

ABSTRACT

WATERS, LASHICA DAVIS. Being Seen from Behind the Screen: Narratives of Non-Traditional Undergraduate Online Transfer Students' Expectations and Experiences of Student Services. (Under the direction of Dr. Michelle E. Bartlett).

Non-traditional undergraduate students have vast experiences and unique learning characteristics, and they hold the expectation that student services should be provided to accommodate their needs when they transfer into online programs. Many services that are available for traditional-aged campus students may not be easy to navigate online, which can lead to student attrition or negative perceptions of the overall student educational experience and the institution.

This narrative qualitative study highlighted the voices of seven non-traditional students who transferred into the only undergraduate online degree-completion program at a research 1 institution that typically caters services to traditional-aged campus-based students. Three research questions guided this study exploring students' expectations and experiences of student services and students' overall perception of their collegiate experience based on their interactions with student services.

The primary data collection method utilized was in-depth semi structured interviews and the analysis and interpretation of findings were organized using Polkinghorne's (1995) two types of narrative inquiry: narrative of analysis and analysis of narratives. This research revealed three emergent themes of the participants' expectations and experiences (1) access (2) engagement, and (3) inclusion. The fourth theme, pride, revealed how students' access, engagement, and inclusion with student services influenced their overall perception of the institution and their educational experience. Using Burgoon's (1995) expectancy violations theory, two sub-themes:

(1) disconnections and (2) connections also emerged as negative and positive experiences from the second theme of engagement.

Participants had an overall positive experience with student services at this research 1 institution; therefore, recommendations are offered for administrators, faculty, and student service professionals at other institutions to consider when making provisions for undergraduate non-traditional online transfer students to provide this population with appropriate resources and experiences.

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Being seen from behind the screen: Narratives of non-traditional undergraduate online transfer students' expectations and experiences of student services

by
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DEDICATION

I dedicate this to all of my grandparents who are now looking over me:

Because of you, I am.

- ♥ Leona Davis: 1936-2002
 - ♥ Claretha Chisom: 1936-2013
 - ♥ Willie Chisom: 1930- 2007
 - ♥ Eunice Saunders: 1934-2020
 - ♥ James Saunders: 1916-1993
 - ♥ William Taylor: 1934-1996
- And to my honorary grandmother:
- ♥ Ms. Edna J. Hayes: 1938-2012

“Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it.”
—Proverbs 22:6

I also dedicate this to my nephews and niece who will carry on this legacy after me:

Imagine. Believe. Achieve.

- ♥ Ty-Shon M. Davis
- ♥ Thomasí M. Davis
- ♥ Tai’Ronnicia M. Davis

“Do the best you can until you know better. Then, when you know better, do better.”
—Maya Angelou

BIOGRAPHY

This biography includes segments of my personal statement written in 2018 to gain admission into this PhD program. It represents my personal and professional history, and I hope it inspires anyone who may need the encouragement to continue to follow their dreams. It is also a humble reminder to never forget the people or my journey that inspired me to reach this goal.

I am LaShica Davis Waters, from Goldsboro, NC. I am in awe as I write this personal statement seeking admission into the ELPHD doctoral program at North Carolina State University as I never imagined this being a possibility. To know why this program is a perfect fit for me requires a little background history of who I am and how I got to where I am today.

I began my undergraduate career a year and a half after graduating high school. As a first-generation student I did not have anyone at home to steer me in the right direction of going to college. It was my neighbor, Ms. Edna J. Hayes, who drove me to East Carolina University (ECU), and guided me through the application processes for admission and financial aid. Prior to graduating with my BA in Communication in 2004, I maintained a work-study position in Admissions all four years until they hired me full-time. As an Admissions Counselor, I was able to provide valuable information about college access to prospective students, once like myself, who had no clue of where to begin. I knew I found my purpose in life in higher education when I saw the impact I was making in the lives of others just as Ms. Edna did for me. Therefore, I decided to further my education and obtained my Master of Science in Counselor Education with a concentration in Higher Education at ECU in 2009. I did this not only for myself but also for my 9-year old nephew who I suddenly gained custody of at this time. I found myself balancing a full-time job and family as many adult learners do. As a single “mom,” I was grateful that my master’s program offered many online courses which provided me with the flexibility I needed.

Upon graduation, I transitioned into Academic Advising for traditional-aged campus students in the College of Education at ECU. After I got married, I relocated and I now serve as the Academic Advisor for the Leadership in the Public Sector (LPS) online degree program at NC State, which is catered to working adults. As a previous online student, my interest grew in undergraduate adult learners in distance education, so I sought additional educational opportunities to enhance the impact I could provide my students and completed a graduate certificate in Teaching, Training, and Educational Technology at NC State in Spring 2016.

Advising for the LPS program and completing the certificate revealed the many challenges adult learners face and how some institutions do not always implement the best teaching and training strategies to help streamline their learning experience. Being a constant advocate for my students confirmed my interest in adult learners and distance education, but to make an impact in this field, I cannot be complacent in just advising. For this reason, I am seeking to further my education and complete this doctoral program to become a change agent for this population. The program aligns with my long-term career goals to become a senior level administrator advocating for the needs of adult learners. I want to shape policy and work to garner collaborations among stakeholders that best impact the adult learning process.

My personal life experiences and constant pursuit of education have provided a great foundation of why I am passionate about the work I do. Now, I believe that it is pertinent for me to further my education and complete this doctoral program concentrating in Adult, Workforce, and Continuing Professional Education to build upon this foundation to become a more competent and confident catalyst for the profession. My goal is to not only be recognized for the work I do, but to continue to advocate for adult learners, particularly in distance education, and ultimately be remembered for the impact my work has done for this growing community.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

“But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you.” Matthew 6:33 is the first scripture I recited as a young child that I still live by. I give God all of the honor and praise for his endless mercy and grace during this doctoral process.

To my parents, Willie & Cynthia Davis, and my sister, Ta-Tanisha Davis: Thank you for teaching me about life through your eyes and your experiences. You all were my first teachers and I appreciate you for inspiring me to pursue my dreams and supporting me along the way.

To my husband, Keith Waters: Thank you for allowing me the time I needed to be away from us to focus on writing. Most of all thank you for feeding me daily! I love you always.

To the best in-laws a girl could ever ask for, Rev. William & Ernestine Waters: Thank you for encouraging and cheering me on, and making sure your baby boy was taking care of me.

To my loyal line sister of ΔΣΘs Spring 2005 line of 19 in Harmonious Play, Dr. Najiyah (Gia) Covington Lewis: Words cannot express the sincere gratitude I have for your guidance, encouragement, and wisdom literally though every step of this journey. Thank you! OO-OOP!

To my extended family, friends, ΔΣΘ Sorors, and co-workers from both East Carolina & NC State: Thank you for your inspiration, support, and random check-ins along this journey.

To my scholar siblings also on this doctoral journey that I’ve never met, Tonelli Hatley, Earl Huff, Jr. and the entire BLK Doc GroupMe me family: Our Zoom writing sessions rock!

To my seven participants: Words cannot express my appreciation for offering your stories and representing non-traditional online students to make this research what it is. Thank you!!

To my committee members, Dr. Donna Petherbridge, Dr. Kevin Oliver, Dr. James Bartlett, and my amazing chair, Dr. Michelle E. Bartlett: My sincerest gratitude for your encouragement, patience, guidance, and comfort during my time of need. I truly appreciate you!!

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION & BACKGROUND

Introduction

Student support services are designed to help students transition to college and are vital to learner success (Schuh et al., 2016) and students' overall satisfaction with their collegiate experience (LaPadula, 2003; Ludwig-Hardman & Dunlap, 2003). Institutions have traditionally handled student services for distance education as an add-on to on-campus services, which worked well when online programs and courses had smaller enrollment numbers. However, as institutions serve larger numbers of non-traditional students, traditional student services solutions are no longer feasible (LaPadula, 2003; Schlossberg et al., 1989; Schuh et al., 2016; Smith, 2016) and many student services should be completely redesigned to serve distance learners (Dirr, 1999; Zirkle, 2004).

Non-traditional undergraduate students have unique learning characteristics and needs when returning to school, such as the need to connect their life to their academic coursework (Kasworm 2003), educational support and programs (Chen 2015; Dumais et al., 2013), and access to student services after traditional business hours (Hadfield, 2003). These needs are often overlooked when students transfer into online programs at institutions that typically cater services to the traditional-aged undergraduate campus student (Chen, 2015; Smith, 2016; Zirkle, 2004). With the increasing number of adult transfer students and overall diversification of students in higher education, educators and administrators need to gain a better understanding of these students to better cater to their educational experience (Boudreaux & Schoenack, 2016; Chen, 2015; MacDonald, 2018; Schlossberg et al., 1989; Schuh et al., 2016). Transfer students tend to be demanding consumers of educational services and their level of satisfaction is closely

linked with their persistence to graduation (Kearney & Kearney, 1994; Owens, 2010; Smith, 2016).

In the U.S., the overall enrollment in higher education between 2012 and 2016 was more than 20 million students, with student demographics and their modality needs shifting to include more non-traditional students and online course enrollment (Anderson, 2016; Boudreaux & Schoenack, 2016; EAB, 2019; Schlossberg et al., 1989; Seaman et al., 2018). Transfer students are also an important population in higher education and institutions are experiencing a significant increase in the number of students who transfer (Lukszo & Hayes, 2019). College students are no longer classified as students aged 18 to 22, attending full-time, and living on campus directly after high school (Chen 2017; Rice, 2003). Between 2012 and 2023, the projected rate of increase for students under age 25 will only be 12%, while the rate of increase for students age 25 and older will be 20% (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2015). Transfer students are included in these numbers as they tend to have non-traditional backgrounds and college experiences (McCormick et al., 2019). These students are typically older, financially independent, less likely to live on campus, and more likely to care for dependents (Monroe, 2006; Tobolowsky & Cox, 2012).

Many public universities are expecting a decrease of traditional-aged students; therefore, they are making a stronger effort to target and attract non-traditional students by providing alternative delivery options such as online degree completion, hybrid programs, and mass open online courses (MOOCS; Council for Adult and Experiential Learning [CAEL], 2018; Gast, 2013; Lieberman, 2018; Prescott, 2008; Smith, 2016). As a result, online learning as an educational option has exploded in the last 15 years. As of 2016, more than six million students in the U.S. higher education system have taken at least one fully online course (Seaman et al.,

2018; Tobin & Behling, 2018). As technology advances and employers begin to require baccalaureate degrees to maintain employment, more and more adult students are entering online undergraduate programs for the convenience and flexibility (Boudreaux & Schoenack, 2016; Britto & Rush, 2013; Layne et al., 2013; Smith, 2016). However, when these adult students arrive, they often find that many student services—such as career counseling, orientation, and academic advising—are geared toward traditional-aged campus students (Dumais et al., 2013; LaPadula, 2003; Smith, 2016; Zirkle, 2004). Online students can experience feelings of isolation and disconnectedness from unresponsive environments, often leading them to withdraw and transfer to another online program that meets their needs (Kurucay, & Inan, 2017; Major & Sumner, 2018; Smith 2016; Visser & Visser, 2000; Zirkle, 2004). Universities must recognize and prioritize the expectations of adult students while also reducing the barriers these students face without receiving the proper support (Boudreaux & Schoenack, 2016).

It is critical for institutions to foster connections at all stages of the online adult student journey—from first inquiry through graduation—by establishing support mechanisms (Chen, 2015; Coomes & DeBard, 2004; LaPadula, 2003; Wyatt, 2011). If student services are essential to student success and satisfaction, online adult transfer students should have the same access to services as traditional-aged campus students (Chen, 2015; Kippenhan, 2004). Non-traditional online students are different than traditional college-aged students; therefore, institutions offering online education should consider the special characteristics of adult students and adapt services to their unique circumstances (Chen, 2015; Dirr, 1999; Panacci, 2015). These evolving student populations will require faculty, student affairs staff, administrators, policymakers, and other stakeholders to redefine teaching and learning approaches, modify educational environments, and expand student services (Coomes, & DeBard, 2004; Jacobs & Hundley, 2010; Schuh et al.,

2016; Wyatt, 2011). It is up to top administrators to change the way many campus offices do business in an effort to support the entirety of their student population (Dirr, 1999; Schuh et al., 2016).

Problem Statement

Non-traditional undergraduate students have to figure out how to navigate their entire collegiate experience virtually when they transfer into online programs at institutions that primarily cater to traditional-aged campus-based students (Dumais et al., 2013; Zirkle, 2004). Tasks such as accessing the online classroom, campus resources, and student services are not as simple to navigate online. Research demonstrates these students are more likely to drop out and less likely to persist (Astin 1984, Bean & Metzner, Britto & Rush, 2013; Smith, 2016; Tinto, 1987) and additional studies have shown there is a lack of support at the college level for non-traditional students. Online adult learners, as a subset of the non-traditional student population, may be lacking even more support (Dumais et al., 2013; Fairchild 2003; Hittepole, 2016; LaPadula, 2003 Lorenzo, 2015). Adult students may hold different expectations about their needs for education services (Boudreaux & Schoenack, 2016; Chen, 2017; LaPadula, 2003). Traditional campus students are surrounded by resources and programs to help them adjust to college, such as orientation programs, upperclassmen mentors, and student support service offices. In contrast, some online adult learners may feel isolated at these institutions (Dirr, 1999; Major & Summer, 2018; Smith, 2016; Visser & Visser, 2000; Zirkle, 2004). The offices meant to provide support are typically closed during the hours that online adult learners—who often work full-time—are available to use them (Gast, 2013; Hadfield, 2003). MacDonald (2018) stated, “adult learners typically cannot alter their lives to fit some schools’ fixed schedules, so they

prefer to find institutions where the programs, services, extracurricular, and employees can adjust to their lives” (p. 161).

Consequently, student departure is an increasing problem for colleges and universities (Astin, 1984; Bean & Metzner, 1985; Jacobs & Hundley, 2010; Smith, 2016; Tinto, 1987). According to Jacobs and Hundley (2010), approximately 25% of students depart from four-year colleges or universities during their first year. Non-traditional students are significantly less likely to complete their degrees within six years when compared to traditional students (Hittepole, 2016; Levin, 2007). Additionally, dropout rates associated with distance learning typically range from 20 to 50% (Smith, 2016) because of students’ dissatisfaction with online courses and feelings of isolation (Boudreaux & Schoenack, 2016; Kurucay & Inan, 2017; Zirkle, 2004). More often, distance learning programs report higher attrition rates than traditional on-campus programs (Britto & Rush, 2013; Ludwig-Hardman & Dunlap, 2003; Smith, 2016).

Tinto’s (1975) theory of college student departure highlights the role of the institution in creating environments that are conducive to student success, which contribute to college student retention. The lack of support within higher education has a significant impact on non-traditional distance education students (Boudreaux & Schoenack, 2016; LaPadula, 2013; Lorenzo, 2015); therefore, the challenge for online education providers is not how to recruit students, but rather, how to retain them once they have begun (Britto & Rush, 2013; Ludwig-Hardman & Dunlap, 2003; Smith, 2016; Zirkle, 2004). According to Noel-Levitz (2011), adult students who indicate high levels of satisfaction with academic factors and campus support are more likely to demonstrate higher degree completion rates. Support services are consequently a critical component to effectively retain these students (Britto & Rush, 2013; Hittepole, 2016; Ludwig-Hardman & Dunlap, 2003). Institutions serving predominantly traditionally-aged students are

now forced to become more mindful of the challenges *all* students face in balancing their personal, academic, and work lives (Jacobs & Hundley, 2010; Schuh et al., 2016).

To add to this complexity, many online learners are transfer students who tend to have non-traditional backgrounds and diverse collegiate experiences (McCormick et al., 2009; Tobolowsky & Cox, 2012). Relative to native students, transfer students are inclined to be older, less likely to live on campus, and more likely to work off-campus and care for dependents (McCormick et al., 2009; Monroe, 2006). Although transfer students are a significant percentage of the student population on postsecondary campuses, they are often invisible or neglected once they begin at four-year institutions (Monroe, 2006; Tobolowsky & Cox, 2012). They face many challenges after transferring, such as lower grades, social adjustment to a new campus, and academic adjustment to a more rigorous curriculum (Laanan, 2007). Yet, despite these challenges, adult students who transfer into four-year institutions have not been given appropriate attention as has been received by traditional-aged and early college transfer students (Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2005; Zhang et al., 2013). Research suggests that the four-year institution plays an instrumental role in a transfer student's successful transition, and these institutions should implement programs and inform administrators of transfer student's unique characteristics and needs (Laanan, 2007; Tobolowsky & Cox, 2012; Zhang et al., 2013).

Considering all of the recommendations for these growing populations, there is a tremendous lack of research on the expectations and experiences of undergraduate online adult transfer students. Additional research is needed on these adult students when they transfer into undergraduate online programs at four-year institutions to verify they are receiving the support they need, while balancing these challenging and multifaceted identities, to have a successful collegiate experience.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study was to understand non-traditional undergraduate students' expectations and experiences with student services when they transfer into the only undergraduate online program at a research 1 university that typically caters its student services to the traditional-aged campus-based student. The experiences of these students may dictate attrition or persistence, and overall satisfaction or dissatisfaction with their educational experience and of the institution. Student services are essential for many reasons. They can enhance enrollment, decrease attrition, and provide for a well-rounded program. Also, they ease students' adjustment to college, assist in their intellectual and personal growth, and contribute to their academic success (Dirr, 1999). Despite the growing presence of non-traditional online transfer students within higher education, some colleges and universities are still catering to the needs of traditional students (Chen, 2017; Gast, 2013; Smith, 2016; Zirkle, 2004). When institutions reduce the differences in identities and student experiences for simplicity's sake of creating a one-size-fits-all model, they run the risk of devaluing or making groups that have different characteristics feel invisible (Schuh et al., 2016). Institutions who wish to design online student support services must consider online adult student goals and lifestyle factors, which often differ distinctly from those of campus-based students (Chen, 2015; Gast 2013; Jacobs & Hundley, 2010; Kasworm, 2003; Smith 2016).

Many institutions of higher education are now beginning to respond to the increasing non-traditional student population by offering undergraduate online programs to help meet their needs (Carroll-Barefield et al., 2005; Chau, 2010; Maloney, 1999). Now that many traditional research 1 institutions offer degree-completion programs that allow students to transfer from a two-year institution to their four-year institution online, a reasonable next step is to determine if

the student services of the four-year institution are meeting the needs of non-traditional students, or if additional accommodations are needed from these services to complement their collegiate experience.

To that end, a narrative qualitative research design was used to determine if online non-traditional students' needs are being met. The participants included adult students who were also considered non-traditional from the Leadership in the Public Sector (LPS) program, the only undergraduate online degree-completion program at North Carolina State University (NC State), a large research 1 land-grant university that primarily provides services to the traditional-aged campus student. The study was guided by three research questions that provided a holistic view of non-traditional transfer students' experiences navigating their undergraduate education online and will offer recommendations for higher education institutions who wish to value this population by implementing appropriate student support services to aid in their academic success.

Significance of the Study

There is an increase of non-traditional students in higher education and many schools are establishing online courses and programs to meet the needs and demands of these students. Traditional brick and mortar schools that typically cater to campus students are included in this influx (Gast, 2013; Smith, 2016); however, as previously stated, non-traditional online students are different, and institutions offering online education should consider the differences of adult students when designing online learning environments (Chen, 2015, Panacci, 2015; Kasworm, 2003). Recognizing this, NC State—which offers over 100 undergraduate degree programs primarily targeting the traditional 18 to 22-year-old residential campus student—wanted to expand educational opportunities to a number of state residents for whom traditional education

was not a possibility and established the LPS program in 2007. LPS is NC State's first and only online undergraduate degree-completion program. The program's target populations are military personnel, community college graduates, and those who have university college-level credit hours and other non-traditional student characteristics. The university saw this program as a way to pursue its mission in the area of teaching and learning with technology, which had become a high priority across the university. This online degree is the first and only undergraduate program offered at the university in the area of Liberal Arts to date.

The LPS program introduced the university to a new non-traditional undergraduate online student population that requires different resources and support than the traditional-aged campus student the university was accustomed to servicing. While developing the program, there was an anticipated need for major funding in the areas of student services; therefore, the program's proposal included funding for full-time staff to coordinate the program and provide advising and additional administrative support, as well as tenure track faculty (already established within the college) to teach the courses. Since the program's inception, the program director, academic advisor, and external relations director have managed the program along with deans in the department of Liberal Arts. Over the years, the program and the university adjusted many administrative processes and resources to accommodate the needs of non-traditional undergraduate online students. Additional education and training for quality online course design was acquired and advising strategies and support systems were modified to meet the demands of the program's typical full-time working adult and online students. The staff in the LPS program have been proactive in informing campus departments about their student population; these campus departments have also modified services to accommodate the needs of non-traditional online students. Additionally, LPS has increased and diversified their marketing and recruitment

efforts to attract more non-traditional students and are building stronger connections with their alumni to connect with current students.

LPS students have access to a variety of online services as a result of the program administrators understanding and recognizing student needs. Examples of these services include:

- Pre-Application evaluation to determine eligibility
- Required online program and university orientation
- Required one-on-one initial appointment with advisor
- Centralized program resources through the university's Learning Management System (LMS)
- Accelerated courses
- Program forums to connect with other students
- Career development course in program area
- Internship opportunity through program curriculum

Research indicates that institutions of higher education must gain a better understanding of adult students and their expectations to cater to their educational experience (Boudreaux & Schoenack, 2016; Chen, 2015; Coomes & DeBard, 2004; Jacobs & Hundley, 2010) to which this program and university have put forth a great effort. Therefore, the significance of this study was to evaluate if the efforts and creation of student support services within this program and throughout the university are meeting the ever-changing expectations and needs of the non-traditional students enrolled.

