

University of Memphis

University of Memphis Digital Commons

---

Electronic Theses and Dissertations

---

2019

**NONTRADITIONAL STUDENTS ACADEMIC SUCCESS  
EXPERIENCES AT A LARGE PUBLIC UNIVERSITY IN THE  
AMERICAN SOUTH: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL INVESTIGATION**

Megan Elizabeth Russell

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.memphis.edu/etd>

---

**Recommended Citation**

Russell, Megan Elizabeth, "NONTRADITIONAL STUDENTS ACADEMIC SUCCESS EXPERIENCES AT A LARGE PUBLIC UNIVERSITY IN THE AMERICAN SOUTH: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL INVESTIGATION" (2019). *Electronic Theses and Dissertations*. 2745.  
<https://digitalcommons.memphis.edu/etd/2745>

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by University of Memphis Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Electronic Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of University of Memphis Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [khggerty@memphis.edu](mailto:khggerty@memphis.edu).

NONTRADITIONAL STUDENTS' ACADEMIC SUCCESS EXPERIENCES AT A LARGE  
PUBLIC UNIVERSITY IN THE AMERICAN SOUTH: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL  
INVESTIGATION

by

Megan Elizabeth Russell

A Dissertation

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

Major: Higher and Adult Education

The University of Memphis

May 2019

## **Abstract**

**Russell, Megan E. Ed.D. The University of Memphis. May, 2019. The Lived Experiences of Nontraditional Students at a Large Public University in the South. Major Professor: Ronald E. Platt, Ph.D.**

This article explored the academic experiences of nontraditional students enrolled in an undergraduate degree program. For the purposes of this study students were deemed to be nontraditional if they met one of the following characteristics: had delayed enrollment into postsecondary education; attended college part-time; worked full time; were financially independent for financial aid purposes; had dependents other than a spouse; were a single parent; and/or were a GED recipient (NCES, n.d.). The researcher sought to justify the importance of gleaned additional information regarding different components of the learning processes and academic experiences in which nontraditional students were engaged in throughout their educational endeavor. Furthermore, it was the researcher's hope that this study would add to the body of research that already exists on the academic side of nontraditional students' journey to a bachelor's degree. This article specifically addresses the experiences of nontraditional students at a large public university in the South.

## Table of Contents

Abstract .....	i
Table of Contents .....	ii
Chapter	
<b>1. Introduction .....</b>	<b>1</b>
Background of the Study .....	2
Statement of the Problem .....	5
Purpose Statement .....	6
Research Questions .....	8
Potential Significance.....	8
Theoretical Framework .....	8
Definition of Terms .....	10
Assumptions .....	11
Limitations .....	11
Chapter Summary.....	11
<b>2. Literature Review .....</b>	<b>13</b>
Nontraditional Learners .....	13
Experiential Learning Theory .....	15
Motivations of Nontraditional Students .....	17
Learning of Nontraditional Students .....	18
Obstacles to Degree Attainment .....	20
Retention of Nontraditional Students .....	21
Programs for Nontraditional Students .....	22
Chapter Summary .....	27
<b>3. Methodology .....</b>	<b>28</b>
Epistemology .....	28
Methodology .....	29
Research Design .....	32
Research Questions.....	32
Sample .....	32
Participant Selection .....	33
Research Site .....	34
Data Collection .....	35
Interviews .....	36
Interview Participant Information Table .....	37
Electronic Semi-Structured Interview Protocol.....	37
Online Communication.....	37
Researcher Notes .....	38
Reliability .....	38

Member Checking .....	38
Data Analysis .....	38
Inductive Analysis .....	38
Themes .....	39
Commonalities in Themes.....	40
Confidentiality.....	40
Subjectivity Statement .....	40
Trustworthiness .....	42
Triangulation .....	43
Risks and Benefits .....	43
Chapter Summary .....	43
<b>4. Findings .....</b>	<b>45</b>
Introduction of Themes .....	46
Theme 1: Motivations .....	47
Family Support .....	47
Career Growth .....	48
Personal Fulfillment .....	49
Theme 2: Irrelevant Content .....	50
Theme 3: Challenge .....	52
Theme 4: Unfamiliar Culture .....	53
Electronic Semi-Structured Interview Protocol Data.....	55
Time Restraints .....	55
Support Systems .....	56
Academic Focus .....	57
Commonalties in Themes .....	57
Chapter Summary .....	58
<b>5. Discussion and Implications .....</b>	<b>60</b>
Institution Implications .....	60
Instructor Implications .....	64
Recommendations for Future Research .....	67
Concluding Remarks.....	68
<b>References.....</b>	<b>70</b>
<b>Appendices</b>	
A. Interview Guide.....	82
B. Electronic Semi-Structured Interview Protocol .....	83
C. Email Request Sent for Participation.....	85
D. Informed Consent Form .....	86
E. Institutional Review Board Approval.....	90

## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

Historically, research on the academic components of higher education at the undergraduate level has centered around the experiences of traditional on-campus college students who are entering college as soon as high school is completed. At this stage in life, students are focused on academics that align with future career opportunities and developing their individual identity as this is the first time that many traditional students are out of their parents' houses and on their own (Astin, 1978; Feldman & Newcomb, 1969; Sanford, 1962). Since the start of research on higher education, developing variety from this student profile has become a critical concern of colleges and universities as the student population has evolved and diversified to include students from all walks of life (Kasworm, 1990). Many of today's college-going students are very different from the traditional students seen in the past.

It is becoming increasingly apparent that today's institutions of postsecondary education may not be adequately equipped to efficiently accommodate the increasing number of nontraditional students in their student populations. As nontraditional students continue to account for more enrollments on college campuses across the nation, it is imperative that institutions of postsecondary education find ways to ensure that these students are successful in their endeavor to obtain a degree. Success should be measured not only by the ability to complete coursework within the program but also in practical skills, learning, and meaningful academic activities that can be applied outside the classroom. Finch (2016) suggests that thus far efforts of higher education institutions to accommodate the needs of nontraditional students have been just an extension of their traditionally focused programs which are not capable of offering comprehensive support to the nontraditional student population.

This chapter will provide in detail a background of the study, the statement of the problem, the purpose statement, the research questions, the significance of the study, and definitions of key terms that will be used throughout.

### **Background of the Study**

Various classifications and differing descriptions are used to define nontraditional students among research. However, researchers all agree on the fact that students who fall into this category have been on the rise for the past several years. Blumenstyk illustrates the importance of this group through her focus on student demographics. She declares that more than a third of college students in the country are over the age of twenty-five and points out that this group of students has been increasing faster than traditional students in number of postsecondary education enrollments (2015). In the fall of 2011, 14.9 million of the 17.6 million Americans enrolled in higher education were considered to be nontraditional students by the definition used in this study (U.S. Department of Education, 2011).

Many researchers have focused on nontraditional students in education exploring numerous topics pertaining to this portion of the student population. Markle (2015) as well as Gilardi and Guglielmetti (2011) have studied retention issues among nontraditional students. The studies of Eppler and Harju (1997) are centered around the multiple roles of nontraditional students and how their additional responsibilities affect academic performance. Additionally, research has explored the many obstacles that nontraditional students face on the path to an undergraduate degree (Grabowski, 2016). More details on the existing studies are provided in the literature review that follows this chapter.

Researchers have only begun to delve into the topic of the preferences and needs of nontraditional students when it comes to learning in postsecondary education. Furthermore, the majority of phenomenological studies performed by researchers focus on one aspect of the

nontraditional student's experience like retention or motivation. There have been very few, if any, phenomenological studies of nontraditional students at large public universities in which the researcher's goal has been to allow students to give a full account of their academic journey and develop a comprehensive description of that experience through the study's findings.

Studies such as the one performed by Adams and Corbett (2010) have explored whether nontraditional students prefer online or on-campus classes and how they prepare for class, but fewer research studies exist that provide more specific information pertaining to the preferences of nontraditional students in learning activities and academics. Colleges and universities everywhere have instilled facets of the success of nontraditional students into their mission statements and developed initiatives geared toward helping this subpopulation of students succeed in their educational goals. Apart from the research on nontraditional students mentioned previously, studies are needed to show whether or not institutions are in fact fulfilling the mission of facilitating student success and providing meaningful learning experiences in curriculum for this division of the college population. The researcher's hope is that this study will provide additional insight on the wants and needs of nontraditional students in academics. The researcher used a definition from the Glossary of Education Reform to define academic experiences. Therefore, an academic experience for the purposes of this study refers to any interaction, course, program, or other experience in which learning takes place whether it occurs in traditional settings such as classrooms or nontraditional settings like those outside of the school's physical parameters (The Glossary of Education Reform, 2013).

As postsecondary institutions' student populations are increasingly becoming filled with learners who are different from traditional college students, it is critical that a clear understanding of the ways that nontraditional students learn best is reached among the field of



higher education. This is further evidenced by the call of federal initiatives such as “Pathways to Success” for institutions of higher education to increase educational attainment of nontraditional students and identify the ways to best serve this population (Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance, 2012). The primary challenge in dealing with nontraditional students is that this group is more likely to stop out of college before completing their degree (Diamond, 2016).

The researcher chose to use the NCES’s definition to determine whether or not students would be labeled as nontraditional due to a shift in the student population. Adult enrollment across colleges in the state of Tennessee has dropped 25 percent from 2011 to 2015 (IPEDS, 2016). With enrollments of adults declining in the state of Tennessee it is important for postsecondary education institutions to elicit feedback from students who are considered to be nontraditional to even out the playing field in terms of access to a satisfactory educational experience. As more traditionally aged students continue to show characteristics of nontraditional students, age has become an ineffective way of labeling students to provide support. Furthermore, focusing only on adult learners, whom Deutsch and Schmertz (2011) identified as any student over the age of 24, would leave out a large number of students who are affected by the same hardships and obstacles of the older nontraditional students. In this study adult students are nontraditional but not all nontraditional students are adults. Andragogy is the concept upon which the field of adult education was formed. It is the belief that nontraditional students learn differently than traditional students. Blondy (2007) contrasted andragogy and pedagogy. Pedagogical approaches assume that the student is solely dependent on the instructor and that the content of learning comes from that instructor. Whereas, andragogy places emphasis on the process of learning and posits that more equality should be sought between teacher and student in the learning environment (Knowles, 1960). Andragogy assumes that adults are self-

directed and promotes collaborative learning methods in which the student holds an active role. Andragogy promotes more independent learning. One way to ensure that students are actively engaged in the learning process is to implement teaching methods centered on experiential learning. Doing this provides more leeway for interpretation of assignments than traditional methods of teaching such as the lecture style of learning. It is believed that nontraditional students benefit from andragogical methods of instruction.

Nontraditional students bring a wealth of experience to the classroom with them, which may not be taken into consideration in most traditional teaching methods used at the college level. Also, continuing the use of teacher-based instructional methods could present a risk of introducing conflict in nontraditional students due to the amount of authority held by the instructor in these situations. Many different ideologies have been introduced concerning which types of learning work best for nontraditional students, but if the United States expects to remain prominent in higher education more exploration of nontraditional students' experiences is needed.

Like many postsecondary institutions today, the research site, a public university in the South, has a large number of students who possess at least one characteristic of a nontraditional student as outlined in the NCES definition. Furthermore, the site has a department dedicated specifically to helping these students navigate the college experience to promote their success. This study investigated the academic experiences of nontraditional learners at a large public university in the South.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Nontraditional students are a critical key to the welfare of an institution of postsecondary education. The population of nontraditional students continues to grow on college campuses

across the nation. It is expected that by the year 2019 adult students' college entry growth will increase by as much as twenty-eight percent (Markle, 2015). According to the United States Department of Education, only twenty-six percent of students meet the definition of a traditional student (USDE, 2015). Despite this, some researchers believe that the amount of research that focuses on the remaining seventy-four percent of students who meet the qualifications of a nontraditional student remains insufficient (Chao and Good, 2004; Cavote and Kopera-Frye, 2006). Many studies exist on the various ways to define which students fit into the nontraditional bracket within the college-going population. Furthermore, there are a plethora of studies on the life experiences that nontraditional students go through on their quest to earning a bachelor's degree. However, few studies showcase the academic experiences of this subgroup through the voices of nontraditional students themselves.

### **Purpose Statement**

While much research has been conducted in prior years on the life experiences of nontraditional students, fewer studies have been performed exploring the academic experiences that nontraditional students go through to obtain a baccalaureate degree. Researchers tend to centralize studies on the lives of nontraditional students and the responsibilities that affect their educational journey while failing to recognize that there are many characteristics of the learning process that can be managed by the university that are critical to the success of these students.

The various qualitative studies that have been conducted regarding nontraditional students have been limited in scope and have not solely focused on the academic aspects of the educational endeavor. Moreover, some studies have explored barriers, facilitators, and policies that impact nontraditional students but a gap in knowledge remains when it comes to the specifics of the learning experiences of these students as told in their own voices. Understanding

the perspectives of nontraditional students is essential for program delivery and academic success of these students. This study sought to explore students' perceptions of their academic experiences in undergraduate coursework at a large public university in the South.

Phenomenological studies are needed to fulfill the purpose of exploring nontraditional students' preferences on learning and knowledge exploration as this type of study will allow researchers to discover the essence of students' lived experiences during their enrollment in an undergraduate degree program. While many postsecondary institutions have produced programs designed specifically to help nontraditional students reach their end goal of a baccalaureate degree, few of them have been explored after implementation in detail through the student's perspective. This type of exploration will prove beneficial to the universities in aligning their offerings to meet students' expectations. This study attempted to research undergraduate programs through the first-hand accounts of nontraditional students at a large public institution in the South.

More specifically the researcher is looking into nontraditional students' academic experiences in the state of Tennessee. Long recognized for its innovative education policies, this state currently faces significant challenges in improving educational attainment among its residents ranking 42<sup>nd</sup> nationally with only 36 percent of its adult residents holding a postsecondary certificate or higher (Wright, 2016). Despite all of the efforts put forth by stakeholders thus far, Tennessee seems to be experiencing only marginal increases in college completion (Finney et al, 2017).

## **Research Question**

The primary research question in this study follows: What are the lived academic experiences of nontraditional learners who are currently enrolled in undergraduate coursework at a large public university in the South?

The secondary research question is as follows: How are the lives of nontraditional students impacted by their academic experiences in undergraduate coursework at the research site?

## **Potential Significance**

This study aimed to provide a deeper understanding of the experiences of nontraditional students by examining an aspect of students' lives that has not been widely vocalized from a first-person perspective: the academic experience. The objective of the researcher was to provide information about nontraditional students' academic experiences at large public universities in the South. The findings of this study unveil more efficient ways to guide nontraditional students to academic success. Soliciting the input of nontraditional students themselves led universities to innovative learning techniques. The discoveries of the researcher in this study benefit students and faculty at the research site as they provide ways to make students' academic endeavor more meaningful. This study's findings also positively impact universities with a large population of nontraditional students specifically by spurring a need for change in practices.

## **Theoretical Framework**

This study was developed as a phenomenological study. Creswell (2004) emphasizes phenomenological practices for use in research when knowledge of participants' common experiences is needed in order to develop policies and practices. Phenomenology was chosen because this study centered on the essence of only one significant aspect of the participant's life

and seeks to gain a deeper understanding of that experience. The phenomenon of focus is the participants' learning experiences in undergraduate coursework toward a bachelor's degree at a large public university in the South. Experiential learning theory and constructivism were used for this study as both are relevant to nontraditional student learning. Dewey (1916), Piaget (1973), Vygotsky (1978), and Bruner (1996) advise that student learning is active. Furthermore, they suggest that new knowledge is constructed from prior knowledge.

