ABSTRACT

AYCOCK, JR., GERALD LAMAR. Support Needed By Adult Learners to Accomplish Educational Goals In Higher Education. (Under the direction of Dr. John M. Pettitt and Dr. Peter A. Hessling.)

This study identified and analyzed support systems and services needed by a group of nontraditional students and examined how these systems and services were provided by one educational institution. Research questions addressed 1) how adults enrolled in a formal degree program managed the demands made on their personal resources; 2) how these learners made use of existing resources provided by the college and other support systems; 3) what these adult learners perceived as unresolved issues related to their participation in higher education, and how they coped without their resolution. This qualitative study of 15 nontraditional learners was conducted at a military base in the Southeastern United States, and included both military personnel and civilians. Data were gathered through in-depth interviews and through some participant observation and minimal document analysis. The researcher employed the constant comparative method to code and analyze data. The researcher concluded that the nontraditional learners in the study added education to already complex life schedules. Family, employment, school, and social issues were partly responsible for either success or failure in attaining educational goals. Participants revealed that life responsibilities and guilt affected their ability to be successful, and that family, work, school, and social issues produced guilt. Overall, participants’ goals, expectations, and time management strategies were the most significant themes. Interdependency among the participants’ sources of support was identified conclusively. Unexpected results included the amount of peer support used, the fact that none of the military participants referred to their
military status as a barrier, and the fact that financial concerns were not a dominant issue. Additionally, library and research resources were not identified as important issues.

Based on these results, the researcher discussed ways that the study site and other institutions of higher education could create more supportive educational contexts for nontraditional learners.
SUPPORT NEEDED BY ADULT LEARNERS TO ACCOMPLISH EDUCATIONAL GOALS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

by

GERALD LAMAR AYCOCK JR.

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty of North Carolina State University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Education

ADULT AND COMMUNITY COLLEGE EDUCATION

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APPROVED BY:

[Signatures]

Co-chair of Advisory Committee - Co-chair of Advisory Committee
DEDICATION

The research reported herein is dedicated to my wife, Terrye, for the love, patience, support and understanding shown me throughout my doctoral program.
BIOGRAPHY

Gerald Lamar Aycock Jr. was born October 21, 1950, in Goldsboro, North Carolina. The eldest son of Gerald Lamar Aycock Sr. and Charlotte Fields Aycock, he was raised on a dairy and tobacco farm in Northwestern Wayne County. He has two brothers. He is married to Terrye Lucas Aycock and they have four children and three grandchildren.

He graduated from Charles B. Aycock High School, Pikeville, North Carolina in 1969. He graduated from Atlantic Christian College, Wilson, North Carolina with a Bachelor of Science degree in 1984. He received a Master of Science degree in Administration from Central Michigan University in 1993. In 1996 he enrolled as a part-time student in the Department of Adult and Community College Education with a major in Higher Education Administration, in order to pursue the Doctor of Education Degree.

From 1971-1978 he was involved in family businesses and coaching youth and adult sports. In 1976 he and three other men organized Polly Watson Volunteer Fire Department located in Northwestern Wayne County. He continues to be a volunteer firefighter at Pinewood Volunteer Fire Department, Goldsboro, North Carolina. In 1978 he became employed with the United States Postal Service and continues to serve as a Facilitator for the Greensboro District and a Rural Carrier in Kenly, North Carolina. From 1988-1991 he was an instructor of ABE and GED curriculum at Wilson Technical Community College. From October 18, 1993 to the present he has been a Business Lecturer at Mount Olive College teaching Business and Human Resource Management courses. Since 1994 he has sometimes instructed Business and Human Resource Management courses at North Carolina Wesleyan College and Louisburg College. He has been a Fire and Rescue Educational Methodology instructor for the North Carolina Community College System since 1994.
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The demand for a higher skilled workforce, changing employment opportunities, a changing economy, and the desire for promotion and self-fulfillment are among the factors that have motivated adults to return to the classroom and continue their education. This trend has resulted in significant enrollment increases at institutions of higher education across the country. However, in some cases, the rate of increase in adult college enrollment has far exceeded the rate of institutional change. Although multiple institutions have made notable changes in curriculum and have added new programs and services to meet the special needs of these new students, much remains to be done. The purpose of this study was to identify and analyze support systems and services needed for success of nontraditional\(^1\) students and evaluate the extent to which these systems and services are being provided by educational institutions.

Typically, higher education serves students between the ages of 18-24 who have finished high school. We refer to these students as traditional\(^2\) students and higher education has responded to them in traditional ways. Traditional student models of support services typically provide, but are not limited to, academic advising, bookstores, bursar’s offices, cafeterias, career counseling, computer facilities, financial aid, libraries, and orientation (Pascarella, & Terenzini, 1991; Buhr, 1999).

Despite the fact that most of the services provided to undergraduates are tailored to meet the needs of traditional students, adult learners, high school graduates over 25 years old who are returning to school after being absent from the education environment, constitute an ever-increasing proportion of undergraduate students nationally. Adult learners' participation in higher education began to grow in the 1970s, continuing through

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\(^1\) The term nontraditional student is discussed in the definition section.

\(^2\) The term traditional student is discussed in the definition section.
the 1980s, and at the present time the enrollment of adult learners has assumed an increasing proportion of the undergraduate population in America's colleges and universities (National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), 1997). The NCES predicts a significant increase in the number of adult learners in institutions of higher education throughout the next decade. The demographics of the undergraduate student body in America are changing. These changes invite more examination.

The National Center for Education Statistics data reveal that colleges and universities in America are experiencing great changes in the demographics of the undergraduate student population. In 1996, about 45 percent, or 14.3 million, of the total population of students was non-traditional (NCES, 1996). Rangaswami (1999) points out the increase of nontraditional students, compared to the overall undergraduate population:

Between 1980 and 1990, the enrollment of traditional students increased by three percent. During the same period, enrollment of non-traditional students rose by 34 percent. From 1990 to 2000, the NCES projected a rise of 10 percent in enrollments of persons over 25 years of age. (p.1)

Discussing projections for 2002 enrollment, Willits (2001) states that 35-44 year olds will represent about 45% of the college population, 30-34 year olds will comprise 17-18% of the college population, and 25-29 year olds will comprise about 18% of the college population. By the year 2011 it is projected that 35-44 year olds will comprise 38%, 30-34 year olds will comprise 21%, and 25-29 year olds will comprise 22% of the college population. Assuming that the number of traditional students will grow or remain constant, these figures denote a significant increase in the number of nontraditional college students on America’s college and university campuses.

The economic and financial status of adults involved in higher education may connect to changes in the U.S. job market. The U.S. Department of Labor predicts that during the beginning of the new millennium, over 40% of the new employment in this
country will require highly skilled persons (Buhr, 1997). In addition, according to Buhr, these jobs will require higher levels of education. This fact, combined with the shift from a manufacturing to a service-oriented economy, promotes the need for technology skills in the competitive global market and illustrates changing skills the adult learner must possess or develop.

The attainment of advanced education becomes a vehicle for acquiring both occupational and social mobility. Adult learners are acquiring the degree they started but never completed, pursuing advanced degrees related to their current employment, as well as seeking education in different areas or job fields (Settersten & Hagestad, 1996). According to Wlodkowski (1998), both nontraditional students and educational institutions welcome adult-oriented programs, but the inclusion of this population also introduces new concerns for these students and the institutions that enroll them. In my experience nontraditional students are concerned with required curricula as well as their acceptance by both faculty and the traditional students. The institutions' concerns arise from the fact that adult students do not share the same needs and goals as traditional college students. Colleges need to have more information about the meaning of the educational experience for the adult learner to develop an understanding of how life experiences and attitudes toward higher education influence student behavior. If institutions of higher learning can become aware of and recognize the special characteristics of adult learners, these institutions can identify and adapt to the special needs of this growing population.

Adults return to college for a variety of reasons, including improving their lives, and especially their financial status, via better jobs or advancement in their current jobs. Malcolm Knowles (1970) describes the self-direction possessed by adults and how they respond to realities that are socio-economic in nature (Buhr, 1997). In my experience adult learners may have different motivations and require different supports than traditional-age students, but some colleges and universities have not been proactive in
addressing their needs. Higher educational institutions' awareness of the environments they foster may affect the success of adult learners. Yet, due to the researcher’s experiences, colleges sometimes continue to focus resources on traditional students.

**Statement of the Problem**

Historically, colleges and universities have been slow in their response to develop support services for adults. The support services provided by many colleges and universities focus on the needs of the traditional student (Scott-Summers, 1992). Educational institutions have created admission processes that attract the nontraditional student, yet the college and university culture remains for the most part unchanged, focusing on the traditional student. Green (1998) reports that colleges and universities welcome the increasing enrollment of adults, but institutions find that providing adequate services and meeting their needs is challenging.

Chartrand (1992), Polson (1994), and Rangaswami (1999) state that institutions of higher education are both aware of and challenged by nontraditional students, but they are without a model to follow; one reason for this problem may be that we do not have sufficient documentation of how these students live their lives while pursuing formal education. Available research indicates that this population is unique in several respects. First, it is transient. Due to this fact, adult learners must learn how to adapt and identify the needed resources and support quickly. Secondly, as Home (1993, 1997, 1998) says, nontraditional students have a greater number of roles than do traditional college students. Kasworm, Sandmann, & Sissel (2000) further add that higher education institutions need to acknowledge that there may be interdependency between higher education, the community, and other environments, given that non-traditional students have a wider range of social networks and responsibilities.

Yet, few institutions fully recognize or respond to these characteristics. In brief, nontraditional students who are attending classes at night and on weekends are experiencing limited support services. A lack of knowledge of these nontraditional
students, financial restraints, and the prevailing "overall business as usual" approach (Green, 1998, p. 6), have deterred colleges from arranging programs geared to the non-traditional learner.

Buhr (1997) says that educational institutions need to understand what supports nontraditional students see as necessary to realize their goals. To aid the nontraditional student who works primarily away from home, either full or part-time, and is attending college, either full or part-time, it is necessary to have an understanding of the "perceived role of support systems with regard to the achievement of academic success and completion of educational goals" (p. 10). Buhr says that previous research indicates that the adult learner has greater "external demands and pressures in comparison to the traditional age students. Support and the sources of support, therefore, take on greater meaning for adult learners participating in higher education" (p. 10). A study by Simcox (1998) “revealed that those aspects which most significantly contributed to a nontraditional learners’ continued enrollment were family support, faculty/staff support, peer support, and recognition as an adult learner” (p. 61). Concurring with Simcox, (1998), Hatch (2000) says that nontraditional students report traditional support methods are not working. Nontraditional students whom she interviewed described some common institutional practices that are not supportive, including "(a) excessive standardization, (b) insufficient individualization, (c) teaching to conventional clienteles, (d) inadequate recognition of prior learning, (e) rigidity of schedules, and (f) emphasis on research" (2000, p. 3). According to the students she interviewed, the types of support services needed by nontraditional students include the following:

(a) Improved availability of assessment, academic advising, and career counseling, (b) enhanced faculty competence in teaching nontraditional audiences, (c) program accommodation related to work/family obligations, (d) integrated work-related instruction with learning, (e) improved instruction delivery-distance learning, more locations and times, and (f) on-campus
considerations with daycare, parking, nontraditional centers and tutoring. (2000, p. 3)

Rangaswami (1999) reports that adult learners continually balance roles in their complex lives, searching for support that will aid in the completion of their educational goals, often maintaining their employment as well as other life activities and responsibilities. Rangaswami adds that nontraditional students are facing situational factors such as role conflict, time management, family and work problems, and economic and logistical constraints—all of which may affect their ability to sustain their pursuit of educational goals. Cullen (1994) recognizes this dilemma, stating that "the pressures of juggling the roles of student, partner, [parent], and worker would be lessened if the role of student was seen as including the others" (p.8). Adults facing such circumstantial barriers need services that will enhance their academic adjustment by allowing them to concentrate on their student role. In brief, nontraditional students’ life issues have not been addressed, a problem that requires attention from the community of researchers committed to adult education.

For the most part, "it is the private liberal arts colleges that have diligently worked towards designing special undergraduate adult learner programs” (Buhr, 1997, p. 8). In view of this fact, a private liberal arts college located on a southeastern military base was chosen as the research site for this study. Mount Olive College (MOC), chartered in 1951, operated as a junior college until 1984. Its main campus is located in Mount Olive, North Carolina. The college began its first branch educational program at the military base in 1975. Mount Olive College, which has four branch locations, has awarded more than 4,000 baccalaureate degrees since becoming a four-year college in 1986. A broader description of the college, its mission, governance, branch locations, enrollment, faculty, instructional resources, students, and student services is located in Appendix B of this document.

This site was an ideal choice for the study of nontraditional students due to the
population of adult students that attend this site and their diverse lifestyles. This site does offer more support to nontraditional students; while some traditional students do attend the site, the focus of its programming is on adult learners. Given these characteristics, the site represented an important opportunity for research, because it offered the chance to examine how supportive educational environments may still leave some adult learners' needs unfulfilled. An understanding of how successful nontraditional students include higher education successfully with the rest of their complex lives is needed to meet the special and specific needs of these students. The research carried on at this particular site addressed these overarching concerns.

Purpose Statement

Existing literature fails to address how nontraditional students live their lives while incorporating the educational process. Often available research fails to address how nontraditional students identify the support they will use to be successful in their educational pursuits and in the rest of their life activities and responsibilities. Ultimately, the literature presents an incomplete view of nontraditional students and their life issues. The purpose of this study was to learn from these students what types of support help them complete their educational and life goals, how the supports they utilize may be interdependent, and how these supports affect their educational and life successes. By focusing on an under-researched adult population that includes both civilians and members of the military, this study adds depth and diversity to the body of research on adult learners.

Significance of Study

There is a compelling need for the development of both research and theory specific to adult learners and their life issues in order to create and refine educational and institutional practices that are successful with nontraditional students in higher education. Although adult learners in some institutions of higher education may have the benefit of more appropriate curriculum choices, courses that are aligned with their work schedule,
and bookstores that are open late into the evening, many are not matriculating to complete their degrees. According to Dr. Paula Willits, editor of the *Nontraditional Students Report* (April 2001), adult learner student retention continues to be a problem: “Here is a group of students who are working, have families, and are going to school. They are high-risk because of all the demands on their time and energy. This produces a recipe for low retention” (p.1). In fact, the retention of nontraditional students has been a problem for some time. In a 1996 study, The National Center for Education Statistics found that nontraditional students were less likely to earn degrees than their traditional counterparts. The NCES study also reported that adult learners attending two-year schools were less likely to persist than those enrolled in four-year schools. Dr. Walter Pearson, Director of Adult Learning at Simpson College in Iowa, agrees that retention of adult learners is a problem and argues that although the number of adult learners is increasing in higher education, persistence continues to be a problem due to barriers such as family and work (Pearson, 2000). Simcox (1998) emphasizes the need to do further research on life occurrences and their influence on nontraditional graduation patterns, and says that while “much research has been completed regarding the external forces influencing persistence, fewer research studies have been conducted to determine if one’s meaning of life factors into the issue of persistence” (p. 87). In response to the increased population of nontraditional students, the questionable rates of graduation, and the way nontraditional students see education fitting into the rest of their life activities, this study examined why some undergraduate nontraditional students complete their educational goals and why some fail to graduate.

Unfortunately for adult learners, some colleges and universities continue to organize services to meet only the needs of traditional students (Coates & Doblmeyer, 1990). Barker (1996) challenges higher education to recognize and to support the specific needs of adult learners. Yet according to Kasworm, Sandman, and Sissel (2000), the existing literature does not suggest that higher education understands that the support
used by the adult learner comes from various environments and that each support environment may be interdependent. A study by White (1999) recommends that future research needs to “study the level of support services, originally designed for traditional age students, needed by adult students” (p. 89). In response to the gaps in the available body of research, this study focused on identifying the support services needed and used by the nontraditional students at Mount Olive College.

During a pilot study conducted by the researcher, one adult learner identified the kinds of support needed for her to participate in higher education (1999). This student’s educational success was dependent, in part, upon the networks she maintained and relied upon continuously. Some life learning issues important to this student included the following: (a) arranging a flexible work schedule with her employer, (b) leaving work on time, (c) picking up her children from day care, and (d) relying upon her mother (who also worked) to take care of her children while she was in class. Support from various environments was necessary for this adult learner to attend class, illustrating the mutual dependency of support environments that learners employ to reach their educational goals. In this example, support environments became interdependent; if one support environment failed, the student was unlikely to get to class. The pilot study indicated that adult learners develop a support network that includes, but is not limited to, transportation, childcare, employment situations, getting assignments for adult learners that are absent or late for class, and working in discussion groups.

Historically, Aslanian and Brickell (1980) argue that “to know an adult’s life schedule is to know an adult’s learning schedule” (p. 391). Understanding the life issues the adult learner faces, as discovered in the pilot study, prompts questions about other adult learners’ networks and life issues relative to participating in higher education. Because providing support to nontraditional students requires knowing more about their lives, more research is needed regarding these learners’ lives and learning schedules.

Institutions of higher education need to have access to more information about
how adult learners from a variety of different backgrounds and cultures live their lives in order to understand how attaining educational goals becomes possible. A comprehensive examination of the possible interdependence of the support environments (community, educational institutions, employment, family, and other social and economic institutions) is missing from the literature. Indeed, Kasworm, Sandman, & Sissel (2000) argue that “as higher educational institutions begin to craft contemporary mission statements that more accurately reflect the complex position of adults in society, there must be a new understanding of the interdependency among higher education, other learning providers, and the broader community” (p. 461). Leaders in higher education need to progress beyond just admitting adult students; they have a responsibility to re-evaluate their goals, institutional purposes, missions, and services provided to the adult student. If adult learners are going to matriculate in higher education, they will require appropriate services designed to meet their real-life issues and to support their educational goals. This study was designed to explore the community, educational institutions, employment, family, other social and economic institutions, and potentially unidentified kinds of support and connections that adult learners create in order to accomplish their goals. Findings from this study provided new insights for institutions of higher education that are enrolling adult learners at an ever-increasing rate. The support systems nontraditional students use and need and their possible interdependency has not been described; therefore, this study specifically addressed this void, thereby generating needed information.

Research Questions

In order to examine the possible interdependency of adult learners’ support systems, how they use supports, and what needed supports are lacking, this study posed the following research questions:

1. How do adults enrolled in a formal degree program manage the demands made on their personal resources?
Only a minimal number of studies have examined how adults incorporate educational goals into their lives. Further, few studies have examined how the various elements of their lives may be interdependent and how these elements may have an impact on how adult learners live their lives while pursuing a degree.

2. How do adult learners make use of existing resources provided by the college and others?

It seems reasonable that adult learners rely on family resources for financial support, for tuition and college costs as well as childcare, preparation of meals, and other fundamental needs. This study was prompted by the need to add to the body of knowledge related to adult students’ use of resources and support systems.

3. What do these adult learners perceive to be unresolved issues related to participating in their educational experiences and how do they cope without their resolutions?

What adult learners perceive to be their greatest unresolved issues has yet to be discovered. This study explored this question with the informants in order to describe how these adult learners cope with unexpected issues as they arise.

Limitations

This study was conducted at a four-year private liberal arts college located on a single military base in the southeastern United States. A sample of nontraditional students was derived from students currently attending this college. As a multiple case study, this project was not intended to supply generalizable findings. Rather, this study was designed to provide insight into the lives of these nontraditional learners’ educational and life experiences. As with any research project, the population selected for study, the sample chosen for participation, and factors that were not identified prior to the project’s design influenced the results of this study.

Additionally, the researcher’s own views and experiences shaped the study’s focus and design. However, because this study is a qualitative project, the researcher’s
point of view represented an important dimension of the research, and was treated as such. Lack of experience in qualitative research design may be considered a limitation; however, the researcher has had an opportunity to observe and interview and has conducted a pilot study with individuals in this population. More than two hundred employment interviews conducted by the researcher over the last twenty years provide the framework for conducting and understanding participant interviews.