Research Questions

This narrative analysis examined the viewpoints of non-traditional undergraduate online transfer students and was guided by the following three research questions:

- 1) What are non-traditional students' expectations of student services before they transfer into the only online undergraduate program at a large research 1 land-grant university?
- 2) What are non-traditional students' experiences with student services after they transfer into the only online undergraduate program at a large research 1 land-grant university?
- 3) How do non-traditional students feel their interactions with student services impacted their overall experience at the large research 1 land-grant university?

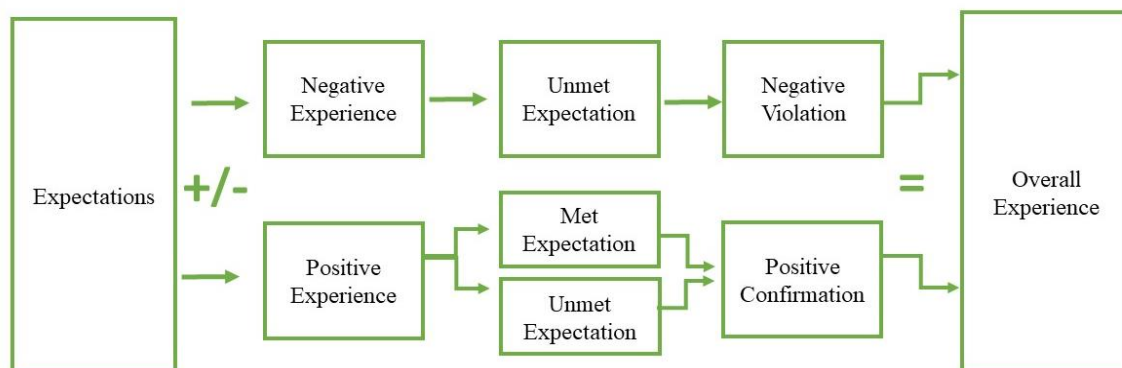
Theoretical Framework

Expectancy violations theory (EVT) provided the framework for this study. EVT (Burgoon, 1978) is an interpersonal communication theory that attempts to explain people's reactions to anticipated and unanticipated behavior. It suggests that based on social norms and relationships, people develop expectations about verbal and nonverbal communication behavior from others and that violations of these expectations can lead to increased attention to deviant behavior (Burgoon et al., 1995). For this study, deviant behavior is represented as attrition or feelings of an overall negative experience as a student at the university. EVT also distinguishes between positive and negative violations stating that positive violations of expectations can oftentimes produce desirable results (Burgoon, 2015). In this study, a positive confirmation was classified as a pleasant unexpected experience with a student service, which would increase the student's outlook of student services. A negative violation was classified as a negative unexpected experience a student had, which would decrease their outlook of student services. Additionally, based on their expectations of student services before they enrolled, how did the participants feel their experience impacted their overall impression of their collegiate journey as non-traditional online transfer students at the university?

EVT was an appropriate framework for this study to determine if non-traditional undergraduate online transfer student's expectations of student services at a traditional research 1 institution were positive or negative, while also investigating if a positive violation of an expectation produced a more desirable experience. Building on the works of Boudreaux & Schoenack (2016), Chen (2015), and LaPadula (2003), the use of EVT in this study will help personnel working with online adult transfer students in higher education understand and address students' needs so these students do not face the frustration of unmet expectations with student services, which should encourage student persistence and an overall pleasant experience. The use of EVT for this study also adds to the body of literature by using this framework in a different context other than proximity and one-on-one communication, for which it started, by including non-traditional undergraduate online transfer students' possible violations of expectations of students' services at a research 1 university. Figure 1 provides a visual illustration of the theoretical framework as it is used in this study.

Figure 1

Theoretical Framework

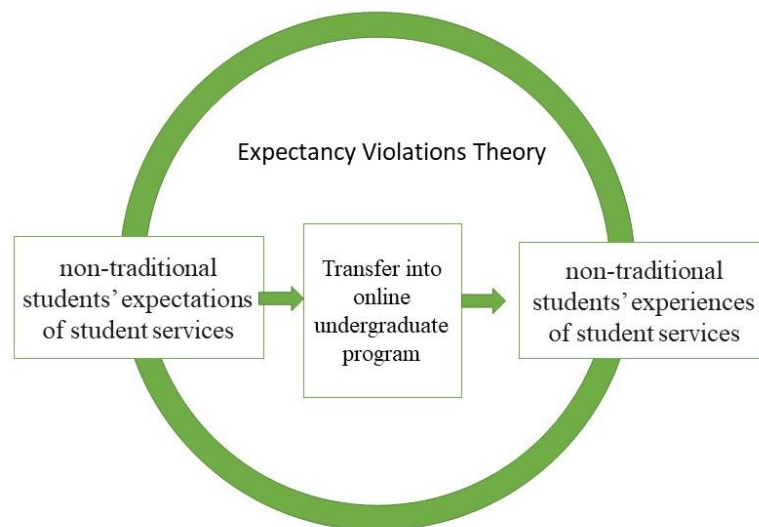


Conceptual Framework

A conceptual framework is a visual depiction of the research questions grounded in the EVT framework (see Figure 2). The left square represents the first research question that sought to understand non-traditional students' expectations of student services before they transferred into a research 1 university that typically caters to the traditional-aged campus-based student. Next, the middle square represents non-traditional students transferring into an online undergraduate program at a research 1 institution. Subsequently, the right square highlights the second and third research questions which sought to understand non-traditional students' experiences with student services and how those experiences influenced their overall impression of their collegiate experience at a research 1 university that typically caters to the traditional-aged campus-based student. These concepts are encompassed around the EVT framework.

Figure 2

Conceptual Framework



Definition of Terms

Adult student/learner. A student 25 years or older (CAEL 2018; Kasworm, 2018).

Distance education. Education that uses one or more modes of technology to deliver instruction to students who are separated from the instructor and supports regular and substantive interaction between the students and the instructor synchronously or asynchronously (Seaman et al., 2018).

Distance education program. A program where all required coursework for program completion can be completed via distance education courses (Seaman et al., 2018).

Non-traditional undergraduate student. A student who has at least one of these six characteristics: (1) delays enrollment (i.e., does not enter postsecondary education in the same calendar year they finished high school); (2) attends part-time for at least part of the academic year; (3) works full-time (35 hours or more per week) while enrolled; (4) considered financially independent for purposes of determining eligibility for financial aid; (5) has dependents other than a spouse (usually children, but sometimes others); or (6) is a single parent (either not married, or married but separated, and has dependents; Choy, 2002).

Online learning. Any learning experience or environment that relies upon the internet (WWW or web) as the primary delivery mode of communication and presentation (Appanna, 2008).

Student support services. The system of services provided by a higher education institution, which fulfills students' emotional, academic, and social needs and is a precondition for increasing student's individual welfare and academic success (Sajiene, & Tamuliene, 2012). This definition of student support services in this study is inclusive of academic and non-academic support received in and out of the classroom.

Traditional-aged undergraduate students. One who earns a high school diploma, enrolls full-time immediately after finishing high school, depends on parents for financial support, and either does not work during the school year or works part-time (Choy, 2002).

Transfer student. A student who changes their institution of enrollment irrespective of the timing, direction, or location of the move, and regardless of whether any credits were transferred from one institution to another (Shapiro et al., 2018).

Chapter Summary

Non-traditional undergraduate online transfer students are an increasing population in higher education institutions that typically cater services to the traditional-aged campus-based student. More and more institutions are offering online degree programs and courses to meet the needs of this growing population, which have also required student services to modify their procedures. These students are entering research 1 institutions with vast experiences, unique characteristics and needs, and have expectations that student services should also accommodate their needs, as they view themselves as paying customers. The lack of student satisfaction with services can lead to student attrition or overall negative perception of their educational experience. Using EVT (Burgoon, 1978), this narrative qualitative study revealed non-traditional students' expectations and experiences of student services after transferring into the only online undergraduate degree-completion program at a research 1 institution that typically caters to traditional-aged campus-based students.

Organization of the Study

This study is structured in five chapters: introduction, literature review, methodology, findings, and discussion. The first chapter introduces the increase of undergraduate non-traditional online transfer students in higher education and how student service departments at

these institutions need to be aware of the unique characteristics of adult students to support them adequately. The chapter included the statement of the research problem, purpose and significance of the study, research questions, as well as an overview of the theoretical and the conceptual frameworks used to guide the study. The definition of terms essential to the study and the chapter summary concluded the chapter.

The second chapter provides a thorough review of the literature on the historical growth of online, non-traditional, and transfer students in higher education settings. It also provides an overview of student services in general. It then highlights the differences of services typically available to the traditional-aged campus-based student as opposed to the non-traditional, online, and transfer student individually, and how collectively this combined student identity is affected by the student services provided. The review concludes with a discussion of the theoretical framework EVT (Burgoon, 1978) and how it has evolved to be a useful framework to ground this study.

The third chapter describes the methodology used for the study, including the research questions, research design, data collection techniques, and a detailed description of the data analysis process based on the methodological approach. It concludes with ways the study ensured trustworthiness and credibility and outlines the ethical considerations included in the IRB process.

The fourth chapter includes the researcher subjectivity statement and overall emergent themes in the findings in a narrative format. The participants were presented using Polkinghorne's (1995) narrative of analysis approach from their perspective which revealed the findings for research question 1 and overall emergent themes for the study. Research question 2 was revealed using Polkinghorne's (1995) analysis of narratives and research question 3 was

again summarized using the narrative of analysis approach from the participant's perspective.

This chapter also explained how the theoretical framework EVT related to one of the emergent themes in the findings.

Chapter five concludes with a brief discussion of the key findings by each emergent theme and subtheme. It also includes limitations to the research, implications for practice and research, suggestions for future research, and an overall summary. Lastly, the chapter ends with my final reflection as the researcher.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Much of the existing literature on non-traditional students focuses on those who physically attend college campuses and the services provided to support them (Austin, 2006; Chen 2017; Coulter & Mandell, 2012). Less is known about non-traditional online transfer students or the online programs and services created to accommodate their needs. This literature review will first highlight the historical growth of non-traditional students, distance education, and transfer students in higher education institutions, and will then discuss the scope of student services and the implications they have on each of these student populations individually and collectively.

Historical Growth of Adult Learners and Non-Traditional Students

Adult learning has been a topic of discussion since it was first introduced in the education vocabulary in the U.S. by Eduard Lindeman (1926) in his book, *The Meaning of Adult Education* (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). Later, in the late 1970s to 1980s, andragogy became the face of adult learning and teaching as Malcolm Knowles (1968; 1980) introduced the construct to the field. Based originally on five key assumptions about adult learners, Knowles (1984) defined andragogy as a learner-centered approach in which the adult learner determines their own goals for learning and how they will be achieved (Stavredes, 2011). Knowles' theory was based on the characteristics that distinguish the mature adult from the pre-adult learner. It also argued that the process of learning on a continuum from teacher-directed learning (pedagogically-oriented) is different from self-directed learning (andragogically-oriented; Ross-Gordon et al., 2017). Knowles and his colleagues developed a set of assumptions to describe key attributes of adults that included their need to know, self-concept, experience, readiness to learn, orientation to

learning, and motivation to learn (Knowles, 1984; Stavredes, 2011). These basic assumptions offered a set of guidelines for those who educate adults, provided a philosophical basis for the nature of adult learners, and for some, became the foundation for the purpose of adult education overall (Taylor & Laros, 2014).

Adult learners are more motivated and serious than their traditional-aged counterparts, and spend more time on their academics (Kasworm, 2008; Schlossberg et al., 1989; Wyatt, 2011). For the adult learner, there is often a realization that there are personal responsibilities that must be altered to transition back to school (Compton et al., 2006; Schlossberg et al., 1989). Adults alter their roles, routines, relationships—both at home and in the educational setting—and they are motivated to make these adjustments by the desire to improve their situation in life, whether that situation is related to work, personal needs, or their community. (Fairchild, 2003; Merriam & Bierman, 2013; Schlossberg et al., 1989). This is validated as studies on adult learner participation indicated that their inclusion is clearly linked to the roles of worker, family member, and others, while readiness to learn is linked to the developmental task of the adult's role (Clapper, 2010; Houser, 2005). In an effort to attract and retain adult students, institutions must first recognize who these adult students are with all of their diverse identities. Non-traditional students are professionals changing careers, nurses, displaced homemakers, grandparents, CEOs, engineers, production line workers, and pursers of associate degrees, master's, GEDs, or cake decorating skills; some even return to school because it will look good for their parole hearing (Chen, 2017; Coulter & Mandell, 2012; Fairchild, 2033; Hadfield, 2003; Zirkle, 2004). Essentially, adult learners transfer to institutions with previous life experiences while still maintaining work and family obligations. However, it is important to note that returning to school education is only one of the many activities in which adults are involved

(Chen, 2015; Fairchild, 2003). Their varied responsibilities and identities often lead them to withdraw from pursuing their education or participating in social and academic activities on campus when enrolled (Hadfield, 2003; Zhang et al., 2013; Zirkle, 2004).

An important first step in research that focuses on adult students is to delineate the adult undergraduate student population from the general student population (Boudreaux & Schoenack, 2016; Chen, 2015). However, defining who and what characterizes the adult undergraduate student “has become a stubborn and messy problem in the literature” (Kasworm, 2018, p. 78). There is a diverse body of literature on adult learning in higher education and a number of studies attach a variety of labels to these students such as adult learners, non-traditional students, mature students, and lifelong learners (CAEL 2018; Merriam et al., 2007; Chen, 2015; Choy, 2002; Merriam & Bierema 2013; Panacci, 2015; Ross-Gordon et al., 2017). The terms non-traditional and adult are most often used interchangeably in the literature; however, Chen (2017) categorized this population holistically as non-traditional adult learners (NAL’s). Adult students are oftentimes combined within the larger pool of non-traditional students that also include groups such as part-time students, students with first-generation status, students with disabilities, or the LGBT community (Zhang et al., 2013). However, many researchers argue that adult students are different from other types of non-traditional students and deserve to be studied in isolation (Compton et al., 2006; Schlossberg et al., 1989); therefore, adult students/learners have generally been defined as students who are 25 years or older (CAEL, 2018; Chen, 2015; 2017; EAB; 2019; Kasworm 2008; 2010), while a commonly used definition by Choy (2002) for non-traditional students is that they possess at least one of the following characteristics: delayed enrollment, financially independent, cares for dependents with a partner or is a single parent, works full-time, or attends classes part-time.

The percentage of non-traditional adult students enrolled in higher education is expected to grow faster than the number of traditional students (Anderson, 2016; CAEL 2018; Chen 2015; Choy, 2002; EAB; 2019; Schlossberg et al., 1989). By 2023, the projected rate of increase for students age 25 and older will be eight percent higher than the rate of increase for students age 25 and under (NCES, 2015). According to Choy (2002), 73% of undergraduates had non-traditional characteristics, making them the majority rather than the exception on today's campuses. Non-traditional students account for more than 71% of students enrolled in all of higher education, and this population tends to be predominantly female (Austin, 2006; Compton et al., 2006; MacDonald, 2018). Additionally, most non-traditional students classify themselves as employees rather than students and are more likely to choose to enroll in two-year institutions (Chen, 2015; Choy, 2002; Compton et al., 2006). Non-traditional student growth has been attributed to many things such as an aging population, desire for a career change, reasons related to retirement, increased educational requirements by employers, and increased access to higher education as a result of technology (Boudreaux & Schoenack, 2016; Chen, 2015; 2017; Compton et al., 2006; Dumais et al., 2013; Kasworm, 2010).

The definition of a college student has changed from those who have been historically classified as aged 18 to 22, attending full-time, and living on campus directly from high school (Chen, 2017; Choy, 2002; Rice 2003; Schlossberg et al., 1989). In the U.S., the overall enrollment in higher education between 2012 and 2016 was more than 20 million students, with the student demographics and their needs changing to include more non-traditional students and online course enrollment (Boudreaux & Schoenack, 2016; Seaman et al., 2018; Zirkle, 2004). The economic downturn in 2008 led many people to delay starting families, thus birth rates declined. The impact, beginning around 2026, could mean a loss of 15% of the typical college-

going population (Jaschik, 2018). Many higher education institutions are recognizing the expected decrease in the number of traditional-aged college students enrolling in their programs. They are attempting to make up for this decrease by making a stronger effort to target and attract non-traditional students to their institution by providing alternative delivery programs to include fully online offerings (Gast, 2013; Prescott, 2008). The Lumina Foundation, a private organization with a mission to expand student access and success, also reports that 39% of adults currently hold two- or four-year degrees. They have a goal to increase this to 60% by 2025 and know they will fall short of this goal if the nation only focuses on traditional-aged students (Matthews, 2012). To achieve this, much of the literature (CAEL, 2018; Coomes & DeBard, 2004, Jacobs & Hundley, 2010, Schuh et al., 2016; Wyatt, 2011) is consistent with Chen (2015) in that

Higher education institutions must focus on a commitment to meet the needs of new and returning non-traditional students, and must consider 1) whether non-traditional students require more or different support services, and 2) how non-traditional students can be integrated into the campus structure to guarantee a successful academic experience. (p. 50)

Historical Growth of Distance Education and Online Learning

The correspondence course was the earliest instructional delivery system within the rubric of distance education. The first course was the Pitman Shorthand training program that brought cutting-edge stenographic practices to the U.S. in 1852 (Casey, 2008). The evolution and progression of distance education spans over the last 300 years and runs parallel with innovations in communications technology, and distance learning continues to grow in popularity (Shultz et al., 2008). After the World Wide Web was introduced in 1989, it changed the way education was

made available. Learning became supported by communications technology, such as television, videotape, computers, e-mail, and mail. Earlier studies of distance learning concluded these technologies were not significantly different from regular classroom learning in terms of effectiveness (Allen et al., 2004; Jagers & Bailey, 2010).

Online learning overlaps with the broader category of distance learning, which encompasses earlier technologies such as correspondence courses through programs like home study and university extension. Online learning is any learning experience or environment that relies upon the internet/World Wide Web (WWW or Web) as the primary delivery mode of communication and presentation (Appana, 2008). Basic technology requirements for students anywhere in the world are conventional personal computers with a broadband connection to the internet (Mayadas et al., 2009). In 1993, Jones International University in Colorado took advantage of these broadband options and opened their virtual doors to provide instruction in five bachelor's and 24 master's degree programs and was the first fully online university to be accredited by the Higher Learning Commission (Casey, 2008). Institutions of higher education now offer their courses in different formats. In most cases, class cohorts are formed similar to traditional classes that start and end on specific days (Mayadas et al., 2009). Today, computer-supported learning, the fastest-growing form of distance education, incorporates numerous advances in technology (Choy et al., 2002; Tracey & Richey, 2005). These technologies, according to Tracey & Richey (2005), give instructors the opportunity to act as learning facilitators, rather than simply suppliers of information.

Enrollment in distance education and online courses has increased over the past 10 years (Kentnor, 2015; Seaman et al., 2018). With the increase of innovations in computer and internet technologies, interest in online learning has been on the rise (Boudreaux & Schoenack, 2016;

Brigham, 2001; Kurucay, & Inan, 2017). The number of higher education institutions offering online courses and the number of students registering for these online courses has also increased significantly (Choy et al., 2002; Kentnor, 2015; Kurucay, & Inan, 2017; Seaman et al., 2018; Tobin & Behling, 2018). As the use of technology has increased the delivery of learning programs, our picture of learning through formal and informal learning settings has expanded dramatically (Choy et al., 2002; Kasworm, 2010; Merriam et al., 2007).

As of Fall 2016, there were over 6.3 million students taking at least one distance education course, comprising 31.6% of all higher education enrollments (Seaman et al., 2018). Among the students taking distance education courses, less than one-half (47.2%) are taking only distance courses with half of this population (23.6%) taking them through public institutions. There are nearly five times as many undergraduate enrollments as graduate enrollments among students taking at least one distance education course. The proportion of undergraduate distance students is highest at public institutions (89.9%), which is very close to 90.1% of their overall student body that is composed of undergraduates (Seaman et al., 2018).

Studies show that online education has advanced teaching and learning since it combines the exchange of information and expertise while providing learners in distant or disadvantaged locations with alternative options for education (Allen et al., 2004; Jaggars & Bailey, 2010; Kentnor, 2015). The majority of online learners are between the ages of 25 and 44 (CAEL, 2018; Lieberman, 2018; Prescott, 2008; Stavredes, 2011). Adults value online learning as a delivery system because it offers the freedom to manage adult life role responsibilities, such as work commitments, family obligations, and child care (Boudreaux & Schoenack, 2016; Britto & Rush, 2013; Layne et al., 2013; Ross-Gordon et al., 2017). Noel-Levitz's (2013) demographic questionnaire on online learners' priorities reported that technological delivery of formal

education has become highly valued by adult students because of the convenience of access, flexibility of the format, ability to participate in specific academic programs, and a focused support system often designed for adults; therefore, many institutions now offer degree programs that can be completed entirely online. Specifically, public universities are gaining popularity in the field of online education by providing adult learners a variety of online options for degree completion, such as online degrees, hybrid programs, and MOOCs (Gast, 2013; Layne et al., 2013). Of the 6.3 million students enrolled in at least one distance education course, adult undergraduates (25 years and older) have been the predominant student group (Seaman et al., 2018). Unfortunately, the rapid growth of distance education has been overshadowed by the drop-out rates; therefore, more efforts have been placed on institutions to focus on student support and retention initiatives for online students (Britto & Rush, 2013; Choy et al., 2002; Smith 2016; Zirkle, 2004).