In experiential learning theory, knowledge is created through the transformation of experiences (Kolb, Boyatzis, and Mainemelis, 2001). Experiential learning relies on critical thinking, problem solving, and decision making for learning to occur. All of these skills have value to nontraditional learners as they will be applied throughout life in all areas, not just within the constraints of their educational program. This method of learning provides students with real-life scenarios that offer a chance to work through the issue without their actions having consequences in other settings.

Experiential learning requires learners to be personally involved in the process of constructing knowledge. Students are solely responsible for their own learning in this way of teaching; therefore, nontraditional students are permitted to be self-directed in their activities (Saleh, Mujiyanto, & Shofwan, 2017)

For this study constructivism was paired with experiential learning theory as both suggest that learners construct their own knowledge from interaction with their environments. Both constructivism and experiential learning theory promote student-centered learning and give the opportunity for learning to occur on an individual, personal level.

Problem-based and active learning approaches which fall into the constructivist view of education allow students to make deeper meanings of the information received through their

coursework. Tara Fenwick's (2001) constructivist view of learning advocates that students reflect on their lived experiences in order to formulate mental structures. These mental structures, recalled from memory and transferred into new situations, impact how students obtain and construe knowledge. Giving students more flexibility and freedom to explore the curriculum in a way that puts more of the learning responsibility in their hands helps them retain more of the information. Toynton (2005) posits that adult students gain confidence in learning when their prior knowledge is validated. Experiential learning theory, or "the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience," has become prevalent in the field of higher education for this very reason (Kolb 1984, p. 41). These theories support the beliefs of Merriam (2001) that adults have the capability of self-direction in learning.

### **Definition of Terms**

**Academic Experience:** any interaction, course, program, or other experience in which learning takes place whether it occurs in traditional settings such as classrooms or nontraditional settings like those outside of the school's physical parameters (The Glossary of Education Reform, 2013).

**Adult Learner:** Any student over the age of 24 (Deutsch and Schmertz, 2011).

**Constructivism:** A learning theory that suggests that people build knowledge on a foundation of prior knowledge (Krahenbuhl, 2016).

**Experiential Learning:** A direct encounter with the phenomena being studied as opposed to just thinking about the encounter (Borzak, 1981).

**Nontraditional Student:** Students who meet at least one of the following seven characteristics: delayed enrollment into postsecondary education; attends college part-time; works full time; is

financially independent for financial aid purposes; has dependents other than a spouse; is a single parent; and/or is a GED recipient (NCES, n.d.).

### **Assumptions**

For the purpose of this study, the researcher assumed that students would be truthful in the responses that they provided during all communication regarding their academic experiences. The researcher assumed that the information gleaned during electronic response collection, interviews, and online communications with participants was accurate and forthcoming.

### **Limitations**

This study involved nontraditional students currently enrolled in undergraduate coursework at a large public university in the South. The sample was pulled from a large public university in the state of Tennessee. The sample of participants chosen by the researcher may not be a true representation of all students who complete their degree at this institution or elsewhere. Additionally, this study consisted of a very small sample size, meaning the experiences gleaned from participants may not accurately portray the overall experiences of students who complete their degree as nontraditional learners. Participants were chosen because they met at least one of seven criteria; since the number of participants included in this study was small, there may be subgroups of nontraditional students who were not represented in this study. It should be said that students who meet the remaining criteria may give information regarding their experiences that is different when asked.

### **Chapter Summary**

This chapter presented an introduction to the study on nontraditional students' lived academic experiences in undergraduate coursework at a large public university in the South. The background of the study presented an overview of nontraditional students in higher education



and the various thoughts that exist on this group of students' learning at the postsecondary level. The statement of the problem and purpose of the study explained why this study is needed and outlined what it hopes to accomplish. Primarily, a more in-depth understanding of the academic experiences of nontraditional students in the pursuit of their bachelor's degree. Practitioners in the field of higher education are quickly discovering that nontraditional students should be a point of focus as their success is essential to the success of institutions of higher education. Digging further into the matter of this group's academic preferences and needs is a critical issue that must be explored in order to ensure that the programs intended to facilitate nontraditional students' pursuit of degrees are doing just that. The chapter concluded with a section on the potential significance of the study, definition of terms throughout the study, and the limitations of the study.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Literature Review**

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, eighty-five percent of undergraduate students possess characteristics that differentiate them from traditional college students. Undergraduate students in the United States are a diverse group of students including adult learners, employees who study, low-income students, commuters, and student parents (NCES, 2010).

It has long been understood that adult education is very different from the learning of traditional aged students. For many years researchers have examined these differences; andragogy was defined as the understanding of how adults learn (Merriam, 2001). As our postsecondary institutions' student populations are increasingly becoming occupied by older students, it is imperative that we find a robust understanding of the ways that adults learn best. This paper will explore the topic of the learning processes of nontraditional students as it was the researcher's observation that prior studies of nontraditional students were confined to other types of institutions that nontraditional students are thought to frequent, such as community colleges and technical schools and/or focused on only one aspect of students' experiences instead of looking at their academic journey holistically as told in their own voices. The researcher's aim was to give students the opportunity to share the details over their overall academic experiences at a large public university in their own words as prior studies have not focused on this category of institutions in relation to meeting the needs of nontraditional students.

#### **Nontraditional Learners**

Numerous definitions of what defines a nontraditional student can be found in research. However, all constituents agree on the fact that the students who fall into this category have been

steadily increasing for the past several years among the college-going population. Studies of varying nature have been conducted on nontraditional college students. Researchers have explored how nontraditional students learn, how they balance their many responsibilities while in school, how they survive the transition to college, and how a college degree will help them in the work place; however, few have focused on the academic experience itself. Many research studies have only focused on one portion of the nontraditional students in college: the adult learners. In doing so the perspective of many students who fit the descriptors of being nontraditional in ways other than age have been ignored.

The shift of learning from the teacher to the student has allowed universities to reorient the process of learning to accommodate each student's individual needs. This move to more active learning processes has also given universities the ability to account for the differences in learning between students. A study performed by Ohashi (2018) gathered student feedback on self-directed learning, and overall it was found that this method of teaching was largely beneficial for learners. Furthermore, this study indicated that when instructors use self-directed learning students are willing to put in more time outside of the classroom studying as well. However, postsecondary education institutions as a whole have not done enough to accommodate nontraditional students. This may be due to a lack of understanding of adult students' needs (Fincher, 2010).

Including hands-on and participatory activities in curriculum can increase the effectiveness of learning for some students. In these types of practices, learning takes place by building on the student's foundational base of knowledge; therefore, activities should be student-centered. These activities offer instructors the ability to personalize and individualize learning to students. Responsibilities of instructors in these active learning approaches include providing

opportunities for students to build knowledge for themselves instead of focusing on dispensing knowledge (von Glasserfeld, 2005).

### **Experiential Learning Theory**

Experiential learning theory was developed by Kolb (1984) after studying the writings of Dewey, Piaget, Jung, Lewin, and others. Seventeen years of research went into the creation of this learning theory. Experiential learning theory describes two dialectical components of learning that occur in the brain: perceiving and processing. Perceiving occurs when a person has a concrete experience; processing occurs when that experience is transformed into knowledge either by reflection or action. Perceiving is how we take in information, and processing represents how we deal with the information received (Murrell and Claxton, 1987).

Experiential learning theory promotes the belief that learners reach a resolution between action/reflection and experience/abstraction. Michelson (1996) suggests that experiential learning is one of the most significant directions of focus for current research and practice in the field of adult education. This theory is related to many other concepts in the learning of nontraditional students. Some of these include self-directed learning, lifelong learning, working knowledge, practical intelligence, and situated learning.

Experiential learning theory proposes that students go through the cycle of experience, reflection, and conceptualization; essentially it is the process of learning through experience. Hands-on experiences greatly increase engagement thus improving the retention of the information for students (Kolb and Kolb, 2008).

Giving students the ability to take the lessons that they receive in the classroom and apply them in real-world scenarios is invaluable to the educational experience. Estes (2004) highlights the value of experiential learning for nontraditional students in the fact that this method of

learning focuses on the learner's relationship to the context. Taking learning outside the classroom also offers instructors the ability to personalize learning and tailor it to meet the individual needs of each student. This is essential in fostering learning in nontraditional students as every single student is unique, and each student brings with him or her different levels of experience to schoolwork. Nontraditional students come to college with diverse beliefs and backgrounds, and these students are successful when professors engage them by utilizing their rich histories and acknowledge their preference for hands-on learning activities (Hussain, Khan, & Ramzan, 2013).

Boud, along with other researchers, has written on experiential learning in adult education. He claims that learning is an intentional act and that students must be actively engaged for learning to occur (Boud, Cohen, and Walker, 1993). Boud's explanation of learning takes the process outside the classroom and opens up opportunities for learning to occur in other places.

Dewey (1961) believed that learning was dependent on the student's self-direction through active participation thus his beliefs prioritize experiences of students over curriculum intended in higher learning. Self-directed learning puts students in control of their own educational experiences. This method of learning is ideal for nontraditional learners who are intrinsically motivated as it gives the student a proactive role in learning.

Situated learning is an instructional method and theory of learning introduced by Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger in the early 1990s, and this approach to learning emphasizes the active participation of students throughout the learning experience (Lave and Wenger, 1991). It is the practice of creating meaning from the activities of everyday life in addressing real world problems. Essentially the student is situated in the learning experience with the acquisition of

knowledge becoming a part of the learning activity, its context, and the culture in which it is developed and used (Oregon Technology in Education Council, 2007). The idea of students learning from one another stems from this theory. Furthermore, situated learning theory supports the idea that learning can occur anywhere and should not be restricted to the formal setting of a classroom or online portal of a course. Situated learning is one way that self-directed learning can be put into practice. This is a way of learning that allows learners to acquire knowledge and then apply that knowledge in the same setting. This is useful for nontraditional students as it allows them to gain authentic experiences and encounters with the material instead of just reading from a book or listening to a lecture.

### **Motivations of Nontraditional Students**

Nontraditional students have the motivation to continue pursuing their education even though the institutions in which they enroll are not set up to meet their needs (Sandler, 2000). Nontraditional students are motivated to pursue an undergraduate degree by both intrinsic and extrinsic factors in most cases. Some nontraditional students return to education for better career opportunities while for others the motivation is to be able to better provide for their family. For nontraditional students, personal growth and self-improvement are interwoven into the extrinsic benefits of a degree such as financial growth, job advancement, or a change of position in society. Bye, Pushkar, and Conway (2007) performed a study comparing the motivations of traditional and nontraditional students, and it was found that nontraditional students, meaning those over the age of twenty-eight, possessed higher levels of intrinsic motivation for learning.

Taylor and House (2010) found that older students credited both extrinsic and intrinsic motivations while those under the age of twenty-one solely cited extrinsic motivation for attending. Ross-Gordon's (2003) study indicated that the primary reasons that nontraditional

students list for returning to school include pressures in the workplace, changes in family situations, and personal goals. Deci and Ryan (1985) developed self-determination theory which is the idea that a person engages in a behavior that helps meet their need for competence, relatedness, and autonomy. Nontraditional students have many external motivations along the path to a degree including a better career or more money after graduation (Chao, 2009). Nontraditional students also want to set a good example for their children with their educational pursuit teaching them to work hard and not quit. Furthermore, many nontraditional students, as defined by the NCES definition used for this study, see returning to school as a way to provide their families with a better quality of life (Strang, 2014).

Compton, Cox, and Laanan (2006) discovered that adult students, those over the age of 25, are more likely to pursue vocational tracks in college that are in line with the work they do because of the predominance of work in their lives. Often educational goals of nontraditional students are closely related to their careers because they put more importance in their work than in their student role (Chao and Good, 2004).

### **Learning of Nontraditional Students**

According to Kuenzi (2005), labeling students as nontraditional is highly debated as there is very little consensus on what differentiates traditional and nontraditional students. He further argued that the primary objective should be to understand that today's college students are much different than those who attended in the past at the origination of postsecondary education. Because of this it is important for institutions of higher education to acknowledge that the practices that worked in the past may not be as effective for today's student population. Bohl, Haak, and Shrestha (2017) discovered that five themes emerged among nontraditional students surveyed regarding their experiences in college: motivations to return, academic challenges,

generation gap, support systems, and the benefits to being a nontraditional student. This study fails to look deeper into the preferences of nontraditional students in academics.

Nontraditional students may possess intrapersonal characteristics that have an impact on their learning. While some of these factors, like readiness to learn, may positively impact a student, others can present a hindrance to the learning process. Jameson and Fusco (2014) found that students who hold the characteristics of nontraditional students under the NCES's definition often hold negative perceptions of themselves which may serve as a barrier to their ability to learn. Additionally, these students are going against social norms in their decision to come back to school and are participating in an education system that was originally designed for students in very different life situations than themselves, namely traditional college students (Hagedorn, 2005).

Nontraditional students are different from the students who have taken a linear path to college as their experiences and backgrounds are more extensive and are significant to producing learning (Chen, 2014). Nontraditional students tend to be more self-directed in learning as they thoroughly and genuinely enjoy the act of learning and are more committed to their educational pursuit (Carlan, 2001). The characteristics that students need to be successful in self-directed learning include control, regulation, internal and external motivation and proven records of success in learning and activities (O'Shea, 2003). The majority of nontraditional students who are pursuing undergraduate education have these traits and are set to succeed in learning because of this. Instructors may have more achievement from nontraditional students when they move away from traditional didactic instruction. Fostering student empowerment by allowing students to make decisions for themselves, changing the classroom design, and implementing more reflective writing produces more engagement in adult students (Ishler, 2003).



Self-directed learning allows nontraditional students to tailor learning so that it meets their needs and helps accomplish any goals that they may have. While adults may be apprehensive about participating in this type of learning at first, once they establish confidence in their own abilities through the support of instructors it is often preferred to other learning activities (La Porte, 2015).

Furthermore, Boynak (2004) identified personal responsibility for learning, challenging problems, willingness for learning and basic studying and time management skills as areas of competence that need to be mastered to benefit from self-directed learning. Nontraditional students are much more likely to have these abilities than traditional college students which further proves the fit of self-directed learning to this subgroup of students. These qualities afford nontraditional students the ability to thrive in postsecondary coursework and may help to explain why nontraditional students are often found to be as successful if not more so than their traditional peers (Giancola, Grawitch, and Borchert, 2009).

### **Obstacles to Degree Attainment**

Nontraditional college students often serve in various roles throughout their daily life. Serving in multiple capacities while in college can lead to role conflict for these students. For some nontraditional students' conflict between school and family responsibilities is experienced while others have trouble finding a balance between school and work (Markle, 2015). In 2012, the Lumina Foundation found that family and work responsibilities were the two most common blockades specified by nontraditional students in completing their degree (Erisman and Steele, 2012).

Older students who return to college to finish a degree often have many more trials in doing so than traditional aged students who continue on to college right out of high school. For

nontraditional students, life can get in the way of the pursuit of a degree as life responsibilities increase. These students tend to face different issues in their educational venture as they balance families, jobs, and school (Bidwell, 2014). Caschera (2013) identified three main challenges that nontraditional students face in choosing to return to school: finding a school/life balance, accessibility of classes, and the cost of education. The increased hardships that are present for nontraditional students in school make them more at risk of dropping out of coursework before completing their degree. Time constraints and financial hardships are challenges that directly impact nontraditional students at a much higher rate than traditional students (Forbus et al., 2010).