Definition of Terms

Nontraditional Students (Adult Learners): In this study, the terms “nontraditional students” and “adult learners” were synonymous. They are defined as graduates of high school who are at least 25 years of age and who are attending college for the first time or returning after a lapse in their educational experience. Most of the students have family responsibilities and work either full-time or part-time. Such students are faced with time constraints and their community, educational programs, employment, family, and other social and economic institutions affect their educational experiences. Their attendance in college may be motivated primarily by economic reasons, because educational attainment may involve job advancement/change or the acquisition of new skills; however, some of the students may attend for personal reasons, such as to improve their self-esteem.

Traditional Students: These students come directly from high school and usually begin college at about age 18. These young students leave their home environment to be cared for by faculty and college administrators or may commute from their homes daily. Colleges are usually instrumental in assuming a significant part of their "personal development and socialization" (Rangaswami, 1999, p. 9).

Support Services: Student support services are either formal or informal (Buhr, 1997). Informal support comes from community, family, and social interaction, and other sources which were yet to be identified at the study’s outset. Examples of formal support services are the educational institutions that include academic advising, administration, admissions, career planning, financial assistance, and the student
services department (Buhr, 1997).

Summary

This study examined support systems nontraditional students employ to achieve their higher educational goals. Research is needed to understand if there is interdependency among the supports provided by the community, educational institutions, employment, family, and other social and economic institutions necessary for nontraditional students to succeed in higher education (Kasworm, Sandman, & Sissel, 2000). Research is also needed to learn how these nontraditional students deal with life issues and include education as part of their lives. Because existing literature presents an incomplete view of the nontraditional student, this research investigated how nontraditional students fit educational goals into the rest of their life activities, how they use the support available to them, and what support is needed but not being provided by colleges.
CHAPTER II
LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to examine existing literature that focuses on the nontraditional student. This chapter will also define topics related to the present study that appear underrepresented in the literature. Research published within the last five years, 1997-2002 will be the main focus. However, seminal works will also be described, including literature that was published more than two decades ago. This literature guided the development and design of this study, which focused on nontraditional students’ pursuit of their educational goals in higher education institutions.

Sources used in this research include Dissertation Abstracts International, computerized databases, such as ERIC and NC LIVE, related journals and periodicals, and literature relevant to this study. This search used the following descriptors: adult education, nontraditional students, adult learners, higher education, continuing education, adult barriers and support, re-entry students, and student retention. Additional data were collected from five related Internet resources, The Nontraditional Students Report, NcesWebmaster, ANTSHE, Lifelong Learning, and The Guide to Adult/Continuing Education. Discussions with experts and reviews of bibliographies provided additional authors and titles to review.

The literature review is divided into seven sections. The first section focuses on the history of higher education in America and how the population of nontraditional students has evolved. The missions, goals, objectives, and trends of higher education and how these institutions currently support the needs of the nontraditional learner will be addressed in the second section. The third section focuses on demographic changes in higher education, while the fourth section examines adult development and learning, including the various types of adult learners. The following section focuses on the barriers, supports, and needs that are currently identified as being influential in the life of
the nontraditional student. The next section provides a discussion of the conceptual/theoretical framework used in this study. The final section furnishes a summary of the main points covered in the chapter.

Historical Foundations of Adult Education

An historical perspective on higher education in America provides evidence of the progression of higher education and nontraditional students’ increasing presence on college and university campuses across the nation. Adult learners’ perceptions of what adult education is influence when and if they will pursue higher education. Until the 1970s, access to higher education for most nontraditional students was limited (Rangaswami, 1999). However, due to the changing of the social and economic trends in America, the adult learner population is increasing.

Modern forms of adult education began in America during the 1800s. This education took on various forms such as: evening schools, the Chautauqua Movement, settlement houses, Sabbath schools, correspondence schools, summer schools, parks and recreation centers, social service agencies, junior colleges, university extensions, national voluntary associations, and residential labor colleges (Knowles, 1977). New methods of delivery introduced included the short-term institute, home study courses, demonstration methods, conferences, and various short courses. Specialized adult education was an important introduction (Axford, 1980; Knowles, 1977).

In 1926, The Carnegie Corporation facilitated the organization of the American Association for Adult Education for research and demonstration projects (Stubblefield, 1988). From this organization’s view, adult education was a means by which adults could become informed about their lives and situations that affected their lives in addition to the defined course of study. This seems to be the theme that guided the foundation of this organization.

The federal government’s participation in higher education increased greatly after World War II as it made a commitment to provide educational opportunities to
returning servicemen. In 1944, Congress passed the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act, popularly known as the G. I. Bill (Ewell, 1998). This act subsidized both higher education and vocational training, making post-secondary education available to students who were outside the boundaries of the traditional college profile, with respect to age, income, and background. In 1964 federal programs created Title 4, a plan for student financial aid programs (Ewell, 1998), providing additional opportunities for adults interested in higher education.

The 1970s represented a pivotal era for most colleges and universities. This was especially true with most small private institutions (Astin & Lee, 1972; Pfinster & Finkelstein, 1984; Smith & Finch, 1975). During this decade, enrollments of traditional age students began to decline, and inflation began to affect institutional allocations of traditional resources. Administrators were faced with new concerns such as cost containment and cost effectiveness. This situation created a dilemma for those in higher education administration, as the population of nontraditional learners grew by phenomenal numbers in the following decades; this growth continues today.

Missions, Goals, Objectives and Trends of Higher Education

As the student population of colleges and universities across America changes, so should the mission of higher education. Nowark and Shriberg (1981) compiled the following mission statement from college catalogs at institutions where the average age of the student was about thirty-five: “This university exists to help young people grow and develop, and this college is committed to providing our young citizens with a liberal education” (p. 43 [emphasis added]). Historically, Stadtman (1980) noted that some freestanding liberal arts colleges and universities were concerned that they may lose their sense of historic mission if they responded to the demographic environment that was beginning to emerge. What may appear to be mission loss is “rather a new variation on, or a new expression of, a historical institutional commitment that is distinctly shaped by new environmental conditions” (p. 118).
Ackell, Epps, Sharp, and Sparks (1982) presented a comprehensive model of adult learners and how institutions adapt to them. In this model, there are three stages in this developmental process of adaptation:

Stage 1: The Laissez-faire Stage: The system is neutral concerning the adult learner. Artificial constraints and barriers are removed although there is neither structure for support of adult learners nor any administrative policy.

Stage 2: The traditional students are segregated from the adult learners and separate services of lesser quality are provided for the adult students. These adult learner programs also receive less funding than do the programs tailored to meet the needs of the traditional students.

Stage 3: The Equity Stage: Both the adult students and traditional age students are treated equally and are provided service that is both equal in quality and quantity. This model responded to administrative commitment and institutional barriers through the mission statements and policies.

(pp.30-35)

Unfortunately, Stage Three, or the “Equity Stage” is an ideal many institutions have not attained, as their historical and contemporary focus on traditional-age students suggests.

One important aspect of this stage involves crafting a comprehensive mission statement. Douchette, Richardson, and Fenske (1985) observed that institutional mission statements typically provide “descriptions of overarching institutional purposes that are primarily intended to justify the institution to external constituencies” (p. 193). However, mission statements should provide descriptions of “specific activities in which institutions actually engage. These activities in turn, are defined in terms of the institution’s services, the specific clientele for whom these services are provided, and the rationale that is commonly advanced for providing them” (1985, p. 193). However, these kinds of authentic descriptions are largely absent from institutional statements of
purpose, an issue that is problematic, considering the changes in student demographics that have occurred over the past several decades.

Tough (1987) noted that institutions involved in higher education should regain a realistic sense of their mission for the individuals they serve. The importance of the adult student must be addressed within the higher education institutions’ mission if they are to “remain viable institutions with a society undergoing demographic, economic, and social changes” (p. 23). Many small and private institutions of higher education that have commonly had singular missions focused on traditional age students have been forced to change their admissions and recruitment procedures, due to the changing enrollment trends. To ignore this could be the difference between keeping the institution doors open and closing them (Aslanian, 1988). However, instead of anticipating and preparing for adult students by creating and designing programs and services that will meet their needs, many institutions of higher education have attempted to make suitable the existing programs and services that were originally designed for traditional age students (Siegel, 1978; Thon, 1994). Institutions’ reluctance to engage in more extensive reforms may be due in part to their fear of losing their traditional identities by providing more comprehensive services to adult learners.

Kasworm, Sandmann, and Sissel (2000) state that “higher education institutions are slow and unwieldy, so intent on studying things excessively that it is impossible to get a timely response.” Ironically, these institutions “are expected to be more involved in the resolution of complex social, civic, ethical, and economic issues” (p. 454). To address this dilemma, Boyer (1996) supported creating a climate that involves both the academic and civic cultures working more “continuously, collaboratively, and creatively with each other” (p. 459). Further, he asserts that planning services for adults can be an integral part of the planning process. Rather than viewing their mission as one focused toward the traditional student population, educational institutions may focus their mission on learning relevant to the adult lifespan. In the end, the result of such a revision may be
“a movement away from a patriarchal, authoritarian mission toward a recurring co-partnership among society, adult learners, and educational institutions” (Kasworm, Sandmann, & Sissel, 2000, p.460). If attention is given to adult learners then the possibility for understanding their needs should be better addressed.

Realizing when needs exist and what type(s) of support will suffice is imperative. According to Kasworm, Sandmann, & Sissel (2000),

by now, it should be patently clear that most adults, and a significant population of young adult learners pursuing for-credit learning, are faced with the need to combine work, family, community involvement, and collegiate learning. If these individuals are situated within the broader world, the mission of higher education include this complexity as part of the overall learning process. (p. 460)

The mission statements of higher educational institutions must include recognition of the value of learning in action and engagement in life through work and social commitment.

According to Kasworm, Sandmann, & Sissel (2000), “as higher educational institutions begin to craft contemporary mission statements that more accurately reflect the complex position of adults in society, there must be a new understanding of the interdependency among higher education, other learning providers, and the broader community” (p. 461). Institutions need to progress beyond just admitting adult students; they need to examine and reevaluate their goals, institutional purposes, missions, and services provided to the adult student. Colleges and universities need to understand that other learning providers, such as churches and social and civic organizations, are part of these nontraditional students’ lives, as are the communities they live in. Educational goal completion may be dependent on what occurs in all areas of nontraditional students’ lives. Examining the intricacies and interrelationships among the different aspects of the lived experiences of adult learners may represent a crucial step in fostering a more supportive educational climate for these students.
Gender Trends

A significant trend in the changing face of adult education has been the increase of adult women participating in higher education. Because of economic necessity and changes in social conceptions of occupations usually designed for men, women are becoming more visible in the workplace (Simcox, 1998). Merriam and Caffarella (1999) state, “because of social and technological changes, women are leaving home but also the existence of new opportunities in both education and the labor market entice women into entering the new environments of both education and work” (p. 14). It is projected by the year 2011 that the number of full-time women students will increase by approximately 15%. It is also projected that by the year 2011 there will be an increase of approximately 20% in the number of part-time women students (NCES, 2001). The greater participation in the workforce has been mirrored by the greater participation in higher education by women.

Economic Trends

Another important trend that has impacted student demographics is the changing economic landscape of the U.S. One of the primary motivating factors for adults seeking higher education pertains to economics. As the economy changes or becomes less robust, enrollment in educational institutions tends to increase. Economic fluctuations occurring nationally may affect the number of adult learners involved in higher education (Swanson, 1996).

As a result of economic factors, some adults have lost jobs and the ones who continue to be employed are expected to perform at a higher rate than before. The expectations and demands of corporate America are sophisticated. Some corporations in this country expect their employees to be pursuing educational goals that are associated with training methodologies identified by their respective job descriptions (Swanson, 1996). Business organizations in America are relying on higher education to provide formal training in areas such as management processes and human resource skills.
These changes have influenced adult education—although not as profoundly as one might expect. Davis & Botkin (1994) state that although educational institutions are aware of the ways in which changing work practices impact adult learners, and have begun to provide needed curricula, it has become imperative that they establish alternate schedules that meet the needs of these adult learners. Ultimately, many adult learners have returned to the classroom for the purpose of economic survival; yet, in many cases, little has been done to ensure that these students’ experiences within the university setting are more supportive than their experiences in the marketplace.

Demographics

The study of student demographics is instrumental in the development and structure of learning in society today. According to Merriam and Caffarella (1999), “For the first time in our society, adults outnumber youth, there are more older adults, the population is better educated than ever before, and there is more cultural and ethnic diversity” (p. 6). To understand the needs of the adult learner more clearly it is necessary to understand the demographics of the adult learner population and their relationship to educational goal attainments. According to the United States Bureau of the Census (1995), the median age of Americans is supposed to increase to “35.5 in 2000 and 39.1 in 2035” (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999, p.7). With the aging of the overall population, adults are gaining notice from our nation’s government, educators, and industries.

Additionally, cultural and ethnic diversity has a strong impact on the adult learner population. Gardner (1996) projects that within 10 years the Hispanic population will represent “37.7 percent of the total population growth, Asian-Pacific Islanders about 19.5 percent, and African Americans 17 percent” (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999, Learning in Adulthood, p.9) The cultural and ethnic diversity of our population, and the increase in the median age, will require those involved in adult education to be both aware of and sensitive to the needs of adult learners.
Adult Development and Learning: Teaching Nontraditional Students

This section examines issues involved in teaching the nontraditional student, types of adult learners, and differences that exist between traditional and nontraditional students as defined by the current literature. If educational institutions are to attract and retain adult learners, it seems imperative that they know more about them. Institutional survival may be dependent on nontraditional students, thus their retention seems critical. If institutions of higher education accept the responsibility of educating the adult learner, it seems reasonable that these institutions accept the task of responding to adult learners’ needs.

According to Knowles, the researcher responsible for developing the theory of Andragogy, and providing a foundation for the principles of adult learning, “the adult learner has been a neglected species” (1990, p.27). However, available information on adult learners suggests that their learning preferences are often different from those of traditional learners. Due to their richer and more extensive life experiences, adults may not be as receptive to the usual formal learning settings of a lecture-discussion format (Darkenwald & Valentine, 1990). Because their approach to learning is problem-centered (Slotnick, Pelton, Fuller, & Tabor, 1993), an active learning environment better meets the complex needs of the adult learner (Houle, 1972). Additionally, these learners’ motivation may differ from the factors that motivate traditional learners. According to Rusin (1993), most adult researchers and learning theorists view the adult learner as internally stimulated as well as self-motivated. Often adult learners may be involved in higher education because they choose to be, rather than because it is a parental/societal expectation or an employment requirement. Frequently adult learners are engaged in higher education because they seek advancement, career changes, or for personal growth (The Educational Resources Institute & The Institute of Higher Education Policy, 1996).

However, the available information on these students’ characteristics and needs is limited. One reason for this problem may be that adult learners continue to be
understood as a secondary segment of the student body. As White (1999) suggested, so much of the existing literature concerning adult learners’ persistence as well as the attainment of their educational goals has focused on the impact and influence of academic and social integration rather than adult learners’ needs. However, existing research does indicate that adult learners’ needs may vary; therefore, it may be useful to examine the available information on the ways in which these needs vary.

**Types of Adult Learners**

According to Endorf and McNeff’s study of adults enrolled in an adult degree program (1991), there are five types of adult learners. Type one is confident, pragmatic and goal-oriented. This type of adult learner has a strong desire to work with peers. These students are in competition with themselves, not the other students, and their learning style is “interactive and experiential” (p. 21). These adult students obtain learning from many individuals, not just the professor. Type one learners are always prepared for class and they expect their classmates to be prepared also. These adult learners need their ideas to be heard and matters involving them to be responded to promptly. It is unlikely that returning to the classroom will be intimidating to type one adult learners. As confident learners, these adults will question why they are assigned specific tasks in order to clarify the assignment. They enjoy being involved in the learning process and tend to become irritated if the professor continues to review more than they consider necessary. According to Endorf and McNeff (1991), “instructors need to be aware that these students select courses that will lead toward specific goals and that they will confront professors whose courses or methods appear inadequate” (p. 22).

The second type of adult learner defined by Endorf and McNeff (1991) is termed “affective” because s/he responds to “the affective elements of learning” (p. 21). These adult learners share some of the characteristics of traditional students. They usually like school, have relationships with their instructors, and enjoy the “feeling” of school. They
consider instructors to be expert sources of knowledge and are very reluctant to question them. Endorf and McNeff claim that “initially, affective learners feel apprehensive about returning to school, but feel ‘alive’ once there” (p. 21). These learners take responsibility for learning and are eager to satisfy a professor’s expectations. Affective learners respond well to written assignments. Additionally, these learners appreciate getting to know their professors; however, “to stimulate classroom contributions of type two learners, instructors will have to invite their participation” (p. 22). Encouragement by the professor to participate in discussions and other school activities will enhance their enjoyment of school.

The third type of adult learner, according to Endorf and McNeff (1991), is one who is in transition. This type of learner is involved in the development of independence as a student. These adults are interested in the connection of life experiences with what they are learning while at the educational institution. Transitional learners enjoys instruction that is interactive and involves discussion. According to Endorf and McNeff, “learners in transition are pragmatic in their approach to learning and recognize their educational progress” (p. 21). Transitional learners enjoy the opportunity to relate their life experiences with the professor and the class. The instructor of type three learners will be more effective in the role of a mentor. When the students are removed from a competitive climate, they are better able to focus on the information they are being taught. Like type two learners, they need reassurance and their instructors are encouraged to entertain participation in discussion. However, unlike type two learners, “because they see problem solving and learning as more complex than do affective learners, transitional students enjoy challenges to their thinking and do not expect that everything in a course will have a simple resolution” (p. 22).

The fourth type of adult learner, according to Endorf and McNeff (1991), views life as “a composite, rather than as separate entities” (p. 21). These students appear to be relaxed and their satisfaction level with other adult learners seems to be relatively high.
They appear to be in control and exhibit a sense of freedom. Additionally, these “integrated learners understand learning as their own personal responsibility and establish relationships with professors that are more peer-like than those of traditional-age learners” (p.22). Integrated learners seem to be self-directed. Education appears to fit well into their overall lives. They show little evidence of apprehension about returning to school, and they appear to possess the tendency to want to acquire more knowledge. Endorf and McNeff indicate that “because integrated learners know how to be real students, faculty is freed from the need to teach the basics of how to study and how to perform in a class” (p. 22).

Endorf and McNeff (1991) refer to the fifth type of adult learner as the “risk taker.” These students seem to be satisfied to “go it alone” rather than depend on anyone. Risk takers usually have good relationships with instructors. They enjoy new ventures and work hard to accomplish goals. They are busy balancing job, home, and school and prefer to rely on themselves than on support groups. They appreciate the support they receive from the institution and look to the professors for learning and guidance (p. 22). Teaching type five learners may provide the professor the opportunity to cover topics and ideas areas not originally envisioned as part of the scope of the course. Accommodating these learners may allow the class syllabus to be used only as a guideline, since deviation from it may promote enjoyment rather than fear. Instructors of risk takers may want to remove any predictability they may have built into the course.

These five student “types” described by Endorf and McNeff (1991) represent a useful introduction to the multifaceted nature of the adult learner population. However, this taxonomy is incomplete, in that it fails to provide a nuanced description of the ways in which the various facets of adult learners’ lives intersect with one another. Examining how these students cope with barriers and needs via a system of formal and informal supports represents an as-yet under-explored avenue of research in this field.
Barriers, Needs, and Supports

Barriers

Adult learners confront barriers, needs, and supports as they progress through the educational process. The needs of the adult learner cannot be considered without knowledge of existing barriers. Although the body of research on adult learners’ needs and barriers is incomplete, available literature suggests that these barriers fall into three categories, dispositional, institutional, and situational. Situational barriers arise from a person’s situation in life at a given time. Institutional barriers are those practices and procedures that exclude or discourage working adults from participating in educational activities. Dispositional barriers refer to attitudes and perceptions about oneself as a learner. Previous educational experiences seem to influence this barrier the most. (Cross, 1981, p. 99)

Examples of situational barriers include community, family, employment, social responsibilities and time. Barriers related directly to college include attendance requirements, unavailability of needed courses, lack of information, too much bureaucracy, and classes that are scheduled at inconvenient times. Dispositional barriers can include the fear of being too old, lack of confidence, and lack of energy (Cross, 1981). These forces can be and often are barriers to adult learners’ participation in higher education, preventing some adult learners from achieving their educational goals.