Historical Growth of Transfer Students

Transfer students are also an important population in higher education and institutions are experiencing a significant increase in the number of students who transfer (Kirk-Kuwaye & Kirk-Kuwaye, 2007; Kippenhan, 2004; Lukszo & Hayes, 2019). Shapiro et al. (2018) defined “transfer student and mobility as any change in a student’s institution of enrollment irrespective of the timing, direction, or location of the move, and regardless of whether any credits were transferred from one institution to another” (p. 4). Almost 40% of first-time students will transfer or co-enroll at least one time in six years, according to the Shapiro et al. (2018) and Ishitani and Flood (2018). Of the students who eventually enroll at a four-year institution, 55% will transfer from a two-year institution while 45% will transfer from another four-year institution (Shapiro et al., 2018). The traditional-aged college student population is declining as students have more

options and routes to obtain a baccalaureate degree by transferring between higher education institutions (Alpern, 2000; Kippenhan, 2004). Additionally, transfer students tend to have non-traditional backgrounds and college experiences (EAB, 2019; Monroe, 2006; Rosenberg, 2016; Tobolowsky & Cox, 2012; Zhang et al., 2013). Relative to native students, they tend to be older, less likely to live on campus, more likely to work off-campus, and more likely to care for dependents (Austin, 2006; Choy 2002; Laanan, 2003; McCormick et al., 2009; Monroe, 2006; Nowak, 2004).

Transfer students are a very complex population, as many students may change institutions for several reasons. For example, those who transfer as a necessary step to reaching their educational goals from two- to four-year institutions are known as traditional, vertical, or upward transfers (Crisp & Delgado, 2014; Kirk-Kuwaye & Kirk-Kuwaye, 2007; Wang & Wharton, 2010). Although the number of students enrolled at community colleges has significantly increased, it is important to note that approximately half of all community college students transfer out to four-year institutions (Laanan, 2001; Wellman, 2002), which places these students in the traditional, vertical, or upward transfer category. On the other hand, horizontal or lateral transfers—students who transfer from the same type of institution—do so for reasons such as not being able to afford out-of-state or private college tuition, financial difficulty, academic performance, desire to pursue an alternate degree programs, change in a student’s life, or substandard social or personal opportunities (Davis, 2010; Ishitani & Flood, 2018; Kirk-Kuwaye & Kirk-Kuwaye, 2007). Berkner et al. (2002) found that approximately 23% of college students had transferred from one four-year institution to another four-year institution in NCES data tracking college students from 1995-2001. Kirk-Kuwaye and Kirk-Kuwaye (2007) noted that vertical and horizontal transfer students may stop-out and return to institutions, sometimes for

many years, and this diversity in types of transfers contributes to the lack of an institution's understanding in supporting transfer students. Another category is reverse transfer students who have earned credits at a two-year institution, transferred to a four-year institution to earn a bachelor's degree, and transferred those credits back to the two-year institution to also earn their associate degree. For these students, the incentive is having an additional credential and often an increase in earnings (Lester, 2016; Shapiro et al., 2018). Lastly, students who flow in and out of college coursework inconsistently from one institution to another are categorized as swirlers. These students typically transfer from four-year institutions to community colleges and then back to the original four-year institution to graduate. Many students swirl in and out of schools primarily for reasons such as life role changes, academics needs, student background, and commitment to succeed (Layne et al., 2013). According to a report by the National Student Clearinghouse, this population correlated to higher degree completion rates at the starting four-year institutions (Shapiro et al., 2018).

These transfer behaviors are common for college students (Tinto, 1987). Many transfer students intentionally enter into colleges and universities with the plan to leave prior to completing their degree (Alpern, 2000). This practice is expected for two-year college students, but many four-year college students also choose this path especially if they were not accepted into their first-choice institution (Kippenhan, 2004; Laanan, 2001). Tinto (1987) indicated that both types of students enter these colleges as a short-term step to a long-term goal. However, many researchers found that those students who transfer from two- to four-year institutions are less likely graduate at the same rate as compared to those who remain at their original institution because they are less academically prepared and not as well adjusted (Astin, 1984; Bennett & Okinaka, 1990; EAB, 2019; Hills, 1965; Keeley & House, 1993; Kippenhan, 2004; Laanan,

2001; Tinto, 1987; Townsend, 1993; 1995). Reasons are attributed to both two- and four-year institutions, which do not provide adequate student support services to aid in transfer student success (Laanan, 2007; Rosenberg, 2016; Tinto, 1987; Townsend & Wilson, 2009).

Although transfer students are a significant percentage of the student population on postsecondary campuses, they often feel invisible or neglected once they arrive (Kippenhan, 2004; Tobolowsky & Cox, 2012). Universities often lack the incentives to address their needs because transfer students are not the preferred students (Monroe, 2006). Moreover, previous research on transfer student success focused on support programs for traditional-age students after they have successfully enrolled at a four-year school (Alpern, 2000; Miller & Durham, 2014; Miller & Erisman, 2011). However, adult learners who transfer to research 1 universities have non-traditional experiences and needs (Rosenberg, 2016; Zhang et al., 2013). Though they have a more mature outlook on education, they are more likely to encounter difficulties with time management and work-life balance because they may have a more complex set of life circumstances than their younger counterparts and need additional targeted support (Alpern, 2000; Austin, 2006; Kasworm, 2008; Schlossberg et al., 1989; Wang & Wharton, 2010; Wyatt, 2011).

Student Services in Higher Education

Student support services are designed to help students transition to college and are vital to learner success (Arnold, 2018; Chen, 2015; Dirr, 1999) and students' overall satisfaction with their collegiate experience (LaPadula, 2003; Ludwig-Hardman & Dunlap, 2003). Functions of student support services are typically grouped within student affairs and include programs that meet student needs for housing, disability services, career services, and other areas of student life. Outside of student affairs are significant student services provided by academic advisors,

campus events, clubs, and programs (Arnold, 2018; Schuh et al., 2016). There are many approaches to help students transition to a university, and an important strategy is to increase supportive relationships on campus through counseling and support services. Student affairs professionals are often placed in the role of helper and many students rely on them for compassion, support, and guidance, which, in turn, help to create environments that value and understand students (Compton et al., 2006; Schuh et al., 2016). By providing support services through programs, students are able to develop significant relationships with others and therefore feel more integrated into campus life (Grant-Valonne et al., 2003).

There are many ways in which the practice and meaning of student support have been understood in higher education contexts. For example, the word “support” has been used to describe services as well as staff (e.g., academic support and support staff), and the terms student support and student support services have also been used and defined differently in the literature. LaPadula (2003) defined student support as assistance and information offered to students above and beyond their learning materials. On the other hand, Sajiene and Tamuliene (2012) and Dirr (1999) referred to student support services as a variety of non-academic interactions that students have with an institution that fulfills students’ emotional, academic, and social needs, and is a precondition for increasing student’s individual welfare and academic success. Such examples are pre-enrollment services (recruiting and orientation), admissions and registration, academic advising, financial planning, library and bookstore services, academic and career counseling, and social support services support (Floyd & Casey-Powell, 2004).

Universities are becoming increasingly concerned with ways to increase retention rates, student success in college, and comfort levels for students on their campus (Grant-Valonne et al., 2003; Schuh et al., 2016); therefore, student services are important for many reasons. They can

enhance enrollment, decrease attrition, and provide for a well-rounded program. In addition, they ease students' adjustment to college, assist in their intellectual and personal growth, and contribute to their academic success (Arnold, 2018; Chen, 2017; Dirr, 1999). However, student affairs professionals must show commitment, dedication, and skills to develop strong relationships with students, advocate for them as decisions are made, and design programs and services to promote their development (Schuh et al., 2016). According to Sajiene and Tamuliene (2012), student support in higher education institutions enables successful integration into the institution, creates conditions for a positive educational experience, and helps to ensure a smooth transition college to the workforce. Grant-Valonne et al. (2003) examined factors expected to contribute to student retention and commitment, and the effects of adjustment on goal and university commitment, and found that students who were better adjusted to campus life were more likely to be committed to the goal of a college degree and more committed to their university.

However, not all research supports student support service efforts in regard to retention. According to Kuh et al. (2006), "some evidence suggests that the ratio of student development professionals to students influences persistence" (p. 65). These researchers noted that Hedland and Jones (1970) found that two-year colleges that had less than a 1:150 ratio of students to student development professionals only graduated 20% of their students, in contrast to schools that had more than a 1:150 ratio that graduated 50% of their students. Additionally, Patton et al. (2006) analyzed a plethora of empirical and propositional articles to expose assertions made about campus programs and strategies to decrease student drop-out rates at universities, and found that "they do not provide empirical analyses of campus-based programs that purportedly enhance student persistence" (p. 10). Patton et al. (2006) classified their findings into five

categories: counseling, mentoring, learning communities, student-faculty interaction, and transition and orientation programs. Of the five, transition and orientation was the only program to show strong positive evidence to improve student retention rates. Within the other empirical studies, there was a lack of longitudinal assessments to prove their programs had an effect on retention (Patton et al., 2006).

Despite the lack of evidence of proven retention rates, much research on student support services continues to focus on institutional support for multiple categories of first-year students (Allison, 2015; Chaney et al., 1997; Gardner, 2001; Schnell et al., 2003). In addition, another subset of research, along with student support allies, expressed that student services are needed for all students throughout their entire collegiate experience, such as sophomores, athletes, and students with learning or physical disabilities (Boudreaux & Schoenack, 2016; Brock, 2010; Gaston-Gayles, 2003; Lightner et al., 2012; Ludwig-Hardman & Dunlap, 2003; Young et al., 2015). As such, non-traditional online students are included in the category of “all students” as they also need institutional support when they transfer into research 1 institutions. Compared to the traditional-aged student for whom support services are usually a part of their educational process and readily available on campus through student service divisions, institutions had traditionally handled student services for distance education as an add-on to on-campus procedures which worked well when online programs and courses had smaller enrollment numbers (LaPadula, 2003; Zirkle, 2004). However, as institutions serve larger numbers of students, traditional student services solutions are no longer feasible (Chen, 2017; Dumais et al., 2013; Gast, 2013; LaPadula, 2003; Schuh et al., 2016; Smith 2016), and many student services should be completely redesigned to serve distance learners (Dirr, 1999; Zirkle, 2004).

Non-traditional undergraduate students have unique learning characteristics and needs when transferring into online programs, such as needing to connect their life to their academics (Chen, 2015; Kasworm 2003; Panacci, 2015), educational support and programs from their institution to be successful (Chen 2015; Dumais et al., 2013), and access to student services after traditional business hours (Erisman & Steele 2015; Gast, 2013; Hadfield, 2003). These needs are often overlooked when they transfer to institutions that typically cater to the traditional-aged undergraduate campus student (Smith, 2016; Zirkle, 2004). Additionally, transfer students tend to be demanding consumers of educational services and their level of satisfaction is closely linked with their persistence to graduation (Kearney & Kearney, 1994; Smith 2016).

With the increasing number of adult transfer students, it is essential for educators and administrators to gain a better understanding of these students to cater to their educational experiences (Chen, 2015; MacDonald, 2018). However, “delivery of student support services requires support from top administrators and a change in the way many offices on campus do business. Student support services are not something that can easily be changed incrementally” (Dirr, 1999, p. 18). Moreover, as institutions begin to create programming and services to cater to these populations, student affairs professionals must also take the time to focus on assessing and evaluating these activities to demonstrate their efforts are worthwhile (Schuh et al., 2016).

Student Services for Non-Traditional Adult Students

Non-traditional adult learners are often a neglected population in higher education institutions (Chen, 2017). In the U.S., the overall enrollment in higher education is increasing, with student demographics and student needs changing to include more non-traditional students and online course enrollment (NCES, 2015; Seaman et al., 2018, Wyatt, 2011). The definition of a college student has changed from those who attend full-time and live on campus directly from

high school (Chen, 2017; Choy, 2002; Rice, 2003). The projected rate of increase for traditional-aged students is decreasing, while the projected rate for non-traditional students is increasing (Choy, 2002; NCES, 2015). Institutions are recognizing the increase of adult students in their student body and know they must retain these students by providing programs and services to help them succeed (CAEL, 2018; Coomes & DeBard, 2004; Jacobs & Hundley, 2010; Schuh et al., 2016; Wyatt, 2011).

The literature on non-traditional students and adult education in terms of theory and pedagogy are quite robust (CAEL 2018; Choy, 2002; Knowles, 1968; 1980; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999; Merriam et al., 2007; Ross-Gordon et al., 2017; Stavredes, 2011); however, this population is quite invisible to higher education institutions when implementing student services to support their needs, especially first-tier universities (Austin, 2006; Chen 2017; Coulter & Mandell, 2012). Research has shown that about 40% of institutions surveyed nationally indicated they do not identify adult students for purposes of outreach, services, programs, or financial aid (Erisman & Steele 2015; Lakin et al., 2008). Further research also indicated how this evolving student population will require faculty, student affairs staff, administrators, policymakers, and other stakeholders to redefine teaching and learning approaches, modify educational environments, and expand student services (Chen, 2015; Coomes & DeBard, 2004; Jacobs & Hundley, 2010; Schuh et al., 2016; Wyatt, 2011), but have they? According to Erisman and Steel (2015):

Much of what we know about adult learners, in general, is not new. The problem is that this knowledge about the differences between traditional college students and adult learners has not been factored into the pedagogy and operations of nearly enough colleges and universities. (p. 1)

Much of the literature agrees that adult students are often treated as unvalued members of the college community and lack the adequate support they need (Chen, 2017; Dumais et al., 2013; Fairchild, 2003; Hittepole, 2016; Kasworm, 2010; Zirkle, 2004). They have to pay and find parking for classes on the weekends or evenings and arrive to dark buildings with only lighting in their class, closed business offices, and no options for childcare or meeting with an advisor (Hadfield, 2003; Zirkle, 2004). Many pay out-of-pocket to cover tuition and fees and prefer programs that are efficient and responsive to their needs and lifestyles (Jacobs & Hundley, 2010, p. 9). Results from Chen's (2015) narrative study of non-traditional students returning to the community college indicated that many of them struggled in their program upon returning to college, but the availability of support systems catered specifically toward non-traditional students aided in their positive educational experience. Narratives from the participants concluded that as a result of the college's commitment, the non-traditional students were also committed to their programs (Chen, 2015). This demonstrates that adult learners benefit from programming and services that cater to their unique needs provided by staff members trained to support their college experience, much like services available for veterans or first-generation students (Compton et al., 2006; Gast, 2013). It is important to note that community colleges are known to do a fairly good job of ensuring that non-traditional students make the best use of the support services in order to have a good educational experience (Chen, 2015).

Non-traditional undergraduate students have unique learning characteristics and needs when returning to school (Chen 2015; Dumais et al., 2013; Erisman & Steele, 2015; Gast, 2013; Hadfield, 2003; Kasworm 2003; Panacci, 2015), and these needs are often overlooked when they transfer into programs at institutions that typically cater to the traditional-aged undergraduate campus-based student (Smith, 2016; Zirkle, 2004). Adults often find that many student services

are only geared toward these traditional-age campus students, such as career counseling, orientation, and academic advising (Dumais et al., 2013; LaPadula, 2003; Zirkle, 2004); therefore, if other institutions are interested in providing programming and services for this population, they should consider innovative programs and services that appeal to non-traditional students such as accelerated courses, online delivery options, prior learning assessments, flexible course schedules, and childcare (EAB, 2019; Hadfield, 2003; MacDonald, 2018; Ross-Gordon, 2011; Schuh et al., 2016). Institutions must also provide programming and services that understand the busy lives of adults and tailor services to accommodate them after normal business hours (Fairchild, 2003; Gast, 2013; Hadfield, 2003). Recognizing the multiple life roles and commitments of adult students—such as worker, partner, caregiver, and community leader—is important when these students return to school as they are seeking programs and institutions that are flexible in terms of time, locations, and access to student services (Chen, 2017; Coulter & Mandell, 2012; EAB, 2019; Rice, 2003; Ross-Gordon, 2011; Schuh et al., 2016).

There are resources and higher education institutions prepared to recruit and retain adult students by meeting their needs (Rice, 2003). Some institutions have implemented adult-focused curriculums and programs, which have proved to increase their retention rates (Austin, 2006; Fincher, 2010). Others have a dedicated office to support adult students which stresses the importance of the first contact through admissions and enrollment, an abundance of resources and referral options to address adult student's needs, flexible and accessible hours, convenient location, staff to accommodate adult students' different lifestyles, and dedicated orientations and support groups that target this population at various times they may be available (Erisman & Steele, 2015; Rice, 2003). Similarly, other research studies suggest providing orientations for adults, easy parking to administrative buildings, tutoring labs for students over 25 with tutors

with the same demographics, trained counselors who understand non-traditional student needs, improved communication with targeted information, and program offerings that includes non-traditional students and their families (Fairchild, 2003; Wyatt, 2013).

Higher education institutions and professional organizations are recognizing the increase of non-traditional students and realize their unique needs call for unique services. The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL; 2018) offers ten principles for effectively serving adults, which can serve as a framework for institutions to develop programs and policies that help adults reach their educational goals.

Student Services for Online Students

Student support has gained more attention in distance education (Choy et al., 2002; Floyd & Casey-Powell, 2004; Lorenzo, 2015; Ludwig-Hardman & Dunlap, 2003; Zirkle, 2004), but there is a lack of empirical research on how to effectively design these services in the online environment (Tait, 2000; Visser & Visser, 2000). The purpose of distance education is to offer students a flexible and convenient mode of studying independently, but in order to be successful, educators must anticipate the potential difficulties and provide support mechanisms to address these issues (Choy et al., 2002). Institutions have traditionally handled student services for distance education as an add-on to on-campus services, which worked well when online programs and courses had smaller enrollment numbers (LaPadula, 2003).

Online learning as an educational option has exploded in the last 15 years. As of 2016, more than six million students in the U.S. higher education system have taken at least one fully online course (Seaman et al., 2018; Tobin & Behling, 2018). As technology advances and employers begin to require baccalaureate degrees to maintain employment, more and more adult students are entering undergraduate programs as online students because of the flexibility and

convenience (Britto & Rush, 2013; Layne et al., 2013; Smith, 2016). As such, public universities are gaining popularity in the field of online education by offering adult learners a variety of online options for degree completion, namely online degrees, hybrid programs, and MOOCs (Gast, 2013; Schuh et al., 2016; Smith 2016). Most relevant are the online degree-completion programs that allow students to transfer in credit hours to complete the remainder of their degree at the four-year institution (Gast, 2103). This causes institutions to now serve two different populations with different needs (Dirr, 1999; Floyd & Casey-Powell, 2004). Campus students can walk into an office to seek assistance, but not online students. Many paper forms that need to be submitted throughout a student's collegiate career must be made available and accepted electronically for online students (Dirr, 1999; Smith, 2016).

Online adult learners, as a subset of the non-traditional student population, may be lacking even more in support (Dumais et al., 2013; Fairchild 2003; Hittepole, 2016). Institutions that primarily cater their student services to traditional-aged students may cause online learners to feel isolated and disconnected from an unresponsive environment if their needs are not met, possibly leading them to withdraw or transfer to another school (Britto & Rush, 2013; Major & Sumner, 2018; Smith 2016; Visser & Visser, 2000; Zirkle, 2004). For this population, the focus then shifts to retention since there are many other online programs to which they can transfer. Many online students have transfer credits; therefore, they shop around to see which online schools offer the best tuition and less time to degree-completion (Layne et al., 2013). To assist students in making these decisions, it is essential for institutions to have designated academic advisors for online students to answer these questions and provide pre-application assessments (Smith, 2016). According to Crawley and Howe, (2016), academic advising is the service most online students want to have access to, which 79% of institutions do provide. Additionally,

research concluded that instructor support is one of the leading resources for learner success (Boudreaux & Schoenack, 2016; Visser & Visser, 2000).

Research also indicated that successful distance learners have a distinct profile. They are self-disciplined, confident, and can work independently to overcome frustration and confusion (Floyd & Casey-Powell, 2004). However, tasks such as accessing the online classroom, campus resources, and student services are not as simple to navigate online (Crawley & Howe, 2016). Similar to non-traditional students, online students benefit from student support services specifically designed to meet their needs, and their experiences are often linked to the quality of service provided (Choy et al., 2002; Compton et al., 2006; LaPadula, 2003; Lorenzo, 2015; Tait, 2000). The challenge for online education providers is not so much how to recruit students, but rather, how to retain them once they have begun (Britto & Rush, 2013; Hittepole, 2016; Levin, 2007; Smith, 2016). According to LaPadula (2003), “student support—the assistance and guidance that students are offered above and beyond the learning materials—has often been an overlooked component in distance education systems” (p. 119) to which Dirr (1999) agreed that many student services should be completely redesigned to serve distance learners. Online students need adequate support services and it is essential that providers are aware of their limitations in current services and address those needs (Choy et al., 2002; Lorenzo, 2015; Visser & Visser, 2000).

