear of math and little confidence in their abilities. The interviewees described how they overcame these problems by enlisting tutors, practicing with problem sets, and seeking assistance from faculty. After successfully completing the required courses and overcoming difficulties, they described the satisfaction they felt because they succeeded. In sum, adult learners cope with the work and address difficulties before they become insurmountable obstacles as part of the overall strategy to earn the degree (Cross, 1981; Goleman, 1995, 1998; Kasworm, 2003).

By prioritizing education, as well as time, resources and work involved, non-traditional-age learners demonstrate it is a worthwhile pursuit. With a disposition of worthiness, adult learners focus on the long-term commitment, address the role of student in context with other activities and responsibilities, and, avoid strain and preoccupation with other roles (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Bradburn et al, 2003; Cross, 1981; Fairchild,
2003; Thompson, 1992; Tinto, 1987, 1993). For example, Abbey Harden enrolled at Big City after figuring out how she could manage her work responsibilities, her commute, and her course work. Once she settled those issues, she enrolled and employed creative strategies such as using conference calls for group work to avoid impinging on her work obligations and, at the same time, complete her assignments. For most adult learners with busy lives and many responsibilities, planning, commitment, and problem solving are essential parts of achieving success.

Perseverance, value and self-actualization are evident in the determination adult bachelor’s degree recipients display. One component of this drive is the longing to achieve an unfinished goal and the value associated with this desire. This is related to the manner in which several of my informants talked about their determination to finish and the strong desire to be credentialed. Patrick Callahan articulated this well:

I’d made up my mind and it was going to get done and that was the end of it and I wasn’t taking no for an answer and I’m going to get that piece of paper. That was first and foremost.

My study participants provided ample evidence of persistent yearning, making the endeavor especially valuable to them (Adelman, 1999, 2006; Bradburn et al. 2003; Kasworm, 2003; Kim et al. 2004). And, as a result of their efforts, degree recipients talked about feeling confident, fulfilled, vindicated and proud because they persisted and accomplished their goal.

In sum, earning the bachelor’s degree as an adult entails taking action, being purposeful and assuming responsibility. In addition, non-traditional-age graduates enlist support and demonstrate the value this pursuit holds for them. These interrelated realities
shape and influence the endeavor in multiple ways, revealing a more defined description of the experience of attaining a bachelor’s degree as a non-traditional-age learner.

Organizational Value and Support of Adult Learners

The informant accounts naturally represent the learner perspective of the degree attainment experience, yet the conclusions are incomplete without addressing issues related to organizational matters and bachelor’s degree attainment among adults. This perspective provides more clarity about the dimension and complexity of the conceptual framework, with an explication of how organizational support and the value it holds for adult learners influences non-traditional-age learner success. I describe this by showing the connections between the abstract structure and the themes of initiative, mattering, perseverance, resourcefulness and self-actualization.

At the organizational level, designing programs and policies to meet adult student needs signals to non-traditional-age learners they are valued members of the community. The literature and research on mattering and conditions for success confirm this concept (Kuh et al. 2005; Polson, 2003; Schlossberg, et al. 1989). Participant accounts of their experiences at Big City University were positive and the informants felt they mattered. Their earlier experiences at other institutions, however, were uneven, and the negative experiences influenced interviewee decisions regarding stopping out. Tinto (1987, 1993) asserts students depart when student needs are incongruent with institutional characteristics.

The informants described how resources affected whether or not the organization valued their presence. As a result of that conversation, they made several recommendations about resources and services, and these are supported by the literature.
These suggestions arose from discussions about their different institutional experiences, as 8 out of the 15 informants attended three or more institutions. The proposals include minimizing bureaucracy and realigning student services to incorporate technology and reduce extra trips to campus, which shows respect for students’ time (Fairchild, 2003). Further, organizations providing academic support services, such as advising, tutoring for math and writing, computer labs, and library reference services demonstrate they are willing to equip adult learners with the tools they need to succeed, thus aiding persistence (Braxton et al. 2004; Cross, 1981; Flint & Frey, 2003; Kilgore, 2001; Kuh et al. 2005; Rice, 2003; Schlossberg et al. 1989; Siebert & Gilpin, 1989; Tinto, 1987, 1993). As discussed in the previous section, when non-traditional-age learners take the initiative to use these resources, as many of the study participants did, they have an opportunity to refine or acquire skills. Further, they increase their chances of performing well, gaining confidence in their abilities, and, persisting.

Transfer credits are important because the study informants asserted they enrolled at Big City because they could receive credit for past coursework, advanced placement and CLEP. For this reason, they felt their past experience was validated, which concurs with the literature in this realm. Transfer credit policies offering credit from advanced placement, past collegiate coursework, competence testing, and, work experience, impact persistence among adult learners (Doyle, 2006; Flint & Frey, 2003; Johnston et al. 2002; Wiggam, 2004). The greater the momentum toward accumulating credits required for graduation, the better the chances are that a non-traditional-age learner will succeed (Adelman, 1999, 2006; Doyle, 2006; Wiggam, 2004). Generous transfer credit policies are indicative of valuing and supporting adult learners.
Another area of concern is affordability. Several informants discussed finances and the resources they used to pay for their education, and their suggestions come from those conversations. The professional literature in this area, especially relative to adult learners, is scant. However, more research is beginning to emerge about costs, affordability, financial aid and adults, and this signals a growing interest in the subject (Berkner & Wei, 2006; Clinedinst et al. 2003; College Board, 2001; Cook & King, 2005; Fairchild, 2003; Hatfield, 2003). Even with little empirical evidence at this point, the implication from the informant narratives is clear. When institutions align pricing and financial aid opportunities and policies to support and serve non-traditional-age learners, their efforts signify adult students matter (Hatfield, 2003).

The interviewees most frequently recounted issues with financial aid, particularly in relation to scholarship opportunities through the honors program at Big City. The study participants were interested in the honors program. However, honors was not a viable option for several informants because it required attendance in day classes, and, for one participant, Mary Sanchez, joining the program would have extended the amount of time to graduate. Abbey Harden said, “my education was explicitly limited” because her schedule would not permit her to be in the honors program. Thus, interviewees recommend having financial aid and programs that provide funding support. These programs should be accessible and accommodate adult learners by not extending the amount of time necessary to graduate as a condition of participation. Inherent in these suggestions is that organizations value adult learner needs when offering accessible programs that facilitate degree completion.
In sum, organizational policies, programs and resources influence the degree attainment experience among adult learners. The adult graduates in this study provided insights and suggestions about issues they encountered while pursuing the bachelor’s degree. In the following section, I describe considerations related to faculty.