Admissions

Several researchers have addressed admission constraints as causing problems for undergraduate nontraditional students (Fagan & Williams, 1991; Glass & Rose, 1987; Lewis, 1988; Petersen, 1991). Upon entering educational institutions, adult undergraduate students may sometimes encounter red tape and unfamiliar jargon surrounding the admissions process. Requirements that are focused toward the traditional student sometimes cause problems. Requiring the SAT or the ACT can be
discriminatory because the original scores of these learners are usually outdated and the thought of having to retest can cause adult learners to become intimidated (Grottkau & Davis, 1987). Additionally, high school transcripts can present problems due to the lapse of time and personal changes that have occurred (Grottkau & Davis, 1987).

Lance and Mayo (1979) determined that a re-entry admissions counselor was undergraduate adult learners’ primary service need. According to Conrad (1993), these learners need a different approach to student services, primarily because of problems arising due to the length of time they have been out of school. Conrad’s research emphasized that students’ comfort level increased when admissions and enrollment concerns were eased. This, according to Conrad (1993), had a definite impact on the adult learners with respect to their retention and success. This research also noted a correlation between the cultural and social comfort of nontraditional students and their academic achievement and retention rates.

**Orientation**

Special orientation programs for nontraditional students can provide an easier transition back into school because such positive assistance helps adults start school with immediate support. Spratt (1984) indicated that most orientation programs were not geared to address the important specifics of the educational process, but rather were intended to expose students to the activities that surround campus life. Adults returning to institutions of higher education have a need for a heightened opportunity for both advisement and orientation. Iskyan (1993) observed that 48% of adult students participating in a three-hour orientation appeared to receive benefits. Chickering (1994) also agreed that an orientation program designed precisely for nontraditional learners would be favorable: “They may be especially heartened by a panel of returnees talking about what helped and how they succeeded” (p. 442).
Financial Aid

The financial demands of education also appear to be particularly significant for adult learners. Wheaton and Robinson (1983) found that women entering into higher education were impacted negatively by financial aid policies. For example, financial aid office hours are not flexible enough for many adult learners. In Terrell’s study of adult students (1990), one of the needs was developing financial aid programs designed for adults. A number of studies have identified this need; for example, finances were a strong barrier in a study of Navy personnel and their participation in a program on base (Smith, 1997). This was true even though this program was voluntary and off-duty. In a study done by Malhotra (1997) in a small tuition-driven private college, the most pronounced individual barrier was financial aid. Similarly, in Ryder, Bowman, and Newman’s (1994) study of adult learners’ barriers to degree completion, the researchers found that 41% of the nontraditional students surveyed identified financial concerns as the most prominent barrier. Brown (1990) is relatively sure two trends that indicate the need for financial aid will continue to be acute for adult learners: tuition costs are growing faster than inflation, and the most rapidly growing population in higher education is the part-time student. Thus, this barrier has a powerful negative impact on the adult learner, and if Brown is correct, will continue to create pressure for this population.

Academic Support

The response of institutions to the adult learners has been consistently focused on academics, through the provision of evening and weekend courses, credit-for-life experiences, and off-campus courses (Thon, 1984). Kasworm (1990) surveyed students, grouping them by age, and found that academically related affairs were a primary need of adult students. Mardoyan, Alleman, and Cochran (1983) found that there was a striking difference between adult students and traditional students concerning their need for
alternatives to standard daytime class scheduling. A lack of a variable curriculum schedule was noted as a definite barrier. Adults expressed a great need for evening and weekend scheduling as well for training that involved development of study skills. Thus, by revising and expanding the course schedule, some institutions have addressed some academic needs of adult learners. However, these students may require more academic support than most institutions currently provide. For example, Warchal and Southern (1986) found as a result of their study that adult student respondents chose academic survival skills as their most important need. Mabry and Hardin (1982) noted that academic remediation in some areas was needed due to the learning skills that had been lost over time or never acquired. In addition, White (1999) found as a result of her study that many adult students confirmed a need for remedial mathematics courses, in particular.

Faculty Interaction

Additionally, the lack of faculty involvement can prove to be a significant barrier for these learners. Faculty may not always be aware of the expectations, needs, and problems of adult learners (Lamb & Porterfield, 1987). Due to this lack of interaction, many faculty members may conclude that the difficulty experienced by some adult students is due to poor academic skills or a lack of confidence (Sparks, 1994). This results in the instructor being either delighted or dismayed by the adult learners in the classroom (Spratt, 1994). In a paper prepared for the Commission on Higher Education and the Adult Learner, Chickering (1983) pointed out the need for faculty to learn to work with adult students and to be identified by these students as colleagues and resource persons. A study conducted by Kurlandsky (1990) found that traditional age students were more satisfied with the level of faculty concern than the adult students and concluded that adult students both desire and need interaction from the faculty more than do the traditional students. In brief, these adult learners need an increased level of understanding from their professors concerning their various and complex roles and lives
Employment/Personal Responsibilities

Many adult students are employed full time and have family responsibilities. Both of these responsibilities can lead to difficulties in budgeting adequate time for learning experiences. About 57% of adult undergraduate students over the age of 40 work a minimum of thirty hours per week (The Educational Resources Institute and The Institute for Higher Education Policy, 1996, p. 4). An additional concern for adults re-entering school is the care for family members, especially their children. Family care expenses can exacerbate a financial burden that has been created by entering higher education. This can create new barriers as well as challenges related to study time and course scheduling (The Education Resources Institute & The Institute for Higher Educational Policy, 1996).

Historically, Bean and Creswell (1980) noted that family responsibilities related to the retention of adult learners have not been widely researched. Their investigation of an all-female post-secondary institution revealed that the more significant the family responsibilities, the greater the probability that the educational goals would not be reached. More recently, a study conducted at a large university (Slotnick, Pelton, Fuller, and Tabor 1993) examined how adult learners integrated issues such as class attendance, employment activities, family responsibilities, and studying. Their results indicated that satisfying these issues while completing a degree would require the nontraditional learner to perform some type of balancing act. This finding was supported by Mercer (1993), who claimed that nontraditional learners who were unsuccessful were very likely trying to balance various roles, and noted that family responsibilities, employment responsibilities, finances, and insufficient time were usually the reasons adult learners left school and failed to attain their educational goals.

This research study of nontraditional civilian and military learners added to these above findings by exploring life issues of nontraditional students on a military base. The
population selected for study was different, in that it comprised both military and civilian elements. Because available research was conducted almost a decade ago, this study was designed to update the body of existing information, and address issues of current interest for adult learners. To so do, this study attempted to identify what specific roles had to be balanced to attain academic and life success and how these nontraditional students live their lives while pursuing higher education.

Influences

Existing research indicates that various factors can affect adult undergraduate students greatly and influence whether they have a positive educational experience. Some of these influences include family, friends, work associates, and school (O’Callaghan, Hau, & Lebold, 1993, Hatch, 2000). These influences can be significant barriers. In fact, these influences have been identified as the most prevalent cause of nontraditional learners leaving the educational arena (Swift, 1987). When investigating the influences of these institutions on the retention rate of the adult learners, Naretto (1995) found that being a member of a supportive institution was a significant factor in the completion of the adult learner’s educational experience.

Negative self-concept

Many adult learners have developed a negative self-concept due to poor educational histories. They consider themselves unable to learn new skills and knowledge and may even question why they are participating in higher education. Negative self-concept can be a major barrier. Having a negative view of oneself can deplete one’s self-confidence and adversely affect an adult learner’s ability to complete his or her educational experience. Chartrand (1990) discovered that if a student’s self-evaluation was congruent with his role as a good student, both academic and personal adjustments were improved. The adult student’s goal completion can be positively affected by such adjustments.

MacKinnon-Slaney (1994) agreed with this philosophy and indicated that a
positive self-image can propel an adult learner through a competitive educational environment. They also indicated that adults who have a poor self-image, especially women and adult learners of color, are more prone to leave the educational arena before they reach their educational goals. While conducting a study of the nontraditional student on campus, Slotnick, Elton, Fuller, and Tabor (1993) discovered that, ironically, traditional support services such as the library, tutoring, and registration assistance can represent major barriers to the college experiences of nontraditional students. These researchers encourage educational institution administrators to remove these barriers by extending the time the library and business office are open as well as by offering tutoring at times that are convenient with the nontraditional student.

Needs

Technology Needs

Technology is another factor that influences adult education and the way that adults learn. We have moved to an informational society and are experiencing a technological explosion. This rapid explosion is contributing to the need for continued learning, as professional knowledge is becoming obsolete in a very short time. The use of the Internet, teleconferencing, and distance education are examples of the technological tools developed to meet the “growing learning needs of adults” (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999, p. 17). It is important that adult educators become aware of the strategies to be used when faced with an overload of information and technology. According to Whitson and Astute (1997), adult educators “should build more and better connections with those who directly teach information skills, especially librarians, but also computer specialists” (p. 133).

Educators can also focus on developing the students’ “higher level thinking skills” so that judgments can be made about the credibility and usefulness of information (Whitson & Astute, 1997, p. 133). Since much information is available electronically through the Internet, the authors underscore the need for educators themselves to become
comfortable in this environment to the point they can help the adult learners take advantage of the technology.

**Career and Counseling Needs**

The number of adult students participating in higher education continues to increase, and addressing the career development requirements of this population is the responsibility of both educators and institutions alike. Choosing their academic major is a primary concern of these students, according to Brock & Davis (1987) and Mounty (1991). To respond to these needs properly, educational institutions will need to establish career development programs that are appropriate for this expanding population (Günter & Brown, 1996; Griff, 1987; Mounty, 1991).

Miller and Winston (1990) argued that there are differences between career counseling of traditional and nontraditional students. Traditional methods of career counseling may be less effective when using the same techniques and strategies on the adult student population. Previous research has recognized the differences in the characteristics of traditional and nontraditional students (e.g., Asher & Scenes, 1993; Chartrand, 1992; Chickering & Havighurst, 1981; Miller & Winston, 1990). A primary and very recognizable difference is that adult learners usually are employed outside the home and have families and community responsibilities, in addition to their academic responsibilities. Many nontraditional students, unlike most of the traditional students, are working full-time and focused on both family and occupational goals as important factors in their lives. Asher and Scenes (1993) stated, “As their participation in the college’s social life is limited…their participation in other communities (family and work) is much more extended” (p. 92).

Chartrand (1992) says that due to differences between the traditional and nontraditional learners, student development models focused on late adolescence could possibly not fit well when attempting to understand adult student development as it relates to career counseling. Miller and Winston (1990) also voiced their concern,
arguing that the nontraditional student group reflects a population that is experiencing considerably different developmental needs and tasks than those of students of traditional college age. Because these nontraditional students are at different developmental levels, it is important that psychological assessment strategies and instrumentation be geared to the special characteristics and life patterns of these different age cohorts. (p. 109)

However, available information on the issues adult students face is incomplete. Healy & Reilly (1989) expressed the need for future research to address questions that past research has left vacant concerning career counseling needs of the adult learner. Luzzo (1999) pointed out that there is an overall weakness with existing nontraditional student research because most participants in the previous research studies were traditional age college students. According to Luzzo,

even studies that were specifically designed to evaluate differences between traditional and nontraditional students have suffered from relatively few participants representing the nontraditional student population. An in-depth analysis of the career decision-making needs and concerns of nontraditional college students requires additional data to be gathered from a much larger proportion of students over the age of 25. Because of the changing landscape of the college population, career researchers must make a concerted effort to achieve greater representation in their studies. (1999, p. 8)

Just as this research study, of nontraditional civilian and military students on a military base, examined adult learners in a relatively unexplored setting, its use of an all-adult sample contributes to the body of qualitative literature on nontraditional students, the educational barriers they face, and their needs when confronted with these barriers.

Support Systems

Investigating how adult students make use of available support systems also represented an important facet of this study. Mackinnon-Slaney (1994) reported that one of the most important components of the adult education experience is the support system
and the way it affects nontraditional learners’ attainment of educational goals, as well as how these systems provide opportunities. Support systems that provide a positive outcome for the adult learner may enhance the nontraditional enrollment for the institution.

Personal sources of support such as family and friends are located within social structures that are informal (Wellman, Carring, & Hall, 1988). These supports are different from the community and institutional support systems because they are based on an adult learner’s resources and contacts (Burgio, & Tryanski, 1988). Personal support systems and informal networks also include social support systems. Social support, as defined by Levine (1986) is based on the people we interact with who tell us that they care about us and that we can rely on them. He maintained that social support is actually an attitude and can be considered an act of compassion and/or concern. Social support is usually considered that which is provided to us by good friends, caring neighbors, and close relatives.

Champagne (1982) conducted a study in Springfield, Massachusetts that offered an insight into the development of potential support for adult learners. Using a structured interview guide he interviewed twenty women. The women said they did not have complete support for their educational goals from their external support systems, but were able to create a “buddy system” to support each other and their needs. This study actually identified many of the barriers confronted by the women and emphasized the barrier of time constraints that was later identified by Darkenwald and Valentine (1990). Champagne’s study was further supported by a study done by Brown (1994) concerning the effects of a support group on student attrition related to poor academic performance. Brown noted the relevance of the academic environment and social support, and described the effects of a program that offered feedback, guidance, intimate interaction, and problem-solving skill development. Brown’s conclusions revealed that students participating in social support groups were more likely to realize academic success due to
the positive influences of a support group.

Support systems also include formal services that are offered through student service departments at the college. Buhr (1997) found that for nontraditional students, various support systems were only some of the components of the college experience; however, if these systems were satisfactory, the higher education experience for these learners was more likely to be positive. Various formal services provided to the traditional college include, but are not restricted to, academics and advising, bookstore, cafeteria, career counseling, computer facilities, financial aid, and libraries (Pascarella, & Terenzini, 1991). All of these services are provided by most educational institutions. Located in the college environment, these services have the capability of changing the adult learner’s experience (Astin, 1985).

Astin (1993) reported that increased involvement with the educational environment resulted in academic achievement. Barker (1995) articulates five postulates regarding student involvement:

1. Involvement is the investment of physical and psychological energy to various academic and social activities related to the student’s on/off campus college experiences. For example, the amount of time a student spends in the library researching a topic and writing a paper, or the time a student spends being involved as a member of an academic honor society on campus are all expended energies of involvement.

2. Involvement of the student may range from highly involved to not involved; the level of involvement may occur along a continuum. For example, a student may be an elected officer representing nontraditional students in a student government organization, or an active member of a honor society, and seen at the high end of the continuum of involvement; whereas, an uninvolved student may not devote his/her studies, nor choose to be involved in any campus activities. He/she is then seen at the lower end of the continuum of involvement.
3. Involvement has both quantitative and qualitative features. This simply indicates that data collection on involvement may be revealed through measuring how many hours a student studies, identifying what facilities he/she uses, and recording students’ grade point average (quantitative), or by understanding how a student spends time while studying (qualitative).

4. “The amount of student learning and personal development associated with any educational program is directly proportional to the quality and quantity of student involvement in that program” (Astin, 1985, p.136). Simply stated, devoting more time to his/her studies, and being involved in activities that give an opportunity to learn and develop skills further enhance the student’s talents and abilities. For example, if a student who is enrolled in a research class is also involved in a joint research project with a faculty member, the amount of time devoted to that activity would yield that student a higher level of learning benefits. Through his involvement, the student will gain a deeper understanding of the topic, unlike the student who only attends the lecture on the topic.

5. The effectiveness of any educational policy or practice is only as strong as the commitment from the institution to enhance “all” students’ involvement academically and socially. For example, if the programming and policies encourage a student to be more involved, then the student may be more involved. Moreover, if students are involved in those activities that reflect who they are and what their interests are, they will be more likely to be involved. If educational institutions are to realize educational gains by increased adult learner involvement, they must identify and support the special needs of the adult learner. (pp. 17-18)

Many colleges and universities fail in the area of providing formal support services to adult learners because their normal schedules focus on the needs of the traditional student rather than those of the nontraditional student (Coates, & Dombeyer,
The involvement of the adult learner is manifested by the increased amounts of time spent on campus, and interaction with faculty, administration, and other students, both traditional and nontraditional. Increased accessibility to the support services provided by the institution can substantially increase the main element of academic success and student involvement (Astin, 1993). Student development is very important to administrators who have the responsibility of originating, designing, and maintaining supportive learning environments that are effective (Astin, 1984). Levels of involvement are directly affected by learning environments that are effective and encourage the participation of students (Astin, 1993).

Cullen (1994) reported that educational institutions could employ the following adult learner support strategies, which may help in the retention of the adult learner as well as in their pursuit of the ultimate goal—a completed degree. Some strategies and services that adult students may find particularly helpful include the following:

1. Pre-enrollment counseling to establish expectations gives a sense of the university community (Cullen, 1994).
2. Personal attention; staff willing to listen; assistance with personal and financial problems (Cullen, 1994).
3. Managing the culture of the institution; recognizing adult anxiety about school (Hagedorn, 1993).
4. Flexible, convenient scheduling and frequent contact with faculty (including electronic methods) (Hagedorn, 1993).
5. Organizational support such as the reimbursement of educational expenses by an employer (Boyer, 1987).

Understanding how adult learners utilize support systems is significant because it adds to the knowledge base of the ways in which adult learners learn, and it provides educators with knowledge of how to design programs and services for them (Boyer, 1987). Although available research provides many useful suggestions for administrators,
educators, and counselors working with nontraditional students, through its qualitative approach, this study of nontraditional civilian and military learners on a military base, examined adult students’ use of various support systems in greater detail. The case study approach of this project enabled the researcher to focus on the complex interrelationships that may exist among these systems, addressing one of the limitations that exists in the body of literature on this subject.

This section focused on the current literature that addresses barriers, needs and support that influences the nontraditional student. The following section will address the conceptual and theoretical framework of this study.

Conceptual/Theoretical Framework and Summary

The theoretical framework of this study was guided by a number of influential voices from various disciplines. Carl Rogers (1969) expressed the need for learning experiences to be significant, claiming that such learning experiences can lead to personal growth, and acknowledging that people might need help to make life decisions. Within this humanistic framework, the instructor becomes the facilitator who brings to the surface previous knowledge and helps learners add new information to their cognitive maps. Humanistic perspectives comprise the foundation for much of the research concerning adult education and adult learners. The education of adults, or Andragogy, “is saturated with ideals of individualism and entrepreneurial democracy” (Pratt, 1993, p. 21). The humanism expressed by Pratt (1993) establishes the importance of students, their opinions, and decision-making processes at the center of education. Simcox (1998) identifies the importance of life issues to nontraditional students and their connection to education persistence and completion. Understanding what adult learners think and what help they need is vital to providing adequate support. Autonomy and self-direction must undergird adults’ decisions related to education. The humanistic perspective voiced by Rogers, Knowles, Pratt, Simcox, and others provides the framework from which to identify what existing support systems and resources the nontraditional student uses, and
which additional supports and resources are the legitimate responsibility of the educational institution to provide.

Given the changes in the demographics of the college population, a study that addresses these concerns of adult learners from this theoretical framework is important. For the last several decades, nontraditional learners have become increasingly active participants in the college and university experience. This trend is expected to continue. However, these adult learners enter the arena of higher education with life experiences and responsibilities that affect the way they learn and/or how they are able to accomplish their educational goals. Community, educational, employment, family, and other social and economic institutions offer both support and barriers that affect educational goal attainment. Institutions of higher education are challenged to create ways to aid these adult learners in completing their educational programs by understanding how these environments may be dependent on one other.

Higher education is experiencing a time of rising costs and shrinking resources, and timely investigation of the types of support used by these nontraditional students can have a positive impact on the existing and future adult undergraduate programs. The issues of support and barriers have been documented in the literature for the last several decades, although the majority of this literature includes research that is specific to the traditional age college student. The existing research does not adequately explain how adult learners create their own systems of support, how they choose what support they employ, how they fit education into their life as a whole, and does not address the interdependency that may exist among the support structures utilized by adult learners. This research study addressed the void that exists in educational research concerning nontraditional learners and the nature of support they expect from their colleges. By investigating the experiences of adult learners in greater depth than does most available literature on this population, this study was designed to help institutions target these students’ needs, and ultimately foster a more supportive learning environment.
CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to describe the design of this study which examined how adult learners use supports from various environments and how the supports provided by these environments are interdependent and necessary for both educational and life success. The design is best characterized as a multiple case study of individuals at Mount Olive College that has programs located at a single military base in the southeastern United States. Classes are scheduled primarily during evening and lunch hours to accommodate a nontraditional student population that includes both active military members and civilians. This researcher has not found such programs described in adult education literature.