There are resources to help guide institutions to create and implement support services in distance education, such as the Online Student Services Self-Assessment Tool (OLSS-SAT), which is a tool to help users evaluate current services available and determine additional services that may be needed. It allows users to view college websites for important links and online services for students (Floyd & Casey-Powell, 2004). Additionally, institutions have found

success in developing their student services to online delivery and can be a model for other institutions to follow (Brigham, 2001; Britto & Rush, 2013; Dirr, 1999). However, institutions should continuously evaluate students' expectations and experiences and improve their online student services (Visser & Visser, 2000). For example, in a survey conducted by LaPadula (2003) on online student satisfaction with existing online student services, most students expressed satisfaction with services, particularly from the library, admissions, textbooks, prior learning assessments, technology, and advising. Still, they were interested in having additional services offered at other schools like book clubs, a student newspaper, current events chat rooms, academic clubs, seminars related to career choices, and online tutoring.

Overall, online students need the same support as students taking courses in traditional formats, such as enrollment, technical, academic, and personal services (Choy et al., 2002; Crawley & Howe, 2016; Lorenzo, 2015). Online orientations, tech support, and user-friendly websites that clearly differentiate services for distance and on-campus learners without clicking from page to page encountering conflicting information is also imperative (Britto & Rush, 2013; Floyd & Casey-Powell, 2004). Other resources that can help retain online students are web pages with quick reference tools, priority registration, virtual office hours, tutoring, faculty mentors, library and research services, counseling on work-life balance and basic literacy, and disability support, etc. (Crawley & Howe, 2016; Dumais et al., 2013; Smith 2016; Prescott, 2008). Institutions offering online courses and programs also need to adapt these student services to accommodate online students' unique circumstances, including time and location barriers (Chen 2015; Compton et al., 2006; Dirr, 1999; Online Education, 2020; Schuh et al., 2016; Smith, 2016). Most importantly, a successful online program allows its students to have the same

opportunities and services as students in traditional classes (Choy et al., 2002; LaPadula, 2003; Lorenzo, 2015).

Student Services for Transfer Students

Transfer students are also an important population in higher education and institutions are experiencing a significant increase in the number of students who transfer (Kippenhan, 2004; Lester, 2006; Lukszo & Hayes, 2019) and should try to provide services to support them (Austin, 2006; Rosenberg, 2016; Wang & Wharton, 2010). Students often choose to begin their educational careers at a two-year college, mainly due to the appeal of open access admissions and affordability (Choy, 2002; Laanan, 2003; Monroe, 2006; Nowak, 2004). Although transfer students are a significant percentage of the student population on postsecondary campuses, research is minimal, and they are often invisible or neglected once they arrive at four-year institutions (Monroe, 2016; Tobolowsky & Cox, 2012). Therefore, more attention should be placed on understanding the needs of transfer students while they are still enrolled at their two-year school (Austin, 2006; Laanan, 2007; Rosenberg, 2016). Moreover, students who transfer to four-year institutions often face psychological, environmental, and academic challenges (Laanan, 2001). These challenges have been attributed to institutional differences in size, location, competition among students, and adjustment to more rigorous academic standards (Kippenhan, 2004; Laanan, 2007; Tobolowsky & Cox, 2012). The National Study of Student Engagement (2003) found that transfer students spend more time preparing for class and tend to be less engaged in educational activities, although other researchers indicated that transfer students also face issues involving academic and social concerns (Astin, 1984; Lester, 2006; Tinto, 1987; Tobolowsky & Cox, 2012). Academic concerns include advising and planning, academic skills and performance, faculty-student interaction, while social concerns include involvement and

adjustment to college, finances, and level of self-efficacy (Lester, 2006; Townsend & Wilson, 2009). Before transferring, students should research their potential transfer institution to ensure the institution can provide appropriate academic programs, access to academic support and advising, and other services that may address areas they may deem as personal barriers to success before preparing for the transfer process (Layne et al., 2013; Rosenberg, 2016).

Since many students do not inquire about these services before transferring, research consistently noted the challenges they face when matriculating from a two- to a four-year institution (Keeley & House, 1993; Townsend, 1993). Laanan (2001) summarized these issues as transfer shock (drop in grades), transitional trauma (social adjustment to a new campus), and academic trauma (academic adjustment to the more rigorous four-year campus), and, in some cases, transfer ecstasy (an increase in GPA). Yet, despite these challenges, adult learners who transfer into research universities have not been given appropriate attention as received by traditional-age and early college transfer students (Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2005; Tobolowsky & Cox, 2012; Zhang et al., 2013). Much of the existing research on transfer students compared them to native freshmen or focused on student transition, often tracking students' retention, persistence, and academic progress measured by their GPA (Duggan & Pickering, 2008; Ishitani, 2008; Laanan, 2001; Wang & Wharton, 2010). Other research contended that four-year institutions play an instrumental role in facilitating transfer students' successful transition. Therefore, additional research is needed on transfer students' experiences and needs so institutions can inform administrators and implement programs that cater to this population (Laanan, 2007; Matthews, 2015; Schlossberg et al., 1989; Townsend & Wilson, 2009; Zhang et al., 2013).

To address this need, Zhang et al. (2013) conducted a qualitative study using Hagedorn's (2005) four corners framework interviewing seven undergraduate adult students about their post-transfer experience to a research 1 university. Their results suggested:

Access, success, and retention of the adult students can be enhanced through strengthening positive institutional receptivity. When coupled with institutional efforts that intend to understand and enhance adult students' transition process, an improved college experience of adult students can be achieved. (Zhang et al., p. 38)

Additionally, Laanan (2007) conducted a similar quantitative study (not specifically targeting only adult transfers) using a 304-item transfer student Likert-type scale questionnaire that was organized into three main sections: (a) social demographics, (b) community college experiences, and (c) university experiences. The responses were consistent with Rosenberg's (2016) findings that community colleges could support students' transition to four-year universities by implementing a more rigorous curriculum that requires students to do more reading, writing, and researching. Four-year institutions should also be aware of the types of information and services prospective transfer students need to make a successful transition. Subsequently, four-year universities can support this population by offering new transfer students important information during orientation sessions about strategies for a successful transition. This information can be presented by various support staff who work directly with transfer students (Laanan, 2007).

Other studies focused on student services also recommended supporting the challenges of transfer students by providing trained counselors to address feelings of alienation (Bennett & Okinaka, 1990); creating opportunities for students to spend quality time with faculty members (Astin, 1984; Tinto, 1987); and implementing the use of transfer centers, required transfer orientations, social networking events, and transfer mentors or ambassadors (Miller 2013). In a

qualitative study of community college students' adjustment to a four-year institution, students reported that they expected the academic environment to be different, although they did not specify how. They also expected good customer service to which they did not receive (Owens, 2010). Based on their experiences, they also recommended that four-year institutions provide more direction and individual attention from knowledgeable transfer advisors, offer transfer checklists and a transfer website, and explain that students may need to take more initiative to connect with their instructors than they did at the community college, which is consistent with Rosenberg (2016). They did appreciate the transfer day which allowed them to meet with faculty in their major department, discuss financial aid, and obtain their student ID, but would have preferred varying days of the week or times to attend in order to better accommodate their work schedules (Owens, 2010).

The results of these studies are consistent in that four-year institutions play an instrumental role in a student's successful transition, and that institutions should inform administrators of transfer students' unique characteristics and needs and accordingly implement support services. Providing these services would help increase satisfaction, persistence, and the academic performance of transfer students who feel isolated, a lack of engagement with the campus community, or experience academic difficulties (Miller, 2013; Rosenberg, 2016; Tobolowsky & Cox, 2012; Wang & Wharton, 2010). However, institutions typically face resource limitations that prevent them from providing costly packages of all possible services to transfer students (Schneider, 2008).

Student services are an important component to students' transition and overall success, and many colleges and universities try to provide support to meet the needs of different student populations. However, as shown the traditional college student demographic is changing and

may not remain the dominant population (Boudreaux & Schoenack, 2016; Chen, 2015; MacDonald, 2018; Schlossberg et al., 1989; Schuh et al., 2016). When considering that many students now fit into multiple categories of student populations such as non-traditional, online, and transfer as presented here, it is imperative to recognize their unique characteristics to reconfigure services to best meet all students' needs (Schuh et al., 2016).

Expectancy Violations Theory

EVT (Burgoon, 1978) is an interpersonal communication theory that attempts to explain people's reactions to anticipated and unanticipated behavior. EVT was proposed by Judee Burgoon in the late 1970s based on her original work of proxemics and continued through the 80s and 90s as nonverbal expectancy violations theory. Proxemics analyzed individuals' allowances and expectations of personal distance and how responses to personal distance violations were influenced by the level of liking and relationship to the violators. EVT was created to address the possible conflicts of what communicators expect, what meanings they assign to proxemics patterns, and what consequences are associated with alternative distances and spatial arrangements by synthesizing the research from a communication perspective (Burgoon, 2015).

Over the years, the theory evolved and was revised to extend to other nonverbal behaviors and communication outcomes and applied to contexts ranging from interviews, interpersonal conversations, message comprehension, and persuasive discourse to marital interactions, conflict, and deception (Burgoon, 2015). Numerous tests of the model and results from other empirical research gained interest in receiver response toward behavior violations and thus the creation of a primary component of EVT, violation valence. The results also confirmed that the framework could be reinterpreted to support the theory's seven propositions (Burgoon &

Hale, 1988). Propositions show the empirical relationship between two or more variables that are pitched at a high enough level of abstraction to generate multiple testable hypotheses. However, inconsistent findings in the studies prompted further elaboration and revision of the theory (Burgoon, 2015). The updated propositions of the model were still encompassed around proximity and distancing between communicators, but it allowed other researchers to explore the model in other nonverbal and communication contexts.

The basic premise of the model now assumes that there are situations where violations of social norms may produce a positive result. Based on the number of times we encounter others who continually deviate from expected behaviors, it becomes a communication issue to determine if these violations leave a favorable or negative impression (Burgoon, 2015; Burgoon & Hale, 1988). According to Burgoon & Hale (1988), EVT differs from Anderson's (1985) arousal-valence model and Capella Greene's (1982) discrepancy arousal model in the underlying explanatory system. The primary focuses of their models are to predict the immediate response to change in the communicator's level of intimacy or involvement during an interaction, with an expectation of receiving a similar response, albeit aversive or non-aversive. EVT, on the other hand, also takes it a step further to attempt to explain the consequences placed on that behavior to predict future impressions of the violator. EVT has the potential to account for the effects of the behavior (positive or negative) beyond predicting the intimacy and involvement signals at that moment (Burgoon & Hale, 1988).

Components of the EVT used in this study examined three main premises: (1) Expectancy, how a person expects an interaction to happen based on social norms, or familiarity with the person. For strangers, expectations are based on the social norms associated with their personal characteristics like gender or culture, relationship factors like status or trust, and context

factors like the type of interaction and setting (Burgoon, 2015); (2) Communicator reward valence, the evaluation a person makes on the person (in this case, the student service) who positively or negatively violated an expectation and; (3) Expectancy violations and confirmations, the connotation the receiver places on the evaluation, met or unmet. Unmet expectations are considered violations, while met expectations are considered confirmations.

Three other concepts of EVT are arousal-distraction, the interpretation evaluation appraisal process, and violation valence. Violations of expectations can cause arousal and compel the recipient to initiate a series of cognitive judgments of the violation (Floyd & Voloudakis, 1999), thus distracting from what is being said and drawing attention to the violation (Burgoon, 2015). This assumption is grounded in the other theories that people will react to unexpected behavior, but the appraisal process of EVT describes what the recipient does to make sense of the behavior or violation. This interpretation means assigning meaning (valence) to the violation (i.e., was it welcoming or favorable, intentional, or not intentional; Burgoon, 2015). EVT indicates that positive violations should increase the attractiveness of the violator, and negative violations should decrease the attractiveness of the violator (Burgoon & Hale, 1988).

There is a plethora of research using EVT expanding its utility beyond proxemics and distancing. Research closely related to this study included first-year college students' expectations versus their experiences (Smith & Wertlieb, 2005); student expectations of the advising process and perceived advisor behaviors (Anderson et al., 2014); expectations of traditional and non-traditional students (Houser, 2005); international students' experiences (Mullen, 2018); and adult students in the online learning environment (Bourdeaux & Schoenack, 2016).

Conclusion

Non-traditional online transfer students are a growing population individually and collectively and will soon surpass the traditional-aged student in higher education settings. Each population presents its own unique, yet similar, characteristics and needs when they enroll in four-year institutions. These populations of students are often overlooked when institutions establish student services on campuses that typically cater to the traditional-aged campus student. These students view themselves as paying customers, and dissatisfaction with student services may cause them to withdraw or transfer to another school where their needs can be met. Some institutions are beginning to gain a better understanding of this population and are creating and modifying their student services to accommodate all of their students' needs.

Chapter Summary

This chapter presented an individual summary of the historical growth and characteristics of non-traditional, online, and transfer students in higher education. It continued with an overview of the importance of student services in general, followed by the need for these services for each of these populations. It concluded with a synopsis of the theoretical framework, EVT, that guided this study. The section discussed how EVT was first proposed as a nonverbal theory based on proxemics and then expanded its utility to include other interpersonal communication behaviors in research.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

This chapter recaps the research questions and presents the research design and methods used in this study. The chapter begins with an explanation of why qualitative research is a suitable method to answer the three guiding research questions by utilizing in-depth interviews. The chapter continues with a discussion of the setting, participants, sample size, and data collection. Next, the chapter describes why narrative inquiry was chosen as an appropriate methodology to analyze the research questions, including a detailed discussion of the use of Polkinghorne's (1995) steps of narrative of analysis and analysis of narratives presented in the overall findings. The chapter concludes with a description of standards used to ensure quality of the study through trustworthiness and credibility and outlines the ethical considerations for IRB.

Research Questions

As demonstrated in the literature review, it is essential to understand the viewpoints of undergraduate non-traditional online students in terms of their expectations and experiences of student services when they transfer into a research 1 university that typically caters services to the traditional-aged campus-based student. This understanding will help administrators and policymakers at colleges and universities ensure the unique needs of this growing student population are considered so these students have a positive educational experience and do not experience attrition. To gain this understanding, this study was guided by the following research questions:

- 1) What are non-traditional students' expectations of student services before they transfer into an online undergraduate program at a large research 1 land-grant university?

- 2) What are non-traditional students' experiences with student services after they transfer into an online undergraduate program at a large research 1 land-grant university?
- 3) How do non-traditional students feel their interactions with student services impacted their overall experience at the large research 1 land-grant university?

Research Design

To answer these questions, this study employed a qualitative research method using a narrative inquiry approach. Qualitative research is suited to promote a deep understanding of a social setting or activity, as viewed from the perspectives of the research participants (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012). This qualitative approach implies an emphasis on exploration, discovery, description, and explanation of a complex situation (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Qualitative studies vary by type, purpose, and quality, and findings grow out of three kinds of data collection: (1) in-depth, open-ended interviews, (2) direct observation, and (3) written documents (Patton, 2002, p. 4). This study used in-depth, open-ended interviews to capture the breadth and in-depth descriptions of non-traditional online students' expectations and experiences of student services when they transferred into a large university that typically caters to traditional-aged students.

The use of narrative inquiry for this study helped to explore how undergraduate non-traditional online transfer students narrated their expectations and experiences of student services. According to Creswell & Poth (2018), narrative research begins with the experiences as expressed in lived and told stories of individuals. Clandinin (2016) defined narrative inquiry as an approach to the study of human lives conceived as a way to honor lived experiences as a source of important knowledge and understanding. Although other methodologists argue a singular definition of narrative inquiry does not exist (Kohler-Riesman, 2008; Richards, 2011),

there is consensus that narrative inquiries are examinations of verbal or written stories that are temporal in nature, describe place, characters, and settings, and offer an individual's subjective view of experiences (Richards, 2011; Spector-Mersel, 2010). This study used narrative inquiry as defined by Polkinghorne (1995):

A subset of qualitative research designs in which stories are used to describe human action. Narrative refers to a discourse form in which events and happenings are configured into temporal means of a plot, and the plot's integrating operation is called emplotment. (p. 5)

Further explanation of the use of Polkinghorne's definition of narrative inquiry is discussed in the data analysis section. Narrative inquiry as an approach is appropriate for researching non-traditional undergraduate transfer students because it is a means through which those who have been historically marginalized can be heard. Much research indicates that if institutions want to support non-traditional online students, they must first understand their needs to better cater to their educational experience (Chen, 2015; NCES, 2013); therefore, the use of narrative inquiry for this study, at a university catered to traditional-aged campus-based students, allows the university to hear the voices and needs of the non-traditional undergraduate online transfer students enrolled.

Setting

The setting for this study was NC State University, a large, research 1 land-grant institution in the South that offers over 100 undergraduate programs primarily catered toward the traditional-aged residential student. The program studied was the Leadership in the Public Sector (LPS) program, which is the only undergraduate online-degree completion program in the area of Liberal Arts at the university. This bachelor's program was established in 2007 and is mostly

geared toward community college graduates, military personnel, or those who have university college-level credit hours and other non-traditional student characteristics. It is also a transfer program requiring students to transfer in with an Associate of Art or Science degree, or a minimum of 60 transferable hours with a 3.0+ GPA. The program accepted an average of 29 students each year over the past five years. The average student age is 35; 60% of students identify as female, 40% of students identify as male, and 6% of students are military-affiliated.

The LPS program operates on the same academic calendar as the entire university and the college and university requirements are the exact same as the other majors within the College of Liberal Arts and the general undergraduate student population. Given that LPS is a transfer program catered to working adults, the department offers 8-week accelerated courses to allow students the opportunity to earn the same amount of credit hours in a shorter amount of time. However, this option is only available within their departmental requirements for LPS with instructors who are also familiar with their non-traditional student status.

LPS students must also complete general education courses offered by different departments at the university, and these requirements vary by individual student based on what specific courses they transferred in. This results in intergenerational online courses with traditional aged campus-based students to whom most instructors typically consider when designing and implementing their courses.

Participants

Seven participants who were recent or upcoming graduates of the LPS program from the past three semesters were recruited for this study. Participants were eligible if they had at least one of the following six non-traditional characteristics as defined by Choy (2002), which were slightly modified by me for this study: (1) delays enrollment in postsecondary education at least

one year after completing high school; (2) attends part-time for at least part of the academic year; (3) works full-time (35 hours or more per week) while enrolled; (4) considered financially independent for purposes of determining eligibility for financial aid; (5) has dependents other than a spouse (usually children, but sometimes others); (6) has/had a spouse (either not married or married but separated or widowed). Five of the seven participants met all six non-traditional characteristics as shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Participants' Non-Traditional Student Characteristics

Pseudonym	Years delayed enrollment	Attends part-time	Works full-time	Financially independent	Dependents	Marital status
Tkzari	9	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Divorced
Bill	7	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Married
Gabby	25	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Divorced
Lynn	25	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Married
Caleb	24	Yes	No (works part-time)	Yes	Yes	Married
Sarah	2	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Married
Dawn	10	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Married

The participants were given pseudonyms to protect their identity throughout the analysis and documentation process. The demographic profile of the participants was characteristic of the overall population in the LPS program. Five participants were female and two were male. All participants self-identified as white, ranged in age from 23 to 46 when they began the program, and were continuously enrolled until they graduated. All seven participants had prior online

learning experience at their previous institutions before transferring into the LPS program. Six participants completed an associate degree primarily online and one transferred from two other four-year institutions, the latter all online. Table 2 outlines the demographics and characteristics of each participant.

Table 2

Participants' Demographics and Characteristics

Pseudonym	Age at start	Age at end	Gender	Race	Number of children	Associate degree	Previous online experience	Visited student service
Tkzari	39	42	F	White	2	No	Yes	Yes
Bill	28	32	M	White	1	Yes	Yes-All	Yes
Gabby	46	48	F	White	4	Yes	Yes-All	No
Lynn	46	48	F	White	1	Yes	Yes-All	No
Caleb	44	46	M	White	3	Yes	Yes-All	Yes
Sarah	23	24	F	White	0	Yes	Yes-All	Yes
Dawn	34	38	F	White	2	Yes	Yes	Yes

Sampling Method

The participants were recruited using an in-house database maintained by me, as I serve as the academic advisor for the LPS program. The database included personal and university email addresses, phone numbers, and physical addresses provided by the participants when they entered the program. Participants were selected for the study using a purposeful sampling method. The use of purposeful sampling was to select participants who would be most knowledgeable based on specific characteristics relevant to the research questions, willing to

reflect on their experiences, and had the time to participate (Morse & Richards, 2002). An email was sent to 18 students who recently graduated from the LPS program in the past two semesters or were on track to graduate within the next year as this group of participants were the most knowledgeable students likely to recall their expectations and experiences with student services as recent or upcoming graduates. The participant solicitation email included a link to a short, open-ended demographic questionnaire through Qualtrics for those interested in participating in the study to complete. The demographic questionnaire asked basic background information to verify if the participant met the specified definition of a non-traditional student for the study as outlined above. The data collected also served as background information included in their narratives relevant to the findings. A copy of the participant recruitment email and demographic questionnaire can be found in Appendices A and B, respectively.

Moreover, qualitative researchers use purposeful sampling to seek valid representation with participants that will best help the researcher understand the problem and answer the research questions, and not to provide broad, generalizable descriptions (Creswell, 2013; Morse & Richards, 2002). The use of purposeful sampling in this study allowed me to promote maximum variation by choosing students with diverse backgrounds in age, race, location while enrolled, marital and employment status, and other life characteristics relevant to non-traditional characteristics needed in the study.