Faculty Value and Support of Adult Learners

During the course of the interviews, the study informants discussed organizational issues as well as the impact faculty made in their efforts to attain the degree. This additional perspective reveals more dimensions of the conceptual framework, especially value and support, by explaining how faculty shape the attainment experience.

The interviewees recounted numerous instances when faculty made an effort to get to know them and help them resolve problems. In this regard, faculty actions signified support and value. For example, Susan Roberts talked to a faculty member about the challenge she was facing while trying to complete the math requirement. Because Susan and several of her classmates were struggling with math, and, they feared not passing would mean they could not graduate, this faculty member offered to teach a math class that would satisfy the graduation requirement. Susan was grateful at the time and continues to be thankful, because, she feels, she would not have graduated without this faculty member’s help. This example illustrates the impact of faculty-student interactions, for which evidence exists in the literature. Faculty who teach adults and show concern for these students indicate they care and older learners’ presence and success matters (Allen & Smith, 2008; Graham & Gisi, 2000). Furthermore, faculty and student interactions produce additional benefits, as faculty interactions with students result in a rise in learner self-concept and self-confidence (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).
Moreover, faculty who demonstrate they value student background knowledge and personal characteristics integrate these considerations into their teaching (Ross-Gordon, 2002). For example, by using teaching techniques that are both challenging and nurturing, faculty empower students to succeed. The result is greater self-confidence among students, because these learners attribute their success to ability and effort (Pratt, 2002). In sum, faculty support and interactions influence adult learning and success as well as signify non-traditional-age learners are important.

Summary

In conclusion, when adults engage in the degree attainment endeavor, they are successful because they take action, are purposeful, and accept responsibility for what the experience entails. Further, organizations and faculty positively influence the degree attainment experience among adults by valuing the learner and supporting his or her efforts. Thus, action, purpose, responsibility, value and support constitute the multifaceted abstract structure that depicts the degree attainment experience among adults. These concepts are interrelated and they shape the experience in many ways and from several vantages, revealing intricacies and dimension that point to adult learner achievement. In sum, this complex conceptual framework features multiple perspectives converging at non-traditional-age learner success.

Recommendations

Recommendations for Stakeholders

Based on the input from my study participants, I make recommendations for various stakeholders, including institutions, faculty, and students. I also make
suggestions for policies. These proposals are set out to support the efforts of non-
traditional-age learners who seek to attain the bachelor’s degree.

*Institutions*

From an institutional perspective, I suggest delivery of programs, services, 
resources, and, policies for adults seeking bachelor’s degrees. I recommend such 
programs provide conditions conducive to entry, success and completion. My proposals 
complement the substantial discussion containing recommendations for administrators 
and faculty in the preceding chapters. As such, the advice I present below is from the 
perspective of the meanings drawn from the adult graduate’s attainment experience and 
are focused on value and support.

Resources are finite, so institutions determine what they can offer for academic 
programs and define the student population those programs are designed to serve. As 
such, over the course of program planning and delivery, I recommend continuously and 
comprehensively assessing, and, critically reflecting on the effectiveness in meeting 
program objectives (Kilgore, 2001). This includes regularly collecting and analyzing 
institutional and system-wide data. I also suggest institutions regularly clarify program 
objectives. Further, I advise institutions to address internal and external culture and 
climate in order to serve adults in bachelor’s degree-granting programs effectively.

Institutions should consider what type of degree-granting program(s) to offer. 
The adult graduates in this study expressed a desire for choice. I agree and encourage 
institutions to offer more than one option for adult learners, such as liberal arts and/or 
business degree completion programs and career-focused degrees. I recommend 
institutions provide orientation programs, campus and facility tours, and, regular
communication to aid student acclimation to the environment. Institutions should arrange to have services and resources open and accessible at the times and on the days adult learners are on campus. These critical offices and services include academic support services, such as tutoring, computer labs, libraries and advising. Further, I recommend having financial services offices open when adults are on campus, especially financial aid. Also, I urge institutions to offer funding opportunities to adult learners.

Institutions should utilize technology to conduct registration, bill payment and other business online, minimizing unnecessary trips to campus. I propose institutions assess effectiveness of program delivery and services by walking through the institution in the shoes of a non-traditional-age student. Students want to feel they matter and their presence is valued, but they may actually feel marginalized if the parking lot is dark, they do not have access to coffee, they encounter uninterested employees, or, service offices are located across campus from their classrooms.

I recommend institutions accept credits for transfer courses, advanced placement and life experience. Further, I encourage institutions to consider eliminating “expiration dates” on transfer courses, CLEP and advanced placement credits amassed prior to enrollment. In the cases where institutions are unwilling to eliminate expiration dates on amassed credits, then I recommend offering an option of allowing adult learners to prove their competencies in equivalent courses through assessments. I also propose low or no cost to the student for the assessments, as they have already paid once for these amassed credits. I urge institutions to offer options for adults to take CLEP and competency exams. Non-traditional-age learners want validation for the work they have already completed and they do not want to repeat coursework.
I urge institutions to fully disclose program requirements and regularly communicate with adult learners about the program. I suggest institutions discuss how the curriculum in the “adult” programs compares to programs in which traditional-age students are enrolled. By doing so, institutions would demonstrate that the programs attracting non-traditional-age learners are legitimate and on par with other options for undergraduates. I also encourage institutions to address these same issues with faculty, advisors and other personnel with whom the adult students have regular contact, to reduce the risk of bias against the program, and by association, against adult learners.

Further, I recommend institutions regularly communicate with non-traditional-age learners and use technology to do this systematically. I propose surveying students to determine from where they prefer to get their news, and then devise the communication strategy to get the messages out and delivered, using a variety of mediums, such as e-mail, announcements on Web pages, or text messages. For the content of these messages and news, I suggest the institution focus on what recent adult graduates are doing, because that is another vehicle to reinforce the legitimacy of the program and it encourages adult learners to consider future possibilities after attaining the degree.

I urge institutions to scrutinize course availability for non-traditional-age learners. Institutions should schedule courses during the hours in which adult students are on campus. If particular programs are not available during those time frames, I suggest disclosing this to non-traditional-age learners from the outset. I recommend offering opportunities for adults to participate in programs distinguishing high performing students, such as honors programs. Institutions should make such programs accessible to
non-traditional-age students when they are on campus, which may involve evening hours and weekends.