Qualitative research methods permitted an intense examination of these programs and the students they serve. This chapter describes qualitative research and a pilot study from which the design of this study emerged. Additionally, this chapter includes descriptions of the sampling techniques and data collection methods (interviews with nontraditional students, participant observation, and document analysis), as well a discussion of member checks, triangulation, and ethical considerations relevant to this study. Finally, the role of the researcher as participant observer, his biases, and relative strengths and limitations will be described.

Qualitative Research

Qualitative research is embedded in the social sciences, with its primary objective being to explain and comprehend data that are obtained in a natural environment (Guba & Lincoln, 1981). Qualitative research is "pragmatic, interpretive, and grounded in the lived experiences of people" (Marshall and Rossman, 1999, p. 2). According to Marshall and Rossman there are eight major characteristics that identify qualitative research:
It (a) is naturalistic, (b) draws on multiple methods that respect the humanity of participants in the study, (c) is emergent and evolving, and (d) interpretive. Qualitative researchers (e) view social worlds as holistic or seamless, (f) engage in systematic reflection on their own roles in the research, (g) are sensitive to their personal biographies and how these shape the study, and (h) rely on complex reasoning that moves dialectically between deduction and induction. (p. 2)

A qualitative approach added strength to the study by making it possible for the researcher to examine the educational program and the environment it creates, which may affect the educational outcome of these adult learners. It is imperative to examine the "human actions" (Marshall & Rossman, p. 57) existing in these programs. Thus, the interviews, document analysis, and observations were needed to identify and describe the importance of adult learners’ experiences. Merriam (1998) states, “qualitative researchers are interested in understanding the meaning people have constructed, that is, how they make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world” (p. 6).

The qualitative approach provided a richer, more meaningful and descriptive answers to this study. Interviewing and observing experiences of other people operating in their own environment seemed to be a natural and realistic way of learning about adult students’ experiences. Examining the complexities of their lives and attempting to understand what occurs during their real life interactions was accomplished via qualitative research’s pluralistic nature.

Participants/Sampling

The participants in the sample came from the Mount Olive College program at the military base, which is the site for this study. According to the site director at the research site, the average enrollment for each of the five terms per year has been between 450-500. The site director indicated that this was an Air Force base and is the home to approximately 5,000 active military employees and their dependents. According to the research site director, at the time of the research study, the average class size was 20.
More than 80% of these students enrolled in evening classes, while the remaining 20% enrolled in classes held during lunch hours. The counseling services were provided by the site director, who served as the counselor and academic advisor for all students at this site.

Each of the participants were employed either full or part-time, and attended college during the evening and lunch hours. One participant had recently graduated. The researcher employed the snowball sampling technique. This method begins by asking the first person the researcher interviews to recommend other informants (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). As the researcher contacted individuals whose names were mentioned repeatedly, a wide variety of variables were represented. This either happened by chance or the researcher was blessed. Civilian and military students from Mount Olive College were included. Other variables included gender, age, work status (full-time or part-time), and marital and parental status. Time and other limitations dictated how many variables were included. The researcher interviewed 15 participants. These 15 participants were needed for data saturation. Before each interview, the participants were asked to sign a consent form. Each participant read, agreed with, and willingly signed the consent form. An example of the consent form is located in Appendix E.

Data Collection

Case studies rely on “interviewing, observing, and document analysis” (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p. 202). The data collection strategies for this study consisted of in-depth interviewing (which was the dominant data collection strategy), participant observation, and very limited document analysis.

In-depth interviewing was used because it represented a methodical technique that could shed light on how students think and progress in their studies and allow the researcher to focus on their characteristics. Open-ended questions were employed. Examples are “What is a typical day like for you?” and “What do you like best about your work?” (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998, p, 3). The interview guide located in Appendix A
of this document contains the open-ended questions which helped structure these student interviews. The researcher kept a tape recorder with him at all times because he never knew when he may see something or hear something that could serve as data from field notes.

This researcher used an interactional approach when interviewing the participants. This provided a deep understanding between the researcher and participants that was mutual (Silverman, 1993). All interviews lasted from 45 minutes to one hour, depending on the informant’s responses. Using an open-ended approach allows informants to answer questions in their own words and time rather than having to adhere to a pre-determined structure and guidelines they feel obligated to follow. This encourages the participants to express their thoughts freely about various topics. The interview guide structured the interview, while the free expression approach described by Bogdan and Biklen (1998) was used to follow-up. In each interview specific questions were asked; based on participants’ responses, additional probing questions were posed. As each interview was completed, the interviews were transcribed and the data was coded.

Data generated by informants was the “major thrust” (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998, p. 133) of this study. However, in addition to interviewing study participants, the researcher also used observational techniques. Bogdan and Bicken note that participant observation develops as the researcher enters the world of people s/he plans to study, “gets to know them and earns their trust, and systematically keeps a detailed record of what is heard and observed” (p.3). Patton (2002) claims that “the participant observer employs multiple and overlapping data collection strategies: being fully engaged in experiencing the setting (participation) while at the same time observing and talking with other participants about whatever is happening” (pp. 265-266). This researcher experienced this process during this study. As an instructor at the research site, the researcher sometimes becomes part of the world this study examined. These informants were either former students or students that will not be instructed by the researcher, due to their imminent graduation. In
qualitative studies, the development of trust between the observer and the informant is very important; accordingly, in this study, the researcher was attentive to the need to create a trusting environment that would enable the observer to get a more accurate interpretation of what was actually occurring.

The researcher observed these participants during their class breaks and as they arrived at school to attend classes. The researcher observed the communications between the nontraditional learners participating in the study and other nontraditional learners and faculty at the research site. These observations were used to identify if the research study participants were using their break time to discuss school items with their peers and/or faculty or if they utilized this time as an opportunity to relax, eat a snack, or call home or work. The study participants arrival at school provided knowledge of how they arrived at school. The arrival observation of the nontraditional students participating in this study also provided knowledge of what happened after they arrived. Did they go directly to class, call someone with their cellular telephone, or find a familiar peer or faculty member? Arrangements were made to conduct interviews at the research site. A private office was provided. All participants selected where they wanted to be interviewed. Some students preferred a more private setting and the researcher obliged. Five interviews were done at the research site, one in the private office, one in a library conference room, and three in a classroom away from the Educational Center. This classroom was part of the base school but was in a separate building that had been utilized for classes due to the limited space at the main building. Two interviews were done at the participants’ workplace during their lunch hours. The rest were done at restaurants during hours that were not busy and the distraction level was minimal. This data collection segment of this research study took 105 days.

The study also involved a very limited review of documents. The quality and relevance of document analysis varies. Some documents have only factual details, whereas others can “serve as sources of rich descriptions of how the people who
produced the materials think about their world” (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998, p. 133). Bogdan and Biklen note that in recent times “researchers have become particularly interested in the documents. . . to see how the documents get interpreted by real people instead of imaginary audiences” (1998, pp. 133-134). These types of records can serve as “records of activity that the researcher could not observe directly” (Stake, 1995, p. 68). This study reviewed course offerings at the research site during the last academic school year. These offerings are available to students in the administration office and usually posted on the school bulletin board. The course schedule for Spring II, 2003 is located in Appendix D. Another document reviewed was a publication in the local newspaper (The Goldsboro News-Argus, November 10, 2002). This publication disclosed the record enrollment at the base in the fall of 2002 and how the base school administration was accommodating these larger numbers. These records were available in the public domain.

Data Analysis and Interpretations

The data analysis procedures for each person interviewed were conducted after each interview session. Prompt analysis made data more manageable as well as easier to analyze. The constant comparative method of analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) provided a systematic flow between analysis and data gathering, focusing on two core inquiries: (a) the perceptions of adult learners and (b) how perceptions are related to support systems (e.g. whether they are effective or problematic). The constant comparative method involved creating coding schemes, recoding as more data are gathered and analyzed, developing themes, and asking readers to review the data. This method develops "during the actual research, and it does this through continuous interplay between analysis and data collection" (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998, p. 158). During this research study this method did evolve and interplay between the data collected and the analysis was continuous.

Field notes were recorded on paper and with a cassette tape to assist in creating an
analysis faithful to the actual situation and events during data collection. It is not possible to remember every situation or point that might be integral to the study; thus, the use of informal memos was very important to the accuracy and consistency of this study. Bogdan and Biklen (1998) advise the researcher to “use a free style, informal language, and let the ideas flow” (p. 163). This researcher followed this advice. Observations were noted immediately and similarities examined as soon as practical. This was usually done when the researcher returned home. Bogdan and Biklen also recommend to researchers that "if you notice that certain subjects have things in common, point it out in the observer's comments" (p. 161). Following these suggestions, the researcher did strive to make the collection of field notes accurate, systematic, and transparent.

Using procedures based on Colaizzi (1978), and further developed by Simcox (1998), this researcher took the following steps during data analysis: first, each transcript was read several times so as to develop a feeling for the experience described by the nontraditional participant. Next, statements that significantly related to the nontraditional students' attainment of their educational goals were extracted so as to identify structures of the experience that were thematic. The indicators, or significant statements, and structures were listed, and the thematic structures were organized around the indicators. Third, meanings were constructed via the significant statements and their relevance within each nontraditional learner’s transcript. Throughout the analysis phase, identification of the meanings occurred. Fourth, clusters of themes were then organized and grouped according to shared elements. Validation of the clusters of themes occurred by checking and re-checking for anything unaccounted for in the transcriptions that was not present in the cluster of themes; this researcher checked the original transcripts repeatedly to ensure understanding. In order for the researcher to develop an exhaustive description of the nontraditional learner’s pursuit of educational goal attainment, indicators and the clusters of themes were reflected upon. Finally, the researcher had two readers who read and evaluated the same clusters of themes and indicators to triangulate
his interpretations. This researcher also conferred with his co-chairs and other experts in the field for their recommendations.

To examine differences and similarities in the data gathered from different students, this researcher examined data collected across the following groups; age, gender, marital status, and work status (full-time or part-time). Throughout these procedures, all information was typed and color-coded. The researcher had a beginning code list from the interview guide questions. As coding progressed and the researcher saw repetitive references, new codes were added to the code list. They were color coded and marked on a typed copy, and underlined to note what subject was being addressed. Then the coded information was cut and pasted to separate files such as “time management.” Anytime the informants mentioned time management themes or the literature mentioned time management issues, these references were grouped with information coded “time management” and the source was noted. All informants were assigned pseudonyms and all references were therefore anonymous. Given the compact size of the study site, the researcher also decided that to further protect participants’ identities, it was necessary to omit participants’ pseudonyms from discussions of specific statements. When quoting or paraphrasing from the research study participant’s interview his or her gender was usually identified.

Validity

Pilot Study

A pilot study was conducted during 1999 using nontraditional students as informants. This study lasted approximately 30 days. The setting of the pilot study was the same as for this study. The pilot study helped the researcher to become more familiar with the college’s program and students, and helped him better formulate questions asked

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1 This final step was not addressed in Simcox’s (1998) procedure. This step was intended to ensure that readers were seeing the same main themes developing in the study as the researcher.
of the participants. The questionnaire (interview guide) used appears as Appendix A at the end of this proposal. The information gained from the pilot study helped the researcher design and conduct this research project. The researcher understood that the information from this study would be different from the pilot study. For example, the time allocated for the pilot study was limited. In the pilot study, participants were asked about what support systems were offered at the educational institution, whereas this study looked at total environments of support that are used by the adult learner, how one support may be dependent on another type of support, how participants create their systems of support, and how they see their educational goals fitting into the rest of their lives. Despite the differences between the pilot study and the more complex project undertaken in this study, the pilot study provided an opportunity to field test some of the methodology used in this study, and provided the researcher with a richer experiential basis in qualitative methods and design.

**Member Checks**

Member checks were one of the most important components of validity for this research. Allowing participants to review the transcripts of their interviews ensures that they are in agreement with the transcript, and adds strength to the project’s validity (Davis, 2002). The participants were allowed to review their responses. All confirmed that the transcriptions were accurate. Three wanted to reiterate points they had made during the initial interview.

**Triangulation**

The use of triangulation represents one crucial means of trying to enhance validity in a qualitative study. As Marshall and Rossman (1995) claim, “Triangulation is the act of bringing more than one source of data to bear on a single point” (p. 144). Patton notes that “Triangulation strengthens a study by combining methods. This can mean using several kinds of methods or data” (Patton, 2002, p. 247). The researcher used data triangulation as described by Denzin (1978b), by collecting information from several
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kinds of data sources in his study. In this study, the data sources included in-depth interviews, participant observation, and limited document analysis. Additionally, the inclusion of multiple informants provided a supplemental means of triangulation.

A second method of triangulation, according to Patton (2002), begins with testing for consistency. The researcher understands that inconsistencies are likely to arise from the results because different kinds of inquiry are sensitive to different nuances. Therefore, the researcher understands that finding inconsistencies among various types of data can be illuminating. Patton says that finding inconsistencies provides a broader understanding of what is naturally occurring. Researchers must look for consistency in the data, but at the same time, inconsistencies may add unexpected information. This researcher wanted to develop a deep and rich understanding of these informants’ experiences so he could discover more about what additional supports these nontraditional students needed colleges to provide. Therefore, this study included a careful consideration of both emergent patterns—as well as potential deviations from these patterns.

**Ethical Considerations**

Ultimately, the ethical integrity of any study rests with the researcher. In this study, the researcher’s own value system served as a guide when negotiating ethical issues.

The research site director gave permission to use the name of the college (Mount Olive College). The informants in this study retained their anonymity. This was imperative if a risk-free environment for the informants to express themselves was to be created. To support this type of environment, information participants revealed was not discussed with other informants or other instructors or administrators. When interviewing informants, no matter what their status, the researcher was careful to maintain a neutral affect, even if he totally disagreed with their perspective. Additionally, the researcher was mindful not to encourage individuals to say what he
wanted to hear. Agreements made with the informants were treated as business contracts. Also, "because researchers take the promises they make seriously" (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998, p.45), this researcher was “realistic in such negotiations” (p. 45). Informants had the opportunity to choose pseudonyms used in this study. Promising confidentiality and anonymity can add credibility to the study, since the participants were seemingly honest with the researcher because they were not revealing their real identities. The researcher considers ethics a matter of responsibility, accountability, validity, and integrity, and made a concerted effort to maintain these ideals throughout the research process.

**Role of the Researcher**

The researcher has been an adjunct faculty member at several colleges for more than a decade and is currently an instructor at the military base chosen as the site for this study. The majority of his students have been adult learners. He has also been a doctoral student enrolled at North Carolina State University in the Adult and Community College Education Program, with an emphasis on Higher Education Administration, since the fall semester of 1996.

From personal experiences, this researcher is aware of the complexities of the lives and activities of the informants and the criteria that surround the basis for their actions. The researcher intended to and did interact extensively with participants to develop and maintain sensitivity to these complexities.

**Researcher’s Biases and Strengths**

In any study, the researcher brings prior views to the research context, and these views must be addressed. This researcher was aware that the most important thing is to realize that potential biases are present and must be acknowledged. Sewhandt & Halpern (1988) report that the degree of bias present, as well as its effects, may be identified and defused. One problem involving researcher bias pertains to data collection. If the researcher rationalizes that he has done enough the results may not be conclusive. However, in this study, the problem of closing the investigation or data collection before
saturation occurred never arose. Secondly, Scwhandt and Halpern say that sometimes researchers fail to explore field notes thoroughly. To prevent this problem, the field notes created in this study were thoroughly explored several times. Third, Scwhandt and Halpern note that because of biases brought into the study context, researchers sometimes fail to look at similar cases that are not as positive as the ones that have been reviewed for the researcher’s particular study, and fourth, empathy can become a problem. They go on to explain that this problem may occur when researchers get very close to the participants involved in the study. In this study, the researcher was aware of the potential for these problems, and handled issues related to data saturation, exploration of results (including negative or unexpected results), and participant relations with great care.

Another issue this researcher expected to encounter was related to his assumptions about outcomes. From his years of intense involvement with adult students, he was aware of some of the obstacles faced by nontraditional learners. However, this awareness was in fact a strength, because during interviews, new questions and probes arose from this knowledge. Ultimately, the researcher’s nine years of experience as an instructor at this military base enriched his understanding and analysis of the data. Another strength this researcher brought to the project was the fact that he was an instructor of nontraditional students. These interactions provided contacts with possible informants and knowledge of the setting. Another advantage—potentially the most important attribute the researcher brought to this project—was the fact that the researcher was a nontraditional learner himself, and could identify with the conflicts and challenges encountered by this population.

Summary

Qualitative research provides the opportunity to explore nontraditional students, the decisions they make, the way they manage their lives and resources, how they cope with unresolved and unexpected issues, and the support resources they employ to function in life and complete their educational goals. Such supports were found to be
interdependent on each other. Since interdependency does exist, exploring and understanding it may provide institutions of higher education with the opportunity to play a more dynamic part in developing positive educational and life outcomes for all nontraditional students. Given the unique nature of the setting and target population, as well as the multiple case study methods detailed in this chapter, this project represented an important addition to the body of research on adult learners. Similarly, the researcher’s immersion in the research environment and experiences as an adult learner brought a valuable dimension to the project, whose ultimate aim was to clarify and support the educational and life experiences of an underserved population, the adult learner.
CHAPTER IV
FINDINGS

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to identify support that was needed for nontraditional students to accomplish their educational goals. An investigation of what occurs within the lives of nontraditional student while pursuing their educational goals was conducted. All the participants were 25 years of age or older at the time the research occurred. A total of 15 participants were involved in the study.

The data collection involved three strategies, two primary strategies, and one secondary strategy. The primary strategies involved in-depth interviews and participant observation. The secondary strategy was document analysis. There were 15 in-depth interviews. During these interviews, descriptive/demographic information concerning each participant was also obtained. The observations occurred during the in-depth interviews, class breaks, and while students were sitting in class waiting for class to begin. The document analysis was limited to course schedules that are available to the nontraditional students and a news article published in the Goldsboro News-Argus, Sunday, November 10, 2002, page 11A. An illustration of the current course schedule is located in Appendix D.

Information concerning the positive and negative characteristics of the snowball method of sampling will be discussed in this chapter. Following this discussion will be a description and/or demographic profile of each research participant. Themes and sub-themes that arose during the research will be identified and discussed. Finally, the research questions will be addressed by the participant responses to the interview questions. The design of this study was qualitative, thus providing substantive data to investigate the nontraditional student’s educational experience.
Snowball Sampling

Choosing the snowball method of sampling seemed to be the correct method of sampling due to the interaction that had been observed between the nontraditional students at the research site. Patton (2002) also refers to this type of sampling as “chain sampling,” and notes that “the chain of recommended informants would typically diverge initially as many possible sources are recommended, then converge as a few key names get mentioned over and over” (p. 237). This method of sampling proved to be very effective. The individuals referred to the researcher took on special importance due to the richness of the information they possessed. Many names were suggested by initial contacts. These peers became a chain of new contacts. Another positive result of this sampling method was the willingness of the participants to engage in conversation about their experiences. All informants who had been nominated by their peers were very willing to discuss their experiences. This researcher was never denied access to participant information due to the participants’ unwillingness to discuss their experiences.

However, there were a few minor negatives associated with this sampling procedure. The most prominent negative was time. Some of the nontraditional students contacted could not fit the interviews and member checks into their schedule. Another problematic issue was that some of the referred students did not meet the nontraditional participants criteria that were set at the beginning of the research. For example, some nominees were less than 25 years of age and some were not employed. Finally, another negative was that some of the initial nominees might possibly be future students of the researcher. In order to ensure greater confidentiality, and to address the research questions more effectively, this researcher chose to use abide by his original nomination criteria, and limited the participants to nontraditional students who would not be enrolled in any of the researcher’s future classes due to their imminent graduation.

Overall, the positive aspects of this sampling technique were more prevalent and
more compelling than the negative. Finally, this researcher recognizes the time saved by using this method. The snowball sampling method eliminated the retrieval of information that would not be connected to this study and provided participants that were willing to share their lived experiences with the researcher.