Financial constraints may be an issue for nontraditional students. With basic necessities such as food, clothing, and shelter taking priority over education for these students, often the availability of financial assistance is the determining factor of whether or not a nontraditional student can enroll in coursework.

It cannot be denied that nontraditional students are plagued by many obstacles along the way to degree completion. However, instead of becoming absorbed by the challenges that go along with being a nontraditional college student, one should instead concentrate on the benefits that this classification brings. Focus, clarity of goals, and life experiences are facets that help set nontraditional learners up for success in college coursework (Ahmadzai, G., 2013).

### **Retention of Nontraditional Students**

Because it is often hard to pinpoint reasons that nontraditional students stop out or drop out of college, it is difficult to find effective ways to lessen the growing attrition rates among this group of students. In most scenarios, an adult's decision to stop working toward a degree is made for several reasons. Tinto's student integration model and Bean and Metzner's student attrition

model have been utilized as guides for dropout research studies. Tinto (1993) claimed that attrition developed from the student's interactions with the educational environment. He argued that students became more committed to their education when they were socially and academically integrated into the college setting.

Bean and Metzner (1985) believed that nontraditional students' drop outs were because of academic performance, psychological factors, their background, and variables in the environment. They determined that the greatest predictors of dropout for nontraditional students are GPA and number of hours enrolled which contrasts with the findings of studies on traditional college students (Bean and Metzner, 1987). Nontraditional students' commitments to jobs and their families can isolate them from classmates ultimately leading to the decision to leave schooling (Kasworm, 2010). Hull and Hinckley (2007) concluded that the failure of nontraditional students can be attributed to a lack of postsecondary education systems to meet the needs of those students.

### **Programs for Nontraditional Students**

Hutchens and Franklin (2013) suggest that it is unlikely that nontraditional students' priorities and needs in considering college enrollment are the same as those of traditional college students. Changing demands in the workplace, transitions in their home life, and a shifting economy are some of the reasons that returning students who have been out of postsecondary education for some time document as their motivation to return to complete a collegiate degree. Because these students are serving in multiple capacities, they require flexibility in time and location of classes to be able to complete coursework. Convenience and affordability were found to be the most heavily weighted factors in nontraditional students' decision on college choice (Bers and Smith, 1987). As Kasworm (2014) suggests, programs designed for adult students

should look to maximize access, be responsive to adult learner lifestyles, and be relevant to adult life roles.

Institutions of higher education have begun to recognize this need in recent years and have started shifting dynamics of coursework as well as student support services to accommodate nontraditional students on their schedule as traditional college programs rarely give these students the opportunity to be successful in reaching their ultimate goal of degree completion. As Backels and Meashey (1997) discovered, it is not enough for nontraditional students to make use of services designed for traditional college students.

Students drop out of college for many reasons. However, in returning to finish their degree, students who have been out of school for some time will look for the following factors in a degree completion program: convenient time and place, flexible pacing for completion, transferability, reputation of institution in accordance to adult learners, need based on work opportunities, ability to earn credit for work/life experiences, financial aid availability, and/or child care (Bart, 2010). Nontraditional students also want the ability to self-design their own educational programs.

Some institutions strive to assist nontraditional students by handling everything through one unit within the college. This can be beneficial to students but can also have its drawbacks when matters cannot be fully resolved without the student being transferred multiple times (Clark, 2012). Other postsecondary education institutions utilize alternative instructional methods as part of their undergraduate programs geared toward nontraditional students. Alternative educational options can be ideal for nontraditional students who have limited time and resources to put toward degrees. Work-based education, e-learning, and acknowledgement of

prior learning are some of the tools that colleges have used to make higher education more accessible to nontraditional students.

Table 1, which follows, summarizes some of the studies on nontraditional students that served as the resources used from the literature for this study. The methodology of the studies reviewed as well as the specific focal point and findings regarding nontraditional students are outlined in the table below.

Table 1

*Comparison of Research Studies on Nontraditional Students*

Authors	Methodology	Focus	Key Findings
Sandler, M. (2000). Career decision-making self-efficacy, perceived stress, and an integrated model of student persistence: A structural model of finances, attitudes, behavior, and career development. <i>Research in Higher Education</i> , 41, p. 537-580.	Quantitative study  Data collected through a survey questionnaire and institutional records.  Sample: 937 students 24 years of age or older studying in two-year and four-year degrees programs.	Persistence of adult students and factors affecting their decision to stay in school	It was found that career-decision making self-efficacy had the widest range of influence on a student's decision to persist in education.
Bye, D., Pushkar, D., and Conway, M. (2007). Motivation, interest, and positive affect in traditional and nontraditional undergraduate students. <i>Adult Education Quarterly</i> , 57, p. 141-158. Doi: 10.1177/0741713606294235.	Quantitative study  Data collected through an assessment conducted by researcher  Sample: 300 undergraduates ranging in age from 18 to 60 years old	Comparing motivations of Traditional and Nontraditional Students	It was found that nontraditional students, meaning those over the age of twenty-age, possessed more intrinsic motivation to persist in education than traditional students.
<a href="#">Taylor, J. and House, B. (2010). An exploration of</a>	Qualitative study	Three areas of interest including	Male gave more intrinsic reasons

<p><a href="#"><u>identity, motivations, and concerns of non-traditional students at different stages of higher education.</u></a>  <a href="#"><u><i>Psychology Teaching Review</i>, 16 (1), p. 46-57.</u></a></p>	<p>Data collected via a questionnaire.</p> <p>Sample: 42 students who had accepted a university place for the coming year, were current learners at the research site, or had graduated in the previous year.</p>	<p>motivation to pursue education, aspirations post-university, identity, and student concerns.</p>	<p>for returning to education while females cited extrinsic motivators. Mature students tended to be more negative in their self-descriptions; however, these improved as the student spent more time at the university. Student concerns were found to be related to their nontraditional characteristics.</p>
<p>Bohl, A., Haak, B., and Shrestha, S. (2017). The experiences of nontraditional students: A qualitative inquiry. <i>The Journal of Continuing Higher Education</i>, 65, p, 166-174.</p>	<p>Qualitative study</p> <p>Data collected via open-ended questionnaires</p> <p>Sample: 9 participants from a private, non-profit, four year, liberal arts, Catholic university: 3 males and 6 females who met the following criteria: minimum age of 25 years, no enrollment in a higher education setting immediately after high school, and currently pursuing an undergraduate degree on a full-time basis.</p>	<p>Students spoke to overarching themes of nontraditional students: motivation to return, academic challenge, generation gap, support, and benefits of being a nontraditional students.</p>	<p>Family support was found to be important to students. Nontraditional students connect their new learning experiences with their preexisting, real-life experiences. Nearly three-fourths of participants were looking for occupational opportunities, fulfilling a desire to complete a degree, or had an interest in the subject. Participants expressed a lack of information regarding university</p>

			resources and programs.
Jameson, M.M. and Fusco, B.R. (2014). Math anxiety, math self-concept, and math self-efficacy in adult learners compared to traditional undergraduate students. <i>Adult Education Quarterly</i> , 64 (4), p. 306-322.	Quantitative study  Data collected via Abbreviated Math Anxiety Scale, Mathematics Self-Efficacy Scale, and the Math subscale of the Self-Description questionnaire  Sample: 226 undergraduates from a medium-size state university. 60 were classified as traditional students and 166 were classified as adult learners.	Students' anxieties, self-concept, and efficacy	Found that nontraditional students view themselves negatively which may serve as a barrier to learning
Hagedorn, L.S. (2005). Square pegs: Adult students and their "fit" in postsecondary institutions. <i>Change</i> , 37 (1), p. 22-29.	Quantitative study  Data collected via questionnaire and transcript data  Sample: 5,000 students from the Los Angeles Community College district	Access, Success, Retention, and Institutional Accommodation of Nontraditional Students	Found that nontraditional students are often going against the norm and participating in systems of education that are set up for traditional college students meaning there is a lack of support for nontraditional students.
Markle, G. (2015). Factors influencing persistence among nontraditional university students. <i>Adult Education Quarterly</i> , 65 (3), p. 267-285.	Mixed methods study  Data collected via an online survey	Persistence of nontraditional students	Found that nontraditional students have trouble balancing school and family responsibilities or

	Sample: 494 nontraditional men and women attending a large public university in the southeastern U.S.		school and work roles.
--	---	--	------------------------

### Chapter Summary

While much research exists on the topic of nontraditional learners in college settings, there is a need for future research to explore the intricacies and individuality of the academic experiences of these students. Each and every nontraditional student has his or her own life story filled with obstacles and hardships along the way to obtaining a bachelor’s degree. Exploring the details of these stories can help higher education institutions by providing information about the needs of this subgroup of students in the pursuit of an undergraduate degree. Without these students’ first person accounts of their academic experiences, it is difficult for universities to know if they are providing the support services needed to help these students be successful in reaching their end goals. Further exploration of students’ academic journey can help identify areas in which support services could be changed or increased to better assist nontraditional students in their studies. As adults consider returning to complete their degree, many are faced with various administrative and academic obstacles along the way. Because of this, nontraditional students are a vulnerable population in that if the institution is not a good fit for them from the beginning they may give up on the quest to a degree and never return.



## **Chapter 3**

### **Methodology**

Postsecondary institutions of higher education must rise to the challenge of discovering the most effective methods of teaching adult and nontraditional learners if they hope to remain competitive in the ranks of colleges and universities. These challenges require institutions to obtain feedback on preferences and effectiveness of teaching practices from the nontraditional students among their population and make use of that information in practices and policies.

According to Glesne, methodology is “a theoretical framework that guides how researchers come to know what they know. The methodological framework includes assumptions about what is of importance to study, what constitutes legitimate knowledge, and what counts as evidence for making knowledge claims” (p.282). The procedures by which researchers go about their work of describing, explaining and predicting phenomena are called research methodology. In short, methodology is how researchers solve the research problem or answer the research question. The study of research methodology gives researchers the necessary skill set to choose methods, materials, and scientific tools, as well as training in techniques appropriate for the problem chosen.

This chapter will describe the methodology and methods that will be used for this research study. First the research design will be explained including the theoretical framework, research methodology, participants, and data collection. Second, a description of how the researcher analyzed the data collected will be given. Third, the validity of the research methodology and methods will be provided. Lastly, the chapter will conclude with a summary.

### **Epistemology**

Epistemology is concerned with the nature of knowledge; it explores how we obtain knowledge (Crotty, 1998). Constructivism was chosen as the most appropriate epistemology for

this study as the researcher sought to understand the academic side of the shared experiences of nontraditional students at large public universities in the South. Often adults take the information received in class and try to connect it to their own prior experiences to make sense of it in their own lives. Because of this practice, constructivism was applicable to this study as the researcher hoped to explore how nontraditional students construct knowledge in learning environments.

Constructivism proposes that people construct their own knowledge of the world through experiences and the reflection of those experiences. Several researchers argue that knowledge construction is based on the learner's social interactions with others (Dewey, 1916, Vygotsky, 1978, Bruner, 1996). In the case of students, the assumption is that their reality is created from the social interactions had with peers and teachers, as well as stimuli outside the classroom.

The constructivist view of knowledge is that truth comes into existence as people engage with the world around them (Constantino, 2008). Creswell says that the goal of qualitative research from the constructivist epistemology relies on the participants' point of view of the situation (2013). This study sought to explore nontraditional students' academic experiences through examination of the participants' lived experiences at the research site. The researcher wanted to give students a chance to voice their own personal reflections of the time they spent in undergraduate coursework.

## **Methodology**

The methodology used for this qualitative study is descriptive phenomenology. Phenomenology was chosen because the researcher's exploration of the literature indicated that more research was needed on the academic experiences of nontraditional students enrolled in undergraduate study. This study intended to provide an in-depth understanding of effective educational processes through the first-person accounts of nontraditional students.

According to Moustakas (1994), a phenomenological approach to qualitative research allows researchers to focus on studying a small number of participants expansively in search of underlying meanings or themes. Moustakas (1994) declares that phenomenology is guided by personal explanations of the phenomenon being studied. Because of this, phenomenological inquiry is fitting for exploring nontraditional students' academic experiences in a particular type of university through the first-hand accounts of participants in interviews. As Seidman (2013) did, the researcher used the phenomenological research design to explore the participants' personal experiences and how they make meaning of those experiences through a theoretical perspective which views the world as a set of socially constructed ideas.

Creswell states that “phenomenological research is a strategy of inquiry in which the researcher identifies the essence of human experiences about a phenomenon as described by participants” (2009, p.13). Since the researcher wanted to understand the lived academic experiences of nontraditional students in undergraduate coursework at the research site from the students' perspective, phenomenology was chosen as an appropriate fit for the study.

Much like Moustakas, the researcher focused on the participants' descriptions of the lived experiences of the phenomenon being studied. The descriptive phenomenological methods used in this study were deemed to be the most appropriate fit of methodology given the goal of the study. The researcher relied on one of Husserl's concepts, *epoche*, which requires investigators to set aside their own experiences to gain a fresh perspective on the phenomenon under examination (Moustakas, 1994).

Descriptive phenomenology was primarily the work of Edmund Husserl. His method of phenomenology supports impartiality, in which preconceived notions, bias, and judgments, are bracketed out (Papp and Markkanen, 2003). This will attempt to be done through first admitting

and bracketing out the researcher's own experiences with the phenomenon before exploring the experiences of the participants. The researcher's subjectivity statement can be found in the next chapter. This will give details of the potential biases and prior knowledge on the topic of educational experiences of nontraditional students.

The procedures of phenomenology as identified by Moustakas (1994) include identifying a phenomenon to study, bracketing out one's own experiences, and collecting data from several persons who have experienced the phenomenon. The researcher conducted the aforementioned process and analyzed the data collected by reducing the information given to significant statements or quotes, which were then be combined into themes. From there, the researcher developed a textural description of the participants' experiences as well as a structural description of their experiences. This will produce a combination of what participants experienced and how they experienced it in terms of the conditions, situations, or context.

Because the study's aim was to provide information on ways to improve the learning experiences of nontraditional students, this problem was best suited for the descriptive phenomenological approach as it is important to understand individuals' shared experiences of the phenomenon at hand: undergraduate academic experiences. For this purpose, generalizability is not the most important consideration. The thick, thorough descriptions provided by the data collected in qualitative research, qualitative researchers believe, often lead to detail-rich analysis and broad-scale understanding in areas which may remain methodologically underexplored in quantitative research. Additionally, as Englander (2012) puts forth, the notion of generalizability is sometimes misunderstood. It is possible that smaller, more in-depth studies (such as qualitative research studies) may do more to increase the understanding of rarely studied groups or phenomena no matter the study's 'sample' size.

Phenomenology's focus on exploring how human beings make sense of their experiences steered the development of the study's research questions. Phenomenology looks for the meaning, structure, and essence of the lived experience of a phenomenon from person to person while staying true to the experience and context in which it appears (Patton, 2015). The study's research questions focused on nontraditional students' academic experiences through an exploration of their shared experiences in undergraduate coursework at large public university in the South.

For the purpose of this study, the experience or phenomenon that the participants had in common was their academic journey to a bachelor's degree through large public university in the South. The researcher sought to get a detailed first-person account of the students' lived academic experiences in undergraduate courses at the research site. Descriptive phenomenological theory was deemed to be the most suitable methodology for understanding nontraditional students' academic experiences at a large public university in the South due to its focus on individual accounts of the phenomenon as it creates a thorough description of the phenomena at hand which enables the researcher to provide a holistic view of the experience.