Institutions should have a systematic method or plan for conducting outreach to adult learners. As part of the program planning and delivery, I propose setting up a system to intentionally and regularly contact adult students, and utilizing technology to support these efforts. For example, I suggest institutions establish online advising groups to facilitate communication between advisors and students, and, encourage student-to-student networking. Another idea is to encourage advisors to walk around the hallways in the vicinity of classes with adult learners. Institutions should have a plan for creating opportunities for scheduled, unscheduled, interactive, face-to-face, and online contacts. Institutions ought to use various tools and resources to communicate and interact with students. These recommendations demonstrate to adult students that the institution values their presence and supports them, especially when personnel make an effort to get to know the learners on an individual basis.

Institutions should establish expectations for student and advisor roles in advising. I recommend helping students with program planning, setting goals, assessing progress, realigning expectations, and celebrating achievements. I suggest institutions set conditions for success by offering full-service tutoring, computer labs, and reference services at the library. I recommend institutions work with faculty teaching adult learners to monitor academic progress, and use a system to address student performance, especially early warnings of trouble. I encourage the institutions coordinate the monitoring of academic progress through one central administrative office, to ensure all students are accounted for and all involved personnel are responsible. I advise
institutions to have personnel, including faculty and advisors, assure students that asking for help is normal, especially given the specialized skills required to succeed in the academic environment. The informant accounts of their experiences demonstrate they are willing to seek help in service of achieving the goal of earning the degree.

Institutions should provide training to faculty about adults in the classroom and teaching techniques. Non-traditional-age learners are a heterogeneous population and current research indicates effective teaching relies on a variety of strategies and techniques (Ross-Gordon, 2002). Furthermore, I recommend institutions orient faculty to the organization, facilities, services and resources available for adult learners, especially because faculty are the most regular contact students have with institutional authority. Faculty who understand issues adults face can more effectively support their efforts, and, in doing so, demonstrate adult students matter.

I recommend institutions cultivate interest in their own graduate programs through outreach, marketing and faculty encouragement. This would give adult learners tangible evidence the institution values the degree they are pursuing, and it builds learner self-confidence. The study informants indicated a high level of interest in pursuing graduate degrees, and the institution can capitalize on its own captive audience of currently enrolled non-traditional-age learners for this purpose.

Last, institutions should set conditions conducive to completing the degree. I recommend institutions establish a clear graduation audit procedure that takes into account part-time students. As part of the strategic planning and continuous program assessment strategies I discussed above, I suggest institutions conduct exit surveys to gauge student satisfaction and effectiveness of program delivery. I encourage institutions
to induct graduates into the alumni association and offer programming for networking and career support. I urge institutions to celebrate the accomplishment of adult learners attaining the bachelor’s degree with receptions befitting the occasion, honors awards, and, programs showcasing adult student work.

In sum, I recommend the following to institutions serving (or planning to serve) adult learners: 1) offer services and resources, 2) set conditions conducive to entry and acclimation, and, 3) focus on non-traditional-age learner success and completion. By following these suggestions, institutions signify to non-traditional-age learners that they matter. Additionally, the institution supports adult learner efforts with the tools and resources they need to succeed.

Faculty

The study participants’ experiences and recommendations focus on three main areas concerning faculty. These are teaching style and techniques, treatment of adults, and, program delivery matters. I address these issues from the perspective of the conceptual framework and specifically in regard to value and support.

Adult learners are increasingly diverse, and, in the context of multiple perspectives, various backgrounds, and different levels of preparedness among non-traditional-age learners, I recommend faculty utilize a variety of teaching strategies, and participate in workshops about teaching techniques for adult learners.

I encourage faculty to consider the complexities of their adult learners’ lives and responsibilities. As such, when assigning group projects, I recommend faculty allow some class time for meetings. By doing this, faculty show respect for students’ time.
I recommend faculty use strategies to foster community in classes, through activities designed to increase student-to-student and student-faculty interactions. For instance, I encourage faculty to utilize course management systems or other online services to cultivate community and interaction. I suggest faculty reach out to students by getting to know each one individually. The adult graduates in this study remarked about how meaningful it was for them to make this type of connection with a faculty member. I propose faculty honor and respect the experience non-traditional-age learners bring to the classroom by devising lessons and using teaching techniques that tap into that resource. I suggest faculty make the course content relevant, interesting and up-to-date. I advise faculty to consider providing links to a variety of Internet-based resources in the course management system or through online community and discussion group services. This technique demonstrates the currency of relevant material, supplements course notes, and it helps students learn how to locate appropriate resources. The individual support and effort to make meaningful connections and provide a dynamic learning environment demonstrate faculty value teaching non-traditional-age learners.

I recommend faculty understand program requirements because adult learners will seek their input and advice. As I stated earlier, I urge faculty to be knowledgeable about program requirements to help guide adult learners through decisions and considerations that may affect attaining the degree. Further, I recommend faculty discuss institutional resources with students, guide students to assistance, such as tutoring, and, normalize asking for help. I believe the better the faculty member knows the institutional resources, the more effective he or she is in making referrals. Last, I suggest faculty teaching adults do so responsibly with enthusiasm and respect for the learners.
Students

The recommendations I present here are reflective of suggestions the informants made for non-traditional-age learners. Detailed discussions are located in the previous chapters. When viewed through the lens of the essential meanings of the experience of attaining the bachelor’s degree as a non-traditional-age learner, I focus my suggestions on action, purpose and responsibility.

When embarking on this endeavor, the study participants suggest seeking advice, discerning why pursuing the degree is important and making a commitment. I suggest exploring options to find the best alternative for an individual’s circumstance. I recommend adults learn about and understand the degree requirements at the institution they choose to attend. I urge adult learners to establish a budget, figure out financing and seek financial assistance. I advise adults to consider resources such as employer tuition benefits and scholarships from professional and community organizations. I encourage adult learners to apply for assistance through the traditional financial aid application process at least once, to understand what it entails and what options are available. I recommend non-traditional-age learners take intentional action, and proceed purposefully because doing so will help them firm the commitment to and accept responsibility for attaining the degree.

I suggest to adult learners that they get organized and find a balance with other activities and responsibilities of modern adult life. I urge non-traditional-age learners to keep moving forward; in other words, do not give up. Challenges are inevitable and successful graduates address them when they encounter them. Attaining a bachelor’s degree as an adult requires significant personal effort, yet this pursuit is not done in
isolation. I suggest to adult learners that they find and enlist support in the form that facilitates progress toward the goal, be it in family, friends, faculty, program administrators, or other associations and relationships.