Descriptive/Demographic Profile of Participants

The research study participants were nontraditional students at Mount Olive College at the Seymour Johnson Air Force Base site. The participant’s ages ranged from 25-49 years of age and each participant was employed either full-time or part-time. Each participant was informed about the research study they had agreed to participate in and were given a pseudonym to protect their identity. A demographic profile chart is in Appendix C. The descriptions that follow will include age, gender, family, employment, student status, civilian or military status, and reasons for completing their college education.

Juggler

“The Juggler” is a 49-year-old male. He has a family consisting of his wife and one child. His wife works full-time and his child is in high school and involved in many extracurricular activities that require the Juggler’s attendance. He is a senior at the school site and takes at least two classes per eight-week term during the evening hours. He has taken as many as four previously when the terms were nine weeks long. He is ex-military and now a civilian working full-time. His job requires him to work between 40-50 hours per week. He has been employed by the same organization for many years and is looking for job advancement opportunities after graduation, though he also claims to be seeking self-fulfillment through his pursuit of education. Juggler returned to college after being away from the education environment for many years. Juggler is very active in his community.

Charlie

“Charlie” is a 35-year-old male. He is single and lives with his aging parents. He
is a senior at the school site and takes at least two courses per eight-week term during the evening and lunch hours. He is a civilian now, although he has been in the military and chose to leave and pursue other opportunities. He has several part-time jobs requiring him to work closely with his employers so as to complete his education. Charlie switched from a full-time job to a part-time job to go back to school and complete what he had began many years ago. He understands that his job advancement is dependent primarily on completing his education. Charlie has few outside activities.

Max

“Max” is a 38-year-old male. He is in the military, married with one elementary school age child. He attends the research school site. He attends classes during the evening and lunch hours. He and his wife have full-time jobs that required her being out of town often. The responsibility for the child is often Max’s, and he finds himself faced with scheduling conflicts concerning work and education. Max is working 45-55 hours per week. He began school several years ago but indicated that class scheduling and his work schedule have sometimes clashed, which has caused his delay in finishing. He had never been involved in higher education until this educational effort. He feels this is the right thing for him to do at this point in his life. He wants to provide a better lifestyle for his wife and daughter and be a role model for his daughter. Max is not very active in his community.

Jethro

“Jethro” is a 31-year-old male who is married, but has no children. He is a civilian working 40-50 hours per week. He is a senior at the school site attending classes during the evening hours. During the last year, he has changed employment and has been faced with scheduling conflicts with his employment. Also, during the last year, Jethro and his wife have moved to a new apartment further away from school and work. Jethro feels he is trapped in low-paying, low-skilled types of employment as long until he completes his college education. Jethro has expectations of new doors opening for him.
Jethro has limited civic responsibilities.

**Hollywood**

“Hollywood” is a 30-year-old female. She recently married and has no children. She is a senior at the school site and attends classes at lunch and during the evening hours. Hollywood is a civilian. She works at a family business and is still expected to complete her job requirements along with attending school. Her employment requires from 40-50 hours per week. She is very involved in family and civic activities and has found scheduling to be a challenging issue. Hollywood went back to college after being away from school for several years. She chose this site due to the availability of classes and the close proximity to her work. She expects job advancement as soon as she graduates.

**Justine**

“Justine” is a 45-year-old female. She is married and has two children, and a military dependent. She is employed full-time and is a senior at the research site. Justine attends classes at lunch and during the evening hours. She works approximately 40-45 hours per week. Her employment requires that she take work home with her. This expectation is not included in this approximation of her work hours. She says her take home workload varies from 5-7 hours per week. Her children are both high school students involved in extracurricular activities, primarily sports, which consume lots of time. She is constantly battling scheduling difficulties. Justine went back to school for several reasons. Her first reason was to prove to her family she could finish this time. Justine was previously enrolled at another institution and according to her, scheduling conflicts and unsympathetic administrators forced her to stop. Her second reason for enrolling involves job advancement. She has been in the same position for almost twenty years and she has been promised advancement when she completes her degree. Her third reason involves proving to herself she has the ability and determination to make this happen.
Leroy

“Leroy” is 38 years old. He has four children and is a stay-at-home father during the week, but works on weekends most of the time as a reservist. Although he is associated with the military, this association is only part-time. The remainder of time he is a civilian. Sometimes he is required to work during the week. His wife is employed full-time. Her job is very demanding and she works many hours. Leroy is a senior at the research site and he attends lunch and evening classes, but primarily evening due to domestic responsibilities. He takes two courses per eight-week term. Leroy has been enrolled in several schools but has not completed his college degree. He is soon to be a graduate and is proud of this accomplishment for several reasons. First, he will prove to himself he can do it. Secondly, he will show his children that perseverance and determination can be rewarding. Finally, it will enable him to pursue a career in the corporate arena.

Bobbie

“Bobbie” is a female who is 35 years of age and is a senior at the research site. She is employed full-time and attends classes during the evening. She says she would like to attend classes at lunch because this would allow her to be home some evenings. She takes two courses per eight-week term. She is married and has three children. Her husband stays at home with the children, which makes her solely responsible for the finances. Her employer has been very supportive of Bobbie’s educational goals, and she has been satisfying her responsibilities as an employee. Bobbie began college several years ago but said that moving and having children caused her to be unable to complete her degree. She feels the need to complete the degree to help her advance in her employment and for herself. Bobbie also wants her children to understand that if one is determined and committed, she can accomplish almost anything.
Jane

“Jane” is a female, 38 years old, and married. She and her husband have no children. She is a civilian. Both work full-time. Jane attends is a senior at the research site and takes two classes per eight-week term during the evening hours. When the terms were nine weeks long, Jane took four classes sometimes to expedite her finishing her educational goals. She works 40-50 hours Monday-Friday and attends weekend seminars, usually once a month. She is also responsible for relatives that have been ill and has been spending weekends with them recently. Her schedule is very complex which allows for little variation. Jane began school many years ago, but chose to stop due to work responsibilities. Her job requires someone with a four-year degree and she is expected to attain her degree in the near future. She says until recently this was the only reason she went back to school, but now she has included doing it for herself as another reason.

Felix

“Felix” is a 44-year-old male, who is married and is a full-time military employee. He is a senior and attends school at the research site during lunch and evening hours. He takes a minimum of two classes during the eight-week term. His job requires him to be on call constantly, which can hamper his progression toward his degree. Additionally, his unit may be deployed, which is another critical variable, as it could totally interrupt the progression toward his degree. However, Felix has decided to finish school someway, somehow. He is doing this primarily for himself, although he admits it will serve him well to have a four-year degree along with the experience he has attained during his tenure of duty with the military.

Misty

“Misty” is a female, 27 years of age. She is unmarried and a single mother of one. Her child is very young and requires a great deal of attention. Sometimes the availability
of a baby-sitter becomes an issue affecting her school attendance. Misty is a civilian, and works full-time, usually 40-45 hours per week. She is a senior and only attends classes at the base during the evening hours. She takes two courses per eight-week term. Misty is completing her degree for job advancement where she is working now. She expresses a desire to provide better for her child and sees education as helping her accomplish this. Misty says she is also pursuing her degree for her family as well as herself.

Mr. Baseball

“Mr. Baseball” is a 43-year-old male, and is employed full-time by the military. He is not married, at this time. He has three children. All but one have finished college, and his youngest will finish soon. Mr. Baseball is a senior and attends class during the lunch and evening hours. He takes only two courses per eight-week term. His job with the military is very demanding. When he is deployed, he is unable to take classes. However, Mr. Baseball sees the need for a degree. When he separates from the military, he will be applying for positions that require both experience and a degree. He also wants to show his children that “Dad can do it.”

Swifty

“Swifty” is a 35 year-old female who works full-time. She is a military dependent. Her husband is military and he is often not at home. She and her husband have an elementary school-aged child and much of the responsibility concerning the child belongs to Swifty. Her job usually requires 40-50 hours per week. Her child is very involved in sports. This causes scheduling conflicts with her educational goals. Swifty is a senior and attends school at the research site. She takes two courses per eight-week term. She usually enrolls in evening classes, sometimes four nights per week. She often takes one late course on Mondays/Wednesdays, and another late course on Tuesdays/Thursdays, scheduling permitting. Swifty began her college career many years ago on the West coast and never finished. She says she will go through with it this time, primarily for herself. She did comment that her family found it difficult to believe she
was accomplishing her educational goals.

**Butch**

“Butch” is a male, 36 years old. He and his wife both work full-time. They have one child. A civilian, he and his wife work for the same organization. Some weeks, he works full-time, and some weeks part-time, though he was promised by his employer his work responsibilities would be part-time. He attends school at the research site. He is a senior and attends two classes per eight-week term. Butch only attends evening classes due to his work schedule. He hopes to advance either in his company or acquire another job with a different organization. His primary reason for acquiring the degree is for job advancement, but he says this something he needs to do for himself. Butch says he and his wife have made substantial financial sacrifices for his educational goals.

**Macho**

“Macho” is a 30-year-old male who recently graduated from the research site. He is a civilian and attended classes during the evening hours. Two classes at a time were his limit. He was single at the time and was temporarily living with his parents. He worked approximately 25-35 hours per week and assumed home responsibilities. He chose to complete his degree because he could not attain the salary he was looking forward to without the degree. Macho also says he did it for himself. He had gone to several schools before the one at the research site and he made the decision to finish this time. Macho says that time management became an issue affecting the completion of his degree.

**The Nontraditional Student**

The nontraditional students participating in this study were very willing to express their points of view and expressed the desire to share these views with other nontraditional students. These students provided clarity and new insights through their descriptions of their educational journey at the research site. They expressed their desire
and the need for their voices to be heard. Their verbal and nonverbal messages communicated their determination to add to our understanding of nontraditional learners in pursuit of higher educational goals.

The existing literature suggested that the nontraditional student was affected by numerous things, including support systems, finances, time, faculty involvement, and multiple responsibilities. Other studies had also found that the nontraditional adult learner was presented with barriers such as family, work, school, and other scheduling responsibilities. The researcher chose to design the interview guide to include questions that would address these specific issues. However, the questions were open and broad so as to permit the participants to expand their discussion to address other issues that were important to them and important to this study.

The participant observation involved observing the participants during their break and before class. Because the research site is a small campus, most knew this researcher was conducting a study. All the participants were aware of the observations. Very few actual conversations were overheard but the nonverbal expressions exhibited were noted. The researcher used the emic perspective, which involves an “insider’s view of what is happening. This means that the participant observer not only sees what is happening but feels what it is like to be a part of the setting or program” (Patton, 2002, p. 268).

The following discussion provides the analysis of what was shared by the participants through in-depth interviews and participant observation. Also provided will be the participant reaction to the available document analysis. As this discussion will reveal, completing their educational goals, as described by these nontraditional students, involved encompassing numerous facets. Attaining their educational goals meant sustaining personal sacrifices, such as time away from family, friends, work, and the community. Reaching their goals meant juggling complex schedules, sleepless nights, and questioning their ability to reach their educational goals. However, the drive to succeed was energized by the endless support from family, other nontraditional students,
faculty and administration at the research site, and pure self-determination.

Data analysis revealed seven major themes among the interviews, participant observations, and document analysis: encouragement, life/school responsibilities as barriers/stressors, time management, goal-orientation, networking, expectations, and strategies for goal attainment. Each major theme has several sub-themes, which further reflect and explain the life of the nontraditional learner. Each theme and sub-theme will be discussed individually to provide a thorough understanding of the phenomenon of the nontraditional learner, as it was encountered in this study. Although this researcher examined participants’ responses by age, gender, marital status, and employment status, no recognizable or notable differences or patterns in difficulties existed in one group that was not evident in the others. Thus, the information presented in the following discussion is treated as representative of all students in the sample.

Encouragement (Support Factors that Promoted Nontraditional Learner Success)

Various factors were involved in making the educational experience at the research site successful. All participants interviewed agreed they needed various types of support and help to attain their educational goals. Availability of faculty for advisement and class assignments and convenience of the classroom sites was important to most of these participants. However, from the data emerged several factors that were the most essential to the educational goals of the nontraditional learner. These factors were family support, peer support, employer support, faculty and administrative support, media support and technological support. The support mechanisms utilized by nontraditional students during this study appeared to be interdependent. That is, support from one source enabled the student to use support from another source. The participants indicated that each source of support was necessary to attain their educational as well as life goals. For example, if an employer let a participant work through his lunch hour, a baby-sitter could provide childcare, but if a family member could not make a vehicle available in time for school attendance, the nontraditional student would probably not be
able to attend classes. In the previous example, if any of the stated support mechanisms failed, this student was unable to attend class at the research site. Throughout this study, several participants stated, “everything has to work out for me to go to school. If anything, such as transportation, work, or childcare, for example fails to work out I don’t go to school.” This study identifies the interdependency of support mechanisms, reliance, and barriers to nontraditional students’ goal attainment.

Family Support

Family support was stressed as a very important support. All of the participants said that family was a support mechanism that they utilized and 9 of the 15 participants identified family as their principal type of support. The support gained from the family was primarily financial, emotional, and logistical. Financial support was either by the spouse or some other family member. For example, one participant said, “If I need to buy books this term and my money is short my husband usually pays a bill I have been paying previously so I can purchase the books I need.” As another participant volunteered,

We had another child recently and with the extra expenses, I did not have quite enough money to pay the tuition and book bills. My parents were able to lend me the money to suffice this debt, and by the way, my parents also forgave this debt. Access to shared family resources appeared to be a major enabling factor for these participants.

Other types of family support were the words of encouragement and shared responsibilities. One woman said,

My husband will never know how instrumental he was in my educational success. He is always there for me. You know, he has only a high school education and no desire to pursue further education at this time, yet he sees this is important to me and when I am done, he tells me he knows I can do this.

The logistics of family responsibilities were also of concern to all the participants that
had families. As one man said,

Even if I am not at home, some things have to happen. I have been so busy with family, job, and school, or just life in general that I have not functioned well at home. My brother would watch my son play ball and tell me what my son accomplished. There have been times my wife had to remind me of bills that needed to be paid. This had never before happened and my wife took this responsibility on without me asking. That’s support to me.

Just as the family unit was seen as a source of financial assistance, it also emerged as a significant source of emotional and logistical support, as family members gave participants encouragement and shared in their responsibilities.

**Peer Support**

Of the 15 interviewed, 6 said that support from other nontraditional learners was their most important type of support. The remainder of the participants listed this support as the second most important. Observing these nontraditional learners, it was very visible how they relied on each other for assignments or other school information. One woman said,

My family is very supportive of what I am doing and so are the friends, I have left, but these people out here (the research site) know what is happening. They understand the personal pressures we have on us just to get to class. This does not even take into account the outside assignments.

Another participant described the experience with the other nontraditional students as a “type of togetherness that is difficult to explain. We understand what each other is experiencing and we can communicate about it. We trust each other and can talk about almost anything, family, relationships, children, and instructors.” Several participants expressed their relationship with other nontraditional students as a type of “solidarity.” One woman interviewed expressed the necessity to talk with someone who was sharing the experience:
My family loves me and supports me but they cannot understand the pressure on me to succeed, from not only them, the school, and the community, but also the pressure I exert on myself to maintain a good GPA. Only the people that attend school with me can understand this pressure. I couldn’t make without them. The bond that arose from shared experiences with other nontraditional learners emerged as an important source of support for these participants, second only to the family unit.

**Employer and Co-worker Support**

Employers were considered by all participants as a very important support factor. All participants said that without the support of their employers, attending class would be either difficult or impossible. One woman said, “My employer allows me to skip lunch and leave work one hour early so I can attend class during the evenings.” Another participant revealed his employer would allow him to have longer lunch breaks so he could attend class during the lunch hours. Of course, the time had to be made up, but this was a feasible situation for him. Two applicants revealed that their employer helped them financially. As one woman said, “This is a necessity. Without financial reimbursement from my employer, I could not attend school.” Of those interviewed, 13 said that their co-workers were instrumental in their ability to attend school. One female participant observed,

My employer gives me the latitude to go to school but my co-workers help me get there. They support me emotionally and will help me with my work responsibilities so I can attend school. I could not leave early some days, even with no breaks and no lunch, if they did not help.

Both employers and co-workers were seen by these participants as enabling support factors.

**Faculty and Administrative Staff Support**

According to the participants, faculty and administrative staff support at the research site was helpful and understanding, for the most part. One woman said it best:
“Most instructors have been nontraditional learners themselves and realize we learn differently and we have a lot going on in our lives.” Another participant stated, “Most of these instructors realize we are not as young as traditional main campus students and we have been away from learning institutions for a long time.” Instructors were also recognized for their willingness to meet with the students after class or communicate via email or telephone. One participant noted that “most of my assignments are done on the weekends due to my work schedule and other responsibilities. If questions arise my instructor is usually only a telephone call or email away.” The administration at the school is very supportive of the nontraditional students according to the participants. One hundred percent said the administration at the research site was always helpful. One man claimed, “The administration we have here at the base are problem solvers. If they don’t have an immediate answer they will work to have you one as soon as possible.”

A document corroborating the research site’s support of its nontraditional students was published in the Goldsboro News-Argus, a local newspaper. This article articulated how the research site was working to meet the needs of the nontraditional student such as adding additional classes to the mid-day and Friday evening schedule to accommodate the larger number of students. According to the site director, “most classrooms are at full capacity. Mount Olive College is the only four-year liberal arts institution on the base” (2002, p. 11A). Document analysis provided additional evidence of support from the site’s faculty and staff. One military student stated that

when we deploy, or are just unable to get to class due to mission requirements, most professors will let you use e-mail to remain in contact with them. They care about all their students’ requirements and go to every measure to ensure all students receive the best education available (p.11A).

Document analysis of the current and past academic year course schedules revealed that the college continues to offer an increasing variety of courses. The current course schedule is shown in Appendix D.
Finally, during this study the researcher has observed main campus reaching out to the nontraditional student at the research site. In an effort to meet the needs of these nontraditional students’ the main campus has diversified course offerings, held faculty meetings at the research site, and provides counseling, both academic and spiritual.

Relevance to Learners

Additionally, a type of support that this researcher has not found in any of the existing literature was media support. This type of support rose in importance with the increased awareness level some of these participants experienced after becoming enrolled in school and taking classes. Of the 15 participants in the sample, five identified media support as a type of support they realized existed soon after enrolling in school. One male participant said

Many things that were occurring in our world just had been going over my head. After I began school I would listen to the news or talk shows and understand what the discussion was about and could say, hey we discussed that in class. This made me more enthused about learning because I was able to apply what we discussed in class and through the lectures to what was occurring in the world. This felt really good and made want to learn some more.

The information students received from media outlets reinforced their classroom learning. Another female participant commented that

sometimes when my friends and/or family would go out to eat discussions would arise concerning world issues, especially if we were at a restaurant and there were televisions. If a subject came up on the news channel, and a discussion arose, I found myself entering the discussion by mentioning we had discussed this in class, whereas before I would only listen and try to understand.

Finally, one male participant said, “Even driving down the road and I hear something mentioned that has been discussed in class makes me feel good, about learning and myself. I know I am learning something, not just spending money, and this makes it
worthwhile to me.”

**Technological Support**

Another type of support identified by the study participants involved technology. In particular, participants stressed the importance of the Internet and the technological support associated with it. All of the participants voiced their reliance on the use of this tool to research certain topics and assignments. The use of NC LIVE was the most utilized research site due to its relation to education and its research tools. In the existing literature Merriam and Cafarella, (1999) addressed this as an example of a technological tool developed to meet adult learner needs. However, these nontraditional participants all admitted to relying almost solely on the Internet, as their research and communication tool, due to the distance from main campus and the lack of library text resources in their communities. The college does provide the needed password to connect to NC LIVE. This, as one female informant stated, “is an invaluable resource to us, and something we can count on each school term. We can do this research at home, which means we can spend more time with families and cut down on travel cost.” Another male participant said that many of his classmates live “30-40 miles from school and me. This means a telephone call is long distance. We use email to communicate to save on expenses and no one has to worry about a phone ringing late at night.” Included in technological support were laptops, Palm Pilots, and cellular phones. One male participant said,

If I am late for school, I can call the school or the instructor and advise them of my circumstances. If I need to call work or call home, I don’t have to worry about finding a phone. This allows me to devote myself to school while I am at school and not other things.