### **Research Design**

**Research Question.** This study was designed to explore the academic experiences of nontraditional students in pursuit of a bachelor's degree at a large public university in the South. The main research question is "What are the lived experiences of nontraditional learners who are currently enrolled in undergraduate coursework at a large public university in the South?"

**Sample.** According to Creswell (2013), a researcher should choose participants who can help understand the problem and the research question best. This study's sample included only students enrolled in undergraduate coursework toward a bachelor's degree at the research site

who also possess at least one of the characteristics of the NCES's definition of a nontraditional college student as detailed previously in this study. The researcher chose to include only this portion of the undergraduate population at the research site as she holds genuine interest in this group's academic success due to her work with this part of the college population. The researcher chose eleven participants who met the criteria of nontraditional students at the research site to conduct interviews with to gather information on their educational journey to a bachelor's degree. The researcher also used that same sample of students, the students at the research site who met the criteria as defined previously in this study, in sending out an electronic semi-structured interview protocol through the online software program Qualtrics via email. The participants were all currently enrolled in undergraduate study at a large public university in the South.

**Participant Selection.** This study used purposeful sampling with criterion-based strategies to select participants. According to Patton (2015), purposeful sampling involves choosing participants who by nature will explain and clarify the research questions being considered. Participants for the study had to meet the following predetermined criterion: Undergraduate students currently enrolled in coursework toward a Bachelor's degree at the research site (a large public university in the South) who also met any one (or more) of the principles in the National Center for Education Statistics' definition of nontraditional students which include the following: had delayed enrollment into postsecondary education; attend college part-time; work full-time; are financially independent for financial aid purposes; have dependents other than a spouse; are single parents; or were a GED recipient (NCES, n.d.). The researcher hoped to obtain at least one male and one female participant who met each of the classifications within the NCES definition of nontraditional students to provide maximum

variation within the sample. Through maximum variation sampling the researcher expected to obtain the viewpoint of all subclassifications of students within the nontraditional student population: those who work, those who have children, and those who are older to name just a few. By varying the participants selected, the results will be able to be applied to a greater range of readers (Merriam, 2002).

A list of students' email addresses was provided to the researcher by the research site's Office of Institutional Research once the Institutional Review Board approved this study. Potential participants were contacted by the researcher via email to disclose the purpose of the study and its methodology to determine willingness to participate in the study. The researcher sent out an email requesting voluntary participation in the study. The verbiage of this email is located at the end of this study in Appendix C. The email was sent to all students in the college's population who met the criteria set forth by the researcher in this study.

Participation in this study consisted of at least one face-to-face interview or a phone interview if the student preferred as well as e-mail communications with the researcher as needed. The interviewer explained the study and guaranteed confidentiality (as constructed through the use of pseudonyms, a consent form, and IRB approval). Interviews were audio recorded for data collection purposes. The recording was transcribed and stored on a flash drive only accessible to the researcher and the researcher's advisor. Participation in this study was strictly voluntary, and participants were notified that they could withdraw their participation at any time they wished. Participants were given the opportunity to review the answers they provided as transcribed by the researcher after the interview to ensure accuracy.

**Research Site.** This study was conducted by pulling the sample from a large public research university in the South. The university chosen, referred to as the University of the South

in this study, encompasses 1,607 acres and had a total undergraduate enrollment of 17,394 students in the fall 2017 semester. Full-time equivalent enrollments account for 11,827 of the undergraduate students at this institution; therefore, it also qualifies as a large institution under the Carnegie Classification mentioned previously in this section (University of the South, 2017).

The researcher focused on this institution because in doing preliminary research it was determined that very little information was available on the institution's website that pertained specifically to nontraditional students. After reviewing the websites of several institutions being considered, the researcher settled on the University of the South for this study as she was interested in exploring ways that the institution could improve the chances of success for nontraditional students. In the exploratory research phase prior to the start of the study, the researcher was only able to locate a site for one blog dedicated to articles pertaining to nontraditional students, and the most recent article was posted back in 2013.

### **Data Collection**

Data collection methods in this study were typical of those used in descriptive phenomenological research and relied on electronic responses completed via online semi-structured interviews by the participants as well as interviews conducted by the researcher with participants. The researcher conducted interviews with participants, and they also were asked to write about their experiences in as much detail as possible in electronic responses to questions asked to glean multiple perspectives of the phenomenon in order to detect commonalities in the experience among participants (Colaizzi, 1978; Giorgi, 2009; Hatch, 2002; Spinelli, 2005; Wojnar & Swanson, 2007).

The data for this research study was collected primarily through the use of semi-structured interviews consisting of open-ended questions based on phenomenological principles. The interview questions, which can be found in Appendix A, were constructed around the



research questions with the goal of allowing participants to reflect on their academic experiences in undergraduate coursework and share those with the researcher through their perspectives.

After interviews were conducted, the researcher followed up by sending out an electronic semi-structured interview protocol constructed of questions crafted to gather additional information once the interview transcripts had been reviewed by the researcher. This semi-structured interview protocol was administered through the online software program, Qualtrics. The researcher's goal was to determine if there were similarities in findings when a larger portion of the population was involved.

**Interviews.** Once emails were sent by the researcher to all students enrolled in undergraduate coursework at the research site who also met the components of the NCES definition of a nontraditional student, the researcher conducted interviews by phone with the first eleven students who responded to her request for voluntary participation. A semi-structured format was used for the interviews which consisted of a simple interview guide that contained several open-ended questions in hopes of getting the participants' account of their lived academic experiences in undergraduate coursework toward a Bachelor's degree. This guide is located in Appendix A at the end of this study. The researcher audiotaped the interviews and listened to the recording at a later date to transcribe the interview by hand. The researcher aimed to do as Patton (2002) states should be done in qualitative research: provide a situation in which participants can respond to questions in an accurate way that portrays their thoughts about the world, or the part of the world in question.

Table 2

*Interview Participant Information*

<b>Participant Pseudonym</b>	<b>Participant Gender</b>	<b>Participant Age Bracket</b>
Riley	Female	20-24
Jessica	Female	25-29
Mary	Female	20-24
Beth	Female	50-54
Taylor	Male	35-39
Ella	Female	40-44
Marie	Female	45-49
Eric	Male	40-44
Bob	Male	30-34
Seth	Male	25-29
Susan	Female	35-39

**Electronic Semi-Structured Interview Protocol.** After interviews were conducted, an electronic semi-structured interview protocol was created by the researcher and was administered to participants through Qualtrics. The purpose of this data collection method was to open up the study to include a greater portion of the population to determine whether or not the findings differed from the researcher’s findings in the interviews. The questions used can be reviewed in Appendix B at the end of this study. A link to the questions was emailed out to participants, and they were given two weeks to respond with a reminder being sent through email after one week to the students who had not yet responded. The researcher used Qualtrics to analyze the responses of participants to look for common themes that appeared. Of the 4,698 students that the researcher invited to complete the electronic protocol via email, 125 responded and submitted completed answers to questions.

**Online Communication.** This study employed online exchanges of information in the form of electronic messages between the researcher and individual participants as needed to gather information after the interviews have ended. This form of communication’s primary

purpose was to gather any information as the need arose for the researcher to clarify or ask questions to the participants about the data that was gathered during the interview.

**Researcher Notes.** Throughout the course of the data collection period, the researcher kept a journal of notes on her experiences. Once an interview was completed, the researcher took a moment to reflect and write down any thoughts that came to mind after speaking with the participant. This gave the researcher the chance to reflect on what was happening throughout the study. These notes also served the purpose of helping the researcher to reflect on any of her own subjectivities throughout the process.

### **Reliability**

**Member Checking.** Once the interviews were transcribed, member checking was used to ensure that the researcher's findings were accurately portrayed as the participants' intended. As Creswell and Miller (2005) suggest, member checking transfers the validity practices from the researcher to the participants. Respondents were given the researcher's transcription of his or her interview so that accuracy could be certified. This also served as an opportunity for the researcher to collect additional data regarding the essence of the participants' academic experiences.

### **Data Analysis**

**Inductive Analysis.** The data obtained from the interviews with the participants was analyzed through inductive analysis. The researcher reviewed the transcriptions to identify codes and categories that commonly appeared in the data. From there, the codes that emerged from the data collected led the researcher to establish key themes to be presented in the findings of the study. Through the inductive process of phenomenological reduction, the researcher identified commonalities that appeared across the transcriptions of the interview data gleaned through

interactions with the participants as well as the information obtained in the writing prompts (Merriam, 2002).

Colaizzi, Giorgi, and Van Kaam formulated three methods of data analysis which all centered on describing the meaning of an experience through themes that the research allows to emerge from the data itself. The researcher followed Colaizzi's method of data analysis as she returned the findings of the interview transcriptions to the participants for review and validation once complete (Dowling, 2007).

The flexibility of the inductive analysis method gave the researcher flexibility to adjust methodology as the need arose. This was important in qualitative research because the participants steer the direction of the study with the data that they provided. As Strauss and Corbin (1998) suggest the researcher began with an area of study and let themes originate from there. This approach prevented any preconceptions held about nontraditional students' experiences from inhibiting the evaluation. This was important because in qualitative research the information provided by participants dictated the direction of the study.

**Themes.** The themes abstracted from the data represented the information that the researcher collected from the participants that was pertinent to understanding nontraditional students' undergraduate learning experiences at a large public research university in the South. Themes were identified through a process call horizontalization. This process involved laying out all data and giving equal weight to all aspects of data collected. From here, data were clustered into themes and repetitious statements were taken out. As Moustakas (1994) describes, qualities of the phenomenon in question are recognized and described with nonrepetitive elements being connected thematically to develop a full description. The themes that emerge as

commonalities across participants provide areas that might warrant further study as they represent aspects that can have a positive or negative effect on the experience.

**Commonalities in Themes.** The researcher first identified themes that existed in the data of the interview transcriptions and the electronic semi-structured interview protocol separately. The researcher began the data analysis process by looking at the findings of the eleven interviews conducted with participants. From there, the researcher reviewed the electronic protocol responses from the 125 students who participated in this portion of the study. Once both sets of data had been reviewed, the researcher looked at everything together to determine what, if any, commonalities existed among the two sets of data. The commonalities found indicated areas of concern for institutions and instructors in the experiences of nontraditional students at the research site.

**Confidentiality.** The name of the institution which served as the research site was not be included, but instead the researcher assigned a false name to the site to provide confidentiality for participants. The research site was renamed the University of the South. Names of the participants who took part in this study were not given at any point to provide anonymity. There was no mention of participant's names nor was there any use of information that could identify who the participants are in the study. Instead the researcher assigned each participant a false name to protect his or her identity, and the false name was used by the researcher in referencing participants throughout the study.

**Subjectivity Statement.** The topic of this study, specifically nontraditional students' academic experiences in undergraduate coursework is of particular interest to me, the researcher. I have worked in higher education for the past ten years and have been working specifically with nontraditional students for the last five years.

It is important for researchers to look into their presuppositions and possible biases that may have an impact on the study. I believe that my biases can be separated out into two categories: personal and professional. My study will involve examining participants lived academic experiences in undergraduate education at large public universities in the South. It is critical that I as the researcher address my own subjectivity within this study. Due to the constructivist nature of this study, it is important to acknowledge my own reflexivity as this type of epistemology requires researchers to consider the impact that they can have on the construction of meaning (King and Horrocks, 2010). As Willig (2001) ascertains, personal reflexivity is necessary as the ways in which the researcher's own beliefs, interests, experiences, and identities could impact the research should be explored.

On a personal level, I find it important to establish a relationship of trust with participants. Because my own educational path has been very different than that of the participants that I interviewed for this study, I was concerned about being able to establish authenticity with them. I went straight from high school into college and completed my undergraduate degree within four years. From there I took a year off and then started back to school in pursuit of a Master's degree. The majority of the students who will be participants in this study had a delayed start to college or have taken time away from their studies due to other priorities that have arisen in their lives outside of school. I worry that it will be difficult to get them to share details at the depth needed to give an accurate depiction of their academic experiences in the program due to our differences. Authenticity among the researcher and participants is needed to ensure that participants are open about their experiences and are truthful in their responses to my questions.

On a professional level, my work as an academic advisor at a large public university that shares characteristics of the research site used in this study could be thought of as a potential bias. Glesne and Peshkin (1992) refer to this type of research as “backyard research” as it involves studying the researcher’s own organization. Because of my professional involvement on a daily basis with advising nontraditional students at the university, I have come to have certain connotations regarding what it means to be a nontraditional student pursuing an undergraduate degree. Multiple strategies of establishing validity and reliability will be utilized to counteract the possibility of the researcher presenting any bias to the study due to her own knowledge of the programs through her daily work.

**Trustworthiness.** Trustworthiness of qualitative data refers to the level of confidence in data, interpretation, and methods used in a study (Connelly, 2016).

The selection of participants without regard to their chosen major, department, or field of study at the research site added to the trustworthiness of data collected on nontraditional students’ experiences. Because participants were selected from multiple departments of study across the university, it can be said that the study’s findings have relevance to the practices and policies of the university as a whole.

Member checking was used to establish credibility in this study. The researcher returned transcriptions of the interviews to participants in order for them to verify that the researcher had interpreted answers as intended.

The study can be replicated at other sites to establish validity by making any needed changes that are relevant for the research site to be studied. Further qualitative studies will aid in identifying specific patterns or themes that emerge across data. This data will then enable further studies in understanding the experiences of nontraditional students at institutions similar to the

one chosen by the research for this study. The use of qualitative analysis allowed for detailed and descriptive examination that describes themes and patterns discovered by the researcher.

Furthermore, this methodology allowed the researcher to determine implications for policy and practice to improve the academic experience of nontraditional students.

**Triangulation.** Triangulation is the use of multiple data collection methods in a study by which the researcher attempts to establish validity. Glesne (2011) claims that when researchers hear the same information through multiple sources they can feel confident making those claims (p. 47). For this study, triangulation was achieved through using interviews, gathering electronic responses to questions answered by the participants, member checking, and online communication with participants.

**Risks and Benefits.** I do not believe that there were any risks to students who served as participants in this study since their names were not released. I believe that this qualitative study will provide several benefits. While there may not be any benefits that directly affect the participants in their educational experiences, the findings of this study will help the research site enhance the learning experiences for future students who fall into the nontraditional classification. The university that was used as the research site can utilize the data gathered by the researcher regarding students' lived academic experiences to make changes as needed to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of its programs in relation to obtaining the goal of easing the path to an undergraduate degree for nontraditional students.

## **Chapter Summary**

This chapter has provided a layout of the methodology of the research study by giving details on the research site, participants, data collection, and data analysis methods. The research method, descriptive phenomenology, was qualitative in nature and sought to describe the essence



of the lived academic experiences of the participants involved in the phenomenon in question: the pursuit of an undergraduate degree at large public research universities in the South. The chapters that follow will present the researcher's findings and will offer recommendations for future research and practice.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Findings**

This chapter will present the findings of the phenomenological study conducted to answer the following research questions:

Research Question 1: What are the lived academic experiences of nontraditional learners who are currently enrolled in undergraduate coursework at a large public university in the South?

Research Question 2: The secondary research question is as follows: How are the lives of nontraditional students impacted by their academic experiences in undergraduate coursework at the research site?