I recommend adult learners use resources such as tutoring, computer labs, libraries, advising and financial aid. Students of all ages are expected to use competencies that may be uncommon outside of academia, and it is natural for non-traditional-age learners to have concerns about being sufficiently skilled to succeed in the academic environment. Most academic skills can be picked up and mastered, and adult learners are entitled to use resources the institution provides for these purposes. The study participants used support services and attributed that assistance to helping them succeed. In sum, I suggest that adult learners: 1) take action by using the resources, 2) be purposeful about seeking help, and, 3) accept responsibility for identifying and using the skills necessary to succeed.

Last, people who work for and are associated with degree-granting programs want adult learners to succeed at attaining the bachelor’s degree. Therefore, non-traditional-age learners should actively involve themselves in the endeavor and feel empowered to seek help, ask questions and make suggestions for improvement.

Policies

On a national, system-wide level, I recommend increasing an understanding of the degree attainment rate among adults in the U.S. population to inform policy-makers. Consistently collecting and reporting information about non-traditional-age learners and adult bachelor’s degree recipients, on a national and system-wide basis, can begin to accomplish this. For example, the NCES bi-annual fall enrollment details in the Digest of
Education Statistics do not report on demographics among undergraduates 25 years of age and older, such as ethnic and racial background, income levels, or parenthood. The report does not provide information about intentions of students enrolling at various institutions, thus students who are pursuing degrees are indistinguishable from learners who are taking classes for enrichment or other reasons. Further, NCES does not provide, on an annual or bi-annual basis, detailed information about bachelor’s degree recipients over age 25 related to age at time of degree receipt, gender, ethnic and racial background, time elapsed between high school and initial post-secondary entry, number of institutions attended, time elapsed between completing high school and receiving the bachelor’s degree, parenthood, and, income level. While some information exists in a patchwork of reports, longitudinal studies and analyses, institutions, program planners and researchers are challenged by incomplete data.

As a matter of national policies and goals, without regular, current and consistent information about the adult learner and non-traditional-age bachelor’s degree recipient populations, policy-makers are at a disadvantage devising initiatives and programs to address low attainment rates.

Limitations and Future Research

This study, situated in the naturalistic paradigm and employing phenomenological research methods, has its limitations. This study is exploratory, so I did not set out to test existing hypotheses or theories. My objective instead was to discover a starting point for revealing what the degree attainment experience among adults entails. With the results describing the essence and meaning of the degree attainment experience among a select group of adult graduates, subsequent research might test my results with other groups of
adult graduates to evaluate if the invariant meaning units, themes and conceptual framework hold true for other graduates as well (Moustakas, 1994).

With a sample size of 15 interviewees in my study, I sought thick and rich narratives. The information the study participants provided was detailed, personal, and informative. However, the small sample size is neither statistically representative, nor can I make generalizations about the results. Replicating the study with more informants would add to the understanding of the phenomenon.

This study was designed to provide insight into the degree attainment experience from the perspective of adult graduates. This vantage offered rich and informative details, illuminating parts of the puzzle that represent degree attainment. This limits the understanding of the whole puzzle because it is but one piece. Another component of the puzzle is the institutional perspective, which could be explored in future research.

Even with limitations, the thick and rich descriptions the study informants provided in this research study yielded several results that may be transferable or useful in subsequent studies.

Each of the 15 participants earned his or her first bachelor’s degree from Big City University, which limits this study because some of my findings may exclusively represent the experience at Big City. While I did not intend to have informants from only one institution, and I discussed that issue at length in my data collection procedures in Chapter III, the sampling yielded 15 Big City University graduates. The study could be replicated with a sampling strategy involving graduates from more than one institution.

In this study, interviewee accounts reflected the perspective of older learners, possibly limiting the results. Most of the informants were 40 years of age and over when
they attained the bachelor’s degree. This is older than the majority of adult graduates; since two NCES B&B cohort studies show the majority of adult degree recipients are between 25 and 39 years of age (Bradburn et al. 2003; McCormick & Horn, 1996). This study could be replicated with a sampling strategy stratifying age bands, such as 25 to 29, 30 to 35 and so forth to determine how age at the time of degree receipt influences the attainment experience, and whether generational differences exist.

The relationship between attainment aspirations, age, career trajectory and parenthood among adult learners is another exploration opportunity. In my study, informants discussed varying motivations and aspirations in their lives and they linked age to those issues. Another study might compare these issues at various ages among post-secondary education participants and bachelor’s degree recipients to begin to identify what might be influencing differences between students and degree recipients, and if patterns are related to specific ages.

In my literature review, I compared demographic and background data from national data sets and reports to determine if differences existed in the profiles of adult learners and adult bachelor’s degree recipients. Remarkably, the profiles were quite similar, with one exception. The difference between the two groups was income level. One limitation of this study is that I did not specifically explore how income level impacts the experience of attaining the bachelor’s degree. Future research might explore the relationship between income levels, persistence and attainment among adult learners. In the absence of any regularly reported national data about income levels, the proposed research would aim to identify factors influencing these relationships.
In a related vein, my study did not seek to determine the return on investment in terms of total cost of the degree and subsequent economic gain. Future research might examine the relationship between cost of attaining the degree as an adult and economic gains after degree receipt. The objective would be to determine if a pay-off, in financial terms, exists.

From another angle, a study might examine if economic pay-off is a determining factor in decisions adults make about pursuing a bachelor’s degree. This issue comes to mind because a number of interviewees in my study remained in their jobs and did not receive promotions after graduating, which may suggest an economic return on investment was not a factor. A longitudinal study may be an appropriate vehicle for clarity in this area, since some of the cost may be deferred with loans, and, gains in income may not be realized until some time after receiving the degree.

In sum, qualitative methodology bounds the study according to the highly personal accounts of the study participants. The sample of 15 informants is small in size, they all graduated from the same institution, and, they were older than typical adult graduates. With these limitations, however, the results did meet the objective of exploring and illuminating what the bachelor’s degree attainment experience entails, and have spawned additional questions that may be explored through future research.

Study Conclusion

I embarked on this research to further my understanding of degree attainment among adult learners. For many years, I have been perplexed by the question of why some learners attain the degree while so many others do not. Even after compiling a
large amount of data in the literature review, my question remained unanswered. The answer was not to be found in statistics and data, rather, it required the participation of 15 individuals with stories to tell about their experiences attaining the degree.