Laptops and Palm pilots were utilized to store notes and to do homework between classes. Cellular phones were used to contact family, work, school, and faculty and administration on an as needed basis. This researcher found no existing literature concerning cellular phones and nontraditional students’ use of them when attending
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college, which suggests that this theme may be of particular interest.

**Life/School Responsibilities as Barriers/Stressors**

Some of the areas of the nontraditional student’s life can also generate stress and make life more complicated, especially when these areas are also serving as support. Responsibilities, barriers, and stressors are connected to each other because each is a part of the nontraditional student’s life. For example, family responsibilities may occasionally cause problems and if this is the only stressor/barrier that surfaces, the solution may not be complicated. However, if both family and work responsibilities create barriers to school participation, the solution(s) may be very complex. If one barrier has no available solution then the educational goal outcome for the nontraditional student may not be positive. A female participant identified an example of this situation. She stated,

> My child must be cared for while I am at school. There is no one to keep my child during evening school hours. This means I usually have to leave work about thirty minutes early to get my child to the baby-sitters. If a problem comes up at work and my boss won’t take care of it or my co-workers won’t help me out, I have to stay. This means I am late getting my child to the baby-sitters and I am either late for school or I don’t make it at all.

For these participants, the ability to overcome barriers associated with responsibilities was dependent on the existence of workable solutions in multiple areas of life. Thus, these issues were interdependent, as were the types of supports utilized by these adult learners.

**Family Responsibilities**

Family responsibilities represented an important sub-theme for most of the participants. Although the family provided support, it also generated barriers and caused stress by producing guilt. One participant explained, “It helps when everyone and everything cooperates, but that seems to seldom happen with a family. How can you plan
for sickness, or a meeting with a teacher, or the proverbial no baby sitter? Gosh that is so stressful.” Another participant explained that family responsibilities seem to “illuminate themselves” due to the serious nature that most family situations involve. Another participant, a single parent, said,

On school days my life is so mixed up, I get up, fix breakfast, take my child to day care, work all day, pick my child up, take her to my Mother’s, go to school, pick my child up, go home and put my child to bed, try to study, and usually fall asleep with my book in hand.

As a whole, all the participants with family obligations reported that their families caused the most stress in their lives, due to the responsibility they felt for their families. One participant commented, “Hey, I had my family before I had school and I want to keep my family.”

Interestingly, the discussion of the family provoked much emotion in most of the participants. Many cried as they expressed the guilt they felt. One participant stated, “You know I hope my family forgives me, forgives me for the times I was not there, for the times I let them down because of school.” These participants were quick to identify how they felt about their families. One participant stated, “They are the reason I am doing this. I hope they are still here when I finish.” Thus, for many of these participants, the devotion of the family unit provided the motivation to pursue their educational goals—but also created some pressure to stop pursuing these goals, as time away from family became a source of guilt for many.

**Employment Responsibilities**

Employment responsibilities proved to be a sub-theme that was stressful for all of the participants. The participants noted the lack of study time, and going to work feeling exhausted. Several applicants admitted to taking time off from work due to school assignments and feeling guilty. One participant commented, “If it were not for my co-workers it would be impossible. They cover for me when I am gone. They pick up the
slack. I owe them so much.” Another woman said, “My employer expects me to make up the times I have to leave early. This is understandable but so very difficult.” These participants recognized that their job responsibilities can affect their performance in school. One applicant commented, “Just as the new term began so did mandatory overtime at work. It is almost impossible to do my job and fit school into the schedule—and you know I have to eat, and pay bills.”

School Responsibilities

Responsibilities at school was an additional sub-theme referenced by all the participants. With their complex schedules, school barriers became a major stressor. One participant stated that

School responsibilities are important to me. I want to maintain a good GPA, but how do you accomplish that when your car breaks down on test night and the only time you can retake the test is the following class night? This would be OK but the following class night you have a test in another class.

Echoing this view, one woman stated, “It is just stressful to maintain a home and family, and work, and study for tests and complete assignments. It is just hard for me to do. I am not saying school assignments are not important, it is just hard for me to get it all done.”

These nontraditional students participating in this study expressed the need for information concerning academic expectations and provisions to be provided early on, not when they began to experience difficulties. These nontraditional learners also expressed the need for information concerning resource centers, future class scheduling, tutors, and total degree requirements.

Finally, some of these nontraditional students expressed the need for faculty to better explain the contents of the lecture or discussion information. The use of jargon or terms these nontraditional students were unfamiliar with sometimes prevented them from asking questions due to the fear of appearing ignorant.

Disconnection Between School and Learners
Another school-related stressor was identified by 100% of the participants. This involved the participants and the disconnection they feel with the main campus and the main campus instructors. The participants interviewed at this research site feel the main campus does not recognize them adequately, and they see this as a barrier. They contend they are treated differently by the administration and faculty at the main campus than they are treated by the administration and faculty at the research site. One participant stated, concerning main campus, that “we are treated like stepchildren, and it is a bother to deal with us.” Other participants stated they felt “disassociated with main campus.” Another participant stated that instructors from the main campus are good, but “they do not seem to realize the complex lives the nontraditional students have and exhibit little sympathy for missed classes and late assignments even if it is due to work or family crisis.” One participant stated, “Some of these instructors need to realize I’ve got to have my job. I don’t have to have school.” Several participants expressed the need for a school representative to be on the research site during all the times the classes meet. One participant who attends class from 5-10pm stated, “If I need to know something about registration or any other situation, I usually have to wait until the next day because the administration leaves at 5:00pm.” The participants expressed the difficulties and stress that is associated with attending college. As one participant stated, “Even without school we have lots of stress with our families, job, and life in general. School, as great and beneficial as I hope it is, only adds additional stress to my already crazy life.” Several participants expressed their desire for more classes to be offered at lunch and more availability of existing classes. One participant noted, “I could graduate earlier if some of the courses were offered more frequently.” All participants identified a certain level of disconnect between the main campus and the adult learners at the research site, and indicated that this issue represented an impediment to their educational progress.

Age

Of the 15 participants interviewed, 11 said age was a barrier and one identified it
as a “fear factor, fear of failing.” One female participant said, “It has been almost twenty years since I have been in an educational environment. I always have a fear of failure. I not only want to keep my grades up, I struggle finding the energy to do all I have to do.” Other participants voiced their concerns about being older than everyone in class. One male participant volunteered, “I wish I had done this years ago. Do you realize I have not been associated with any type of educational endeavor in almost twenty years?” Another female participant stated, “I took algebra so long ago. I really struggled through that class. That class and statistics almost did me in.” Finally, one male participant said that every class he takes “is a challenge and, yes, I am scared to death at the beginning of each term. I am almost fifty years-old and learning at my age is not as easy as it was for me when I was younger.” Through the in-depth interviews, most of these participants who said age was a barrier expressed fear, primarily because they had no idea what to expect or what would be expected of them. The major concern related to their age was the ability to retain knowledge and have the energy to continue their educational pursuits, while continuing with the rest of their lives. It should be noted, however, that despite the fact that many participants identified age as a barrier, none of the participants said they were eliminating any other life activities to go to school, only including it as a new part of their lives.

Expectations

One of the concerns expressed by participants in the study involved how they anticipated their lives would change after finishing their degrees. These expectations were a source of motivation—but also a source of stress. The participants in this study had various expectations of what life would be like after graduation, many of which involved a certain degree of apprehension. There were two sub-themes that arose during the analysis, life and employment.

Life

Twelve of the 15 participants were concerned about how their lives were going to
change after graduation. One woman said,

I have spoken with several people that have graduated and they tell me they feel lost. I asked them why and they told me they were bored and could find nothing interesting to do. I asked them why they didn’t go out with friends. They told me the only friends they have now are other nontraditional students and most of them are still in school and don’t have time to go out.

Another life concern was voiced by a participant, who said,

I have been going to school for over three years. When I graduate it will be four years since my family and I have had a normal family lifestyle. I am concerned how I will fit in because I have been an absentee father and husband, sort of.

Life after graduation appeared to be a concern for most, and possibly all, of these participants; it may be that the remaining few simply had not thought about it at the time of their interviews.

Employment.

All participants interviewed either were expecting job advancement where they were currently employed or would be looking for new employment after graduation. Interestingly, a fear several participants had was being over-qualified for potential openings at their place of employment. Another fear was due to the current economy—would it be wise to push the advancement issue or to look for new employment at this time? One female participant stated, “even, if when I graduate, it is not a good time to change jobs or seek advancement within my company, I will have the degree and when good times come again I will be prepared.” Another participant stated “I have been promised a chance to apply for new jobs within my organization once this degree is finished. I hope the chance comes sooner than later.” One female participant stated,

I may be over qualified for my current position when I finish college. I fear that I will be told that I am over qualified for most jobs within my division. This means I will be job hunting. It is sort of scary knowing that to really use my degree I
will have to change jobs, but I’m up to the challenge. It will be worth it. All expressed probable disappointment if they were not experiencing some type of tangible recognition relatively soon after graduation.

Strategies for Goal Attainment

The strategies participants employed to overcome these barriers were diverse and interconnected. The following discussion highlights the strategies referenced during the in-depth interviews, and details the ways in which these strategies were often viewed with mixed emotions by participants.

Time Management

Time management emerged as one of the most salient issues for these participants. The scarcity of time represented a source of stress for participants; for example, late night studying, test preparation, and paper writing were seen as real barriers. However, participants used time management as a means of overcoming barriers. Thus, time management was a major theme, but also connected other major themes. This connection revealed the interdependency between the life issues experienced by these participants. For example, time management was instrumental in enabling participants to utilize sources of support, and their ability to overcome barriers was dependent on how time was managed and utilized. Every participant expressed the necessity of determining how much time was to be allotted for each activity. In this sense, time management could be considered the link to success for the nontraditional students in this sample.

Many of these participants expressed the stress that the obligations brought on by school presented them. One female participant said she caught herself constantly looking at the clock during the day to make sure she was on schedule to fulfill her responsibilities. She then disclosed to the researcher that she was looking at the clock late at night after she had finished her family responsibilities because she had to prepare for school. The following descriptions disclose how these nontraditional students tried to
manage their time. Although time in all areas was important, family and school time management were the most prominently discussed.

**Family time.**

Family time was a sub-theme that continued to arise as the interviews progressed. All participants wanted to talk about their families and how important they were to them. Time spent with family was identified by one participant as “precious moments. They come very seldom since I have been in school.” Most participants related how they organized their schedule to have time for family. They expressed the pressure they felt to spend more time with family. Some said they saved study time for the “wee hours” while others said they would rise early in the mornings to study, or take time during their lunch or break periods. One woman said, “I study and complete assignments around my family’s schedule if possible even if it means me not sleeping.”

**School time.**

Time for school was an additional sub-theme that arose separately from family time for some participants. Some individuals interviewed were able to say they allotted so much time per day or week for school. The way some itemized their schedules and adhered to it seemed particularly interesting. One woman said,

I make time for school. It is very important to me to keep my GPA at the level it is now. Sometimes I don’t sleep and don’t eat but I choose to sacrifice in these areas to get my school work done.

One man said, “With all that is on my plate I cannot afford to stray away from my schedule. If I did I would have to stop going to school. Time management is a necessity, and still sometimes that doesn’t work.” Yet, managing time effectively was more easily said than done for some participants. As another participant asked,

What is time management? How do you manage something you cannot control? I have been fortunate with school because I can study during lunch. With all I have going on I just hope each day when I get up that I can do what is necessary.
Each participant spoke of the lack of time for school assignments. Another participant stated,

Someone asked me how I do it, go to school, look after my family, work, do things at church, and I just answered I don’t know. I really don’t know. I refuse to think about it. When I do think about it I have a dizzy feeling and begin feeling really tired.

All but one of the participants told this researcher that time to go to school was much easier to manage than time to complete school assignments. All but two of the participants said that family responsibilities were the largest obstacles to time management and school, with the other two participants listing work as the major obstacle to time management and school.

**Focus On Goals**

**Commitment/Dedication.**

The participants interviewed were at the point in their educational journey where the end goal was visible. These individuals had each overcome obstacles. Their focus on attaining their educational goals may be best expressed by an individual who had been in the “trenches” and now was able to realize that goal attainment was in sight. She said, with tears streaming down her cheeks,

There is no way I could have done this by myself, so many factors and variables were involved. If one thing fell out of place then the rest would seem to fail. I had community vision, (family, other nontraditional students, people at work, people at church, and school administration), supporting me. They were not only interested in my goals but also committed to me graduating. I couldn’t let ‘em down. Hey, I had support and help from everyone around. They shared my vision and I will never forget them.

As this woman’s perspective illustrates, these participants exhibited a profound dedication and commitment to themselves and their goals, which enabled them to
overcome many barriers.

Priorities.

Setting priorities seemed to be one of the foundations the participants relied on for success. They quickly understood that adding school to their already complex schedules was going to be difficult. In fact, all participants, when asked about how it has been managing their complex schedules, responded by saying one word: “TOUGH!” One participant stated, “You’ve got to have priorities. I am an individual who must plan, and once the plan is determined then I prioritize.” This researcher constantly heard the participants speaking of priorities during the interviews. Almost all the participants began their priorities with family, followed by work, and then school. Three of the participants stated that school had a higher priority than their work. Each participant admitted to sometimes allowing school and/or their educational goals to become the leading priority, although none of the participants were glad this happened. Three of the participants, one male, and two females, began to cry as they revealed family and work sacrifices that were made to satisfy school responsibilities.

Networking

Networking was an additional theme that arose during the analysis. Participants indicated that they relied on the knowledge of other adult learners when learning about important resources, and to surmount various barriers. Within this larger topic, three sub-themes, childcare, assignments, and transportation were identified.

Childcare.

Childcare was an item that was networked; participants reported receiving shared information about care providers from their peers. During the participant observation phase of this study several of the participants were observed discussing childcare. In fact, several of the participants commented to this researcher they relied on other nontraditional students to recommend good childcare providers. One female participant stated,
I just don’t leave my child with just anyone. I have to leave them with someone I trust. Some of the people I go to school with have childcare issues and we discuss how we handle them. For example, some of my peers have recommended certain individuals who provide childcare. Even if I may not choose the ones they have recommended they do provide other options, I mean other options than family. Family sometimes have things they have to do.

Another female participant reported that childcare can bring forth difficulties. She stated that childcare is very important, and sometimes it can make school difficult. My peers here at school have provided me with childcare options that were agreeable with me. I trust what my friends at school tell me about how they handle childcare problems. I have learned through them the importance of having backup plans already in place. On some occasions back up plans have included some of my friends at school.

Assignments.

Sometimes the participants were either late for class or missed class assignments, and were observed copying notes and assignments from other students. The participants themselves told this researcher during the interviews that they relied on each other via the Internet and telephone. For example, one female participant said, “We are constantly emailing. I use this often because I live outside the county and if I used the telephone it would be an additional cost.” Another female participant stated that sometimes on weekends she spends a lot of time on the telephone discussing class assignments and even studying for tests. Finally, one male participant stated,

I find it more effective to email some of my instructors. They are busy during the day and I just leave them an email. It is also easier for me to write down what I want to say to the instructor and prepare it as I write. It usually makes more sense than when I leave a phone message and I can make it more detailed.

During participant observations, this researcher noticed participants asking for phone and
email addresses during break periods and in the parking lots. This usually occurred at the beginning of the term. However, it was not unusual to see these participants seeking contact numbers or email addresses during the term. This researcher observed several students making arrangements to meet near the end of the term. Interestingly, during the in-depth interviews some of the participants said that they maintained phone logs and email addresses, which helped confirm their perception of the importance of peer contacts and networking strategies.

Transportation.

Transportation seemed to become a more visible issue as the research progressed, probably due to the progression of the term. The participants would sometimes pool resources, and either ride to school together, or ride together to get a snack or quick meal. During an interview, one participant said,

You would be surprised to find out how much we can learn about each other in 15-20 minutes. We get all kinds of information from each other, including phone numbers, email addresses, family information, school information, and how we each manage our schedules.

Another observation made during the study was that participants helped each other with transportation breakdowns, by either taking other participants home, or giving their vehicles a boost.

Reliance

The final strategy participants employed to reach their educational goals involves the issue of reliance. The sub-themes that arise include reliance on other nontraditional students (peer reliance), reliance on family, reliance on faculty and school administration, and reliance on self. On the surface, reliance and support seem to be synonymous, but these participants identified differences between these two factors. Whereas support was seen as automatically provided, reliance was something they needed to ask for. In other words, the ability to rely on certain sources of support seemed to require a level of
agency on the part of the participants.

Peer reliance.

Peer reliance surfaced constantly as a factor that kept many of the participants motivated. One hundred percent of the participants said they depended to some degree on other nontraditional students for course and class information. Three participants revealed they depended on their peers to evaluate future instructors. As one participant said, “A nontraditional student will not lie to another nontraditional student about a school situation. They just won’t do it! There is an invisible bond between us.” All the participants expressed willingness to help other nontraditional students and said the situation was “reciprocal.”

Family reliance.

For these participants, family reliance emerged as more than the support previously mentioned. It was a factor that, as one participant said,

You can always count on. Yes, my family supported me in what I was trying to accomplish, but I could also rely on them to be there for me. I guess I feel that support is always there and sometimes you must ask for reliance.

This participant and others expressed a significant difference between support and reliance. As another participant stated, “I need financial support from my family but if that falls through, I make it somehow. I have to rely on my husband to look after my children or my schooling is finished.”

Reliance on faculty and school administration.

The participants also expressed their reliance on faculty, particularly faculty at the base site. Faculty were relied on to provide the nontraditional students quality information concerning their studies. Faculty were also relied on to direct the nontraditional students to school administration that could answer questions the faculty were unable to answer. For example, one male participant stated he needed to know if a particular course could be substituted for another: I have had several courses that I was
able to substitute others for. I usually ask the instructor his/her opinion and almost always they referred me to the site director or the staff and they have always helped solved any curriculum issue I had.

All the participants felt they should be able to rely on administration for counseling and course scheduling and to give them directions concerning their academic undertakings. As one participant said,

I have been out of high school for over twenty years. This is the only college I have been to. If the instructors and administration do not guide me, I am lost. What really makes it bad is that sometimes I don’t know what to ask or how to ask it. The faculty and administration have both helped me. I rely on them to be my “guiding light.”

Self-reliance.

Self-reliance or self-motivation became very important to all of the participants. As one man said,

When I first began school, everyone said I could do it. This was easy for them to say but I was scared to death. I guess I had set myself up for failure because I had so many doubts about my ability. However, I have done it. I have learned to believe in myself.

The importance of the participants’ belief in their ability to succeed was emphasized during their interviews, but this researcher witnessed evidence of this theme as well during participant observations. Doing well on a test, research paper, or end of term grade provoked an outward showing of not only joy but also gratitude. As one participant said, “this school experience has proven to me I can do something I am proud of. Although I had study partners, I had to take the test, do the research papers, I had to perform.” All of the participants expressed doubts about accomplishing their goals, yet they proved to themselves they could accomplish them. When each participant was interviewed they expressed the difficulties they had during their educational journey,
their highs and lows, but at the time they were interviewed 14 said they were making it happen and Macho, who had recently graduated, proudly said, “Hey man, I did it.”

**Negative Self-Concept**

Overcoming this factor was defined by this study as an important progressive step for these participants and developing a strategy to overcome was not always easy but necessary. Each participant admitted to being afraid of failure and this feeling did not just subside after one or two successful school terms. In fact, most of the interviewees admitted to having some types of fear or maybe an unsure feeling about completing particular courses at this point in their educational pursuits. However, they all had reconciled themselves to the fact that this educational venture was not going to be without its hurdles and they must overcome them. As one male participant stated,

> I was so scared when I began school. You see, I am going back to school. I went to college a long time ago and well, didn’t, do so good. This is my last chance, and I am paying for this myself. It has gotten better. You see, I had to develop study habits, at my age, not new study habits but develop ones I never had. Probably fear of failure is what kept me going. I knew I couldn’t fail. I had lots of people looking at me, and giving me encouragement. I also had to learn to believe in myself. This was very difficult but I know I can do it and I feel good about what I have accomplished.