This chapter will also include discussion of how the findings of this study related to literature about experiential learning theory as well as the existing literature on nontraditional students.

This phenomenological study produced a description of a shared experience that all participants had in common. This was achieved by obtaining first-hand accounts of the phenomenon from participants. This approach was deemed appropriate for the topic being explored, nontraditional students' undergraduate academic experiences in a large public university, as it is something that cannot be quantified easily. As Moustakas (1994) pointed out, phenomenology analyzes a phenomenon for themes and meanings through the use of people's shared experiences of the phenomenon so it can be described and understood.

Overall through this study the researcher found that nontraditional students often grapple in isolation due to the differences that separate them from the traditional college-going population. For these students, limited time remains to squeeze learning into their already full work and family lives. For many participants education is seen as their third shift job in addition

to paid work and the work they do at home. Nontraditional students often fit in their school work before their family wakes up in the morning or long after their family members have gone to bed at night. These students have many background characteristics stacked against them in their quest for educational pursuit; however, they persist through these hardships and challenges knowing they will someday reap the benefits that go along with obtaining an undergraduate degree. The participants of this study discussed the tremendous sacrifices they have had to make to balance work, family, and school while pursuing a degree. This balance is particularly difficult for female students who are mothers as adequate and affordable childcare is hard to find.

Difficulty of classes turns nontraditional students skeptical about whether or not they are capable of completing degree requirements upon returning to college. As indicated by participants it is hard for these students to pick up where they left off in regards to academic skills and knowledge after time away from school. Often academic refreshers and remedial trainings are needed to prepare these students for the work ahead. The majority of postsecondary education programs lack in this preparation and academic support for nontraditional students.

### **Introduction of Themes**

Once the interview data collected was reviewed and analyzed, categorical themes were determined by the researcher through the use of open coding. The researcher allowed the themes to emerge from the data collected and strived to avoid letting the theoretical perspectives of the study influence the coding process. As Glesne suggests, the researcher tried to prevent “imposing an a priori set of codes on data” (2011, p. 195).

The identification of themes was done by reviewing the frequency of statements across participant interviews. Similar ideas and concepts were grouped together. The themes were then used to produce explanations of nontraditional students’ academic behaviors and preferences.

Four common themes were identified across the participants' interview data: motivations, irrelevant content, challenges, and support systems.

### **Theme 1: Motivations**

The theme, motivations, brings together a variety of motivators expressed by participants during the interviews I had with them. This theme displays the primary reasons research participants gave for returning to school to obtain college credentials. There were three categories that defined Theme 1: a) family support, b) career growth, and c) personal fulfillment. The categories found in this study are consistent with those of Ross-Gordon's (2003) study on the primary reasons that nontraditional students return to school mentioned previously in the literature review of this study. Ross-Gordon's study cited pressures in the workplace, changes in family situations, and personal goals as reasons nontraditional students return to pursue further education. These reasons parallel the categories assigned to motivations presented by this study's participants. Through the exploration of motivations to continue in pursuit of education as well as investigation of the essence of a college degree, this theme explains the meaning a college degree holds for participants. Overall, motivations fell into one of the three categories that are detailed below.

**Family support.** For nontraditional students, making the decision to return to school can impact relationships with family members. The student's commitment to coursework may require negotiating time spent with family in order to achieve his or her educational goal of obtaining a degree (Cross, 1981). However, as a parent, one of the best investments that can be made for the well-being of your family is earning a college degree. College credentials can improve financial security, social mobility, and the overall welfare of a family. Furthermore, several participants indicated that they were finishing a degree to set an example for their

children. As parents, following through to finish out something started years ago can teach perseverance and grit. Children were noted by several respondents as a significant influence to finish school. Showing children that college is attainable was cited by Riley as her motivation to persist to a degree.

Jessica decided to pursue her degree because she didn't want to be "stuck at a job that doesn't support [her] family." For many nontraditional students being able to provide for their family is the primary reason that they return to school. As the economy continues to change, fewer jobs are available to people who do not hold a baccalaureate degree. Mary credited a change in her family life situation as the reason she returned to school. She said that once she became a single mom, it became a strain to be the sole provide for her son. She also states that a degree will provide a more stable financial future for her.

In a more literal sense, Beth shared that she returned to finish her degree after watching her grandmother go through several hospital stays as she wanted to learn to care for people as nurses do. Family was mentioned in one capacity or another by many participants whether it be motivation to set an example for children, provide more for children and spouses, or to take care of parents and/or grandparents. Family is a very influential factor in nontraditional students' decision to pursue undergraduate education.

**Career growth.** The majority of participants pursuing a postsecondary education are doing so because they want to secure a brighter future. For some this means obtaining a promotion at work; for other students it is the key to finding a job. Although nontraditional students enter the journey to a bachelor's degree at different positions in life, most seem to be looking for a common outcome after degree attainment: career preparation (Warn, 2016).

Now more than ever before a college degree is necessary to obtain a career in which one can support a family. The reoccurring focus of participants on a degree being the key to taking a next step in their career indicates that educators and higher education institutions should take into consideration the needs of the workforce when developing curriculum for programs.

CareerBuilder found in a recent survey that nearly a third of employers have raised education requirements in the past five years (Elejalde-Ruiz, 2016). For many nontraditional students, career-related needs are the primary motivation for returning to school. Taylor even expressed frustrations of having to take classes that he considers a “waste of time as they do not provide any useful information for a career path.” This shows that many students view their education as a means to an end with a job being the ultimate goal in mind.

**Personal fulfillment.** For other participants in this study, their primary reason for returning to school was to fulfill a personal goal or dream. Several nontraditional students mentioned a degree as their end goal. For others, it was a need to prove to themselves that college was something that they could do. Ella referred to education as “something of [her] very own.” Because many nontraditional students are trying to fulfill multiples roles that often require giving their time to others, education was thought of as something they did for themselves. Participants shared a sense of the feeling that education is one thing that cannot be taken away by others.

Nontraditional students tend to be more focused in their studies and hold a clear goal of finishing in their mind. These students are much more determined than traditional students and have had to make more sacrifices to make education a priority in life. A few participants suggested that they have learned about themselves throughout their educational journey. Sam went even further to admit that he has noticed things that he would like to change about himself

in the process of obtaining a degree. He said that he would like to “not procrastinate, be a little more diligent, and not push myself by waiting until the last minute on deadlines.”

## **Theme 2: Irrelevant Content**

Several participants indicated that they did not feel that they were gaining any skills from their education. Marie even referred to the university education available in our country as “a waste of money” and “of little value.” While in a few instances the lack of significance could be because the student is only a semester or two into his or her studies, expressions of negativity regarding the educational experience as a whole were found to be present among data several times. The theme of irrelevant content explains how the knowledge obtained in coursework is not perceived to be applicable to the students’ lives outside of school. More often than not, this theme was presented by students when comparing their educational experiences to their work environments. The nontraditional nature of the participants in this study produced students who are at a stage in life in which they have to be primarily concerned about their career over education. Eric provided an example of this as he suggested that he received a “better education through Seven Eleven’s managerial training program than the University of the South’s training program.” Frustration was a common sentiment expressed by participants throughout the researcher’s communications with them over things such as “tedious classes that are a waste of time as they do not give any useful information for a career path” and “lazy students forcing teachers to go slow and repeat things constantly.”

As the world diversifies and changes rapidly, higher education faces some challenges in striving to remain relevant. Bob shared that he does not feel the education he is receiving relates to anything outside of school and posited that the university is more into “providing a well-rounded education which doesn’t matter a lot of times.” Providing skills and experiences for

students that will carry them out into the real world to become productive citizens and workers should be the aim of college. However, as is apparent among this study's findings, some students do not feel that their education is achieving that goal. Susan stated that she "could have just gotten a job like many friends without a degree." Bob discussed that "classes should be focused on the field of study and not what the college deems is necessary for extra money."

Also, among participants there was found to be a shared sentiment that some of the courses required for a degree are not useful. Several students suggested that the information they are attaining through courses will not be of any use to them in their career path. When asked if he felt that the education he is receiving relates to his life outside of class, Seth answered:

No, because what is being taught in the classroom is mostly theories. I have been in the working world for over twelve years already so while it is nice to know theory, more should be taught for one to succeed.

These remarks highlight the importance of higher education being aligned with career paths and skills needed to be productive in the workforce. This finding promotes the belief of Boud, Cohen, and Walker (1993) that learners have to be actively engaged for learning to occur.

Nontraditional students' academic journey many times mimics the experiential learning theory, in which students go through the cycle of experience, reflection, and conceptualization. When material is relatively unfamiliar, students are likely to connect the information being presented to them to prior experiences in order to make sense of it in their own lives. This process is what makes learning relevant and meaningful for nontraditional students who have real world experience. Being able to take what they learn and situate it in the context of their own experiences is how most adult students make sense of the knowledge they receive in the classroom, and this can look different for each individual student because their life experiences



vary considerably from one another. As suggested by Chen (2017), this practice allows academic knowledge to become something tangible and relevant to the student.

### **Theme 3: Challenge**

Overall, the majority of participants indicated in data collection that they found the pursuit of a degree to be challenging. Many different types of challenges were uncovered by the researcher during the course of this study in correspondences with participants. Some of these included financial challenges, academic challenges, social challenges, and internal personal challenges. The researcher's finding that most nontraditional students at the research site found it difficult to balance school and work along with family obligations backs up the research of others who have explored nontraditional students' experiences prior to this study. Markle (2015) as well as Erisman and Steele (2012) found that nontraditional students had a hard time finding a balance between their various roles.

Many nontraditional students expressed surprise at the large size of classes at the research site. For students coming into higher education from lower socioeconomic conditions, a lack of knowledge about the educational environment and the social norms of college complicate starting school (Borrego, 2001). Large classes made interacting with faculty more problematic to navigate and impacted the student's perceptions of the college experience and its difficulty. Several participants shared concern over not establishing any relationships with faculty or staff of the university. Sam pointed out the difficulty nontraditional students experience in online classes with regard to relationship building and also mentioned that it feels that "nobody is personally invested as far as seeing people and speaking and things like that; they are just there to fit in when they can get it done."

Although challenging, most participants indicated that their undergraduate coursework was rewarding. It was found that participants are driven by their desire to finish what they started and their goal-oriented nature. Mary stated that college has been fulfilling as she “feels like I am opening up so many doors for myself.” When asked to describe her college experience, Brittany used the word “growth” as she said it was the “only word that could encompass both the pain and joy that comes with succeeding and failing.”

Social and psychological integration was found to be cumbersome for nontraditional students as well. Respondents repeatedly expressed concern about being older than other students in their classes. Taylor told me that although he had never been self-conscious about his age, suddenly he was. Often reporting feeling out of place, nontraditional students may find it more difficult to make connections with other students due to being at a different phase of life than the majority of their peers attending college classes. Lack of time due to additional work and family responsibilities furthers this problem as opportunities are not available for nontraditional students to join organizations or clubs sponsored by the university.

#### **Theme 4: Unfamiliar Culture**

When asked if anything felt unfamiliar about college this time around, the prevalent finding was that nontraditional participants felt that the culture of the university was the most different aspect to them. Riley stated that the “diversity among students” was surprising to her upon her return to the university. For some, the main component of unfamiliarity was the use of technology and computers. For other respondents the aspect foreign to them was the difference in age of students and the trends of society that go along with that age gap. Marie stated that she had to get used to “being around kids her own kids ages.” Seth could not believe the “whiny students having a right to be heard” around campus. The diversity of students suggested by

participants in this study validates the findings of Kuenzi (2005) that labeling students as nontraditional is debatable due to the large variance present among the college-going population. As students' situations continue to become more individualized and different from one another, the practices of a university should include getting to know its student population and trying to meet the needs of it.

Social events hosted by universities are typically geared toward traditional students. This leaves few opportunities and/or events that are appealing for nontraditional students to attend. A more inclusive calendar of extracurricular events with events offered specifically for nontraditional students would greatly enhance the college experience of these students.

Nontraditional students' self-confidence was compromised by their lack of knowledge about the university and how everything works in this new environment. The changes seemed to take some respondents by surprise upon their return to classes and studying. Beth exhibited skepticism about the "kids without a care in the world." Many of the participants displayed feelings of being "disconnected" from the university and/or shared sentiments that "everything" felt unfamiliar about the college environment this time around.

Nontraditional students can often be made to feel that they are "late to the game" as Ella noted due to the university's focus on traditional college students. Jargon and terminology that is unfamiliar to nontraditional students returning to the college scene after years away may contribute to the estranged feelings for some students. Several of the participants indicated in interviews that they were not aware of any support services that the university offered. Others stated that they did not feel that the resources were available to them because of their older age. Participants indicated being reluctant to take part in the college life experiences because they felt

like they were out of place in the groups of students who were mainly traditional in age and characteristic.

### **Electronic Semi-Structured Interview Protocol Data**

After conducting the interviews and identifying the overarching themes that appeared from the data collected, the researcher developed an electronic semi-structured interview protocol composed of open-ended questions pertaining to these ideas to further explore the academic experiences of nontraditional students at the research site. The interview protocol was sent out to all students at the research site who met the criteria of a nontraditional student as defined by the NCES, outlined by the researcher in the previous chapter, using Qualtrics, an online software program. By expanding the study to include a larger number of respondents from the population the researcher hoped to examine whether or not differences existed between the two data collection methods and the data each provided. Three dominant themes were discovered among the electronic data gathered by the researcher: Time restraints, support systems and academic focus.

#### **Time restraints**

The majority of participants indicated in their responses that as nontraditional students they do not have time to participate in campus life and/or university events. Furthermore, facing the obstacle of managing time to balance school and family responsibilities was presented repeatedly. Clint acknowledged that there isn't time for her to partake in traditional college activities stating that she "pretty much has to come here, get my education, and then it is time to go. It's time to work to make money to pay bills." Tonya referred to her studies as "revolving around my schedule."

While the additional responsibilities that nontraditional students face from day to day life were thought to hinder the amount of time available to spend on extracurricular activities related to university life, several participants also mentioned that these responsibilities provided valuable life experience which benefited them in coursework. The life experiences that nontraditional students hold greatly influence their learning. Nontraditional students are able to overcome this barrier because of their goal-oriented nature and drive to succeed in obtaining a degree.

### **Support systems**

Participants suggested that support was a major factor in their educational success. The most common support system mentioned by participants was family. The second most common source of support that students expected were faculty and/or academic advisors. Sam expressed disappointment upon returning to school as he was “used to teachers helping along the way which does not happen any longer.” Moreover, Donna said she was “surprised by the lack of connectivity between professor and student due to class volume.” Nontraditional students’ learning is influenced by the social relationships that they build with the instructor and their fellow learners. Adult students often have overcome hardships to be back in the classroom or back in the position of pursuing a degree. With limited time available it becomes more difficult for faculty members to build meaningful relationships with nontraditional students. For many nontraditional students, fear has been a major factor that has kept them from seeking out postsecondary education earlier on in life. Instructors were found to be influential stimulants in the learning process for several of the participants. In response to the question pertaining to people of significant influence, John credited his advisor. He said he would have never been able to “navigate the complexities without his advice and assistance.” Fellow learners should also be mentioned in the facilitation of learning as they can help nontraditional students see the

curriculum from a different angle or viewpoint. Sometimes looking at a situation in a new light can uncover aspects of that scenario that a student would not have explored had he or she not been corresponding with fellow classmates. By exploring the thoughts and opinions of others, students are able to broaden their own understanding of the material.