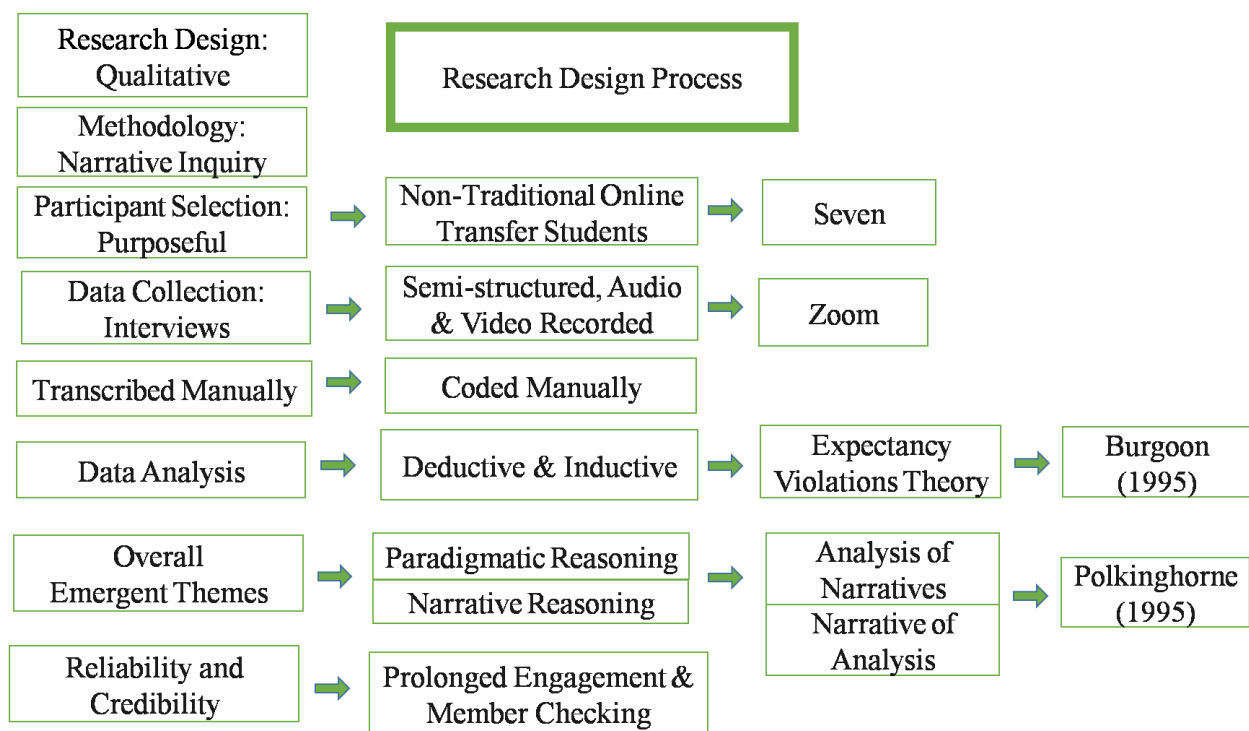
Research Design Process Overview

This narrative qualitative study integrated a variety of components into the research design to effectively address the research questions. The design process was used as a blueprint that outlined a reasonable order in which to conduct the study from choosing the appropriate methodology to presenting the overall findings. Figure 3 provides an illustration of the research

design process and demonstrated the systematic approach used to explore and gain insight into the participant’s expectations and experiences with student services. Details of this process will be discussed in further detail in the subsequent sections.

Figure 3

Illustration of the Research Design Process to Complete the Study



Data Collection

This qualitative research study used in-depth, semi-structured open-ended interviews. Throughout the interviews, I spoke with non-traditional students about their expectations and experiences of student services when they transferred into the only undergraduate online program at a large research 1 land-grant university that primarily caters to traditional-aged campus-based students. The purpose of in-depth interviewing is to gain a knowledgeable

person's perspective with the assumption that their perspective is meaningful. Such interviews explore in detail participants' experiences, motives, and opinions to learn and see the world from their point of view (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Additionally, interviews are conducted to find out what is in and on someone's mind and gather their stories by yielding direct quotations from people's experiences, opinions, feelings, and knowledge (Patton, 2002). In-depth interviews are common in many academic fields such as education, business, communications, nursing, medicine, and health (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). In academic work, interviews have been used extensively by social researchers as a method for generating data concerning research problems (Roulston, 2010).

The use of semi-structured interviews is appropriate when the researcher has a specific topic to learn about but also knows enough about the study topic to frame the needed questions for discussion in advance (Morse & Richards, 2002; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Along with being the researcher for this study, I also serve as the academic advisor for the undergraduate online LPS program and have extensive knowledge of the student services available at the university. I prepared a limited number of questions in advance about the students' expectations and experiences, with a plan to ask follow-up questions. Each participant was asked the same questions, although not in the same order depending on the flow of each interview (Morse & Richards, 2002). Semi-structured interview questions allowed the participants the freedom to express their views in their own terms. The goal was to organically hear about their expectations and experiences of student services when transferring into the online program at a research 1 university that primarily caters to the traditional-aged campus-based student in order to develop relevant and meaningful analysis.

The semi-structured questions also served as a guide to ask pertinent questions as it related to the study which provided reliable, comparable qualitative data between the participants. Supplemental questions were asked that were not planned (Morse & Richards, 2002; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). As such, I designed an interview protocol guide that included 20 semi-structured, open-ended main questions, follow-up questions, and probes that addressed the research questions. The main questions covered the overall research questions and structured the interview; the follow-up questions sought further depth and detail; and probes kept the conversation going while clarifying ambiguities (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). An interview protocol is an instrument of inquiry asking questions for specific information related to the aims of the study, as well as an instrument for a conversation about the research topic (Castillo-Montoya, 2016). Researchers plan interview questions in advance and organize them so they are linked to one another to obtain the information needed to complete a whole picture (Rubin & Rubin, 2010). I arranged the interview protocol into three parts with questions reflective of each research question to assist with the organization of data analysis and aid the participants in reflecting on one period of time. Interview protocols also include a script of what the researcher will say at the beginning and the end of the interview, as well as prompts for the interviewer to collect informed consent and remind the interviewer the information they are interested in collecting. Interview protocols become not only a set of questions but also a procedural guide directing researchers through the planned interview process (Jacob & Ferguson, 2012). I sent the interview questions to all participants before the scheduled interview so they were familiar with the nature of questions asked and they had time to reflect on their prior expectations and experiences to share the in-depth responses necessary for the narrative analysis. See Appendix C for the interview protocol that also includes the human subject disclosure statement.

Furthermore, I ensured the semi-structured interview questions aligned with the research questions by creating a matrix for mapping the interview questions to the research questions (see Appendix D). Ensuring alignment between the interview questions and research questions can increase the utility of the interview questions confirming their purpose (Castillo-Montoya, 2016).

I contacted each participant by email to schedule an interview on a day, time, and place that was mutually agreeable and stressed the importance of agreeing to a place and time that felt comfortable, safe, and had sufficient privacy to record interviews without interruption during the allotted time (Roulston, 2010). The requested length of time to schedule the interview was one hour. The seven interviews ranged from 55 to 90 minutes. Since LPS is an online program, and primarily because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the interviews were video and audio recorded using Zoom—with the participant’s permission—to ensure accuracy of response, analyze tone, see gestures, and read lips if the audio failed. Zoom is a video communications company that provides remote conferencing services using cloud computing and software that combines video conferencing, online meetings, chat, and mobile collaboration. With the use of video and audio recordings, I did not take many field notes, but had a notepad to jot down important points as the participant spoke to ask follow-up questions.

Prior to the interview, I emailed each participant the link to the scheduled video conference call, as well as a short 53-second video with instructions on how to download and access the Zoom meeting for the participant to confirm connectivity and ease of use. All interviews were manually transcribed verbatim and edited for accuracy for data analysis by me.

Narrative Inquiry

As mentioned, this study used the narrative inquiry approach based on Polkinghorne's (1995) definition of narrative inquiry and specific methods of data analysis, which also builds on the theoretical framework grounding this research, EVT. Polkinghorne (1995) stated:

Narrative inquiry refers to a subset of qualitative research designs in which stories are used to describe human action. Narrative, in this context, refers to a discourse form in which events and happenings are configured into temporal means of a plot, and the plot's integrating operation is called emplotment." (p.5).

Plots are the narrative structure through which people understand and describe the relationship between the events and choices of their lives. In this study, the students' stories provided context to their understanding of their experiences with student services and why they placed a connotation of met or unmet if the experience violated or confirmed their expectation. According to Carr (1986), as cited by Polkinghorne (1995), plots also function to select from the myriad of happenings those which are direct contributors to the terminal situation of the story. For example, if the plot of the story concerns a student's positive or negative experience with student services, those events and actions pertaining to that experience are selected for inclusion and highlighted in their story. Other events, such as what they did before or after the experience, are not central to the plot and would be included only as background information. Additionally, the plot relates events by causally linking a prior choice or happening to a later effect. In the same example, based on the events of what the student expressed happened with their interaction with student services, they will label the effect of that experience as either met or unmet, which is confirming or violating their initial expectation as outlined in the EVT (Burgoon, 1995).

Polkinghorne also highlights Bruner's (1985) argument that narrative knowledge is more than a mere emotive expression; rather, it is a legitimate form of reasoned knowing. He proposed there are two distinct modes of thought or types of cognition or rationality, or two ways in which we know about the world. He designated the traditional logical-scientific mode of knowing defined by a set of common attributes by its shared members as "paradigmatic," and storied knowing, memories retained of the situation in which an action was undertaken, and the emotional and motivational meaning connected with it as "narrative cognition." Building on the theoretical framework for this study, EVT, Burgoon (1978) posited that expectations are formed based on social norms and relationships; therefore, it can be argued that expectations fit into Bruner's definition of paradigmatic cognition of traditional logical-scientific knowledge, and their experiences can be categorized by narrative cognitions based on the stories they choose to share.

This study applied Polkinghorne's (1995) two types of paradigmatic narrative research for data analysis. The first type, narrative analysis, used narrative reasoning, and the second type, analysis of narratives, employed paradigmatic reasoning in its analysis. In narrative analysis, I collected descriptions of events and happenings and synthesized them into a story for research questions 1 and 3. This analysis moved from common elements to stories that gave meaning to the overall emergent themes. This required me to develop commonalities among the seven participants and discover the linkages among the overall data to present in their individual stories (Polkinghorne, 1995).

In the analysis of narratives, I collected stories as data and analyzed them with a paradigmatic process for research question 2. The paradigmatic process resulted in themes that held across the participant's stories. The researcher examined the data to identify particular

instances of general notations or concepts. This analysis moved from stories to common elements and sought to locate common themes or conceptual manifestations among stories collected as data (Polkinghorne, 1995). According to Mishler (1986), as cited by Polkinghorne (1995), interviews appear to be the most often used source of storied narratives in contemporary narrative inquiry as interviewees' responses will often be given as stories. He noted, if the interviewer does not suppress the interviewee's responses by limiting the answers to what is relevant to a narrowly specified question, a storied answer will be provided. This analysis requires a database of multiple stories that the researcher inspects to discover which notations appear across them (Polkinghorne, 1995).

Data Analysis

After the interviews were conducted and transcribed verbatim, the transcripts were manually coded and participants were given pseudonyms to protect their confidentiality. Each individual transcript was highlighted in different colors and printed to assist with organization and separation of participant stories throughout the analysis and documentation process. The recorded interviews and transcripts were reviewed multiple times to obtain a clear understanding of each participant's story. The transcribed interviews were then analyzed using Polkinghorne's (1995) two paradigmatic analyses of narrative data for connections among the participants' stories to reveal larger meanings and interpret relationships.

In the first paradigmatic searches, concepts are derived from previous theory or logical possibilities and applied to that data to determine whether instances of these concepts can be found (Polkinghorne, 1995). In this study, research questions 1 and 2 were analyzed seeking to locate common themes among the participant stories that were collected as data to better understand their expectations and experiences of student services. Specifically, I looked for

stories directly related to the students' expectations and experiences and coded them as such. Three overarching themes were identified which revealed larger meanings and interpreted relationships among all the participant stories. This analysis process began with open coding to identify the concepts that seemed to fit the data. Next, I moved to deductive reasoning and axial coding keeping the focus around the theoretical framework used in this study (Morse & Richards, 2002) and examined the codes from the participants' storied experiences that violated or confirmed their initial expectations of student services, which revealed two additional subthemes.

Lastly, I analyzed the data based on Polkinghorne's (1995) second type of paradigmatic searches in which concepts are inductively derived from the data. In this analysis, I developed concepts from the data rather than imposing previously theoretically derived concepts. Research question 3 sought to reveal the student's feelings about their experiences which could not be deducted theoretically. Inductive analysis included the recursive move from noted similar instances in the data to researcher proposed categorical definitions. Generally, inductive analysis involves discovering patterns, themes, and categories in the data (Patton, 2002). For research question 3, I analyzed all of the participants' stories and identified a fourth emergent theme of their overall impression of their collegiate experience and the university based on their experiences with student services.

The overall themes were organized and presented in the findings for research questions 1 and 3 using Polkinghorne's (1995) analysis of narratives where the outcomes were generated in a story from the participant's perspective. Findings for research question 2 were presented using Polkinghorne's narrative of analysis where individual vignettes from each participant's story

were included in the findings, utilizing statements that best illustrated the categories connected to the overall emergent themes.

Trustworthiness and Credibility

To confirm trustworthiness of the study, I intentionally chose a research topic where I had prolonged engagement in the field and persistent observation with the participants (Creswell, 2013). Prolonged engagement is being present in the site where the study is being done long enough to build trust with the participants. The assumption is that longer periods of time spent studying the topic will result in deeper and more complex understandings (Roulston, 2010). To be persistent, the inquirer must explore details of the phenomena under study to a deep enough level that they can decide what is important and what is irrelevant and focus on the most relevant aspects (Creswell, 2013). As the sole academic advisor for the only undergraduate online degree-completion program offered at the university for over nine years, I have developed a prolonged engagement and persistence with this student population and research topic by building a rapport and trust with the advisees and gaining a better understanding of their characteristics and concerns.

To further confirm this study for credibility, I provided each participant the opportunity to review their interview transcript, as well as my overall emergent themes and findings with their specific narrated stories presented in research questions 1 and 3. Each participant was requested to fact-check their personal stories and concluded sentiments and offer feedback of the overall emergent themes. This process is known as member checking (Creswell & Miller, 2000). By member checking, or seeking participant feedback, the researcher solicits participants' views of the credibility of the findings and interpretations (Roulston, 2010). All seven participants provided confirmation of their narrated stories and the overall emergent themes presented in the

findings. This technique is considered by Lincoln and Guba (1985) to be "the most critical technique for establishing credibility" (as cited in Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 261).

Ethical Considerations

The ethical principles considered in this research study were obtaining informed consent from participants by providing them each the right to withdraw at any time. I also protected their confidentiality by assigning and addressing each participant with a pseudonym throughout the entire research process. Additionally, I stored the audio, video, and transcripts of the interviews on the protected Google drive provided by the university. The study did not proceed until IRB approval was obtained from NC State University.

Chapter Summary

This study sought to explore the expectations and experiences of non-traditional undergraduate students who transfer into the only online undergraduate program at a research 1 institution that typically caters to the traditional-aged campus-based student. To that end, this study employed a qualitative narrative research design using in-depth semi-structured interviews. Seven participants were recruited via an in-house database. The interviews were conducted and recorded via Zoom, transcribed verbatim, and coded manually for analysis. I used Polkinghorne's (1995) two types of paradigmatic reasoning, narrative of analysis and analysis of narratives, to find common themes across the participant's stories and presented them in the findings as such.

To ensure quality of the study through trustworthiness, I had prolonged engagement and persistence with the participants and the research topic and established credibility through member checking. I recognized ethical considerations by obtaining informed consent and using

pseudonyms to protect confidentiality. Lastly, all data collected and analyzed were protected on a secure Google Drive provided by the university.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

Introduction

The purpose of this narrative analysis was to understand non-traditional undergraduate students' expectations and experiences with student services when they transferred into the only online undergraduate program at a research 1 university that typically caters services to the traditional-aged campus-based student. The definition of student services was inclusive of the academic and non-academic support received in and outside of the online "classroom." This study was guided by the following three research questions:

- 1) What are non-traditional students' expectations of student services before they transfer into the only online undergraduate program at a large research 1 land-grant university?
- 2) What are non-traditional students' experiences with student services after they transfer into the only online undergraduate program at a large research 1 land-grant university?
- 3) How do non-traditional students feel their interactions with student services impacted their overall experience at the large research 1 land-grant university?

This chapter first discloses my subjectivity as the researcher by outlining my connection to the participants and the research topic. An explanation is also provided of the different uses of Polkinghorne's (1995) paradigmatic narrative analysis in the overall findings. Following is the presentation of the seven participants from their own perspectives, which reveals the results of the first research question and overall emergent themes. Lastly, the chapter explores how the same emergent themes carried through research questions 2 and 3, and these themes are shared through vignettes from the participant stories gathered from the data analysis. The findings also include subthemes that unfolded and were examined as it related to the theoretical framework used in this study, EVT (Burgoon, 1995).

Researcher Subjectivity

As the researcher, I have a deep connection to these research questions as I have served as the academic advisor for the LPS program since 2011 and am considered one of the participants' student services. As the only online undergraduate degree-completion program offered at NC State, this program introduced the university to a new non-traditional undergraduate online student population who require and expect different resources and support than the traditional-aged campus-based student. The program and university changed many administrative processes and resources to accommodate the needs of these non-traditional students. However, since the program's inception, there has not been any research on the students' expectations and experiences to confirm if the overall services provided are catering to their educational needs as non-traditional online transfer students.

As the advisor to the LPS program, I have created resources and adjusted many advising practices to cater to this population, and began this PhD program specifically to learn how to serve these students more effectively. However, I was not fully aware of the expectations or experiences the students had with other services at the university, or how their interactions with student services may have impacted their overall collegiate experience.

I chose to use narrative inquiry for this study to create a platform for the voices of these non-traditional undergraduate online transfer students to be heard. As online students, they are not given many opportunities to voice their opinions formally outside of communicating them to me as their advisor. I wanted to share findings from this population in this way so that readers could not only read, but also feel and understand these experiences from the students' point of view and not solely my interpretation. I had the privilege to speak with these seven participants

and hear their stories about their expectations and experiences with student services as an online undergraduate student while juggling adult life responsibilities.

To fully appreciate the participants as more than just research subjects, I will introduce each of them using Polkinghorne's (1995) narrative of analysis approach, illustrating each of their stories from their own perspective, as well provide my individual synopsis of their expectations gleaned from our conversation. This presentation of findings will illustrate how the participants storied why their prior educational journey led them to develop their expectations of student services before transferring into a research 1 institution, which revealed the findings to research question 1. The function of narrative of analysis here revealed how and why these non-traditional students found themselves returning to school after some time off, and how their prior educational experiences factored into their expectations of student services as an online adult student at the research 1 institution. These storied analyses are an attempt to value each person's individuality, and my synopsis is an attempt to understand them collectively. Using the narrative analysis approach for research question 1 allowed me to make connections among the participant stories to reveal larger meanings and interpret relationships which revealed three common themes that were also common across all three research questions from varying perspectives.

The use of narrative inquiry was also to hear directly from students about their personal experiences with student services as undergraduate online adult learners since this is a growing population that is often overlooked in higher education. As time progresses, this population will require more targeted recruitment and retention strategies as they begin to be a dominant population at many institutions of higher education as repeatedly reiterated in the literature (Boudreaux & Schoenack, 2016; Chen, 2015; MacDonald, 2018; Schlossberg et al., 1989; Schuh et al., 2016).

Given that the nature of the research questions was to explicitly understand the expectations and experiences the participants had with student services as non-traditional online learners, my findings are more of a summary of their collective accounts, although overarching themes are presented to help organize their commonalities and reduce redundancy. There are some individual experiences also presented that I felt were relevant to be included to provide a well-rounded account of the participants as individuals and to reiterate that when institutions reduce the differences in identities and student experiences for simplicity's sake of creating a one-size-fits-all model, they run the risk of devaluing or making groups that have different characteristics feel invisible (Schuh et al., 2016).

The following individual narratives from the participant's perspective are presented in the findings for research questions 1 and 3 in the order their interviews were conducted and have no reflection or representation in the interpretation of the findings. Most of the narrations are direct quotes from the participant from some point during their interview. As the researcher, I synthesized participant interviews to extrapolate their expectations and added a few words for clarity, but I did not misconstrue the participant's intended message as confirmed via member checking. Since participants had access to the questions prior to the interview, some of the participants wrote out their responses and read them. As a result, some of their replies may seem polished. For the other natural responses, a few utterances, slang, and natural speaking patterns for each participant remain in the narrations to bring life to the participant and allow the reader to connect with them more personally.

Research Question 1 Findings and Presentation of Participants: Expectations of Student Services

Tkzari

The following is a synthesis of Tkzari's interview responses analyzed into this narrative by me.

My name is Tkzari. I'm a 40-year-old mom and a full-time employee often working over 40 hours a week for a major corporation in NC. I immigrated to the U.S. in the early 2000s. I was a stay at home mom for a while with my kids, but I really kind of wanted to develop a meaningful career. Coming from a third world country, there weren't a lot of educational opportunities, especially for women because gender roles were very prominent. It was very difficult to get into universities there. There were certain private colleges that you could go to—which I did—but that was during major political changes, so the education system wasn't a part of the internationally recognized credit system where you could actually translate your education in another country. That came a few years after I graduated. So, my education was really meaningless. When I came to the U.S., I went through different pathways to try and figure out if my previous education was worth anything and I couldn't get it validated. I couldn't even get my high school education validated. I was basically viewed as not even having a high school education. Fortunately, I was able to demonstrate my ability to forge a career independently of tertiary education, but knew I would need a four-year degree if I wanted to truly get ahead.