A female participant stated,

> I am doing this for me. When I first began going to school, yes I was afraid I would not make it, you know fail. In fact, some of my past friends discouraged me because they felt I would not make it. But I have made it, I have done well. My GPA is looking good and hopefully I will graduate with honors. I feel good about that and most of all I feel good about me doing it. Yep, I’m still hesitant about a couple of courses but I know I can get through it.
Findings for Research Questions

Research Question One

The first guiding question of this study pertained to students’ negotiation of life and school expectations: How do adults in a formal degree program manage the demands made on their personal resources?

While much research on adult learners has been conducted, only a minimal number of studies have examined how the various elements of their lives may be interdependent and how they have a major impact on how they live their lives while pursuing a degree. This study supplied multiple evidences and examples of the nontraditional learner’s dependency upon various factors or elements while in the process of attaining this goal. This researcher describes these elements as being interdependent because they appear to be dependent on the existence and sustainability of other factors. This study identifies interdependency and contributes new evidence that it exists, providing substantiation for Kasworm, Sandmann, & Sissel’s (2000) position that there may be interdependency between higher education, the community, and other environments, given that nontraditional students have a wider range of social networks and responsibilities.

Interview questions addressed this research question, and participants’ responses supported the conclusion that nontraditional students at the research site use interdependent support systems. One female participant responded by saying,

My school days begin early and are extremely long, and I usually miss lunch and don’t take a break. Then, I have to call home before I go to school and if my children do not have transportation to their school activities it is up to me to provide it, if my husband cannot help me out. I have to make sure there is something at home for my husband and children to eat at supper because it may be almost eleven o’clock before I get home. All this must get done before I can even consider school.
If any of the sources of support fail, then this nontraditional student fails. This pattern suggests that the life occurrences of the nontraditional student are interdependent, which means that educational success is conditional, depending on success in various aspects of life. It is imperative that the nontraditional student make use of interdependent supports.

As one female student stated,

Everything has to work right for me to get to school. Work, kids going to school, supper fixed, car works right, and class scheduling must be on track always just for me to get to school. They doesn’t even address the homework and test study time.

Another participant added,

Hey, I arrange my day around attending school, and if anything gets out of order or doesn’t happen, I may not make it to school. Everything has to work right for me to get there at five o’clock. I have got to be able to get to work early, work through breaks and lunch, leave work at four o’clock, pick up kids at daycare, and drop them off at a friend’s, until my husband gets off work. This is every school day. For example if my child gets sick, or I have car trouble, or if a problem arises at work, getting to school is a problem. My schedule is so tight there is no room for problems and this creates problems at school, work, and at home sometimes.

These comments provide additional examples of how much these participants in this study depend on so many different facets of their lives working in concert with one another. If these participants “juggle” these different facets incorrectly, they may not realize educational success. Attaining their educational goals is dependent on the systematic occurrence of life events. The interdependency comes into play via these systematic occurrences: “It’s tough, there is a lot of juggling time and responsibilities and relying on the cooperation of family, friends, co-workers, employer, and instructors.”

One woman said, “It’s the little things that get in the way and unforeseen incidents that
are not planned for. You just overcome with the help many times from everybody. I cannot do this by myself.” Finally, one participant said,

It takes support and understanding from the school administration at the base, the faculty at the base, my family, including my in-laws, who usually baby-sit, my employer, my co-workers, and the solidarity between me and the other adult students, who have become my friends to make it happen for me. Whew, you know--I had never really thought about how many people were part of this. Man, that’s scary.

Research Question Two

The second question that guided this project involved learners’ use of support sources: How do adult learners make use of existing resources provided by college and others?

Few writers discuss what resources adult learners use. It seems reasonable that they rely on family resources for financial support for tuition and college costs, as well as child care, preparation of meals, and other needs. However, this study attempted to add to the body of knowledge related to adult students’ use of support systems by investigating participants’ use of these resources in greater depth.

This study found that nontraditional students will use almost any means to help them complete their educational goals. Attention to the importance of peer networks, and the degree of assistance these learners received from their peers is relatively absent from most literature this researcher has reviewed. As one woman noted,

The people I go to school with know the circumstances that sometimes arise with me attending class and completing my assignments. Yeah, my family understands me being gone and will cross the t’s and dot the i’s but they don’t really understand the class preparation, the readings, and tests I have to prepare for.

Another participant said,
My friends, family, and co-workers just don’t understand how important this is to me. These other students know where I am, they’ve seen me cry and have been there for me. If you are not involved in the experience, how can you really understand? These other adults know what it takes just to get through this. It is nice for someone to say I understand, but it is the best for a fellow student to say ‘I’ve been there.

As these responses attest, peer support was highly important for these participants, representing an important means of overcoming a number of barriers.

Another element that seems to be missing from existing literature is the type of support offered by most of the faculty and administration at the base. This support comes from the acknowledgment that these nontraditional learners live complex lives, have to juggle schedules, and have multiple responsibilities that most traditional students do not have. Interview questions addressed and answered this research question. While the theme of “disconnection” from the main campus was a barrier identified by all participants, these individuals also indicated that they relied on the instructors and staff at the base site to meet many of their needs. Concerning faculty and administration support, one woman said,

The faculty and the folks in the office know what is happening, some of them have been through what I am experiencing. It is comforting for me to know that they realize things are tough with you sometimes and they always seem to be willing to listen and help.

Although some participants were openly critical of the degree to which administrators at the main campus were available or sensitive to their needs, most indicated that staff members at the base site were generally helpful. One female participant said, “Most of these instructors realize people learn differently and will help you without you having to ask. I sometimes feel stupid asking some of the questions I do but the instructors have never put me down.” Another female participant stated,
The site director here at the base is almost always available. He has answered questions but most of all has listened to me and made me feel confident about what I was trying to accomplish. He has inspired me to feel good about ME!, even when I did not perform well on test or in a course.

One male participant’s response stressed the importance of his peers and instructors equally:

There is no doubt that my cohorts and the instructors have pulled me through. I could not have gone this far without them. They believed I could do it and kept me going when I was ready to quit. And this is not just things at school, but I have been able to discuss with them other parts of my life that were affecting my school attendance, progression, and performance at school and away. These people have been there for me and have yet to fail me. Gosh, I love ‘em.

Although students desired more connection with the main campus, many participants perceived that the support derived from administrators and staff at the base site was crucial to their success, as these comments indicate.

The issue of adult learners’ use of technological support has received minimal treatment in existing literature. The Internet and email resources served as invaluable support for the nontraditional students. This source of support has strong ties to time management. Technological services supported the study participants in ways this researcher did not find in existing literature. Technological services allowed the nontraditional students in this study to research and study at home. Their families were in close proximity and if they needed to address family concerns they had the ability to do so. The Internet and email saved transportation costs and allowed for research and communication to be accomplished at all hours. One female participant said, “Because of the Internet I can research and communicate with classmates after all my family has gone to bed. I don’t have to worry about library hours or coming home late at night.”

Media support appeared to provide reinforcement that learning was important and
that these nontraditional participants were learning valuable information. One male participant stated that

I guess I was not really listening before, but now I continue to hear things on the news and talk shows that are relative to courses I take. I understand things about unions and 401k’s. I knew they existed and I knew I had a 401k but before going back to school, I could not explain how it worked.

Media support also provided self-esteem to these participants. One male participant said he could “communicate with other people at work. It used to be that I would not get involved in conversations because I did not know what to say. Now I know what they are talking about, and it feels good.” Another male participant stated

Since I have been going to college I listen to the radio differently. I find myself interested in news programs and talk shows that deal with current event issues such as economics, financial, and legal issues. Before I began going to school I listen primarily to music. I feel now I was letting the world pass me by. Going to school has sort of tuned me in to world happenings and what I have learned in school makes me want to know what is happening everyday. I utilize the media much more now and for a different purpose. It use to be just for entertainment, now it is also for learning. I can hear something on the radio or on TV and remember discussing a related subject in class.

Research Question Three

The third question that guided the study focused on how participants perceived and managed conflict involved in the attainment of their goals: What do these adult learners perceive to be unresolved issues related to participating in their educational experiences and how do they cope without their resolution? This study explored these issues with the informants in order to describe how these adult learners cope with unexpected issues as they arise.

The research study addressed several issues, but the last interview question
seemed to provoke the most telling responses. One of the first issues addressed by the study participants was course scheduling. Six of the 15 informants wanted to see the school provide more availability of classes during the lunch hours. As one woman commented, “It is just easier for me to get there during the lunch hours. I need to be home during the evenings and if it happens that I am going to school four nights a week no time is left for me or my family.” Additionally, several students felt their files should be more accessible and all of them stated that they preferred not relying on main campus for anything. They wanted all their information at the base campus. Such information included graduation requirements, registration information, course scheduling, class syllabi, and counseling. One male participant said that staff and administrators at main campus “don’t even know who I am. How can they really help me when they have no clue as what makes me tick?” All of the participants praised faculty and staff at the base, yet indicated that something was missing—that the college needed to do more to connect with them and their needs. As one female participant said,

I really don’t think that most of the people out here (the base) know how we manage our lives just so we can get the degree. I am sure that the main campus does not understand.” How many [faculty and administrators] have ever done this? How many of them have ever asked us how do we do it? None until now!

Several of the participants said that even the faculty and administration at the base, “don’t really know us.” As one male participant stated,

These people at the base are so helpful but they don’t know who we are, I mean inside, what is really so different about us than the traditional students. They don’t understand, I think, the personal sacrifices that are occurring in our lives. Yes, it is our choice to do these things, but we need them to know what price we are paying, other than monetary.

Echoing these perceptions, another participant expressed her belief that her school needs to do more to acknowledge her many responsibilities, and the differences that exist
between students like her and traditional students:

The school needs to realize when I get up in the morning, it is not in a dorm room, but in a home with a family that is counting on me to function as a mother and as a wife, as an employee, as a manager, as a taxi service and spectator for children, and as a daughter looking after a sick parent, and finally as an adult student striving for that degree.

Ultimately, these participants perceived that their school needed to make a more systematic effort to reach out to them and support their specific needs.

Summary

The phenomenon of the nontraditional learner involved in the pursuit of higher education is an individualized adventure. However, after discussions with 15 male and female nontraditional college students, this phenomenon developed into seven major themes and a number of sub-themes. The participants reported that to succeed, they required an interwoven system of support from family, peers, employers, co-workers, and faculty and administration.

The participants also referred heavily to the issue of reliance, which emerged as a major theme. The participants distinguished differences between reliance and support. The participants reported that in order to be successful, they relied on peers, family, co-workers, faculty and school administrators at the base, and themselves. Discussions with these participants also revealed how the supports used by these nontraditional students are interdependent, which means many support and reliance factors are dependent on other support and reliance factors to follow through for these students to be successful. Additionally, the study’s results suggested that these nontraditional students experienced stress related to their families, employment, school, and living in general due to the changes that the school process adds to their already complex lives and schedules.

Finally, in an effort to be successful in meeting their educational goals these nontraditional participants devised individual strategies that enhanced goal attainment.
CHAPTER V
SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Introduction
The demographic composition of students attending institutions of higher education has changed significantly over the last several decades. Changes in the economy, employment opportunities, economic needs, skills needed in the workplace, as well as the desire for advancement and self-fulfillment have been driving forces that have stimulated and influenced the increased participation of nontraditional students in higher education. However, there are a number of important issues facing these students, many of which remained unexplored by the body of literature on the topic. Despite the increased population of nontraditional students enrolled in these institutions, minimal research has been conducted that investigates the nontraditional students and their experiences while in pursuit of their educational goals.

This research study’s purpose was to identify and analyze support systems and services needed for success of nontraditional students and evaluate the extent to which these systems and services are being provided by educational institutions. This chapter will summarize the study, introduce major conclusions, discuss implications and present recommendations for higher education.

Summary of the Study
This study explored the experiences of 15 nontraditional students attending an institution of higher education located on a military base. This representation of the nontraditional student was then compared to the depiction of the nontraditional student as reported in the research literature.

The humanistic perspectives voiced by Rogers, Knowles, Pratt, and Simcox shaped the foundation and design of this study and provided the framework that identified existing support systems and resources and guided this research. These voices were utilized to allow for a more integrated and sensitive exploration of nontraditional
students and their journeys toward their educational goals. The nontraditional college student arrives at school with a complex life schedule and life occurrences not yet experienced by the traditional student. These change the nontraditional student’s perception of the educational experience. The humanistic framework of the study led the researcher to examine multiple aspects of these students’ lives which, taken together, contribute to the way they enact the role of student, specifically.

This study utilized a qualitative design, which generated substantive data by examining nontraditional students in their pursuit of their educational goals. Qualitative research also provided the opportunity to examine and investigate the nontraditional learner in areas where research is limited. The researcher used a theoretical basis guided by a conceptual model that incorporated a humanistic perspective and characteristics supportive of the nontraditional learner.

The primary sources of data were collected using in-depth interviews and participant observation with 15 participants who attended college at the military base. These participants were both military employees and civilians. A very limited secondary source of data was collected from document analysis.

Conclusions

This researcher examined data collected across the following groups; age, gender, marital status, and employment status. However, no recognizable or notable differences or patterns emerged existed in one group that was not evident in the others. Thus, the conclusions detailed in this discussion are presented as representative of all students in this sample.

The following conclusions are based on the findings of this study:

1. By adding education nontraditional students add without being able to take any responsibilities away from their already complex schedule. These students are not just deciding they have some free time to give to their studies, but are making a busy schedule even busier. All of the participants in this study worked either full-time or part-time.
Some have children, while some have other dependent family members. These people are challenged by family, work, school, and social issues. These issues are, in part, responsible for the nontraditional students’ success or failure when attaining their educational goals.

2. Participants’ focus on goals, expectations, and time management were probably the most significant themes that emerged from the data. These themes provided answers as to how these nontraditional students dealt with obstacles and continued in their educational goal pursuits. Life responsibilities such as family, work, school, and “just living” caused considerable stress for these participants. Some participants said that they sometimes wondered how they were going to overcome obstacles presented by these responsibilities. Concentrating on goals provided a source of commitment and dedication. Despite obstacles and challenges, being focused and determined helped these learners be successful. This focus represented the driving force compelling these participants to overcome stresses associated with life responsibilities and reach their educational goals.

3. Family, work, school, and social issues caused the participants feelings of guilt. Family-driven guilt was caused by time spent away from family and unmet family obligations. Work-related guilt sprang from participants’ reliance on co-workers and employers to constantly have to perform responsibilities or tasks that were, before this educational endeavor, the participants’ responsibilities. School issues caused guilt, as participants often lacked the time to complete assignments well and failed to maintain the GPA they wanted. Additionally, participants cited constant reliance on their peers for either class assignments or notes, due to being late for class or missing class; this peer-reliance was an additional source of guilt for these participants. Social issues causing guilty feelings pertained primarily to the participants’ inability to spend time with friends. These participants said that they felt their life before school was a previous life and the people who were their friends had been left behind, and this made them feel
guilty. Although these participants were freed to pursue new career goals, their educational process was perceived as limiting other aspects of their lives.

4. Finally, during this study interdependence was identified conclusively among these participants’ sources of support. This researcher predicted that interdependency among students’ support systems might occur due to the way in which one support system relies on another and vice versa, and that this interdependency might be important in making educational goals attainable for the nontraditional participants at this research site.

During the in-depth interviews and participant observations, the participants communicated to the researcher the necessity of meshing various aspects of their lives so they could attend school. Some actually stated that if one factor failed, such as childcare, transportation, or work situations, their educational goals and dreams would not become reality. This suggests that interdependency is indeed a factor in the lives of the participants at this research site.

5. Expectations of what educational goal attainment would mean in the lives of these participants was a driving force that provided the means to overcome guilt. This theme complemented the theme of commitment and dedication. As one participant stated, “I know this is going to be worth it, I just know it. I owe lots people so much.” Another participant said, “When I finish this I expect doors to open that have never opened before. I can provide for my family better, get a promotion, and tell the world I have a college degree.” In addition, these participants had expectations of doing well academically. Although the rigors of school itself presented challenges, these participants expected academic excellence from themselves. Their GPAs were of incredible importance to these participants, given their expectation of graduating with honors and showing their families, employers, friends, peers, and communities that they could accomplish their educational goals successfully. This expectation provided a means of overcoming the guilt they associated with their educational goal commitments.

6. Time and/or time management emerged as a central theme throughout the
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Having time for life and its responsibilities, including family, work, school, and social commitments, was always tied to the amount of available time and how these participants had learned to manage their time. Personal time was identified as almost non-existent. The previously mentioned responsibilities consumed the majority of the day and evening. Participants indicated that they sacrificed sleep to find time for family responsibilities such as washing clothes, paying bills, and taking care of sick children. Sleepless nights were also associated with time spent on schoolwork. This was sometimes their “quiet time” that was also identified as “study time.” Learning how to manage time was instrumental in the academic and life successes experienced by these participants. All of the participants expressed that time management knowledge was necessary to be successful. They were observed discussing time management problems and strategies. For example, they told other nontraditional students they had no available time to eat because they had to come to school directly from work, and military participants said they did not have they opportunity to change clothes before school. They disclosed during the interviews that they learned time management skills from other nontraditional students and from the experience of setting priorities.

7. An unexpected conclusion that surfaced during this study was the amount of peer support and reliance that these participants identified. Although these participants said that family support and reliance was important, 6 of the 15 participants said peer support was their most important support and all participants said peer support was a necessity. Peer reliance enhanced these participants’ motivation. Their peers were always reliable, there for them, and understood situations experienced by the participants better than anyone else.

8. An unexpected finding was that none of the military participants referred to the military as a barrier. If this researcher had not been aware that some of the participants were military members, this information could not have been ascertained from their interviews. None of the military participants discussed being deployed, being away from
school and family, or demands expected from the military. Some of these participants have been involved in exercises on base that required a minimum of 12 hours per day several times during school terms but this was never mentioned. This unique population of military and civilian nontraditional participants seemed to have the same barriers, relied on essentially the same kinds of support, and had the same expectations. 

9. Another unexpected finding was that financial concerns were not a dominant issue. While the participants may have had financial concerns, even civilian students expressed little anxiety over these issues. This may be due to the new method of financial assistance given by the military and the North Carolina Legislative Tuition Grant provided to resident students.

10. Library and research resources were not an issue, which was an unexpected finding. Participants were able to manage these needs with the technological support provided by the Internet. Another type of technological support involved cell phones. This researcher did not expect to find that these nontraditional students relied on these devices to the extent they did.

Comparison of Results to Existing Research

Tough (1987) maintained that institutions of higher education needed to be realistic with their approach to the individuals they serve, particularly the increased populations of adult students. This recommendation is supported by this research study, but this study extends this claim, and suggests that institutions of higher education not only be realistic about the increased adult population but also ask “how better can we serve the adult student so as to make them successful?” Kasworm, Sandmann, and Sissel (2000) contend that attention needs to be given to adult learners so their needs will be better addressed, given that they have complex schedules. The conclusions from this study resonate with their perspective, but this study goes further and identifies the importance of finding out the specific needs of the nontraditional learners in relation to how they live their lives. A good question to ask nontraditional students is “How do you
do make your educational goals and dreams reality?” This study identified how these participants were making educational goals reality and identified experiences along the journey, adding to the existing literature.

Gender trends discussed in the literature (Merriam & Caffarella, 2000; Simcox, 1998), including the increased presence of women in the workplace and other new environments, were not issues in this study. This study found that both male and female participants were faced with similar barriers (family, work, and school). Women did seem to be more sensitive to social issues such as leaving old friends behind while pursuing their educational goals, but some maintained their friendships while employing their friends as childcare providers. Interestingly, male participants utilized only family members as childcare providers.

Available literature indicates that economic issues affect nontraditional students and their participation in higher education. Petrella (1997) spoke of businesses in America relying on higher education to educate their employees and provide formal training in management processes and resource skills. This study added to the existing literature, addressing corporate America’s expectations of higher education’s responsibilities. Additional findings from the study suggested that some these participants are pursuing their educational goals and may begin new careers. Whereas at one time many businesses would reimburse an employee for higher education only if it were related to his employment or specific job description, many of the participants’ employers were paying for professional development with no strings attached.