### **Academic Focus**

Participants highlighted their academic priorities as a difference between their endeavor as a nontraditional student and that of their traditional classmates. Because the nontraditional participants are focused on obtaining a goal which has meaning behind it, they are more likely to be genuinely interested in the curriculum. This finding backs up that of Carlan (2001) that nontraditional students tend to enjoy their educational pursuits more and experience more success academically than traditional students on average. Tiffany stated that she is “able to focus on [her] studies and get done what [she] needs to instead of worrying about typical college problems.”

The nontraditional students who responded to questions electronically admitted to asking more questions in class, being used as examples by instructors, and overall taking a more active role in class participation than their traditional counterparts.

### **Commonalities**

Overlap existed in the electronic interview protocol responses and interview data collected by the researcher in regards to a generation gap and feeling alienated from campus life. Furthermore, similarities were found as students expressed finding it challenging to balance school with all of their other responsibilities as nontraditional students. Suggestions of increased academic focus, motivations, and the importance of support systems were also made across both data collection methods. The lack of time to pursue education means that nontraditional students

are looking for programs that offer credits in flexible and innovative ways. As universities look to better serve nontraditional students they need to consider alternative ways to award credit. Opportunities like prior learning assessment and competency-based learning could provide working students the ability to fit education into their schedule.

Because nontraditional students place their academic demands above social gatherings, it can be difficult for them to become acclimated to the campus. For nontraditional students it is difficult to engage in extracurricular activities and university sponsored events as they already have a packed schedule. Studies such as the one conducted by Taniguchi and Kaufman (2005) suggest that social engagement leads to a greater retention rate. Institutions can better the completion rate of nontraditional students by providing events that they hold an interest in. One specific area that would be of interest to nontraditional students is career services. Universities should strive to be a place where students come to learn additional knowledge as the working world continues to require constant updating of skills.

### **Chapter Summary**

This chapter provided details on the findings of this study. The themes that emerged from the interview data included: 1) motivations, 2) irrelevant content, 3) challenge, and 4) unfamiliar culture. The three themes that were discovered in further exploration through the use of an electronic semi-structured interview protocol included: 1) time restraints, 2) support systems, and 3) academic focus. Additionally, the findings were connected to relevant literature. Ultimately the researcher found that pursuit of an undergraduate degree tends to be prompted by the goal of bettering one's own position in their career or improving the welfare of one's family situation. While nontraditional students' path to a degree is full of challenges including balancing multiple responsibilities with a limited amount of time available and even suffering through some content

that the students feel is not useful in relation to their career or life outside of class, the increased focus of these students and willingness to rely on support systems and available resources make success more feasible. The final chapter of the study will provide implications of the findings and make recommendations for future research opportunities.



## **Chapter 5**

### **Discussion and Implications**

The implications of the findings of this study have a number of applications to postsecondary education providers, particularly those of similar nature to the research site used. The purpose of this study was to better understand the academic experiences of nontraditional students in undergraduate coursework at a large public university. This was done through the use of phenomenology and exploration of the participants' first-hand accounts of their educational endeavor. Nontraditional students face many challenges and obstacles along the way to degree completion, and it is imperative for institutions of higher education to find ways to better serve these students in fostering their success due to today's completion focused agenda for these institutions. This chapter will offer recommendations for policy and practice as well as provide opportunities for future research.

#### **Institution Implications**

The experiences that study participants shared with me regarding their time spent in academia at the research site provided insight into recommendations for services and/or processes needed to facilitate the path to a college degree for these students. On an institutional level, colleges and universities should view the programs and support services offered through the perspective of an online student who is nontraditional in nature. Oftentimes, students hold the perception that services are only offered to assist traditional, on-campus students because as Gilardi and Guglielmetti (2000) pointed out, universities are often designed to meet the needs of traditional students. Furthermore, the lack of specially tailored services and resources contributes to the poor completion numbers seen by nontraditional students as a whole (Powell, 2009). Traditional delivery systems of programs at four year universities assume students are first-time, full-time, and recent high school graduates. This practice creates barriers for nontraditional

students increasing their risk of not doing well or dropping out. These barriers could be removed through the use of innovative programming and curriculum design. Gathering feedback from nontraditional students on services and resources needed as well as programs they would be interested in partaking in could be beneficial to the institution in ensuring that something is offered for students from various backgrounds and life situations. Because nontraditional students enroll in postsecondary education primarily for career preparation, institutions should reconsider the career support resources offered and possibly look to expand upon those offerings.

The large size of public universities is very intimidating to nontraditional students who have been out of school for a number of years. Large classes, common at large public universities, often hinder interaction between the instructor and students leaving students feeling isolated. Instructors are often forced to rely on unproductive teaching methods, such as lectures and can damage student motivation (Cuseo, 2007). Furthermore, students are likely to be less satisfied with their academic experiences in large classes (Walker et al., 2008). Ways to overcome the challenges of large classes for the institution would be to use small groups to allow students to take an active role in their learning. Giving students the opportunity to talk out their thoughts with a smaller group of peers before asking them to share out loud with a large group can provide confidence which is needed for nontraditional students to participate in these environments.

Implementing a mentor program to provide these students with a peer to talk to anytime the need arises could help establish confidence in these students and alleviate some of the concern about not knowing what to expect or do in certain circumstances. The findings of this study show that nontraditional students feel a disconnect from the university and often feel alienated due to their differences from traditional college students. Utilizing students who also fit

the criteria of a nontraditional student as mentors would provide the most value for these students in navigating needed resources.

Public universities should look at their program requirements and mandatory courses that are included in a degree path to ensure that they have relevance to students after the degree is earned. Educational content should be informed through the engagement of employers. Tying education to the needs of the labor market could significantly increase the level of relevance of a degree for nontraditional students who are looking to start a career, switch to a new career, or gain career-specific knowledge or skills for advancement opportunities (Pelletier, 2010). The findings of this study support the beliefs of Chao and Good (2004) that nontraditional students tend to align their education with their vocation and prioritize their job more than their student status. Because of this, making a place for employers' participation in education would be beneficial for institutions of postsecondary education.

In addition to ramifications for the instructors of nontraditional students, this study highlighted the importance of a nontraditional student's family support throughout the journey to a degree. Nontraditional students are considered to be a part of the college population who are at a high risk of dropping or stopping out of college. For many students in this at-risk group, college is a foreign experience as they are the first member of their family to seek out postsecondary education. Educating family members of these first-generation college students can go a long way toward helping these students succeed in their coursework. Letting the family members know ways in which they can help their loved ones persist to a degree while also teaching them about the value of holding a college degree in today's society is a sure step to helping promote success of these students in higher education institutions.

This approach to developing programs to promote the success of nontraditional students by influencing their environment outside of the educational institution can be likened to a holistic approach to education. Although the programs of universities are primarily focused on the educational aspects of college, administrators and faculty members should also understand that students will do better if they are not forced to leave their family and friends back home while cutting all ties from their past. Finding ways to foster support of studying at home for these students is likely to help them perform better academically. Universities providing programs for the student's family members and showing concern for the well-being of students will increase engagement in studies. Literature has supported the importance of family support for nontraditional students; several researchers have suggested that orientation programs and events including the student's entire family might be beneficial to a student's success (Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002; Quimby & O'Brien, 2006). This could be done through the form of workshops for students and/or family members on topics ranging from coping with stress to time management.

The commonalities found by the researcher between the interview data and semi-structured electronic interview protocol data suggest that institutions should look further into developing opportunities to plug nontraditional students into the college's culture. Furthermore, institutions should look into finding ways to help these students navigate the challenges of balancing the multiple roles they must carry out to be successful in all facets of their life from school to parenting. Offering flexible program options and also marketing these programs effectively will attract nontraditional students and keep them engaged in education. Having strong support systems in place to assist nontraditional students in overcoming barrier to success increase accessibility for these students. As financial issues are often a barrier that keeps

nontraditional students out of school, developing financial support services specifically for these students will promote persistence to completion. Choitz and Prince (2008) provided valuable programming options that institutions should implement to better serve their nontraditional students from weekend colleges and evening classes to career pathway and bridge programs, all of these new methods of awarding credit will help students in accommodating for their busy schedule.

### **Instructor Implications**

Instructors need to realize that they cannot take a one size fits all approach when it comes to teaching in order to keep students engaged. Techniques like self-directed learning afford this opportunity. As Cantor (1997) suggested experiential learning theory should be included in higher education curriculum for two main reasons. These include nontraditional learners' preferences for varied teaching methods and facilitating the transition of students from college into the workplace.

The findings of this study support Cantor's suggestions as the participants expressed concern about the inclusion of content not relevant to their jobs and also shared wanting to know more about what they are being taught. Adult students should be treated as such, and instructors should acknowledge that adults bring experiences with them that can be very valuable in classroom instruction. Jarvis (2014) proclaimed that teachers are no longer the possessors of knowledge to be gained by students. Furthermore, he said that instructors also cannot assume that they know more about the topics being covered than the students. Students should take a more active role in curriculum development and activities of learning. Experiential ways of teaching can accomplish this objective as they tap into the experiences of the learner by making practical use of knowledge and applying it in a context similar to that of real life. Some examples

of these activities could include discussion, simulation, and case studies (Caminotti and Gray, 2012).

As the theory of andragogy indicates, adult learners must be handled a little bit differently than younger students in order for effective learning to occur for both student populations because adults have different factors motivating them to continue their education, and they learn differently as well. Teachers should ensure that they are taking into consideration the level of knowledge that students possess when making lesson plans because this will significantly impact the way material should be taught.

Actions like providing feedback on assignments in a timely manner, being available to answer questions, and opening up lines of communication for students by introducing the course from day one in a way that invites community all contribute to a student's engagement level. For nontraditional students, a class featuring lectures and only providing exams as assessment tools, would be very ineffective. Adults are goal-oriented and they like to know the relevance of information and knowledge that they obtain in the real world. In other words nontraditional students want to know why the information presented is important to know. In designing curriculum, instructors need to consider their nontraditional students.

Nontraditional students need to do more than sit in a classroom while the teacher reads from a PowerPoint presentation for learning to occur. For a lesson to achieve its intended learning objectives for these students who are heavily invested and interested in learning, the instructor must be a little more involved than simply providing information to students and hoping that somehow they master the material with very little effort being put forth on the part of the teacher. Rubenson (2011) states that adult learning is selective, implying that students learn what has meaning to them; adult students are not inclined to learn something that has no evident

meaning or importance to them. The findings of this study support the findings of Rubenson as shown by the frustration experienced by participants over being required to take courses that they felt were irrelevant to them. Several participants indicated that they did not feel that the courses they were taking in their degree were applicable to other areas of their lives. For these students their primary concern was to gain knowledge that was going to put them in a better position in their careers or the job market.

For educators, the most effective way to reach the diverse students in a class is to use instructional methods that rely heavily on students' involvement in the process. Several different types of assignments and assessment methods should also be used in order to reach out specifically to the various preferred learning styles of students in the class. Lessons should leave enough flexibility for any accommodations or changes that may need to be made to adapt the lesson to different learning styles. Teaching the same lessons year after year without taking into account the changes that occur each semester in regards to the students you are teaching is not going to produce learning. Situated learning allows for learning to occur from connections and dialogue made between students and learning is done through application instead of just through retention of material. Because nontraditional students have varied experiences and backgrounds, this type of learning is beneficial in developing higher-order skills such as critical thinking and analysis which have real world applications (Lave and Wenger, 1991).

Leveling the distance between instructors and students can be very beneficial in promoting learning. As Barr and Tagg (1995) indicated shifting an instructor's role from providing knowledge to producing learning frees the instructor and allows students to become an active participant in the learning process. Furthermore, making students comfortable enough that they can ask questions of the instructor when needed is a very important aspect in any course.

Overall, students need to know that instructors are trying their best to accommodate their needs which can vary drastically from one individual student to another. Knowles (1984) proposes that fostering a classroom environment in which nontraditional students feel accepted, respected, and supported allows a spirit of mutuality between the instructor and student as joint enquirers to grow.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Limitations of this study suggest possible directions for future research opportunities on nontraditional students' academic experiences. The data collection method involved obtaining data from one research site using a phenomenological approach. Future research could expand on this study by possibly including a multi-site case study methodology. Also, future studies could extend to include private universities, which may provide a different set of challenges for nontraditional students than public universities. Furthermore, including public universities of varying sizes may provide further detail on the experiences of these students.

Digging further into the specific challenges that were found by the researcher in this study could potentially provide helpful information to institutions looking to expand support options or programs for nontraditional students. Future research could also examine whether support services focused on things such as helping nontraditional students learn to balance the various responsibilities they have on a daily basis lead to increased satisfaction with the academic experiences for these students. Bruns (2004) and Branscomb (2007) found that informal sources of support in the form of peer groups improved students' ability to cope with the stress of balancing multiple roles. Researching the usefulness of this type of program in a large public university specifically for nontraditional students could provide input on how to design support services to foster students' success. Furthermore, targeting specific subgroups of



the nontraditional student population such as single parents or veteran students would also help those groups overcome barriers to aid persistence (Borsari, 2017).

Utilizing satisfaction surveys to follow up with nontraditional students would be meaningful for large public universities in bettering their programs to fit the needs of this subgroup of their student population. In large institutions it is easy for administrators to discount students who stop or drop out of coursework; however, as nontraditional student enrollments continue to rise, it is important for institutions to track the retention of all subgroups of students. A study that analyzes the retention of nontraditional students would provide useful data that could enhance program and improve students' success outcomes.

### **Concluding Remarks**

This phenomenological study examined the academic experiences of nontraditional students pursuing an undergraduate degree at a large public university. The existing literature needed to be expanded upon to provide first-hand accounts of the experiences of these students instead of focusing on single aspects of the phenomenon. Four themes were developed through thematic analysis of the data obtained from the participants in interviews with the researcher. In addition three themes emerged when the researcher took the study a step further to include a larger portion of the population of nontraditional students at the research site through the use of an electronic semi-structured interview protocol. This study brought to light some things that institutions and instructors can focus on in helping nontraditional students succeed in their program of study.

## References

- Adams, J. and Corbett, A. (2010). Experiences of traditional and nontraditional college students: A quantitative study of experiences, motivations, and expectations among undergraduate students. *Perspectives*. Retrieved from [http://cola.unh.edu/sites/cola.unh.edu/files/student-journals/JenniferAdams\\_AlexiaCorbett.pdf](http://cola.unh.edu/sites/cola.unh.edu/files/student-journals/JenniferAdams_AlexiaCorbett.pdf).
- Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance (2012). *Pathways to success: Integrating learning with life and work to increase national college completion*. Washington, DC. Retrieved from <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED529485.pdf>.
- Ahmadzai, G. (2013). Real-world experience benefits non-traditional students. *The evollution*. Retrieved from [https://evollution.com/revenue-streams/opportunities\\_challenges/real-world-experience-benefits-non-traditional-students/](https://evollution.com/revenue-streams/opportunities_challenges/real-world-experience-benefits-non-traditional-students/).
- Astin, A.W. (1978). *Four critical years*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Backels, S. and Meashey, L.E. (1997). Anxiety, depression, and the 4.0. *Journal of College Student Psychotherapy*, 12, p. 45-56.
- Barr, R.B. and Tagg, J. (1995). From teaching to learning: A new paradigm for undergraduate education. *Change*, 27 (6), p. 12-25.
- Bart, M. (2010). Non-traditional students: Understanding adult learners' needs. *Faculty focus*. Retrieved from <http://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/edtech-news-and-trends/non-traditional-students-understanding-adult-learners-needs/>.
- Bean, J.P. and Metzner, B.S. (1985). A conceptual mode of nontraditional undergraduate student Attrition. *Review of Educational Research*, 55 (4), p. 485-540.
- Bers, T., and Smith, K. (1987). College choice and the nontraditional student. *Community College Review*, 15, p. 15-45.