I was initially drawn to a four-year private school in NC because they were really big on pioneering this whole adult learner thing. They told me I'd need to get a GED which I did look into, but really just felt it was a waste of my time, so I appealed it and they actually admitted me. So, that's how I started my educational journey in the U.S. But, everything at that school was in-

person which was taking up a lot of my time and was very expensive. It was also cutting into all of my evenings. So, I decided to transfer to another four-year public school in NC that was offering certain online degrees which worked better for my schedule. The only drawback was that even though they accepted the transfer credits, they didn't accept them to meet any of the requirements. By the time all was said and done, I was probably going to end up needing about 160 credit hours just to get a four-year degree. At that point I really couldn't see the end in sight. I felt like they were reeling me in for money because I wasn't put on a proper track. I felt like I did not get good advice at all. The student advising was so bad; I mean it was really bad. My advisor was not really available and he was very disinterested. I felt like an inconvenience and I was kind of whittling away and I just felt like I was getting nowhere. It was by coincidence that I came across the LPS program and I thought, oh my gosh, this is perfect for me. The program area is exactly what I'm looking for! It was attractive because I had an idea at the time that I would like to transition to local politics at some point later in life. So, I contacted you and you said you could do a pre-evaluation, but I decided to just apply and got in!

When I started I was impressed with the admission process and advising. You responded so quickly and just gave me so much information. You educated me immediately on everything that I needed to know. It was really just a refreshing experience coming from the other two schools where I got absolutely no information. I didn't have a clear plan for how to actually earn the degree. I just felt really positive about being in this program. From the admissions and advising perspective it was awesome; it was fair and professional. I mean, even though I had a lot of things I've come up against me to that point, I really felt like I was moving in the right direction.

Synopsis of Tkzari's Expectations

Tkzari was looking forward to a knowledgeable advisor; someone who could provide her with a clear path to graduation. She was very frustrated with her college experience until she began the LPS program. She had been working toward a bachelor's degree for seven years before then and never received the information she needed. She had no solid academic plan. Although she was nervous to take on more credit hours, she was also excited to attend a credible school she otherwise would not have been able to attend since she did not live in the area. She mentioned the passion and energy she received from me as her new advisor and that it was evident I was knowledgeable, which inspired a lot of confidence in her to continue. She chose LPS because she needed the flexibility of being able to learn, not necessarily at her own pace, but really on her own time. She was working as an executive employee never knowing how late her days may be. As an online program catered to adults, she also expected instructors who understood her need for flexibility and a curriculum that was relevant to her career path.

Bill

The following is a synthesis of Bill's interview responses analyzed into this narrative by me.

Hey! I'm Bill! I'm just a country boy from eastern NC. On my days off, I farm. Me and my dad own a poultry farm and raise 60 to 64,000 laying hens. That's part of my career too. But, three days a week, for 24 hours a day, I am also the captain at our main fire station of 10 people. I also have a wife and a son and we're trying for another one now. To get to where I am now has been an interesting journey. I graduated high school early in June 2006 and had to go straight to work, which was a mistake, haha. At that time, I didn't really care about college and I felt like it would have been a waste of my parent's money, so I didn't go and went to the fire academy a

month after I graduated. I was in the fire academy and once I got on at the fire department I knew they offered educational assistance to help pay for stuff so I said well, I'll try to go to school now. So, I was 19, enrolled in the community college and I bombed it. I was busy partying and enjoying my new paycheck so I went on academic probation and never went back.

Anyway, fast forward I guess to 2013, I decided I wanted to further my career and couldn't do that without a degree. At the station, we have firefighter positions and driver positions and that's as far as you can go without a college education. I knew I didn't want to work for the people around me, so I decided I needed to get promoted so I didn't have to work for them, honestly. But, I will say that as I was getting older, it was apparent that a fire-specific degree wasn't valuable. I was noticing to advance you needed a broader understanding of government, business, and technology skills. I wanted to study something different that would make me marketable to my city if I ever needed to exit the fire service by choice or otherwise. So that was a huge motivation for this program. It gave me a way to fulfill my promotion requirements and help me in other areas if I ever needed it. But anyways, I went to the community college from 2013 to 2015 and got my associate degree. From there it had always been a lifelong dream of mine to go to NC State. My mom put that in my head when I was a kid, so I always wanted to go to State. I spent a ton of time at NC State prior to actually enrolling there so my first thought was, if they have an online program, I would really like to go there. I kind of stumbled upon the program one day and said this was something that I could make work, and it would be good for my career, and it was great considering online was my only choice since I was working out here.

I was more prepared at that point in my life at 28, and school was a lot better for me at that time. I was a little more mature because I knew I had something on the line. It wasn't just

going to school; it was about my future career. It's been seven years now since I started at the community college in 2013. And since then I got a wife and a son which almost forces me to do all my work here at the fire station. Before, when I was at the community college, I had just gotten married and I had no kids. I had one job, which was to come here and ride the fire truck, so I didn't have a ton going on. It was a breeze, but once I got in LPS, we had our first kid and just last year I got promoted to captain, and that's when life got harder. Now I can't believe I'm about to graduate with my BA and I'm researching master's programs. So, my education's not over with yet, I don't know what I'm thinking, but I guess I'm going to keep pushing myself.

Synopsis of Bill's Expectations

Bill has always been a huge NC State fan. He was excited when he found out NC State had an online degree program that complemented his career and even more ecstatic when he was accepted. Even though he needed the flexibility of an online program, he was mostly looking forward to any excuse to visit campus. Working at the fire station, he typically works 24 hour shifts every other day for three days and then has four days off. He did this interview and most of his advising appointments while at the fire station. Although all the resources and services he needed were available online, he came to campus when he could. He and his pregnant wife came in for his first advising appointment to discuss class options and to visit other student services while on campus. Bill did not have too many expectations of online services aside from the basics he had at the community college, but his plan was to take care of what he needed to on campus whenever he could or otherwise contact his advisor when necessary.

Gabby

The following is a synthesis of Gabby's interview responses analyzed into this narrative by me.

Hello, my name is Gabby and my college journey began in 1990 when I graduated high school. I actually applied to go to NC State for veterinary medicine or pre-vet. I got in but I decided not to go and went to another school instead to stay home near my boyfriend—don't do that, that was dumb. But, on the other side of that, things happen for a reason. The reason I stopped going to that school originally in 1991 was because I got pregnant with my oldest son and my life got interrupted. Two ex-husbands and four kids later you know, it's just life. As my youngest ones got older—they are 18 now and seniors—and became more self-sufficient, I decided I wanted to finish my degree. I only had one semester done, but I wanted to finish. So, I started again in 2015 and went to my local community college, but I did it online because I work full-time and I did not have time to go in-person. I got my Associate of Science because my strong background is science, which is why I wanted to be a vet. But, when I did get into my career with nutrition services, I got into it for my children. Because I was a single mom, it just worked out so I would be on the same school system schedule as them. I started there and went into school nutrition and it just turned into a career that I love.

I really enjoyed my classes at the community college because I like to learn. I'm always bugging my boss to sign me up for conferences or classes and stuff. But the community college really helped me get back into the swing of school since it had been so long, and it was nice since they were local. If something went wrong I could go and talk to them. I was kind of leery about going further away to NC State and checked out other nearby four-year schools first, so at

least if I needed to go I could go and get something fixed or talk to a person. But, I decided on LPS because it kind of went with my job. I work for the public school system. I've worked there for 22 years, and LPS just made sense because it was all online which I was already used to, so that was very convenient for me and something that could actually help me in what I do already. I was very excited when I found the program as I was looking online for other options and it was perfect since NC State is where I originally wanted to go. And, it wasn't a bad experience starting with NC State. I had only gotten good feedback from people. They responded to you and they talk to you. So, the whole application process for NC State helped me feel better about taking classes there, rather than somewhere with a location where I could get to right away.

Synopsis of Gabby's Expectations

Gabby describes herself as an extroverted introvert. She often jokes that if she wanted to talk to people, she would not be in an online program. But coming from the community college where she also did it all online, she assumed most things would be available to her or that she could find them. She still preferred the comfort of going to a school close by if she ever needed assistance. When she found LPS, she was excited as that is where she originally wanted to attend. She knew she could get the most out of the LPS classes and they would benefit her career in the future, so she decided to apply. Attending NC State online made her a little nervous, but the constant communication she received from admissions and advising during the application process made her feel more comfortable, so she expected to receive that same level of communication from other services she may have needed while enrolled in the program.

Lynn

The following is a synthesis of Lynn's interview responses analyzed into this narrative by me.

Hi, I'm Lynn. I'm a mom, not only to my daughter who's a college student, but I also have two puppies that take a lot of time. I'm a wife. I'm a small business owner. My husband and I run a small business aside from our full-time jobs, and I'm the assistant director of social services that often requires 50+ hours a week of my time, so there are a lot of hats on this head.

When I completed my bachelor's degree from the LPS program I was 48. I always wanted to get my bachelor's degree and of course when you're young and dumb you want to get married, have a family and all that great stuff, so I kind of rushed through and just got an associate degree. When I started working, I noticed I quickly rose to the rank of supervisor a lot sooner than I thought I was going to, and I realized that there was nothing above that for me if I didn't get a bachelor's degree in the field of social services. I was offered a promotion to the position I'm in now, but that was going to be my final stop if I did not further my education. To be an assistant director under the Office of State Human Resources, the requirement involves a bachelor's degree. I remember someone made the comment to me one day, they said, "Do you hear that? That's the train and it's going by. Are you gonna jump on or not?" I realized that if I didn't make some changes for myself, I was at the end of where my trip was going to go and I wasn't ready to be at the end.

I started surfing the web and found a lot of online degrees from other places. I mean, I work in HR and know there are certain ones that the state won't even recognize. And I didn't just want any degree. I wanted a degree from a reputable college, one that would carry some weight. I found the LPS program with State and I actually reached out to you by email and you answered me back. You were so nice and encouraging and told me exactly the path I had to take to get to NC State because at that time I had been out of college 25 years way back when they were quarter hours. But, I will never forget that because there were other colleges I reached out to that

never even responded. You told me I needed some additional coursework before I could begin there so I connected with another wonderful advisor at my local community college and she sat down with me and we put together what I needed to get there. Although I was apprehensive about going back to school after all those years, I really wanted to get there. When I read about the LPS program I was impressed because it was everything I was looking for. I'm involved directly with a lot of what our local government does. I do my budget here; I sit in on commissioners' meetings for the county budgets; and I have a voice for a lot of county employees. This program ended up giving me more knowledge of how to handle myself and handle those situations, and how the government works to do a better job here. I actually had to earn another associate degree, which I did all online because of the demands of my job and my location, and I transferred right into the LPS program a year or so later. But the feeling I had when I walked across that stage to get that piece of paper knowing that I was going to be okay, and that I could land on my feet anywhere is something that I don't think I can ever put a price on.

Synopsis of Lynn's Expectations

Lynn said she honestly did not know what online resources or services were available to her through NC State before she applied. Where she lives in eastern North Carolina the closest community college is an hour's drive. With the demands she has with her job at social services, she could not give up a day or two, or go part-time, to try and go to school anywhere which would be an even further distance. She knew if she wanted to pursue another degree, she had to do so online. She knew she would have to make time to get it done. All she knew was what she found on the website about the LPS program and she was impressed with the information

presented and the immediate feedback she received from me when she inquired. She saw NC State as a reputable and credible school, so she expected things to be covered.

Caleb

The following is a synthesis of Caleb's interview responses analyzed into this narrative by me.

I'm Caleb. After high school, I was a student at the community college for two semesters where I was doing quite well; however, the level of maturity of those around me, as well as the environment made me less interested in partaking in the college scene, so I joined the Marine Corps and departed in 1997. So that was 1993 to 1997. I wanted to immediately enroll at NC State after getting out of the Marine Corps, but I had no encouragement or influences around me, and I was intimidated by the process. That was my own ignorance of just not knowing, so I relied on that which was familiar to me, which was physical labor and a good work ethic.

Beginning with this career journey, I initially refused certain leadership positions offered to me. All my life I've been told I should coach or teach, but I've always been frightened by that sort of thing. As a first-generation college student, I just didn't feel comfortable or that I could do it. But, I was eventually persuaded by others to put myself out there; so, from whatever job I was doing at the time I began stepping into some of these leadership roles and that's when I became more driven for success.

After serving in various leadership positions for 18 years and after my departure from the U.S. Marine Corps, I had some health concerns that steered me to being self-employed and then going into real estate. I was trying to find something to do where physical labor was not required where I could be in a leadership position as well, but I was unable to. It was in real estate where I

found that I had a passion for protecting others, but I didn't want to just help a couple of clients here and there. Instead, I wanted to help on a bigger scale.

Long story short, I left real estate to pursue an education, and it just so happened that Veterans Affairs gave me this opportunity. I ended up going to another community college about 18 years later. They gave me all the information I needed to get my associate degree, and it was all online too. Being there really prepared me for navigating and understanding the computer better. And online was the only option for me. My wife works from home and our three kids are homeschooled, and it's always been our dream to be home together—she's my best friend and she's the best—but with the health challenges we've both had, being an online student has just helped me schedule to be there for her and my family when they need me. It's just very versatile and gives me a lot more options and opportunities to be where I need to be.

When I finished my associate degree, I was looking online for an online bachelor's degree and came across LPS. At that time, I had more experience in leadership roles which gave me the passion for protecting others. So, in hindsight, I think that's what really attracted me to the LPS program—just wanting to help people. Initially I thought I wanted to do something better than what I'm doing now, and LPS would give me something different.

Synopsis of Caleb's Expectations

Caleb is a big teddy bear. I had the pleasure of meeting him at an LPS event we hosted in his area and he spoke of his experiences in our program. To know him, you would not think he would ever be intimidated of speaking in front of a crowd, being a leader, or even going back to school. Luckily, when he decided to embrace his leadership capabilities, he had the encouragement of his wife and his Veteran Affairs representatives to help guide him through the process. Once he enrolled in online classes at the community college, it prepared him for

navigating and understanding the computer better. As a previous online student at the community college he was aware of the basic services like the cashier's office, bookstore, advising, and tutoring, so he figured he would recognize certain services at NC State although he expected they may be structured differently. He also knew he would have the support of his Veteran Affairs representatives if he needed further assistance. As a bonus, Caleb and his family are huge NC State fans, so attending NC State was always a dream and this online program made it possible.

Sarah

The following is a synthesis of Sarah's interview responses analyzed into this narrative by me.

Hi, I'm Sarah! I was 24 when I finished the LPS program and I attended four community colleges before I started there. Ironically, when I was in high school, I never really looked forward to going to college. It wasn't something I didn't want to do, but I just didn't see myself going that route, and definitely not going to a four-year university. I'm not sure why though. We weren't poor as a family, but we were also recovering from the recession in 2008 through 2010. In my ninth-grade year in high school in 2009, we ended up moving to NC. Back then, I was old enough to not want to be additional financial burdens to my parents even though they never said anything, and they probably still don't even know 'til this today. But, I think subconsciously somewhere I didn't want to put paying for my college on them or didn't think it was an option. I ended up marrying my high school sweetheart about a year after I graduated high school in 2012. He graduated a year before me. He was a Marine, so I ended up moving out to the Marine base with him.

I graduated early from high school in December instead of a traditional spring and was dual enrolled in high school and the community college at the same time. I continued at the

community college that next spring and summer, but I ended up taking partial classes that fall and withdrew. At that time, I was in a new town and I had to figure out how to enroll there, figure out financial aid, and really just try to figure out what I wanted to do, so I took some time off.

Over the next two years, I began working full-time. It was around 2015 that I picked back up to finish my associate degree through different community colleges—four community colleges to be exact. And, it was all online that time, mainly for the convenience of being able to get it done while doing other stuff, and so I wouldn't have to be restricted to something like night or weekend courses. At first, I enrolled in another school just because my community college here didn't offer math and sciences online, but at some point, I realized I could be dually enrolled in different places if it worked out. A lot of the time I took a full load to knock a bit of it out, and then sometimes maybe I dropped back for something that was going on in life. Sometimes it came down to the specific semester. If I needed to get done in the semester and my school didn't offer the class then I looked elsewhere. And that's the beauty of being online because it doesn't matter what course belongs to who, it just becomes a nice melting pot of community colleges that gets meshed together on the same transcript. And the community college application process is so simple; it's really like shopping online. I was also driven and focused and motivated in a new way, just having an appreciation of finally understanding the college process, especially once I found out how easy it was applying and enrolling at different schools. And when I also figured out that I could do my financial aid and afford to pay for it myself and make it work, then I was all for it and continuing on to a four-year school too.

After I completed my associate degree, I had this nagging like, “Alright, what are you going to do next. You’re bored. Where are you going to go?” I started Googling my options

about online bachelor programs and NC State popped up. I was interested because for one, my brother was an on-campus student there; and for two, my dad has his doctorate in strategic leadership and theology and I've never seen a leadership degree before. So, I was interested and inclined, it was right up my alley, and after reading more about the program, it was a no brainer since it complemented my career and future goals. Plus, from participating in so many online courses for so long previously, I felt like LPS would be an easy transition.

Synopsis of Sarah's Expectations

Sarah was the youngest of the participants and someone the literature would consider a swirler, a student who flows in and out of college coursework inconsistently from one institution to another (Layne et al., 2013), but her method was not inconsistent. As she said, it was about a year or two into all of the online schooling that she really figured out how to apply and enroll by working with student services at different community colleges. She pieced it together and found the courses she needed to complete her associate degree from various community colleges. After getting into the swing of things and completing all of the general coursework, she was more excited about school because she was able to pick the courses that were most relevant to her and she figured out how to use financial aid to pay for it herself. When she decided on LPS, she only contacted the advisor for an unofficial evaluation, but since she had participated in online coursework for years prior, she was comfortable with the program and knew she could figure out the resources and services she needed as she did with the other four schools. In addition, knowing her brother was a student on campus was great because she knew she would have the opportunity to visit him and the school.

Dawn

The following is a synthesis of Dawn's interview responses analyzed into this narrative by me.

My name is Dawn. After I completed high school in 2000, I attended my local community college, but a little after a year, I just decided to take a break. It became a lot on me. I was 18 or 19 and I was working three part-time jobs, and one job was giving me 30 hours a week. But with the jobs, they kept giving me more responsibilities, so at 18 or 19 years old, I was like, ooh this is rewarding, so I took a break from school. I actually started my part-time job at the age of 16 as an after-school and summer camp counselor. At the age of 18, I was given a supervisor role over one of the after-school sites. Then later on, I was asked to help oversee and plan some of the summer specialty camps, which are week-long camps from fishing to nature. Next, I applied to be our recreation superintendent's marketing assistant, so I began doing that as well. While in that position, I had to coordinate some of our larger special events and I was over all the vendors for one of our large community festivals. I just fell in love with Parks and Recreation and working with the public sector and kept rolling with that. I eventually ended up having a little boy; shortly after that I got married and then we had another little boy, so I became a working parent and wife.

It wasn't until I became the director of the youth center that I started going back to school to finish my associate degree. That was a little over 10 years later from when I was first there. And that took me about four years to complete since I was taking classes part-time because I was working and I had to take either night classes or online classes. I'll say school was a whole lot easier going back as an adult learner, just because I knew how to apply the information in the real world. All the while, I had my eye set on NC State. When we used to go to conferences, NC

State would always be set up with their Parks and Recreation master's program. I knew I had to get my bachelor's first, but I also knew I couldn't commute for classes. I had two young boys and I was working over 40 hours a week with our special events, so online courses were just better for me and my family, so I wasn't commuting. I started looking to see if NC State had any online bachelor's programs. Someone came to the community college at one of the college fairs and gave me information about the LPS online program. I started looking into it. I thought, oh my gosh, Leadership in the Public Sector is right where I'm at. It was just meant to be. I was always wanting to learn more about the other divisions of local government, and then just government overall, because I didn't know if recreation was where I was going to stay or if I was going to venture out into some of the other sectors like the public information office and things like that. I was trying to learn as much as I could about government and then I was also overseeing over 100 part-time staff and being put in more supervisory roles. So, anything I could absorb to help our team and learn about the government, it just all came together with this online program. It was the perfect program for what I wanted to do, so when I found it, I didn't keep looking, I knew this was it.

Synopsis of Dawn's Expectations

Dawn is a natural born leader. From a very young age she had supervisory roles and a support system to encourage her to seek the credentials to support what they already knew she was capable of doing. She was immediately set on the LPS program because of how relevant it was to her current career and because her long-term goal was to attend NC State's master's program in her career field. Because of her commitment to her job and her determination to complete her degree, it took her four years to earn her associate degree and four years to complete LPS because she completed two classes at a time. By the time she decided to pursue

LPS, she had a lot of experience and patience navigating the online services she needed to be successful. She expected NC State to have a similar structure to what she had at the community college, such as access to an advisor and a student services center. She relied on those resources to steer her in the right direction with the different questions she had.

Summary of Expectations of Student Services

All seven participants were surprised and excited to find this online bachelor's program at a reputable research 1 state institution. They all had similar expectations of student services which began with "access," not only to the institution, but also to the resources needed to navigate their undergraduate education online. Since all of the participants had prior experiences with online classes from their previous schools, they expected that this credible state institution would at least offer the same minimal online resources needed, such as advising, cashier's office, and financial aid. However, they did not have an expectation of the ease of use or consistency of these services. They discovered it was easy to access and navigate the university websites, which provided detailed information and included step-by-step directions on what they needed to apply. The information they were able to find was informative and answered most of their initial inquiries so much so that many did not have to contact anyone during business hours to find information. Having these accessible online resources was convenient for them to complete the required steps to apply on their own time.