Demographic trends discussed in the literature were not issues identified in this study other than new research that was found by the researcher that said “almost 75 percent of today’s undergraduate students are considered ‘nontraditional,’ because of their age, their financial status, or when they enrolled in college” (Chronicle of Higher Education, 6/14/2002, p.A34).

However, participants’ reliance on students like themselves suggests that they are
aware of and appreciative of other nontraditional students in their environment, and use them as a resource. In other words, these students have used this demographic trend to their own advantage.

Adult learning and teaching issues arose in this study. This study supports Rusin’s (1993) claim that most adult learners are internally motivated as well as self-motivated. Each of these participants possessed these tendencies. White’s (1999) study suggested that existing literature concerning adult learners’ persistence and educational goal attainment has focused on academic and social integration, rather than their needs. This study added to the limited research available on nontraditional students’ needs while attending college. This study expanded the knowledge of how the nontraditional student utilizes support and reliance from various environments to be successful. This study also described who the nontraditional student sees as best meeting their needs.

Some barriers identified by Cross (1981), (dispositional, institutional, and situational) were identified in this study. The situational barriers such as family, employment, and social were identified. Institutional barriers such as attendance requirements and class scheduling were the most significant needs identified in this study. Dispositional barriers, such as age, and the lack of confidence they would succeed were identified in this study. These findings support Cross’s (1981) findings.

Admissions and financial aid barriers were not issues among these participants. However, orientation was an issue. Chickering (1993) suggested that orientation programs could include returning students or graduates who could relay their experiences. This study supports this suggestion and defines the need for better orientation experiences among this study’s participants. All the participants expressed the need for an orientation day or days just for nontraditional students at either the main campus or the research site. Four of the participants said orientation should include a family day.

Academic support was a need expressed by these adult participants. Kasworm
(1990) found academic affairs represent a primary need of adult students. The findings from this study complement Kasworm’s findings, and add to the existing literature by exposing specific academic needs of the nontraditional student. These participants expressed the need for information concerning academic expectations and provisions to be provided early on, not when they were experiencing difficulties. The participants also stressed their need for information concerning resource centers, tutors, future class scheduling, and total degree requirements.

Sparks (1994) said that sometimes adult learners have difficulties due to poor academic skills and a lack of confidence. Spratt (1994) goes on to say that faculty can be delighted or disappointed by adult student performance. This study found that the existing literature may be accurate, but little information or research exists as to why this happens. According to responses from several of the participants, some nontraditional students were afraid to ask questions because they did not want to appear ignorant. Some participants expressed the need for faculty to better explain the content of the lecture or discussion information and to avoid using technical jargon that was unfamiliar to adult learners.

Employment and personal responsibilities and influences found in this study support existing literature. As O’Callaghan, Hau, and Lebold (1993) and Hatch (2000) claimed, influences such as family, friends, co-workers, and school were found to be influential in these participants’ educational goal achievements. However, existing literature rarely mentions peer influence. This influence was reported in this study during the interviews by each participant as one of the most influential factors responsible for their educational goal success.

Negative self-concept was a more challenging barrier at the beginning of the nontraditional students’ experience, and then began to subside as the participants progressed through the hurdles involved in higher education. This study supported the study of Mackinnon-Slaney (1994), whose philosophy of self-image indicated that a
nontraditional student with a positive self-image can progress rapidly even if the educational environment is competitive. The participants in this study had self-doubts about their success but their attitudes began to change for the positive after their experiences showed progression.

Technological needs as explained by Merriam and Caffarella (1999) were identified in this study as a major factor in the educational journey of these participants. Due to the accessibility barriers posed by the physical distance to the library and other sources of textual information, the Internet was the major source, and sometimes the only resource, utilized by these participants. This study contributes to the body of research concerning technological support and its importance to the nontraditional student. Whitson and Astute (1997) said adult educators should make connections with individuals who are computer specialists. This study’s findings also add to that literature; according to the participants of this study, educators should be aware and share websites and research engines that will help in the progression of nontraditional students. An example would be the suggestion of using NC LIVE, of whose existence most participants stated they were unaware until an instructor informed them of it.

Counseling and career needs were addressed during this research. Luzzo (1999) pointed out that more research needs to be done with college students over the age of 25 concerning their career decision-making needs and other concerns they may have. During this study, participants expressed the need for career counseling to become available earlier on in their educational journey. Also identified during this study was the need for administration and faculty to ask the nontraditional students if they had questions or needed help. Most of the study participants were unaware of what questions to ask and said during the interviews that it would have helped if both administration and faculty would initiate the conversation about career needs. This finding adds more depth and breadth to the existing literature about career and counseling needs.

Support systems were addressed in the literature primarily in a positive way.
Mackinnon-Slanney (1994) said that support systems provide opportunities that affect nontraditional learners’ educational goal attainment, and are thus important components of these learners’ educational experiences. This study found that support systems can provide opportunities and can be instrumental. However, during this study some traditional support systems were also identified by some participants as barriers. For example, family was considered by nine of the participants as the most important type of support. Six of the participants said peer support was the most important because their peers were more understanding of what was happening in their lives and could feel what they were feeling. They said that although family was utilized as a type of support, sometimes their families’ inability to understand these learners’ situations made them seem insensitive, thus becoming a barrier. This study’s findings correspond with Buhr’s (1997) assessment of support systems. Buhr (1997) contended that support systems were necessary and a very important element but support systems only were part of the key components of the college experience. This study’s findings corroborate and extend that claim by identifying factors such as expectations and reliance as additional components experienced by participants. This study adds to the existing literature and looks at support systems from a perspective that has not been identified by the existing literature.

Astin (1993) and Barker (1995) discussed the adult student involvement in higher education and its importance in academic achievement. This study found that student involvement with peers was the most important type of interaction. Peer involvement included studying together, discussing situations of interest, and using peers as a sounding board. Several participants did tell the researcher during the interviews that they would like to know what was happening on main campus but because of time limitations they would not be able to get involved. The participants said they looked to the base campus administration to supply them with answers to all their academic questions and they considered the base campus as very involved in their academic lives.

Expectations and reliance were two major themes that evolved during this
research and current research had addressed them minimally, if at all. The participants voiced the importance of these themes in their lives, and spoke at length of how these themes influenced their continued efforts to attain their educational goals. Being a nontraditional student produced stresses that had not been experienced before. During the interviews, some participants expressed with emotion the barriers they had overcome and who they had relied on. These participants also expressed the importance of expectations and reliance and the driving forces they became and still are during their educational journey. They told of the inner strength they developed during this educational experience. These participants also told of the guilt they experienced as well as the feeling of being disconnected at times from family, friends, the community, and even the school. They told the researcher how they relied on their peers to help pull them through when no one else understood.

This researcher suggests that such detail is lacking in the current body of literature because most studies of the nontraditional student have focused on retention, visible support systems, and numbers of nontraditional students attending college. This researcher also suggests that many of the previous studies were quantitative and did not utilize the qualitative approach. The participants in this study responded to questions that were developed to address nontraditional learners’ pursuit of their educational goals in an encompassing and holistic way. The participants’ responses were analyzed through a grounded approach that used no a priori explanations or coding categories. This qualitative study provided data collection and explanations usually not amassed when using the quantitative approach.

Implications For Higher Education

This study’s conclusions offer several suggestions to higher education institutions, administrators and faculty. The faculty and administration should constantly strive to meet the needs of this growing population of nontraditional learners. The awareness level of faculty and administration of what these individuals are experiencing
while pursuing their educational goals should be elevated to enable these institutions to be better equipped to meet the needs of these learners. Being aware that adult learners are employed and have families is not enough. The knowledge of how they manage their complex schedules is essential in meeting the needs of this unique group. This is not just a matter of knowing what support systems they use to help them accomplish their goals and what barriers they encounter, although this is important knowledge. Faculty and administration must have a clear understanding of how nontraditional students live their lives and recognize that the educational experience is only a part of their lives. Students make many sacrifices in order to pursue a formal educational experience. The knowledge that each nontraditional student has individual barriers is important. They should be asked how they are accomplishing their goals, what is getting in their way, and how faculty and administration can help them attain their educational goals. Each individual’s situation will be different and will need flexible institutional support systems that build on the support systems an individual has rather than conflicting with them.

For the student population involved in this study, specifically, a carefully designed and accessible orientation program for nontraditional students should be provided. The provider institution in this study has an on-campus orientation program but there is not one held on the military base where these students take classes. Such an orientation program should include workshops that provide information about the institution, its academic expectations and requirements, and other general information. During the orientation process students should be made aware of support services and resources offered by the institution as well as the local community. An effective orientation experience for nontraditional students should lessen some of the stress associated with becoming a college student. The more that an institution can do to identify and meet the needs of this population of learners will enhance their learning experiences. This support might include helping their families to understand what it means to be taking classes.
In addition to helping students meet their specific support needs, institutions must maintain academic programs and services that meet the changing needs of adult students. Academic programs should be updated continuously in content and delivery methods to be made compatible with changes and needs of organizations that employ students and graduates. This study found that it was important to structure classes and facilities so that students have access to each other and can build supportive relationships. Much has been written about course designs that connect with adult experiences, and, for example, these learners showed appreciation of their courses connecting with current events in the media. But course designs that use methods such as discussion to connect with experiences or include group projects should recognize that these serve the additional purpose of supporting students’ networking needs. Relationships get built through these approaches that go beyond academics and involve friendship and survival.

Higher education institutions, administrators, and faculty must constantly seek ways to identify the changing needs of nontraditional students and make appropriate institutional changes and services to meet those changes to better support and equip the students who call upon institutions for educational services. While these might include adjusting hours of operation and web access to services, they might also include support such as group cell phone service and Internet service provider partnerships that reduce the cost for students to access resources, including each other, as students with adult lives and needs. Imperative in how higher educational institutions view the needs of adult learners and structure programs in response is the understanding that these students live their lives from an interdependency approach that should be honored and supported. The adult students in this study are resourceful and resilient, and they “rely” on being able to access systems of support that can be flexible and can function on demand as a temporary resource to fill in when a regular source of “support” is unavailable. This means they have to maintain relationships with all their support systems, and their support systems need to feel appreciated.
Recommendations for Future Studies

Future research should continue to examine nontraditional students and their needs due to new and changing environments. In addition, future research may need to include older nontraditional students because their needs may be different from those participating in this study. Additionally, future research should study the need for nontraditional learners to enhance their time management skills as they relate to the integration of their educational and life responsibilities. Although institutions of higher education have support services in place at this time that are available to some nontraditional students, the effectiveness of these programs for the nontraditional learner should be examined.

Summary

Nontraditional students enter the world of education with already complex schedules. These individuals are faced with life responsibilities that can cause them to stumble along the path of educational goal attainment. This research study’s results illustrate that nontraditional learners do triumph over barriers that arise along the way to educational goal attainment. Keeping focused on their goals, maintaining their commitment and dedication, and receiving support from family, peers, co-workers, employers, and faculty and administration were crucial in the pursuit of the educational goals of the nontraditional learners in this study.
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Appendix A

Interview Guide

This guide includes the initial questions that all adult learners were asked during the interviews, although additional questions, sub-questions, and probes emerged during individual interviews. These guiding questions were designed to address issues of perception, experience, perseverance, support, and barriers of the nontraditional students. These issues are recognized in the literature and reflect the researcher’s interest in nontraditional students and their educational goals.

Questions

1. What is a typical day or week for you, in relation, to attending classes/college?
2. How is your family supportive of your goals?
3. How do you manage taking care of your family and meet family responsibilities while attending school?
4. How do you organize your life’s schedules?
5. What gets in the way of managing your complex schedule?
6. How has learning in general been a part of your life as an adult?
7. What are the positives and negatives of being an adult learner?
8. What has it been like to continue to stay enrolled and to progress in school?
9. What has made it difficult for you to be successful and continue in school?
10. What has made it easier for you to be successful and continue in school?
11. What are your perceptions of the support offered by your educational institution?
12. What are your perceptions of the barriers that are presented by your educational institution?
13. How does their approach help or hinder your progression?
14. What supports from school, home, the community, work, socially, and other environments do you need to reach your educational goals?
15. Describe what you consider as the most important support you utilize.
16. What support can your educational institution provide that can help you complete your education?

17. What does your educational institution need to know about you as a nontraditional student?
Appendix B

Overview of Mount Olive College

Sponsored by the Convention of Original Free Will Baptists, Mount Allen Junior College was chartered in 1951 and opened in 1952 near Black Mountain, North Carolina. In 1953, the College relocated to Mount Olive, North Carolina, near the center of denominational strength in the eastern region of the state. Its name was changed to Mount Olive Junior College in 1956 and later to Mount Olive College in 1970. It operated as a junior college until 1984, when the junior year was added, followed by the senior year in 1985. The College awarded the first baccalaureate degrees in 1986. Since that time, the college has awarded more than 4,000 baccalaureate degrees.

Since its founding, Mount Olive has remained true to its mission of providing Christian higher educational opportunities throughout eastern North Carolina. This has been demonstrated through the expansion of educational programs to meet the needs of persons in North Carolina and beyond (Mount Olive College Catalog 2001-2003).

Mission

The College is reaching more students today than at any point in its history. Each year the College awards degrees to more than 500 students (Mount Olive College Catalog, 2001-2003). Today, the College is a robust institution prepared to embrace the future with a service mission and a commitment to the challenges that lie ahead. The Mission Statement as stated in the Mount Olive College Catalog (2001-2003) describes the institution’s goals:

To operate and maintain a private church-affiliated college for the education of men and women that offers programs, including professional studies, that are rooted in the liberal arts tradition and provided in an environment nurtured by Christian values; To maintain and support academic excellence through higher learning and higher values in a community made up of persons dedicated to the practice and advancement of Christian ideals in all aspects of life;
To seek and require higher standards in providing relevant educational programs reflecting an emphasis on the personal growth of each student at places and times that enhance the possible (p. 14).

Governance

Governed by a thirty-member Board of Trustees elected by the Convention of Original Free Will Baptists, the institution has had three presidents during its 50 years of operation: The Reverend Lloyd Vernon (1952-54); Dr. W. Burkette Raper (1954-95); and the current President, Dr. J. William Byrd, who had previously served as Executive Vice President (1992-95). Accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools as a Level I institution in 1960, the College earned accreditation as a Level II institution in 1986. Reaffirmation was approved in 1970, 1981, 1991, and 2001 (Mount Olive College Catalog 2001-2003).

Branch Locations

In 1975, the College’s educational programs were expanded to Seymour Johnson Air Force base in nearby Goldsboro, North Carolina. Subsequently, educational programs were expanded to New Bern, North Carolina (1993), Wilmington, North Carolina (1995) and Research Triangle Park, North Carolina (1997). In 1994, the Mount Olive location also opened an Evening College program. The College enrolls students in programs leading to the baccalaureate degrees at all locations. The branch locations were developed to meet the unmet educational needs of persons in these geographic locations. The College provides educational programs at each of these locations that are supervised by full-time members of the faculty. Each branch location is housed in modern facilities located in excellent, safe surroundings. The traditional programs located at the Mount Olive location forms the academic core of the educational programs and provides a context for evaluating the total effort (Mount Olive College Catalog 2001-2003).
Enrollment

The strongest growth in the history of the College occurred during 1996-1999. Expansion into new locations, coupled with significant growth at the Mount Olive location, increased enrollment by more than 37% during this period. Expansions in the curriculum have resulted in competitive academic programs that respond to the needs of today’s students and have contributed to the institution’s steady growth. Enrollments have grown from about 1,300 in 1996 to more than 2000 currently in all locations (Mount Olive College Catalog 2001-2003).

Faculty

The College has a strong faculty with impressive academic credentials. Approximately 75% of the full-time teaching faculty have earned terminal degrees, while about 50% of the adjunct faculty employed by the College hold terminal degrees. Not only do the members of this diverse faculty possess impressive academic credentials, they also bring substantial professional, occupational, and technical experience to the classroom. In addition to their work in the classroom, members of the faculty remain actively involved in professional organizations, publishing, lecturing, and other scholarly activities (Mount Olive College Catalog 2001-2003).

Students

Mount Olive College enrolls students from a wide range of age groupings; 39% of students are under the age of 24, 44% of students are between 25 and 39 years of age, and 17% are between the ages of 40 and 64. The College’s student population is 95% from North Carolina and includes about 22% from minority populations (Mount Olive College Catalog, 2001-2003).
## Appendix C

### Demographic Profile of Participants

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<th>Work</th>
<th>Student Status</th>
<th>Military status</th>
<th>Reason for higher ed.</th>
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Appendix D

Mount Olive College, Goldsboro (Research Site)

Class Schedule, Spring II 2003

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Monday-Friday</th>
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<tr>
<td>10:00am-11:00am</td>
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<tr>
<td>11:00am-12:00 noon</td>
<td>ECO 211</td>
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<td>CRJ 210</td>
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<td>ENG 232</td>
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<td>PSY 210</td>
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<td>BUS 410</td>
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<td>BUS 332</td>
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CIS 410  Systems Development Project  
ECO 320  Corporate Finance  
HIS 222  American History II  
HRM 491  Advanced Seminar in HRM  
MAT 240  Statistical Methods  

**Tuesday & Thursday 5:00pm-7:30pm**  
ACC 420  Cost Accounting II  
CIS 420  Mgt. of Changes In Systems & Info Tech  
CRJ 370  Criminal Procedure  
HIS 221C  American History I  
PSY 330  Developmental Psychology  
PSY 350  Psychological Assessment  
REL 111  Intro to the Old Testament  
SCI 100  Interdisciplinary Science  

**Tuesday & Thursday 7:45pm-10:15pm**  
ACC 420  Auditing  
BIO 252  Human Anatomy & Physiology II w/lab  
(B Lab every Monday 7:45-10:15pm at Main Campus)  
BUS 335  Business Ethics  
CIS 300  Management of Info Systems  
MAT 120C  College Algebra  
PSY 405  Adv. Research Methodology  
PSY 440  Behavior Management  
SOC 230  Marriage & Family
Appendix E

Consent Form

I, ______________________________, agree to voluntarily participate in and be interviewed for a dissertation study to investigate support that is used by nontraditional adult students in order to reach their educational and life goals. I understand this study is the responsibility of one researcher, Lamar Aycock, who is conducting this research project as part of the requirements to fulfill a Doctor of Education (Ed.D.) in Higher Education Administration at North Carolina State University.

I will be interviewed twice during the semester for no more than 60 minutes each at a time and location which are convenient for me. The interviews will be conducted by Mr. Aycock. The interviews will be one-on-one. The interviews will be tape-recorded, notes will be taken, and tapes will be transcribed by Mr. Aycock. I understand that I will not be referred to or identified by my legal name, but a pseudonym to protect my identity and insure confidentiality. As part of this study I also agree to be observed during my interactions with other students and faculty. The interviews and field notes will be confidential. I understand that only Lamar Aycock will access to this consent form that links me to my participant pseudonym. The audiotapes and field-notes will be stored in a locked file at the home of Lamar Aycock. At the conclusion of this study, the audiotapes, identifiable only by pseudonym will be destroyed. Under this condition, I agree that any information obtained from this research may be used for publication or educational purposes of this researcher and program only.

I understand that through participation in this study I have the opportunity to share information that will potentially benefit the program, other students, and educators. I understand that I can withdraw from this study at any time without penalty. There is no anticipated risk to me, since my participation is limited to exchange of information through interviews and observations.

If I have any questions or problems in connection with my participation in this study I should contact Lamar Aycock (919-778-8271 home; 919-284-3810, work), researcher, Dr. John Pettitt (919-515-6291) or Dr. Peter Hessling (919-515-1763), committee co-chairs for this project at North Carolina State University. If I feel I have not been treated according to the descriptions in this form, or my rights as a participant in research have been violated during the course of this project, I could contact Dr. Matthew Zingraff, Chair of the NCSU IRB for the Use of Human Subjects in Research Committee, Box 7514, NCSU Campus (919-513-1834) or Mr. Matthew Ronning, Assistant Vice Chancellor, Research Administration, Box 7414, NCSU, Campus (919-513-2148).

I have read and understand the above information. I have received a copy of this form. I agree to participate in this study.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Participant’s Signature</th>
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</thead>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Date</td>
<td>Investigator’s Signature</td>
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