- Bidwell, A. (2014). Older college students face challenges. US News. Retrieved from <https://www.usnews.com/news/articles/2014/06/24/higher-education-needs-to-give-older-working-students-more-opportunities>.
- Blondy, Laurie C. (2007). Evaluation and application of andragogical assumptions to the adult online learning environment. *Journal of Interactive Online Learning*, 6 (2).
- Blumenstyk, G. (2015). *American higher education in crisis? What everyone needs to know*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Bohl, A., Haak, B., and Shrestha, S. (2017). The experiences of nontraditional students: A qualitative inquiry. *The Journal of Continuing Higher Education*, 65, p. 166-174.
- Borrego, S. (2001). Social class in the academy. *About Campus*, 6 (5), p. 31-32.
- Borsari, B. (2017). Supplemental material for student service members/veterans on campus: challenges for reintegration. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 87 (2), p. 166-175.
- Borzak, L. (ed.). (1981). *Field study: A source book for experiential learning*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications.
- Boud, D., Cohen, R., and Walker, D. (1993). *Using experience for learning*. Buckingham: The Society for Research into Higher Education and the Open University Press.
- Boynak, F. (2004). Application of computer aided circuit design course. *The Turkish Online Journal of Educational Technology*, 3, p. 61-66.
- Branscomb, K. (2007). Undergraduate students as parents: Managing multiple roles during emerging adulthood.
- Bruner, J.S. (1996). *The culture of education*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Bruns, D. (2004). Support groups for single mothers in college. *Academic Exchange Quarterly*, 8 (3).

- Bye, D., Pushkar, D., and Conway, M. (2007). Motivation, interest, and positive affect in Traditional and nontraditional undergraduate students. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 57, p. 141-158. Doi: 10.1177/0741713606294235.
- Caminotti, E. and Gray, J. (2012). The effectiveness of storytelling on adult learning. *Journal Of Workplace Learning*, 24 (6), p. 430-438.
- Cantor, J.A. (1997). Experiential learning in higher education: Linking classroom and community. *ERIC Digest*. ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED404948.
- Carlan, P. (2001). Adult students and community college beginnings: Examining the efficacy of performance stereotypes on a university campus – statistical data included. *College Student Journal*.
- Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education (2017). Size & setting classification description. Retrieved from [http://carnegieclassifications.iu.edu/classification\\_descriptions/size\\_setting.php](http://carnegieclassifications.iu.edu/classification_descriptions/size_setting.php).
- Carney-Crompton, S. and Tan, J. (2002). Support systems, psychological functioning, and academic performance of nontraditional female students. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 52 (2), p. 140-154. DOI: 10.1177/0741713602052002005.
- Caschera, K. (2013). Three most significant challenges facing adult students. *The evoLLLution*. Retrieved from <https://evolllution.com/opinions/significant-challenges-facing-adult-students/>.
- Cavote, S., and Kopera-Frye, K. (2006). Non-traditional student persistence and first year experience courses. *Journal of College Student Retention Theory and Practice*, 8 (4), p. 477-489.

- Chao, R. (2009). Understanding the adult learner's motivation and barriers to learning. *ESREA*. Retrieved from [https://www.academia.edu/1267765/Understanding\\_the\\_Adult\\_Learners\\_Motivation\\_and\\_Barriers\\_to\\_Learning](https://www.academia.edu/1267765/Understanding_the_Adult_Learners_Motivation_and_Barriers_to_Learning)
- Chao, R., and Good, G.E. (2004). Nontraditional students' perspectives on college education: A qualitative study. *Journal of College Counseling*, 7 (1), p. 5-12.
- Chen, J.C. (2014). Teaching nontraditional adult students: Adult learning theories in practice. *Teaching in Education*, 19, p. 406-418.
- Chen, J.C. (2017). Nontraditional adult learners: The neglected diversity in postsecondary education. *SAGE Journals*, 7 (1). DOI: 10.1177/2158244017697161.
- Choitz, V., and Prince, H. (2008). Flexible learning options for adult students. Retrieved from <https://jfforg-prod-prime.s3.amazonaws.com/media/documents/FlexibleLearning.pdf>.
- Clark, T.B. (2012). One body, many parts. *New directions for higher education*, 159. Retrieved from <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com.ezproxy.mtsu.edu/doi/10.1002/he.20024/epdf>
- Colaizzi, P.F. (1978). Psychological research as the phenomenologist views it. *Existential phenomenological alternatives for psychology*, p. 48-71. New York, NY: Plenum.
- Compton, J.I., Cox, E., and Laanan, F.S. (2006). Adult Learners in Transition. *New Directions for Student Services*, 114, p. 73-80.
- Connelly, L.M. (2016). Trustworthiness in qualitative research. *MedSurg Nursing*, 25 (6), p. 435-436.
- Constantino, T.E. (2008). Constructivism. In L.M. Given (ed.) *The SAGE encyclopedia of qualitative research methods* (pp. 116-119). Los Angeles, CA: SAGE Publications.
- Creswell, J.W. (2009). *Research design* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.
- Creswell, J.W. (2013). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five*

- approaches* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). Los Angeles, CA: SAGE Publications.
- Creswell, J.W., and Miller, D.L. (2000). Determining validity in qualitative inquiry. *Theory into Practice*, 39 (3), p. 124-130.
- Cross, K.P. (1981). *Adults as learners*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Crotty, M. (1998) *The foundations of social research: Meaning and perspective in the research process*, London: Sage Publications.
- Cuseo, J. (2007). The empirical case against large class size: adverse effects on the teaching, learning, and retention of first-year students. *The Journal of Faculty Development*, 1, p.5-21.
- Deutsch, N.L., and Schmertz, B. (2011). Starting from ground zero: Constraints and experiences of adult women returning to college. *The Review of Higher Education* 34 (3), p.477-504.
- Dewey, J. (1916). *Democracy and education*. New York, NY: The Free Press.
- Dewey, J. (1961). *John Dewey on education (selected writings)*. London: Macmillan Publishers.
- Diamond, J. (2016). Why non-traditional student success is more important than ever. *EAB*. Retrieved from <https://www.eab.com/research-and-insights/continuing-and-online-education-forum/expert-insights/2016/non-traditional-student-success>.
- Dowling, M. (2007). From husserl to van manen: A review of different phenomenological approaches. *International Journal of Nursing Studies*, 44, p.131-142.
- Elejalde-Ruiz, Alexia. (2016). No college degree? That's a growing hurdle to getting hired. Retrieved from <http://www.chicagotribune.com/business/ct-employers-raise-education-requirements-0320-biz-20160318-story.html>.
- Eppler, M.A. and Harju, B.L. (1997). Achievement motivation goals in relation to academic performance in traditional and nontraditional college students. *Research in Higher*

*Education*, 38 (5), p. 557-573.

- Erisman, W., and Steele, P. (2012). From contact to completion: Supporting returning adult students in obtaining a college credential. *Higher Ed Insight*. Retrieved from <http://adultcollegecompletion.org/sites/files/documents/higherEdInsightBrief.pdf>.
- Estes, C. (2004). Promoting student-centered learning in experiential education. *Journal of experiential learning*, 27, p. 141-160.
- Feldman, K.A., & Newcomb, T.M. (1969). *The impact of college on students*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Fenwick, T.J. (2001) *Experiential learning: A theoretical critique from five perspectives*. Columbus, OH: Centre on Education and Training for Employment.
- Finch, W. (2016). The adult learner: A critical ally for state economic development. *The Book of the States*.
- Fincher, M. (2010). Adult student retention: A practical approach to retention improvement through learning enhancement. *The Journal of Continuing Higher Education*, 58 (1), p. 12-18.
- Finney, J., Leigh, E.W., Ruiz, R., Castillo, W., Smith, E., & Kent, D.C. (2017). *Driven to Perform: Tennessee's higher education policies and outcomes-A case study*. Philadelphia, PA: Institute for Research on Higher Education, Graduate School of Education, University of Pennsylvania.
- Forbus, P., Newbold, J.J., and Mehta, S.S. (2010). A study of nontraditional and traditional students in terms of their time management behaviors, stress factors, and coping strategies. *Proceedings of the Academy of Educational Leadership*, 15, p. 67-72.
- Giancola, J.K., Grawitch, M.J., and Borchert, D. (2009). Dealing with the stress of college: A

- model for adult students. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 59 (3), p. 246-263.
- Gilardi, S. and Guglielmetti, C. (2011). University life of nontraditional students: Engagement styles and impact on attrition. *Journal of Higher Education*, 82 (1), p. 33-53.
- Giorgi, A. (2009). *The descriptive phenomenological method in psychology: A modified Husserlian approach*. Pittsburg, PA: Duquesne University Press.
- Glaserfeld, E. von (2005). Introduction: Aspects of constructivism, in: C.T. Fosnot (ed.), *Constructivism: Theory, perspectives and practice (2<sup>nd</sup> ed)* New York Teachers College, Columbia University.
- Glesne, C. (2011). *Becoming qualitative researchers: An introduction*. (4<sup>th</sup> ed.). Boston, MA: Pearson Education, Inc.
- Glesne, C., & Peshkin. (1992). *Becoming qualitative researchers: An introduction*. White Plains, NY: Longman.
- Grabowski, C. (2016). Today's nontraditional college student: challenges to academic success and degree completion. *Inquiries Journal*, 8 (3), p. 1-8.
- Hagedorn, L.S. (2005). Square pegs: Adult students and their "fit" in postsecondary institutions. *Change*, 37 (1), p. 22-29.
- Hatch, J.A. (2002). *Doing qualitative research in education settings*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
- Hull, D., and Hinckley, R. (2007). *Adult career pathways: Providing a second chance in public Education*. Waco, TX: CORD Communication.
- Hussain, I., Khan, H., & Ramzan, S. (2013). Integrating cooperative learning activities to instruction at tertiary education level: A qualitative portrayal of the experience [Abstract]. *Journal of Educational Research*, 16 (1), p. 5.
- Hutchens, M.K., and Franklin, S.B. (May 2013). *College choice among nontraditional students*.



- Paper presentation at the American Educational Research Association Annual Meeting, San Francisco.
- Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (2016). 2015-2016 IPEDS Methodology Report. Retrieved from <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2016/2016111.pdf>.
- Ishler, J.L.C. (2003). Laying the foundation for general education: The role of first-year and short seminars. *Journal of General Education*, 52 (2), p. 71-83.
- Jameson, M.M. and Fusco, B.R. (2014). Math anxiety, math self-concept, and math self-efficacy in adult learners compared to traditional undergraduate students. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 64 (4), p. 306-322.
- Jarvis, P. (2004). *Adult education and lifelong learning*. (3<sup>rd</sup> ed). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Kasworm, C. E. (1990). Adult undergraduates in higher education: A review of past research perspectives. *Review of Educational Research*, 60 (3). p. 345-372.
- Kasworm, C.E. (2010). Adult learners in a research university: Negotiating undergraduate student identity. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 60 (2), p. 143-160.
- Kasworm, C.E. (2014). Paradoxical understandings regarding adult undergraduate persistence. *The Journal of Continuing Higher Education*, 62, p. 67-77.
- King, N. and Horrocks, C. (2010). *Interviews in qualitative research*. London: SAGE Publications Ltd.
- Knowles, M.S. (Ed.) (1960) *Handbook of adult education in the United States*. Washington, DC: Adult Education Association of the USA.
- Knowles, M.S. & Associates. (1984). *Andragogy in action*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Kolb, D.A. (1984). *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

- Kolb, D. A., Boyatzis, R. E., & Mainemelis, C. (2001). Experiential learning theory: Previous research and new directions. *Perspectives on thinking, learning, and cognitive styles, 1* (8), 227-247.
- Krahenbuhl, K. S. (2016). Student-centered education and constructivism: Challenges, concerns, and clarity for teachers. *The Clearing House, 89* (3). p. 97-105.
- Kuenzi, J.J. (2005). *The postsecondary education student population*. CRS Report for Congress. Retrieved from <http://kuhl.house.gov/UploadedFiles/postsecstudents.pdf>.
- La Porte, A.M. (2015). Older adult responses to art curriculum and self-directed learning. *International Journal of Education through Art, 11* (1), p. 59-74.
- Lave, J., and Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*, New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Markle, G. (2015). Factors influencing persistence among nontraditional university students. *Adult Education Quarterly, 65* (3), p. 267-285.
- Merriam, S.B. (2001). Andragogy and self-directed learning: Pillars of adult learning theory. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education, 89*, p. 3-14.
- Merriam, S.B. (2002). *Qualitative research in practice: Examples for discussion and analysis*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Metzner, B.S. and Bean, J.P. (1987). The estimation of a conceptual model of nontraditional undergraduate student attrition. *Research in Higher Education, 27* (1), p. 15-38.
- Michelson, E. (1996). Beyond galileo's telescope: Situated knowledge and the assessment of experiential learning. *Adult Education Quarterly, 46* (4), p. 185-196.
- Moustakas, C. (1994). *Phenomenological research methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.

- Murrell, P.H. and Claxton, C.S. (1987). Experiential learning theory as a guide for effective teaching. *Counselor Education and Supervision*, 27, p. 4-14.
- National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). Definitions and data. Retrieved from <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs/web/97578e.asp>
- Ohsashi, L. (2018). Self-directed learning and the teacher's role: Insights from two different teaching contexts. Retrieved from <https://eric.ed.gov/contentdelivery/servlet/ERICServlet?accno=ED590671>.
- Oregon Technology in Education Council. (2007). *Situated Learning From Theories and Transfer of Learning*. Retrieved from [https://otec.uoregon.edu/learning\\_theory.htm#SituatedLearning](https://otec.uoregon.edu/learning_theory.htm#SituatedLearning)
- O'Shea, E. (2003). Self-directed learning in nursing education: A review of the literature. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 43, p. 62-70.
- Papp, I., Markkanen, M., and von Bonsdorff, M. (2003). Clinical environment as a learning environment: Student nurses' perceptions concerning clinical learning experiences. *Nurse Education Today*, 23, p. 262-268.
- Patton, M.Q. (2002). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods* (3<sup>rd</sup>. ed). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.
- Patton, M.Q. (2015). *Qualitative research & evaluation methods: Integrating theory and practice* (4<sup>th</sup> ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.
- Pelletier, S. (2010). Success for adult students. *Public Purpose*. Retrieved from [http://www.aascu.org/uploadedFiles/AASCU/Content/Root/MediaAndPublications/PublicPurposeMagazines/Issue/10fall\\_adultstudents.pdf](http://www.aascu.org/uploadedFiles/AASCU/Content/Root/MediaAndPublications/PublicPurposeMagazines/Issue/10fall_adultstudents.pdf).
- Powell, D. (2009). No more kid stuff: Colleges and universities take a mature approach to serving adult students. *Lumina Foundation Focus*.
- Quimby, J.L. and O'Brien, K.M. (2006). Predictors of well-being among nontraditional female

- students with children. *Journal of Counseling & Development*, 84, p. 451-460.  
Retrieved from <http://web.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdf?vid=2&hid=6&sid=563d70c8-492c-4143-9375-0c2dcc53852b%40sessionmgr10>.
- Ross-Gordon, J. (2003). Adult learners in the classroom. In D. Kilgore and P. Rice (Eds.), *Meeting the special needs of adult students*, p. 43-52. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Rubenson, K. (2011). *Adult learning and education*. Saint Louis, MO: Academic Press.
- Saleh, M., Mujiyanto, J., & Shofwan, A. (2017). Andragogy and pedagogy: Learning methods orientations for EFL adult learners. *Asian Journal of Educational Research*, 5 (2).
- Sandler, M. (2000). Career decision-making self-efficacy, perceived stress, and an integrated model of student persistence: A structural model of finances, attitudes, behavior, and career development. *Research in Higher Education*, 41, p. 537-580.
- Seidman, I. (2013). *Interviewing as qualitative research* (4<sup>th</sup> ed.) New York, NY: Teachers' College Press.
- Southern University. (2017). 2017 Fact Book. Retrieved from [http://\[su\].edu/iepr/factbook/factbook\\_2017.pdf](http://[su].edu/iepr/factbook/factbook_2017.pdf)
- Spinelli, E. (2005). *The interpreted world: An introduction to phenomenological psychology*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Ltd.
- Strang, T. (2014). Why nontraditional students decided to attend college. *Cengage*. Retrieved from <https://blog.cengage.com/nontraditional-students-attend-college/>.
- Strauss, A., and Corbin, J. (1998). *Basics of qualitative research* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Taniguchi, H., and Kaufman, G. (2005). Degree completion among nontraditional college students. *Social Science Quarterly*, 86 (4), p. 912-927.
- Taylor, J. and House, B. (2010). An exploration of identity, motivations, and concerns of non-traditional students at different stages of higher education. *Psychology Teaching*

*Review*, 16 (1), p. 46-57.