What I have learned is that attaining the degree as an adult entails action, purpose, responsibility, support and value. Non-traditional-age learners intentionally decide to pursue attaining a degree because possessing the degree matters to them. Non-traditional-age learners inevitably encounter challenges. Successful adults take the initiative to identify difficulties and accept responsibility for addressing problems before they become insurmountable obstacles. They succeed by enlisting support and being resourceful. Earning the credential is a worthwhile endeavor because reaching the goal represents their capacity to achieve and the potential for possibilities at any age.

This represents the essence and meaning of the experience for this select group of graduates. Absent from this description is the willingness of each participant to share the full range of details of the experience, including ups and downs, fun and frustration, excitement and tedium, as well as understanding and confusion. I appreciate the honesty, humor and grace each informant displayed during our interview and other contacts. I was expecting the participants to talk about feeling proud of themselves for this achievement, and they most certainly deserve praise. Attaining the degree as an adult is a major accomplishment. Finally, I have been touched by all of my interviewees’ enthusiasm for this project, and I cannot thank them enough for their support and encouragement as I proceed on the journey toward attaining my degree.
APPENDIX A

ORGANIZATIONAL INVITATION LETTER
Dear:

Thank you for agreeing to consider my proposal to invite alumni from your institution to participate in my research study focusing on what contributes to degree attainment among adult learners. As I have discussed with the Director of Nontraditional Degree Programs, this research is part of my dissertation for the doctoral degree in Higher Education at Loyola University Chicago. While my committee still needs to approve my proposal, it would be helpful to have your approval to participate in this study. I understand that once I receive faculty committee approval and Loyola’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, I will need to submit my study for approval through your IRB as well.

This research is important because degree attainment among adults is an important issue that has both individual and social implications. Despite steady participation by non-traditional-age learners in higher education, degree attainment is low. According to the 2006 U.S. Census Bureau educational attainment data, about half of adults over the age of 25 had college experience, yet just 18 percent had attained the bachelor’s degree. In addition, experts estimate that the chances of completing a bachelor’s degree after 25 years of age hovers at 7 to 9 percent for part-time and 20 percent for full-time adult learners (Jacobs & King, 2002). While these data show the problem on a general level and provide context for addressing the problem, a dearth of research exists on what transpires during the postsecondary education experience that culminates in bachelor’s degree attainment among adult learners.

My study is an exploration, among a select group of older graduates, of what contributes to successfully attaining the bachelor’s degree as an adult learner. My
research entails in-depth interviews with 12 to 15 adults who received their bachelor’s degree within the past five years and who were 25 years of age or older when they attained the degree. Each 90-minute in-depth interview consists of open-ended questions to explore the degree attainment experience. I will interview each study participant personally at a location and time convenient for the participant. In addition, I will ask each participant to fill out a brief demographic survey, from which I will compile a profile of the sample and compare that data to national data so I can assess consistencies in the profiles.

I am enclosing a synopsis of the study, a description of the process and potential risks of the study, along with the interview and survey questions. If you would like a copy of the full proposal, once approved by my faculty committee, I am more than happy to send it to you.

Thank you for your consideration and support. Please sign and return the enclosed Consent of the Cooperating Institution form at your earliest convenience. If you have any questions, please contact me at moconor@luc.edu or (224) 628-4610.

Sincerely,

Maureen O’Conor
Ph.D. Candidate
APPENDIX B

SYNOPSIS OF THE STUDY
Researcher Background

My name is Maureen O’Conor and I am a doctoral candidate in the Higher Education program at Loyola University Chicago. I have a master’s degree in Higher Education Administration from Boston College, and I have worked as a college administrator for more than fifteen years. All of my professional experience has been with adult learners at the undergraduate and graduate levels, in many roles including an admission director, assistant dean, program administrator, communications and operations specialist, as well as an advisor.

Research Purpose

Degree attainment is especially important at both social and individual levels. In modern society, adults with degrees tend to earn more money, have lower unemployment rates, participate in community and civil affairs, and be more prepared for changes in the marketplace than those who do not have degrees. Among individuals, degree attainment is associated with greater social and economic advancement opportunities as compared to individuals with less formal education.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, among adults 25 years of age and over, about half had some college experience, while only 18 percent had attained a bachelor’s degree (U.S. Census, 2007). This fact indicates steady participation in higher education but low degree attainment rates among learners of all ages.

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) shows steady participation by non-traditional-age learners over the past 30 years. Adults who are 25 years of age and over consistently represent about one third of undergraduates (NCES, 2007). Even so, experts estimate that the chances of completing a bachelor’s degree after age 25 hovers at 7 to 9 percent for part-time and 20 percent for full-time learners (Jacobs & King, 2002).

In terms of the student experience of attaining a bachelor’s degree, expert literature most commonly focuses on motivation, challenges and barriers, learning preferences, and skills. Typically, experts study aspects of the experience among traditional-age learners, who are ages 18 to 24. As a result, non-traditional-age learners are under-studied, especially in the area of degree attainment.

To better understand the degree attainment experience among adult learners, my study is focused on describing the experiences of learners who attain the bachelor’s degree at or after the age of 25. The goal of my research project is to explore what adult learners report as contributing to successfully attaining the bachelor’s degree.
Participant and Institutional Selection

I am seeking adults who received their bachelor’s degree at or after the age of 25 and within the past five years. I am enlisting three organizations, two post-secondary institutions and one community organization, to identify alumni or volunteers who fit the study participant criteria.

Expectations of Participants

I am seeking 12-15 participants for this study. I will ask each participant to sign an informed consent form, which I will keep in a secure file. After obtaining informed consent, I will personally interview each participant for 90 minutes, using an open-ended question format. I will audiotape each interview and supplement the interview data with a written demographic survey. I will transcribe each interview and provide a copy of the transcription for fair representation verification, confirmation of use of the content, and clarification of any material.

Potential Participant Benefits

This study is an opportunity for recent graduates to reflect on their experience. By articulating the strategies employed and discussing what the graduate feels aided his or her effort to persist to degree attainment, the participant may be able to apply similar strategies to graduate studies, work situations or other relevant matters. Moreover, by participating in this study, the graduate has an opportunity to appreciate that he or she accomplished something that many try and few succeed in doing.