The participants also expected "engagement" from the actual degree program and overall courses in the curriculum. They were looking forward to classes within the major that could help retain or advance their careers, and were hopeful they could put theory into practice in their workspaces immediately since many of them currently worked in the public sector which is the focus of the LPS program. Their desire for engagement also extended to student services

professionals, which included faculty and staff. As an online program advertised as being catered to non-traditional students, the participants expected to interact with university professionals who understood their unique characteristics as online adult students.

Many participants were not aware that this was the only online undergraduate degree-completion program offered to undergraduate students, but they expected to feel a sense of “inclusion” from their department and the university. From what they saw on the website, they knew this program catered to non-traditional students and they expected to connect with the other like-minded adults enrolled. Many also felt a sense of inclusion just having the opportunity to attend a credible research 1 school in a program area that complemented their careers. All participants chose LPS because it was offered at a brick and mortar school they knew had a great reputation and was accessible to them if they really needed to visit. Some participants were huge NC State fans and had family and friends who attended the school, and this online program allowed them to feel that sense of inclusion to a university that otherwise may not have been possible if it was not offered online.

Overall, the participants did not put much thought into the availability or reliability of online student services and mostly expected them to be available based on their prior online experiences at other colleges. This expectation also stemmed from the school’s well-known reputation and the participants were all excited for the opportunity to eventually be recognized as alumni of the university.

Table 3 outlines the three themes that emerged from research question 1 and includes example characteristics under each theme as each related to participant expectations of student services before transferring into the only online undergraduate program at this research 1 university.

Table 3

Emergent Themes of Participants' Expectations

Access	Engagement	Inclusion
Reputable university	Program curriculum	Academic department
Basic services	Student service professionals (faculty/staff)	University
Online resources		Like-minded classmates

Emergent Themes

The three overarching themes that emerged from research question 1: (1) access, (2) engagement, and (3) inclusion were also common themes that were prevalent across all three research questions in this study, but from different perspectives. This section will present each theme as it related to the students' experiences after transferring into the only online undergraduate program at a large research 1 land-grant university. The findings for research question 2 will be presented using Polkinghorne's (1995) paradigmatic analysis of narratives where I, the researcher, used excerpts from the participant interviews to inductively derive concepts and common themes from the data. Vignettes from the participants' storied narratives will be included as evidence of their experiences as they related to each theme.

Additionally, this section will highlight how one theme aligned with the theoretical framework, EVT (Burgoon, 1995), and introduced two additional subthemes: (1) disconnections and (2) connections, which were negative and positive violations of the student's expectation of engagement. Further, the participants' overall experiences also revealed an additional theme of pride in research question 3 of how they considered their access, engagement, and inclusion with student services to influence their overall experience at the university.

Research Question 2 Findings: Experiences with Student Services

Access

The first theme of access explores the various services that were accessible to the participants as an online student. Two participants continually used the words streamlined and autopilot when describing the online services they needed to access, including the admissions process, cashier's office, bookstore, and library. Many resources had all the information readily available on their website with step-by-step instructions or video tutorials on what to do without the need to contact a physical person for assistance, although when service staff were contacted they were responsive and helpful. The participants also shared how they were constantly informed of the available resources via email communication or personalized websites created specifically for them. Gabby shared:

The process of getting in and the process of getting through things did not cause stress or put a kink in my life. There were resources. There's a multitude of resources available. You just gotta look for them, I mean, you just gotta click on them! Or you could contact somebody, you know, I never had any trouble with anybody not getting back to me or not, responding to me, as far as services go.

This statement was a common sentiment expressed by all participants. Gabby in particular was initially concerned about attending a school that was not local. If she needed to handle something, she preferred to attend a school that was not too far away. However, all participants shared how everything they needed and wanted to know was accessible on the websites or offered to them via email. Transferring from the community college, many of the participants had the expectation that basic services would be available, but they were not prepared to the extent of services that would be accessible online once they transferred to the

university setting. When talking with Caleb his astonishment for the number of services available to him resonated in his voice when he shared:

I was not aware of ALL the opportunities I guess that existed at NC State, because they make it much more. They offer much more through communication than I was used to for the past previous two years at the Community College before coming in, LPS program and NC State. Everything was in your face, constantly all the time. So, if you didn't feel like you had the opportunity to do something it was because I wasn't checking my email, or I wasn't looking at how everything was structured or listening to the instructors. There were so many opportunities to participate in everything even as an online student; I liked knowing it was an option. It was just, hey, here's everything you can do, and then tomorrow, here's some other stuff, and then the next day, here's more!

As the academic advisor, I was not aware of the substantial amount of emails the participants described as receiving daily, not just from me, but also from the college and the university. The participants indicated how the emails shared information on services that were offered online and on campus, including events, guest speakers, workshops, and overall tips. Dawn mentioned, "Even if there were services I didn't know about, somebody was gonna let me know, hey, this is available!" Aside from the constant email communication, the participants also took notice of the ease of accessing the information needed from the university websites and various platforms. Tkzari was the only participant who attended two other four-year schools (one institution also online), before transferring into the LPS program. She commented:

I just really recognized a night and day difference between the organization of NC State's online platform, and [the other schools] you know. Like their online services were pretty awkward and labor intensive. But when I was accepted [to NC State], I got a welcome

packet. And then the LPS Moodle site with the welcome page and everything that you guys had that introduces us to the department, and the part of MyPack Portal where you actually map out, what your degree requirements are. You know how it is, where you can see how to get from where you are to the end.

Aside from attending two previous four-year schools in NC, Tkzari also completed college-level courses in her country that were not validated in the states; therefore, she had more educational experiences to reflect on and compare to than the other participants. For her, at this point in her educational journey, having an organized way to map out course requirements needed to graduate was an essential resource she expected when transferring to the LPS program as she had not received this resource previously. This resource was structured through the university's degree planner system, which many participants appreciated. As adult students, they wanted a clear direction of exactly how many credit hours or courses they needed to graduate and this resource was very intuitive, easy to navigate, and also included online video tutorials showing how to maximize its use. This ease of navigation was true of many of the services the students needed to navigate the institution. Lynn said:

To be honest with you, I did everything online I didn't really talk to anyone. I pretty much would get the emails of what I needed to do next, and I would do the next thing.

So, I really did have a whole lot of contact with a live body. It was on autopilot.

Everything was either in an email or just the electronic application. I applied for all of the services electronically.

Tkzari also made mention of the LPS Moodle page, which is an online advising project space created by the department just for LPS students through the university's learning management system (LMS). The space includes a thorough online orientation with various video

tutorials, links, and resources for the department and university as well as different forums to connect with other students and staff in the program. This Moodle advising space is available for LPS students to access once they are initially accepted into the program and available until they graduate. This resource is one that many participants said they leaned on often to point them in the right direction when they needed assistance any time of day or night. Sarah, the only participant who attended four community colleges primarily online, was used to navigating her way around needed resources and had no trouble accessing what she needed when she transferred into LPS. Sarah stated:

Comparatively, I mean in the grand scheme of it being the fifth school applying and, you know, coming in getting accepted figuring out what courses would be, I didn't find it any more difficult than any other school so far. It was awesome. Once the websites were provided it was pretty easy, and the, the project page on the Moodle site that's very helpful! So, I mean, once you figured out the websites you're pretty much good to go.

Overall, the participants expected to have access to resources when they transferred into NC State and the LPS program. As online transfer students, they all had experiences navigating services online and had a general idea of who to contact and where to look for the resources they needed. However, many did not expect the number of services that were accessible to them as an online student, or the overwhelming amount of emails they would receive from different departments or the university to solicit their participation and utilize their services. Lynn shared:

The library was probably the biggest resource in regards to all the papers we had to write, and being able to access it online and go where it connected you to the other ones in the network. So, if you were looking for something specific, that resource was a tremendous help. Everything was online and they have tutorials. So, if you didn't quite know where to

go, you can click one of their tutorials and it would get you through anything you were looking for. So, it was awesome.

Any service the participants used was easy to navigate with step-by-step instructions or video tutorials. These accessible resources made it easier for them as working adults who could not always contact student services during regular business hours or for those who lived in a different time zone. Gabby basically summarized many of the participant's experiences accessing the needed services while enrolled when she said:

Everything was there like on the websites or on the Moodle, on the orientation, or usually in the instructions from the professor. So, everything is there it's just a matter of going to find it. Even your things with LPS were streamlined. Or, I just reached out and asked people. I mean, I have never had anybody tell me I don't want to talk to you, you know. Everybody that I've come in contact with has been like, "Oh you do it this way, you go here you look on here", or I mean they'll even send you screenshots, you know, this is how you do it, and if you're having trouble they email me back. So, I haven't had any terrible trouble.

Engagement

The second theme of engagement emerged because of the recurring responses received from the participants about the connection with program content, or its relevance. As non-traditional students, they took pride in their educational journey because many of them were paying for it themselves. They were mostly attracted to the program for the opportunity to learn, knowing the LPS program area was relevant to their current profession or was the leverage they needed to advance or change careers. The theme of engagement also included the interactions they had with others involved with the program who understood their adult learner

characteristics—which was an expectation they had of the program—such as other students, staff, and faculty, as well as other various student service departments around campus.

The theme of engagement also introduced two subthemes. The first subtheme of disconnections derived mainly from the participants' academic experiences outside of the degree program that did not cater to the type of services the online adult participants expected. The second subtheme of connections was attributed to student services professionals around the university who really recognized and catered to their needs as online adult learners. These subthemes were consistent with the theoretical framework in this study, EVT (Burgoon, 1995).

Program Relevance

The LPS program is catered to working adults who are interested in leadership positions primarily in the public sector. This was the attraction all of the participants had to the program because it was relevant to their career field or a career path they wanted to pursue. All of the program area courses are taught by terminal faculty members who are aware of the demographics of students in the LPS program, so they typically structure their course requirements with working adults or mixed-aged students in mind. Additionally, many instructors in LPS participate in online trainings that assist them in building quality online courses that are not only easy to navigate, but pertinent to specific learning outcomes and objectives. This enables them to make learning activities and assessments more applicable to the learners which many adult students appreciate knowing their assignments serve a purpose. Because of this, many participants expressed how engaging courses were within the program area and they actually really enjoyed learning. Tkzari shared:

I wanted to be involved in something that interested me like, the subject matter. You know, I didn't just want to go through the motions of getting a degree. I wanted to

actually learn something, and I have. I've learned so much because I didn't know anything about state and local government. I didn't know anything about terrorism or about the issues of diversity in public leadership, you know. I've learned so much, even like gender and diversity. I think my favorite was on humanitarian response and terrorism, those were so interesting. For the first time ever, I finally understood why they use the term the war on terror. I never even understood. Just little things like that. You know, like, in my 40s and being an immigrant, how do you learn these things, you know?

Dawn and other participants had similar responses about how relevant the courses were to their current career goals since they were already working in the public sector and not looking to change jobs when they began the program. Dawn mentioned how it was easier going back to school in her 30s because she knew which classes to take that she could apply immediately at work. She was more engaged in the program area courses because she was able not only able to make connections with the material, but she was able to connect with other LPS students in the class working in the public sector, so they had more commonalities to talk about in the discussion forums. She explained:

I was able to connect with those [LPS] students, of course better than some of the electives because we're kind of in the same world and just having those communications in the forums was a lot more engaging. It was a different environment, like when you you're with the LPS classes or when you're with other classes [gen ed] that are just a mixture [with traditional-age students].

Bill had a perspective that was often mentioned by other participants about how he appreciated instructors who presented content that was recent and relevant to the current climate in the world. Many participants experienced other instructors who posted outdated lectures and

reused content in their courses which was a disconnection for the participants. Bill described how engaging one course was that had current up-to-date lectures and how important that was to him when he said:

I had this one class with this one professor. I mean that was the best instructor I had the whole time at State. Instructing wise, I also have to teach at work, when I teach I strive to be like him in class, every time because he gets his ideas out so well. And he believes in what he's doing. He's almost telling the story as much as he is teaching. So, one of the classes I took with him was a regular traditional class, recorded three days a week, so the class was going on that semester. Okay, it was Monday, Wednesday, Friday, so I had three lectures to watch a week, but I knew whatever recording I had in the database when I clicked on, they were live. I didn't watch them live very often but even when I saw recordings they were current so they happened that week. Oh man! So that, to me, made the learning better because he could reference stuff going on right now. And that was a core class. I mean, when it comes to the LPS classes, which is our major, I think that's super important, because it is totally different to be a leader right now than it was five years, four years ago or three years ago, and it's changing so fast. So a current lecture is pretty big. Again with them being, I think in some cases, in different parts of the world, I'm sure that's difficult. But it would be something I would like to see other instructors do a little differently in other classes.

This type of engagement with the course content was really life-changing for some of the participants since it was material they could put into practice and relate to immediately. Four of the seven participants were promoted as a result of earning a degree in a field that was applicable

to their career. Caleb, who was once intimidated by leadership positions, also tapped into a new mindset from engaging in the courses in the LPS program. He stated:

LPS, in general, has really given me a confidence and just ability to apply things, how I have not in the past, but intend to in the future. This helped me to discover not my newfound passion, but really to just really remove the dust off the one that I already had that existed. And now I just know how to apply it all. I would also say this confidence was given to me by my instructors, through their obvious dedication to the program and commitment to each lesson taught.

On the other hand, the participants sensed a difference in some online course structures and teaching strategies from classes that were required directly in their major as opposed to those courses that were required for the college or university. LPS is the only undergraduate online degree-completion program offered at NC State and many instructors who teach general education courses, as well as many student services professionals at the institution are still not aware of its existence. As NC State began offering online courses to undergraduate students, the LPS program was created specifically for adult learners, but required the same general education components for the curriculum as other programs in the College of Liberal Arts. All university instructors who teach general courses may not have received formal training on online course structure and design and often assume that all students enrolled are traditional-aged campus-based students, which often frustrated some of the participants. These frustrations came from different aspects of the general education courses, one being the requirement of a general education course itself, and others from the instructor's lack of knowledge of adult student characteristics. In talking with the participants, it was evident early in their interviews that their

only expectation that was extremely violated consisted of the general academic component of the LPS curriculum and presented the first subtheme, disconnections.

Disconnections

The subtheme of disconnections surfaced as a negative experience for the participants with their academic student services which according to EVT (Burgoon, 1995) is considered an unmet expectation labeled as a violation. Negative violations could likely decrease the student's outlook of student services which in this study were primarily from their academic experiences with the general education courses outside of their major.

Many participants expressed their discontent with quite a few general requirements, namely foreign language and physical education. Bill said:

This is probably a selfish thing to talk about because of the career I'm in, but, I don't necessarily need a lot of foreign language. So, having to take a foreign language and learning it online at this age has been super hard. I like taking things I feel like are going to help me, and I don't know an online class can get you to the point where you can use it daily.

Gabby did not understand why general courses were required at all. She and her son, who was also enrolled in Early College at the same time, shared the same disdain. She explained:

I mean, I'm a really big on—and I think my son's written some papers on this because he is too—we're really against the gen ed classes. I just, if I sign up for something I don't know why I have to take all this other stuff, so it kind of frustrated me. And I know why an 18 or 19 year old needs to take it, it makes them a well-rounded person, but I don't see why 47-48 year old person needs to take PE. That was kind of frustrating, but it was part of the process, so you do it. And I won't say I didn't learn anything from any of all of

them, but some of them I didn't. I felt like I wasted my time in some classes where I could have been taking something that specifically spoke to my degree. I was just, get out, you know, just get my grade and get out.

Similarly to Bill and Gabby, many of the participants agreed they were primarily interested in courses that served a purpose to their future career goals or at least were useful in their everyday life. Tkzari also had many frustrations with the online courses that did not cater to adult learners. Her sentiments summed up many of the participants' violations of the expectation of engagement in their online courses and were attributed to their disconnections with their academic related student services. Tkzari shared:

I mean a couple things, you know, I've gotta worry about being diverse enough. You want people to be well-rounded so certain general ed requirements make sense, but not for somebody like myself. Because obviously it's time and money, it's a financial investment. I don't want to waste time learning something that I'm not gonna get some kind of a turn on investment. It's either gotta have a purpose, or it's got to be part of the core, you know. I also think the content not being updated in a couple courses was a bit disappointing. And you know, just be mindful that adult students work full-time. From my perspective, mental fatigue is a very real thing. To work a full day and then have to do a three-hour exam at night because you know it's a Thursday. I mean, you're not you're not really going to like take a day [off] for a [home] exam. You know, for me to have to go work a full day and then to actually go and think critically about writing for three hours in the evening. I just feel like it would have been much easier on a weekend because I predominantly relied on the weekends to do my work. Here's the other thing, if they're going to do online courses like online degree programs, they really got to work to

understand demographic that they're catering to, helping adults get educated without feeling like they're children like you're being treated like a child in some instances. People also have to understand the limitations, the maturity level that you're dealing with. I definitely think that something needs to change about the physical exercise courses because honestly, to do two, one-credit courses was really just as labor intensive as a three-credit hour course. But the other thing is, you're not considering limitations on people, you know, I'm in my 40s. I'm at risk for osteoporosis!

Tkzari thoughts were consistent with the experiences participants had with required general education courses, as well as within the major. Yet, the participants were quick to point out how they were mostly overall satisfied with the major department courses and had more negative experiences with the general course requirements. Additionally, at some point during their interviews, all seven participants talked about the disappointment of outdated content in a few courses and how they did not feel that some courses took adult learners into consideration or even considered that they were not campus-based students. Bill added to the various irritations expressed by participants when he said that he felt some courses did not meet his expectations because of their disorganization, lack of consistency, and not recognizing prior learning experience.

To me, somebody in my life situation who's not a full-time student, simplicity is my friend. Some instructors don't use Moodle very much at all. So, what they'll do is—like the class I'm taking this summer—nothing is on Moodle but the syllabus, and what you have to do every week, everything else is on the textbook website. And to me that was frustrating. Also, some instructors allow you to work ahead but some of them don't. Any instructor that allows me to work ahead is doing me a favor. You know, if I have a

discussion board to do or a quiz, I'm trying to take advantage of the time I have away from my family to do the work, I need to get all the work done when I can. So, the teachers that would allow me to work ahead, that was a blessing. So that was a little difficult. Um, and I mean sometimes consistency in the syllabus stuff like some, some instructors are super super detailed in your syllabus about your due dates—and some of them you know were very vague. However, I do understand a lot of instructors have so much going on—or I would like to think they do—so I'm not knocking them for that. So, I don't know if that could change but that was by far or some of my biggest problems with some of the online stuff. The other part is, I wish we could use your job experience to bypass some of the credits. I feel like I was so advanced in my career and I had just got promoted to captain last year, and before that I filled in a year as a captain at another station. So, for two years I was already supervising people. And I was taking classes that kinda were behind where I was in my career, if that makes sense—with the leadership thoughts and processes and dealing with people. At times I felt like I should be able to submit one of the leadership classes I've had that we take in the fire service and my supervisor experience. Not trying to get out of work, but I just felt like at times it was a waste a little bit, because was just learning and some concepts I learned a year and a half ago in the required supervisor training that I had to take for a week. That would be neat. Since we have so many adults in our program, who are in the military or in public sector that you know they might have been there for 10-15 years already, it would be neat if you could do something like that. I don't know if that would count for something. I would have no idea how to do that.

Another disconnection that surfaced for participants were proctored exams. The university requires students who live within a 50-mile radius of campus to complete required proctored exams at the campus testing center. If students do not live within that radius, they are allowed to use a proctor locally in their area. Although Bill had flexibility with his work schedule and welcomed the opportunity to go to campus to take his proctored exams, he shared:

I think the proctoring test is difficult, especially if somebody is not close to a proctoring center or if they are inside of that 50- mile radius. I don't know that I always would have been able to do that. Luckily in my work situation as a firefighter, I was off a lot during the week. But for those who work eight to five, I have no idea how they have been able to go get a test proctored. I don't know how an organization or boss just continually let you off to go take a test, you know, and they may, I don't know, but that has to be challenging for a lot of people.

Tkzari experienced some of the same frustrations Bill mentioned with her proctored exams for a pre- and post-test required for her physical education courses, as well as for one of her general education courses. She expressed issues with both navigating her way around campus, as well as the ineffectiveness and inconvenience of proctored exams in general.

[In regard to a pre and posttest for PE courses] Here's the thing, you know, I've never been to campus before. So, to try and navigate where to park, how to find the gym, how to enter, and then my student card didn't work, you know, to scan in because I don't know, maybe I'd never activated or knew I needed to. I mean I'd honestly never been on campus before. So, it was like just a real bit of drama, and my time... [In regard to another proctored exam] "You know, I've got to make sure in a three-day window that I can get a proctored exam; I had to take a day off work, and I have to schedule it around

work; I had to get the thing scheduled; I had to drive all the way out from where I live; I had to find parking. And, the exam, it was all multiple choice, all just expected memorization. I mean honestly, I don't have time to memorize mythology. And I think like if you understand what you're learning, like what is the purpose of what you're learning, what is it counting towards, what are you getting out of it, then you can justify why you're working on it, you know, not to just jump through hoops. Like, I hate the feeling of having to do something just for the purpose of doing something.

Other participants mentioned the inconvenience of rearranging their schedules to complete proctored exams although they lived outside the 50-mile radius and did not have to go to campus. Sarah went to campus to complete a proctored exam for a general course and mentioned the uselessness of memorizing material that she will probably never apply again.