The Glossary of Education Reform (2013). Retrieved from <https://www.edglossary.org/learning-experience/>.

Tinto, V. (1993). *Leaving college: Rethinking the causes and cures of student attrition* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.) Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Toynnton, R. (2005). Degrees in disciplinary in equipping mature students in higher education for engagement and success in lifelong learning. *Active learning in higher education*, 6 (2). Retrieved from <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?DOI=10.1.1.922.1422&rep=rep1&type=pdf>

University of the South. (2017). 2017 Fact Book. Retrieved from [http://www.\[us\].edu/about/facts.php](http://www.[us].edu/about/facts.php).

U.S. Department of Education. Institution of Education Sciences. National Center for Education Statistics (2010) . *Digest of education statistics*.

U.S. Department of Education. Institution of Education Sciences. National Center for Education Statistics (2011). *Digest of education statistics*.

U.S. Department of Education. (2015). *Demographic and enrollment characteristics of nontraditional undergraduates 2011-2012*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office.

Vygotsky, L.S. (1978). *Mind in society*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Walker, J.D., Cotner, S.H., Baepler, P.M., and Decker, M.D. (2008). A delicate balance: integrating active learning into a large lecture course. *CBE-Life Sciences Education*, 7, p. 361-367.

Warn, D. (2016). How ‘non-traditional students’ are changing the face of education. Retrieved

from <https://fosteredu.pennfoster.edu/how-non-traditional-students-are-changing-the-face-of-education>.

Willig, C. (2001). *Introducing qualitative research in psychology: Adventures in theory and method*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

Wright, D. (2016). Structuring state policy for student success: Applying incentives in the volunteer state. Retrieved from

<https://www.luminafoundation.org/files/resources/structuring-state-policy-1.pdf>

Wojnar, D.M., and Swanson, K.M. (2007). Phenomenology: An exploration. *Journal of Holistic Nursing*, 25, p. 172-180. DOI: 10.1177-0898010106295172.

## **Appendix A: Academic Experiences Interview**

1. Describe what the first few days of your courses were like.
2. Tell me about some of the important relationships that you have developed with faculty or staff.
3. How do you think your nontraditional student status adds to your college experience?
4. How do you feel that your nontraditional student status takes away from your college experience?
5. Do you feel that the education you are receiving relates to your life outside of the classroom or online portal of the class? Why or why not?
6. Have you changed in any way as a result of things that you have learned throughout your coursework? Please describe.
7. Which course has been the most difficult for you so far? Was this because of the course content or the instructor's teaching strategies? Please explain your answer.
8. Do you have any suggestions for the university to implement to better serve you?
9. Do you feel that instructors use teaching methods that serve you well? Please explain why or why not...

## Appendix B: Qualtrics Electronic Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

1. How did you decide that you were going to pursue your undergraduate degree?
2. Was there someone or something that was particularly influential in the decision-making process? Please explain their significance.
3. How did you feel about your decision to return to school?
4. When you told your family and friends about your decision, what did they say to you?
5. Who or what were some of the significant people or activities that you remember?
6. If you had to describe your experience using only one word, what would that word be?  
Explain your answer.
7. Describe anything that felt unfamiliar to you in the college environment.
8. What does obtaining a bachelor's degree mean to you?
9. What advice would you give other students who are embarking on the journey to a degree?
10. How important is it to you to experience a variety of teaching methods in your undergraduate education?
11. Describe your preferred method of learning.
12. What tangible skills do you feel that you are learning in college?
13. Please check all conditions that apply to you
  - had delayed enrollment into postsecondary education
  - attend college part-time
  - work full-time
  - financially independent for financial aid purposes
  - have dependents other than a spouse
  - are single parents
  - GED recipient
14. What motivates you to stay in school?
15. What is the primary reason that you are pursuing a bachelor's degree?



16. What barriers threaten your ability to stay enrolled at the institution in coursework? Please explain your answer.

17. Would you be willing to participate in an interview with the researcher? If so please provide the best way for the researcher to get in touch with you to schedule this interview. If you are selected to participate in an interview you will be compensated with \$20 for your time.

## Appendix C: Text of Email Request Sent for Participation

University of Memphis  
Volunteers Wanted for a Research Study

Hello, I am currently working on a research project for my doctoral program in Higher and Adult Education at the University of Memphis. As part of my requirements for this program I must perform a research study. I am looking to perform a study regarding the academic experiences of nontraditional students in undergraduate coursework at large public universities to fulfill this requirement. You are being sent this email because you are an undergraduate student who is currently enrolled in courses toward a bachelor's degree. Students participating will have to meet one of the criterion in the definition of nontraditional students set forth by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). This includes students who meet one of the following seven classifications: had delayed enrollment into postsecondary education, attend college part-time; work full-time; are financially independent for financial aid purposes; have dependents other than a spouse; are single parents; or were a GED recipient (NCES, n.d.).

Participation in this study will consist of responding to a semi-structured interview protocol administered online using Qualtrics (an online program), and if chosen to do so participating in an interview with the researcher via phone. I have further explained the study and guaranteed confidentiality (as constructed through the use of pseudonyms, a consent form, and Institutional Review Board approval) in the informed consent form attached to this email (click on link that follows: [Informed consent form](#)). As a participant in this study you will be given the opportunity to review your answers after the interview to ensure accuracy, and you are able to withdraw your participation at any time.

If you have any questions about this study please feel free to email me at [mrssell7@memphis.edu](mailto:mrssell7@memphis.edu). If you are willing to be a participant in this study you can find the link to the survey below. Once you have completed the reflective prompt please email your responses to me at [mrssell7@memphis.edu](mailto:mrssell7@memphis.edu).

Thank you,  
Megan

**Follow this link to the Survey:**

[\\${1://SurveyLink?d=Take the Survey}](#)

Or copy and paste the URL below into your internet browser:

[\\${1://SurveyURL}](#)

Follow the link to opt out of future emails:

[\\${1://OptOutLink?d=Click here to unsubscribe}](#)

## **Appendix D: Informed Consent Form**

Consent to Participate in a Research Study

### **LIVED EXPERIENCES OF NONTRADITIONAL STUDENTS IN LARGE PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES**

#### **WHY ARE YOU BEING INVITED TO TAKE PART IN THIS RESEARCH?**

You are being invited to take part in a research study about the lived academic experiences of nontraditional students in undergraduate coursework at large public universities. You are being invited to take part in this research study because you meet the criteria set forth by the researcher to be labeled as a nontraditional student meaning you have one of the following conditions: had delayed enrollment into postsecondary education, attend college part-time, work full-time, are financially independent for financial aid purposes, have dependents other than a spouse, are a single parent, or were a GED recipient. If you volunteer to take part in this study, you will be one of about 6,000 people to do so.

#### **WHO IS DOING THE STUDY?**

The person in charge of this study is Megan Russell (*Lead Investigator, LI*) of University of Memphis Department of Leadership. She is being guided in this research by Dr. Eric Platt [*Advisor*]. There may be other people on the research team assisting at different times during the study.

#### **WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY?**

By doing this study, we hope to learn about aspects that have room for improvement in program design to ensure that nontraditional students are successful in their educational journey to an undergraduate degree at the research sites. Exploring the efficiency of the learning experiences through the first-person accounts of the participants could increase the satisfaction of nontraditional students in their undergraduate experience thus introducing the likelihood to impact the practices of universities that are engaged in serving nontraditional students. This study could potentially lead to the discovery of innovative ideas for large public universities nationwide to implement in their programs to better serve nontraditional students.

#### **ARE THERE REASONS WHY YOU SHOULD NOT TAKE PART IN THIS STUDY?**

A participant could be excluded from participating in this study if they do not meet the qualifications to be considered a nontraditional student.

#### **WHERE IS THE STUDY GOING TO TAKE PLACE AND HOW LONG WILL IT LAST?**

The research procedures will be conducted primarily via email and by phone. The total amount of time you will be asked to volunteer for this study is 2 hours over the next 3 months. Interviews with participants from the research site, University of Memphis, will be conducted via phone due to distance of location from researcher. The time allotment needed will still be around 2 hours total for participation in the study.

## **WHAT WILL YOU BE ASKED TO DO?**

As a participant you will be asked to complete a survey regarding your academic experiences in undergraduate coursework as a nontraditional student at the research site. The program being used to administer the online survey, Qualtrics, will be set to anonymize your responses so that the researcher will not know names attached to responses. You will also be asked to answer two questions on a reflective prompt regarding your experiences of learning. If you are willing to do so and are chosen for an interview you will be asked to participate in an interview with the researcher which can be conducted in-person, by phone, or by email, whichever you prefer. The interviews will be audio recorded using a handheld recorder.

## **WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS?**

To the best of our knowledge, the things you will be doing have no more risk of harm than you would experience in everyday life.

## **WILL YOU BENEFIT FROM TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?**

There is no guarantee that you will get any benefit from taking part in this study. However, you may gain a deeper understanding of your academic experiences as a student. Your willingness to take part, however, may, in the future, help society as a whole better understand this research topic.

## **DO YOU HAVE TO TAKE PART IN THE STUDY?**

If you decide to take part in the study, it should be because you really want to volunteer. You will not lose any benefits or rights you would normally have if you choose not to volunteer. You can stop at any time during the study and still keep the benefits and rights you had before volunteering. As a student, if you decide not to take part in this study, your choice will have no effect on your academic status or grade in the class.

## **IF YOU DON'T WANT TO TAKE PART IN THE STUDY, ARE THERE OTHER CHOICES?**

If you do not want to be in the study, there are no other choices except not to take part in the study.

## **WHAT WILL IT COST YOU TO PARTICIPATE?**

There are no costs associated with taking part in the study.

## **WILL YOU RECEIVE ANY REWARDS FOR TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?**

You will not receive any rewards or payment for taking part in the study. However, if you are one of the few participants that is chosen for a follow-up interview you will receive \$20 from the researcher in compensation for your time.

## **WHO WILL SEE THE INFORMATION THAT YOU GIVE?**

We will make every effort to keep private all research records that identify you to the extent allowed by law.

Your information will be combined with information from other people taking part in the study. When we write about the study to share it with other researchers, we will write about the combined information we have gathered. You will not be personally identified in these written materials. We may publish the results of this study; however, we will keep your name and other identifying information private.

We will make every effort to prevent anyone who is not on the research team from knowing that you gave us information, or what that information is. This will be done through the use of pseudonyms for participants as well as the research sites. The use of pseudonyms and IRB approval will be used to ensure confidentiality. The content of the interviews, surveys, and prompts will be kept on a flash drive that is only accessible to the researcher of the study. Interviews with the participants will be audio recorded for data collection purposes. The recording will be transcribed by the researcher and transcriptions will be kept on a flash drive that is only accessible to the researcher and advisor of the study.

We will keep private all research records that identify you to the extent allowed by law. However, there are some circumstances in which we may have to show your information to other people. For example, we may be required to show information which identifies you to people who need to be sure we have done the research correctly; these would be people from such organizations as the University of Memphis.

#### **CAN YOUR TAKING PART IN THE STUDY END EARLY?**

If you decide to take part in the study you still have the right to decide at any time that you no longer want to continue. You will not be treated differently if you decide to stop taking part in the study.

The individuals conducting the study may need to withdraw you from the study. This may occur if you are not able to follow the directions they give you, if they find that your being in the study is more risk than benefit to you, or if the agency funding the study decides to stop the study early for a variety of scientific reasons.

#### **ARE YOU PARTICIPATING OR CAN YOU PARTICIPATE IN ANOTHER RESEARCH STUDY AT THE SAME TIME AS PARTICIPATING IN THIS ONE?**

You may take part in this study if you are currently involved in another research study.

#### **WHAT IF YOU HAVE QUESTIONS, SUGGESTIONS, CONCERNS, OR COMPLAINTS?**

Before you decide whether to accept this invitation to take part in the study, please ask any questions that might come to mind now. Later, if you have questions, suggestions, concerns, or complaints about the study, you can contact the investigator, Megan Russell at [megan.russell@mtsu.edu](mailto:megan.russell@mtsu.edu). You may also contact the student's advisor, Dr. Eric Platt at [replatt@memphis.edu](mailto:replatt@memphis.edu). If you have any questions about your rights as a volunteer in this research, contact the Institutional Review Board staff at the University of Memphis at 901-678-2705. We will give you a copy of this consent form to take with you.

#### **What happens to my privacy if I am interviewed?**

Your privacy will be protected at all times. Your real name will not be identified on any documents or other transcripts, and will be replaced by a pseudonym (false name) assigned by the participant or the researchers.

## Appendix E: Institutional Review Board Approval



Institutional Review Board  
Division of Research and Innovation  
Office of Research Compliance  
University of Memphis  
315 Admin Bldg  
Memphis, TN 38152-3370

October 3, 2018

PI Name: Megan Russell  
Co-Investigators:  
Advisor and/or Co-PI: Ronald Platt  
Submission Type: Modification  
Title: Lived Experiences of Nontraditional Students in Undergraduate Coursework at Large Public Universities  
IRB ID : #PRO-FY2019-109  
Level of Review: Expedited

Approval: October 3, 2018  
Expiration: --\*

The modification is approved.

Approval of this project is given with the following obligations:

1. This IRB approval for modification has an expiration date, an approved renewal must be in effect to continue the project prior to that date. If approval is not obtained, the human subjects consent form(s) and recruiting material(s) are no longer valid and any research activities involving human subjects must stop.
2. When the project is finished or terminated, a completion form must be submitted.
3. No change may be made in the approved protocol without prior board approval.

*\*Modifications do not extend the expiration of the original approval*

Thank you,  
James P. Whelan, Ph.D.  
Institutional Review Board Chair  
The University of Memphis.