Potential Participant Risks and Ensuring Confidentiality

Participants may discuss potentially sensitive and private information, and if this information became public, the result could be embarrassing. To mitigate risk, I will securely store all records, including interview audiotape recordings, transcripts of the interviews, surveys, and notes about other contacts with participants, for no more than two years following the completion of the study. I will assign an alias for each participant, and a pseudonym for each cooperating organization to conceal identities. I will securely store the key that contains the actual names and assigned pseudonyms separately from all other study materials, preventing a link between the two. By the end of two years after the completion of this study, I will destroy all raw data and materials.

Treatment of Results

For quality control and to show respect for study participants, I will provide each participant with the verbatim interview transcription, to ensure accuracy, clarify material and verify permission to use the data contained in the transcription. If a participant is uncomfortable with anything, I will exclude that specific portion of the data from the study. In addition, I will verify the accuracy and obtain permission for use of my description of each organization. Both measures ensure quality and accuracy.
addition, these measures encourage respectful partnership between study participants and the researcher.

Lastly, I will provide a summary of my dissertation to any interested participants.

**Contact Information**

If any questions arise during this study, please contact any one or all of the following:

**Researcher:**
Maureen O’Conor  
Doctoral Candidate, Higher Education Program  
Loyola University Chicago  
P.O. Box 961  
Wheeling, IL 60090  
moconor@luc.edu or (224) 628-4610

**Faculty Advisor:**
Terry E. Williams, PhD  
Associate Professor  
Loyola University Chicago  
820 N. Michigan Ave., LT 1138  
Chicago, IL 60611  
twillia@luc.edu or (312) 915-7002

**Compliance Manager:**
Loyola University Chicago  
Office of Research Services  
6439 N. Sheridan Rd., Ste. 400  
Chicago, IL 60626  
ORS@luc.edu or (773) 508-2471
APPENDIX C

CONSENT OF THE COOPERATING ORGANIZATION
Research project title: Degree Attainment Among Adult Learners
Researcher: Maureen O’Conor, Doctoral Candidate at Loyola University Chicago

I agree that once Loyola University Chicago’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) and, if applicable, my institution’s IRB, approve Maureen O’Conor’s study, I will provide the study materials to prospective participants, including the synopsis, consent to participate in research form, and invitation to participate letter. Ms. O’Conor agrees to pay for the cost of the dissemination of these materials. If an alumnus is interested in participating in the study, the alumnus will contact Ms. O’Conor. I will permit Ms. O’Conor to have contact with him or her to arrange an interview. Ms. O’Conor will make arrangements for the interview at a time and location convenient for the participant. The interview will be 90 minutes in length, consisting of open-ended questions about the degree attainment experience, and it will be supplemented by a brief demographic survey. Ms. O’Conor will audiotape each interview, transcribe each one verbatim, and she will collect a complete demographic survey from each interviewee. After completing the interview, Ms. O’Conor will conduct any necessary follow up as described in the synopsis directly with study participants.

I have read the synopsis, interview protocol, demographic survey, and consent to participate in research form. I understand all information remains confidential. Ms. O’Conor will use pseudonyms for the institution and individuals participating in the study.

For my records, I may ask Ms. O’Conor for a final copy of the dissertation.

I understand if I have any questions pertaining to this study, I may contact the researcher, Ms. O’Conor, at (224) 628-4610 or moconor@luc.edu.

Name: ________________________________________________________________
Title: ________________________________________________________________
Organization: _________________________________________________________
Signature: _____________________________________________________________
Date: __________________________________________________________________
APPENDIX D

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL
1. **Motivation**

Please describe for me any factors or influences that motivated your desire to initially pursue a bachelor’s degree?

Did your motivation increase, decrease or remain the same over time? What do you think contributed to any changes that occurred?

2. **Challenges**

As you were working on your degree program, what were the most important challenges that you faced? Why were these important at the time?

In what ways did you personally address each of these challenges?

Did you ever feel that you might not overcome some challenges? Why or why not?

Did you ever feel challenges would stop you from earning your degree? Why or why not?

3. **Knowledge, Skills and Competencies**

What knowledge or skills did you acquire or refine during your undergraduate experience that you believe contributed to your success as a student?

Did someone assist you in developing these skills? If yes, what was his or her role or relationship to you?

Of all the skills and information you acquired, what do you believe was the most important influence on your success as a student?
4. **Resources/Support**

What resources or support did you draw upon (either from the college or university or from your family, work, or personal life) that you believe assisted you during your undergraduate experience and that contributed to your success? Which resources do you now believe, in retrospect, were the most critically important to you and why?

5. **Recommendations**

What advice would you give to other adult learners who, like you did, are seeking to complete a bachelor’s degree program? Do you have any recommendations for colleges or universities about what they can do to assist adult learners in degree completion? More specifically, do you have any recommendations for teaching faculty or administrative staff?

6. **Closing Commentary**

Please describe for me now what it means to you to have successfully completed the bachelor’s degree (on both a personal and professional level)? How has attaining your degree impacted you and perhaps those around you? Do you feel all the time, financial resources, energy and sacrifices you and others have made in earning your degree are going to (or have) “pay off” for you in the long run? Why?
**Instructions:** Please complete each question. Feel free to use the space at the end of the survey and the back of the page for any comments, questions and/or suggestions.

1. In which month and year did you receive your bachelor’s degree?

2. From which institution did you receive your bachelor’s degree?
   *Please list college/university name, city, and state.*

3. How many colleges/universities did you attend?
   - One
   - Two
   - Three
   - Four or more
   - Do not recall

4. How much time elapsed between finishing high school/GED and starting your first college/university studies?
   - Less than a year
   - 1 to 2 years (12-23 months)
   - 2 to 5 years (24 to 59 months)
   - 5 years or more
   - Do not recall

5. At what age did you first enroll in a college or university?
   - 18 or younger
   - 19 to 20
   - 21 to 24
   - 25 or older
   - Do not recall
6. How many years elapsed between finishing high school/GED and receiving your bachelor’s degree?
   - Within 4 years
   - 4 to 5 years (49 to 60 months)
   - 5 to 6 years (61 to 72 months)
   - 6 to 10 years (73 to 120 months)
   - More than 10 years
   - Do not recall

7. What age were you when you received your bachelor’s degree?
   - 25 to 29
   - 30 to 39
   - 40 to 49
   - 50 and over

8. What is your gender?
   - Female
   - Male

9. What is your racial/ethnic background?
   - American Indian/Alaskan
   - Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander
   - Asian
   - White/Non-Hispanic
   - Black/African-American
   - Multiracial
   - Hispanic or Latino
   - Other _______________

Comments, questions or suggestions
APPENDIX F

INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE
Dear:

My name is Maureen O’Conor and I am a doctoral candidate at Loyola University Chicago. I am conducting a study for my dissertation about the experience of attaining a bachelor’s degree as an adult learner. I would like to interview you about your experiences.

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. If you participate, I will conceal your identity by creating an alias for you and disguising any personally identifiable information. Please know you may end your participation at any time, for any reason.

Enclosed is a summary of my proposed study, containing contact information for my advisor, the Compliance Manager at Loyola’s Office of Research Services and me. You are welcome to contact any one of us if you have any questions or concerns about this project. I am also enclosing the consent to participate in research form.

If you are willing to participate in this study, please contact me at moconor@luc.edu with (“Study Participation” in the subject line) or (224) 628-4610. I will contact you to verify your eligibility to participate, and, I will set up a convenient time and location for a 90-minute interview. I will provide the interview questions and a demographic survey to you prior to our meeting. Before the interview starts, I will need you to sign the consent to participate in research form. I also ask you to bring the complete demographic survey with you to our meeting. I will audiotape our interview and may take notes during our meeting.

Following our interview, I will transcribe the interview verbatim and provide a copy of the transcription to you for your review. You have the option of clarifying the material, adding more information, and/or deleting some points.

If you have any questions, contact me at moconor@luc.edu or (224) 628-4610. I appreciate your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Maureen O’Conor

Enclosures (2)
APPENDIX G

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH
**Project Title:** Degree Attainment Among Adult Learners  
**Researcher:** Maureen O’Conor  
**Faculty Sponsor:** Dr. Terry E. Williams, Associate Professor

**Introduction:**
You are being asked to take part in a research study being conducted by Maureen O’Conor for a dissertation under the supervision of Dr. Terry E. Williams in the Higher Education Program at Loyola University Chicago.

You are being asked to participate because you received your bachelor’s degree at or after age 25 and within the past five years. For this study, Maureen O’Conor will conduct interviews with 12 to 15 adults who, like you, are recent bachelor’s degree recipients.

Please read this form carefully and ask any questions you may have before deciding whether to participate in the study.

**Purpose:**
The purpose of this study is to describe the experiences of learners who attain the baccalaureate degree at or after age 25. From the perspective of older graduates, Ms. O’Conor seeks to illuminate strategies employed by successful students, and to discover what they believe was critical to their success. This exploration will provide a fuller understanding of what it may take for an adult student to attain a bachelor's degree.

**Procedures:**
If you agree to be in the study, you will be asked to:

- Participate in a 90-minute interview consisting of open-ended questions about your higher education experiences. You will be asked questions about motivation, challenges, knowledge, skills and competencies, resources, recommendations and your reflection on your experience. In order to participate, you agree to be audio taped during the interview. The recorded interview will be transcribed verbatim. You will be able to review a copy of the interview transcript to make sure that it is a fair representation and an accurate reflection of the interview. You will be assigned an alias to shield your identity, and your real name will not be used in the study. The interview will be conducted at a location and time convenient to you, with the interviewer making the arrangements. Suitable locations include your workplace, meeting rooms at public libraries, or conference rooms in other public buildings.

- Complete a demographic survey. The survey questions include date of bachelor’s degree receipt, institution information, number of colleges/universities attended, amount of time between finishing high school/GED and starting college/university studies, number of years between starting college/university studies and receiving the bachelor’s degree, age at time of degree receipt, gender, as well as racial and ethnic background. The purpose of this survey is to compare the interviewee responses to national data describing older bachelor’s degree recipients.
**Risks/Benefits:**
There are no foreseeable risks involved in participating in this research beyond those experienced in everyday life.

You may benefit from the opportunity to reflect on your experience. By articulating the strategies you employed or talking about what you feel aided your effort to persist to degree attainment, you may be able to apply similar strategies to graduate studies, work situations or other relevant matters. Moreover, by participating in this study, you may appreciate that you accomplished something that many try and few succeed in doing.

**Compensation:**
In appreciation of the time and effort you have made to participate in this study, you will receive a $25 gift certificate. If you complete half or more of the interview and survey, but withdraw before finishing it in its entirety, you will receive a $10 gift certificate. If you withdraw from the study before completing at least half of the interview and survey, you will not receive compensation.

**Confidentiality:**
You may discuss potentially sensitive and private information, and if this information became public, the result could be embarrassing. To mitigate risk, Maureen O’Conor will securely store all records, including interview audiotapes, transcripts of interviews, surveys, and notes about other contacts with you, for no more than two years following the completion of the study. Ms. O’Conor will assign an alias for you to conceal your identity. Ms. O’Conor will assign an alias for you to conceal your identity. Ms. O’Conor will securely store the key that contains your actual name and assigned pseudonym separately from all other study materials, preventing a link between the two. By the end of two years after the completion of this study, Ms. O’Conor will destroy all raw data and materials.

**Voluntary Participation:**
Participation in this study is voluntary. If you do not want to be in this study, you do not have to participate. Even if you decide to participate, you are free not to answer any question or to withdraw from participation at any time without penalty.

**Contacts and Questions:**
If you have questions about this research study, please feel free to contact Maureen O’Conor at moconor@luc.edu (with “Adult Degree Study” in the subject line) or (224) 628-4610 or, you may reach the faculty sponsor, Dr. Terry Williams at twillia@luc.edu or (312) 915-7002.

If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Compliance Manager in Loyola’s Office of Research Services at ORS@luc.edu or (773) 508-2689.
Statement of Consent:
Your signature below indicates that you have read and understood the information provided above, have had an opportunity to ask questions, and agree to participate in this research study. You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records.

____________________________________   __________________
Participant’s Signature                                                   Date

____________________________________________  ___________________
Researcher’s Signature                                                  Date
APPENDIX H

DECLINE OF OFFER TO PARTICIPATE
Dear:

Thank you for indicating an interest in participating in my dissertation study, Degree Attainment Among Adult Learners.

At this time, I have collected sufficient information from other recent graduates and I am not conducting additional interviews.

I appreciate your consideration and thank you for your offer to participate.

Sincerely,

Maureen O’Conor
APPENDIX I

TRANSCRIBER CONFIDENTIALITY AGREEMENT
This CONFIDENTIAL INFORMATION AGREEMENT (“Agreement”) is made between Maureen O’Conor (“Researcher”) here and after the undersigned consultant (“Consultant”).

In consideration of Consultant’s relationship with Researcher, the receipt of confidential information while associated with Researcher, and other good and valuable consideration, Consultant, the undersigned individual, agrees that:

1. **Term of Agreement.** This agreement shall continue in full force and effect for the duration of my relationship with Researcher for the purpose of the research project.

2. **Confidentiality.**
   a. **Definitions.** “Proprietary and Confidential Information” is all information and any idea whatever form, tangible or intangible, pertaining in any manner to the business of Researcher or any affiliates, which was produced by any consultant or sub-contractor in the course of his or her employment or consulting relationship or otherwise produced or acquired by or on behalf of Researcher. All proprietary information not generally known outside of Researcher’s work, and all proprietary information so known only through improper means, shall be deemed Confidential Information. By example and without limiting the foregoing definition, Proprietary and Confidential Information shall include, but not be limited to:
   
   i. Research projects, writings, interview material, data, know-how, formats, and test results;
   
   ii. Information about lists of study participants;
   
   iii. Research project structure and plans;
   
   iv. Unpublished research project materials, participant identities, characteristics, organization identities, and locations;
   
   v. Participant files, including names, contact information and personally identifiable materials.

   Proprietary and Confidential Information is broadly defined, and includes all information that has or could have commercial value or other utility. Proprietary and Confidential Information is information of which the unauthorized disclosure or dissemination could be detrimental to study participants or Researcher, whether or not Researcher identifies such information as Proprietary and Confidential Information.

3. **Existence of Proprietary and Confidential Information.** Researcher owns and has developed, and will develop and compile certain proprietary materials and information that has great value to the Project. This Proprietary and Confidential Information includes not only information disclosed by Researcher to Consultant, but also information developed or learned by Consultant during the course of Consultant’s relationship with Researcher.
4. **Protection of Proprietary and Confidential Information.** Consultant will not, directly or indirectly, use, make available, sell, disclose or otherwise communicate to any third party, any of Researcher’s Proprietary and Confidential Information, either during or after the term of Agreement. In the event that Consultant desires to publish or disseminate the results of Consultant’s work, Consultant will obtain express written consent from Researcher. Consultant agrees not to publish, disclose or otherwise disseminate such information without prior written approval of Researcher. Consultant acknowledges that Consultant is aware that unauthorized disclosure of Proprietary and Confidential Information of Researcher may be highly prejudicial to its interests, an invasion of privacy, and an improper disclosure of information.

5. **Delivery of Proprietary and Confidential Information.** Upon request or when Consultant’s relationship with Researcher terminates, Consultant will immediately deliver to Researcher any and all Proprietary and Confidential Information received from, created for, or belonging to Researcher during the course of Term of Agreement.

6. **Location and Reproduction.** Consultant shall maintain at Consultant’s workplace only such Proprietary and Confidential Information Researcher grants authority for Consultant to possess. Consultant shall keep materials in a secure location. Consultant shall not make copies or otherwise reproduce Proprietary and Confidential Information without express written authority from Researcher.

By signing this agreement, Consultant ensures that Consultant understands the maintenance of confidentiality and agrees to protect confidentiality.

______________________________
Print Name: Consultant

______________________________
Signature: Consultant

______________________________
Date

______________________________
Print name: Researcher

______________________________
Signature: Researcher

______________________________
Date
APPENDIX J

VERIFICATION OF ELIGIBILITY TO PARTICIPATE
Dear:

My name is Maureen O’Conor and I am a doctoral candidate at Loyola University Chicago. I am conducting a study for my dissertation about the experience of attaining a bachelor’s degree as an adult learner. Thank you for your willingness to participate in this study.

In order to proceed, I would like to verify your eligibility to participate in this study. Please respond to these questions.

Do you have a bachelor’s degree?

Did you receive your bachelor’s degree within the past five years?

Were you 25 years of age or older when you received your bachelor’s degree?

If you answer yes to all of the questions, you are eligible to participate in the study, and I will follow up with you about the next steps. Please include your phone number in your reply so I can call you to make arrangements.

If you have any questions, contact me at moconor@luc.edu or (224) 628-4610. I appreciate your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Maureen O’Conor

Note: If am speaking with the prospective participant on the phone, I make note of the answers. If I am responding via e-mail, I ask that the prospective participant reply with the answers via e-mail or phone. If I am leaving a voice mail message, I ask the prospective participant to return my call or reply via e-mail with the answers.
Dear:

Thank you for indicating for being willing and verifying your eligibility to participate in my study about adult learners attaining the bachelor’s degree. It appears at this time that I may have enough participants for this study, but in the event that some participants drop out of the study, I would like to be able to contact you.

Would you be willing to wait a couple of weeks to see if I indeed have enough participants? If yes, and if I needed additional participants, I would make arrangements to conduct an interview with you.

If you are willing to wait a few weeks, I will follow up with you to either make arrangements for the interview or to let you know that I have conducted enough interviews and do not need your participation.

In the meantime, if you have any questions or concerns, you may contact me at moconor@luc.edu or (224) 628-4610. I appreciate your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Maureen O’Conor
REFERENCES


VITA

Before attending Loyola University Chicago, Maureen O’Conor earned a Bachelor of Science degree in Human Resources Management in 1987 and a Master of Arts degree in Higher Education in 1992 from Boston College.

Maureen’s passion for student success was sparked by her graduate studies and professional pursuits. As a graduate student and while working as a college administrator, Maureen completed projects on a variety of topics, some of which include non-traditional students, debt burden and economics of bachelor’s degree attainment, gender and financial aid, and, enrollment management. Additionally, her professional activities have both complemented and fueled her interests, as Maureen has been a professional administrator in higher education for more than 15 years in a variety of positions at several institutions. Over the course of her career, she has gained expertise in program administration and student services, while working with diverse student populations, including non-traditional, graduate and international students.
DISSERTATION APPROVAL SHEET

The dissertation submitted by Maureen A. O’Conor has been read and approved by the following committee:

Terry E. Williams, Ph.D., Director
Associate Professor, School of Education
Loyola University Chicago

Beverly Kasper, Ed.D.
Associate Dean, School of Education
Loyola University Chicago

Betsy Oudenhoven, Ph.D.
Vice President, Student Development
Joliet Junior College

The final copies have been examined by the director of the dissertation and the signature which appears below verifies the fact that any necessary changes have been incorporated and that the dissertation is now given final approval by the committee with reference to content and form.

The dissertation is therefore accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

______________________________  ________________________________
Date                                      Director’s Signature