Caleb shared an unexpected encounter he had with an instructor who must have mistaken him for a traditional-aged student which was truly a disconnection for him. As he described his experience it was evident that he was still irritated by the situation. He shared:

As an online student, you know people can interpret things how they want to read it and however they may be feeling that day about something else who knows. But, I think with the emails, because I'm just trying to understand from an uneducated perspective, versus an educated perspective. So, you know, I felt like this guy must think he's talking to a 10-year-old because that's how the emails read initially. I don't know, so I just kind of ignored him. But then after the fact, I really tried, on every paper. You know, I don't want a perfect grade because it was just long, I want it to be right and that's what I was trying to explain to him. Like, I'm just trying to understand, I'm not trying to say one way or the other, but based on our readings or interpretation whatever, help me to understand, rather

than beat me down, or tear me down like a 12-year-old, you know. So, at one point I had to email and say I'm a 45-year-old veteran, United States Marine Corps, wife, three kids, you know, here's who I am a little bit, just trying to relate, and then from that point on, everything was fine.

For these reasons, Caleb said he sometimes preferred to be in the traditional classroom setting to clarify understanding when needed, but to also put a face with a name so instructors and even other student service professionals would know they were speaking to an adult and give him his due respect. Other participants described instances when the instructor seemingly talked down to them via email as if they were children or traditional college-aged students instead of older adults. Many instructors would also suggest they visit certain student services on campus for the assistance they were asking the instructor to help them with, not realizing they were true distance education students not living on campus.

Justifiably, all but one participant found out during their participant interview that the LPS program was the only online undergraduate program offered at NC State, so some of the experiences they had were completely unexpected which may have attributed to their disconnections with many of the academic-related student services. Many participants were under the impression that because the program was advertised to adult students, the entire curriculum, instructors, and campus community were aware of their adult student characteristics and that they were true distance education students and not campus students taking online classes, which some of them did.

Connections

The participants did not have all negative encounters with the student services provided. They also had quite a few unexpected surprising experiences with academic and non-academic

related services which attributed to the next subtheme of connections. When Lynn found out LPS was the only online undergraduate program, she said:

Well now that I know you're only online program on campus, it's even that much more impressive because you cover everything. It's like you've done it long enough, you know, what everyone needs to know, you know the format to put it out there. And you've made it accessible so even if it's 11 o'clock at night and we're having to figure out what we got to do for graduation you've put it out there. It's in a detailed email there's links to go to tell you exactly what you can do, you know how many people you can bring, like from start to finish. You can tell that you all put a lot of thought into walking through steps, you didn't leave anyone hanging anywhere along the way. And I would have thought there are a lot more programs online for the detail you have put into that. What you guys to do for us is very important, because if we didn't have your support and encouragement telling us step-by-step how to get to where we need to go, it might not encourage us to do it. Other people need to know, you can be 48 and still do it!

The subtheme of connections revealed unanticipated experiences the participants had with student services, which based on EVT (Burgoon, 1995) are positive violations which should increase their outlook on student services. The theory suggests that positive experiences will result in a confirmation, meaning if someone in a student service area went way out of their way to assist a student that was not expected, it would be considered an unmet expectation that resulted in a positive confirmation. The participants had a few unexpected engaging experiences with student services in academic advising, financial aid, career services, and some online courses.

Academic Advising. Many of the participants expressed how instrumental I was to them as the advisor prior to applying to the LPS program. Actions such as responding to their emails immediately and providing them with information they wanted about the program and curriculum contributed to their positive experience. Caleb also did not know that LPS was the only online undergraduate program at NC State, but he spoke of some of our early interactions before he applied and once he was accepted when he shared:

I didn't know that detail, but I reached out on email when I saw the program online you guys provided and you respond back. You know, you gave me some information then the rest was history. I think my case was such a hurry type thing because I was trying to get into Summer I. It [enrolling] was all your dealings; you know. I didn't expect it to be so easily and so quickly done. And all that was your involvement, you, you pretty much enrolled me I think through everything even being on the phone and just, you went out of your way, LaShica and it's, it's, ridiculous. Yeah, wonderfully ridiculous.

As an advisor in a transfer program, I offer unofficial transcript evaluations to show prospective students how their existing credits fit into our requirements, and let them know how much longer it may take them to graduate with the LPS program. A few participants took advantage of that service before applying. As highlighted within their other experiences when they talked about how intuitive and streamlined everything was, they attributed much of that to the online Moodle advising page that I utilize and regularly update that covers everything they need to know from the beginning of the program until they graduate. The online advising space also includes various forums for them to communicate with each other about classes they have taken, share syllabi, post internship and job opportunities, and buy, sell, or give-away books. The

space also includes several resources, links, online tutorials, and instructions so students do not have to search many of the university's websites to find what they need.

After I began advising this population, I went back to school to earn a graduate certificate and continued on to a PhD program to learn more about adult student characteristics. It was through my coursework that I realized online students need a sense of community and belonging, which is why I developed many of the student forums in the Moodle advising space for them to connect with one another. As I continued communicating with them, I recognized that most adult students complete their schoolwork and try to handle school-related business when they get off work or on the weekends. For that reason, I began making myself available to them outside of normal business hours and accommodate students living in different time zones. I often respond to student emails quickly, especially in the evening, and offer to schedule advising appointments after 5 p.m. Many participants expressed that I was primarily the only "live body" they connected with and that I responded to them almost immediately. Bill joked, "An email to you was answered, usually within a day or an hour, I mean right away so I was always really pleased with that."

When asked about which student services went out of their way to assist them, every participant mentioned advising and how resourceful and timely they received responses when needed. Lynn added:

Aside from the library, I would say you were the only other resource I really used. You were in the like the Queen, you took care of everything. We didn't have to do anything, we just call the LaShica and say look this is what I got going on, help me out here.

As the only advisor for the program and one of their student services, this part of the interview with each participant was a bit uncomfortable for me to ask follow-up questions or

solicit engaging “narrative” stories because of the prolonged engagement I establish with each advisor/advisee relationship. Many participants consistently shared their comments with me throughout their time in the program, and my primary goal in this research was to learn more about their experiences with other services around campus and not necessarily mine as their advisor, although I was very open to receiving that positive or negative feedback as well.

Sarah was one participant who was not very detailed in her interview responses, which I noted was the same experience I had with her as an advisee. I was delighted when she signed up to participate in my study because it finally gave me the opportunity to learn more about her since she did not contact me as often as some of my other advisees who I knew a little better. We discovered, because she transferred from four other community colleges before beginning with us, she did not need to reach out to me as often and knew how to navigate her way around finding the resources she needed without much help. She concurred when she said:

I did not interact with many other departments in my time with LPS, but I had consistently positive experience with my advisor. She really was very helpful and provided timely responses. One of the best things was just the responsiveness, it was truly helpful because if that's specifically, if that's the only service that you need or that you kind of use, it being efficient, just makes the experience that much better.

As the only advisor for the program, I strive to provide students all of the information and resources they need when they are first accepted so they will know how to find what they need when they need it. After they complete the online orientation and quiz I created in our Moodle advising space, they are required to have a one-on-one advising appointment with me to discuss their degree audit, remaining requirements, class options, and to enroll in at least one class on their own. This time is also used to answer any additional questions they may have. The initial

advising appointment can be completed via phone, Zoom, or face-to-face, and typically lasts anywhere from 45 to 90 minutes per student. Sarah added after her initial advising appointment that she was aware of all of the resources she needed to get through the program, so she was good to go. She also appreciated the many forums available on the Moodle page that helped her choose which classes were a good fit for her each semester without any input from me. She shared:

The open forum for students to inquire [and share] about the previous courses that they've taken was awesome, because it was almost like a cheat sheet. Just to know what kind of instructor you're getting into, like, I've never seen that before, that was really cool.

Additionally, I always send various announcements through Moodle that automatically filter to a student's campus email which inform them on any updates, deadlines, or opportunities they can participate in. Dawn reflected on some of these advising experiences with me and the resources I shared with students:

Well, you were the biggest help! Pretty much all my communication was with you and you helped me navigate everything. All of your emails were very helpful because they're emails for the beginner student, the students that were enrolled, and the ones that are wrapping up. You always have a list of dates and it just helped keep things flowing. But what was very helpful starting, was you just telling me how to navigate, "Hey, this is available in Pack Portal, be sure to look here for this, did you know this was over here?" I felt like I was kind of going into this big world of NC State and I was going in a little bit blind. So, knowing I had a resource unlike the community college—I had to reach out to them as needed—you were kind of like, "I'm here! Just let me know! Contact me!" But all of that, the enrollment wizard, all that pre- planning classes just made things so much

easier. And then I mean we kind of knew which classes were available, but you also let us know of new options, or a new class that came about or so, that was great too because I kind of had like these are the classes I want to take, but every now and then you'd throw out something new and I'd be like, oooh, I like that better.

Overall, most participants expected to be assigned an advisor similar to how they were assigned at the other colleges and universities they were enrolled; however, they were not expecting to have connections with an advisor who provided the type of encouragement many online students need, one who understood their adult student characteristics, and one who efficiently provided information on additional online services as needed any time day or night. Caleb added, "I had continued positive reinforcement on the emotional level from my advisor. Without an advisor being as truly as dedicated as mine was I may not have even continued with the program."

Tkzari and Gabby seemed to always have the best sentiments to summarize what most of the participants shared about their advising experiences. Tkzari stated:

I mean honestly the advising that I got from you. I just feel like you put so much, like your passion and your energy being there for people. It's just so evident. And you were so knowledgeable. I just think that the knowledge that was given to me just inspired like a lot of confidence. I was like, okay, I feel like this is exactly the place that I need to be. I don't think I would have been able to do this without you.

Similarly, Gabby shared:

Well, my advisor was very good at everything I mean, you were always very, very accommodating and helpful and you explain stuff to us, so I felt like that was unexpected to me as far as, you know, coming from community college, I didn't have that. I think I

had an advisor but I've never talked to them. And you know you sort of just meander your way through at the community college, because you're just sort of out there on your own. So at least with you, I felt like I had a lifeline, somebody to come to when I did have questions. The whole academic advising, yeah you were always fantastic you just help with everything we needed, or me anyway, you always were there to let us know. I feel like we got great support. It's very beneficial the support y'all give out to the students.

Financial Aid. The participants also had positive unexpected connections with other student services professionals around campus that they were very pleased about. Participants were eager to share these experiences with other service specialists who really went out of their way to assist them when they did not expect it. One such service was financial aid. The mention of this service so often surprised me. Tkzari appreciated financial aid when she found out that full-time students were awarded more aid than part-time students. That encouraged her to take on more classes which ultimately allowed her to graduate sooner and save money which was also an important factor to many participants as well. She shared:

I mean financial aid was great. I've never had any issues with them. What I wasn't educated on is that if you do 12 credit hours at a time, you can actually get access to funds. Nobody ever told me that, so that was amazing. I actually got a lot of grant money toward paying for this degree which really surprised me. The extra financing really helped a lot because not only does it keep you motivated, but it also saves me a lot of money. Had known that like years ago, I probably would have tried to do more.

The most notable connections were shared by Bill and Lynn when their financial aid counselors contacted them to offer assistance without them reaching out to financial aid at all.

Many participants were concerned about the additional financial responsibility they faced when deciding to return to school, so any financial assistance they received was always positive. It was evident that Bill was still in shock about the assistance he received when he shared his story:

I tell you one person that helped me a lot was a guy in the in financial aid office. I think I canceled two classes one summer because I didn't have any money left at the city. Things were a little tight at home so I was like I'm just going to reschedule these and take them in the fall or some other time. So, when I cancelled them, I got an email from financial aid it was like hey I saw you cancel these classes, is it financial related? And I say, well, as a matter of fact it is. I told him my situation and he told me that he was able to give me a grant once I did the FAFSA. So, I got a grant that summer to pay for both classes. I would have never expected that because I didn't get any financial aid money at all. So that guy just took the time to email me and asked me, do you need some help, I saw you cancel your classes. So, that was pretty neat. It was just a blessing.

Bill really appreciated that someone in financial aid paid enough attention to realize he may have needed financial assistance and reached out to him to ask. Because the fiscal year ended before his summer tuition was due, he ran out of money from his employer for that academic year. He found himself in a similar situation the next summer and reached out to the same counselor to ask if that grant was still an option, which it was. If it were not for that counselor reaching out to offer Bill the grant the first time, he would have had to postpone graduation by at least a year to take those classes when his funding was renewed by his employer.

Lynn had a similar experience that she considered a positive engagement and connection to a financial aid counselor that she was not expecting. She explained:

When I applied for financial aid, I kept checking and I noticed there were some things on hold, but it looked like I had done everything. Well then, I actually got a phone call from financial aid on campus. And the lady I spoke with was extremely nice and she went through the whole process and actually it was just kind of something hung up in the system and once she talked with me, it dropped and everything worked like it was supposed to. She was able to help me tremendously to make sure everything was good every time the semester would change. My daughter was also in college, so I had to do her Financial Aid too, you know. So, they wanted to make sure my parent stuff had not interfered with my student stuff, and I would have never thought about that either. They took the time to really explain and go through things which was awesome. And to me that was like a blessing because I thought I was gonna have to pay a lot more than I did and after she called, it was like one less thing to worry about. She just called me out of the blue. It was amazing.

Gabby mentioned, consistent with other participants, that financial aid was responsive, as was every service she contacted on campus. When she reached out to them, she always received consistent help when needed. She joked:

Financial aid was always good because they give me money, or they found me some money! But, I just know that I've had the same guy the whole time. I guess because it goes the last name. And if I emailed him he either fixed it, or he told me what I was doing wrong to fix it. I never had to contact him more than once or twice to get something rolling. I've just never really had any trouble. Even I mean, I did my FAFSA you know filled it out, but you know I hear people complaining about them at other colleges or

whatever, but I've just never have had any trouble. I think they were always very receptive to everything. Very responsive.

Career Development Center. Dawn also had a positive unexpected experience with the Career Development Center which she attributes to landing the promotion to the position she is currently in now.

When I had applied for this new job, I was like, let me try the Career Development Center. I think I found out about it in one of your emails. I probably wouldn't have reached out otherwise because I didn't know that was a thing. I said let me just see what resources are available and I got connected with a career counselor. She reviewed my LinkedIn profile and gave me tips. I was able to update all of that information as to what was relevant, what employers are looking for just in case this new employer may look at my page. And then she reviewed my cover letter and my resume, because it had been a really long time since I had to do a cover letter or since I had updated my resume. You know things have changed so much about what employers are looking at. I have to say everything I had was very outdated and I tried to revamp it, sent it to her, and she sent back her suggestions. So, I had all this fresh new look because of the help I got from the Career Development Center got sent in. I mean that's the first that is your first impression. That was a great resource to have at that time. She was real quick to review everything when she knew I was in the process of trying to apply for a job.

Dawn was at her previous job for over 20 years where she began as a camp counselor in high school, so she had not applied for a new job at a new agency in years and never had a need to update her resume or cover letter. When she saw this job opening she felt confident about applying because of the knowledge she gained in the LPS program. She added, "because of the

different topics I've learned LPS, it opened my eyes to leadership in the [previous] department I was with and I was not happy, because I saw so many things that could have been done so much better." She attended a leadership conference and was impressed with a particular company and a job they had posted, and she felt she was capable of doing it with her experience and additional knowledge gained from the LPS program, so she applied and was extremely grateful that the Career Development Center was available to offer online services to help her update her information after 20 years to acquire the job. She got the job.

Online Course Delivery. Although Tkzari shared the most unexpected experiences than any other participant about her disconnections with online classes outside of the LPS program area, she also shared positive feedback about general education instructors who surprisingly went out their way to provide a good online experience that she connected with. She explained:

I think there are times that I had been surprised by how people really do care about delivering a good online experience. I mean, that this past semester, my History teacher really had some awesome lecturers. There are some [gen ed instructors] that really care about online delivery; they really care about the student experience. They are very responsive just really fantastic people. My History instructor really cares about online delivery and catering to online learners. She was very receptive to feedback and course improvements, you know, she was big into surveys to drive the student experience and she really structured the course and online delivery aspect of it very well... I've really had some fun courses, you know, and I think with some of these people, you actually see when they're really passionate about giving people a fun experience, building some fun into it, you know. And then my Philosophy instructor was fantastic. The best advice I can give anybody if you have a full load and you need to take something else and you really

needed to be completely self-pace, do you one of his courses. If it weren't for his courses, I may not have been able to manage as much of the load as I did. What he does is he divides his courses into three sections with milestones, and so the first section is maybe due within like the first block out of eight weeks or something. So, you don't have to work on it every week, you can just dedicate some time as you get closer to that end point and then just knock it out. You know, so I mean I really appreciated that and he teaches philosophy really well. I mean, I'm not someone who's inherently philosophically minded and I did actually get something out of it.

By and large, the participants had a range of engagements with different online student services that included relevancy of course content, and instruction design and delivery. This theme revealed both negative and positive engagements by the participants. The unexpected negative engagements presented the subtheme of disconnection while the positive unexpected engagements presented the subtheme of connections. The negative disconnections were mainly attributed to academic-related student services in online courses outside of participants' major curriculum although they shared some disregard for certain aspects in the major courses as well. All participants expressed positive connections with their advisor as well as other student services professionals in financial aid and the Career Development Center, and faculty members who really went well out of their way to provide them with a positive online course experience.

These subthemes related to EVT in this study presume disconnections decreased the participant's attractiveness to student services and their connections increased their attractiveness.

Inclusion

Inclusion, the last theme from the student experiences in research question 2, emerged from the participants feeling a sense of belonging to the university from the multiple student services offered, not only online but also on campus. This theme was considered from various perspectives, one previously mentioned in the theme of access. Students felt a sense of inclusion to the university just having access to being a student, especially considering this is the only undergraduate program this well-known university offered online. Otherwise, this opportunity would not have been an option since none of them lived directly in the area.

However, not living in the area did not hinder the participants from taking advantage of visiting campus often. Although LPS is an online degree-completion program, many students chose to apply because it was offered by a brick and mortar school they could visit if necessary or whenever they wanted. We encourage students to take advantage of campus activities and resources if they can, but if they cannot, we ensure that everything they need to be successful is offered online. Five of the seven participants went to campus at least once while enrolled. Some visited because they wanted to and not to necessarily take care of any business with student services, although some interacted with student services while they were there. Bill and Sarah knew immediately when they applied and enrolled into NC State that they were planning to visit campus whenever they could. Sarah indicated:

I knew I would visit campus from time to time, and that was exciting because my brother was there. So we would go to visit and it made me feel more a part, even though I never really used the services per se. Just being on campus and, you know, walking around with other students taking pictures was a lot of fun.

Bill also had every intention to visit campus for any opportunity that presented itself. He was the only participant who mentioned joining a student club that allowed him to get free tickets to sporting events. He said:

I felt included as much as a 30-year-old can feel included in college, you know what I mean. I really did, and I would have been way more included, like I said, had we not got pregnant—at which I would rather had my kid. But, I still have visited campus, I don't know, in the four years I've been online student, I visited campus 50 times maybe for whatever reason, most of the time it was for testing. I actually joined the student Wolfpack club for one semester and got me some basketball tickets, so it was pretty neat. I think that is something that if you live close enough to campus for somebody my age who didn't get to go to college, that's a cool thing to go do you know. I had to go to meetings and pick up my ticket so; yeah, I took my pregnant wife to a student Wolfpack club meeting, which was hilarious. I sat two rows behind the bench for a bunch of games, very cool. I took my mom one time she sat in the student section, it was pretty neat and I probably would have done it every year, if not for the child. I was not gonna leave them at home to go to a basketball game, not without them. So yeah, that happened for one year and I was happy with it and then my kid came.

Caleb and his family were also able to receive free tickets to sporting events through Veteran Affairs. Caleb was the only military participant in the study who I discovered had quite a bit of interaction and assistance from the Veteran Affairs office throughout his time in the program. Many of his interview responses with student services included his affiliation with Veteran Affairs and how supportive they were to him while enrolled which made him feel even more included at the university. Caleb explained:

I think they try to build like camaraderie for a lot of veterans. You know, even as an online student they're always having little social events, celebrations, end of year, end of the semester, just small community get-togethers I was invited to, although I didn't get to participate in any of that. But, also sporting events, they afforded me opportunities to go to State games, for free, and for my family to go too. We were able to participate in these smaller events and once or twice being recognized. They really went out of their way, to offer what they could which really made me feel welcome. I was also in contact with a lot of student veterans and people at veteran services. I can't even name them all. And some of those weren't necessarily affiliated with the veteran services but they were links. The VA office would mention me in something, and it would go to someone who then would contact me. They were great, always sending stuff, you know, I think they did a really good job communicating what services they had.

Dawn also visited campus for proctored exams, but she intentionally took advantage of other events with her family who also enjoyed being on campus. She appreciated the welcoming environment as an adult student, and even the opportunity to bring her family at times. Dawn shared:

Even though you think you'd kind of feel out of place as an adult learner, especially if you go on campus, but I didn't feel that. When I went on campus everyone was very welcoming. I always felt included and connected. Plus, there was only one year we missed, but we came out to the PackaPalooza every year, and it's an event I've been able to bring the family to. It's been great and I just go around seeing all the different student clubs and just everything the campus is doing. It's nice. And my kids love it. They're looking at all the cool activities, music and dancing. All of the athletes line up and they'll

sign their posters. Super cool. Families, everybody's sporting their red and white. Since I'm not on campus, this is one event that's not all young students that I can participate in and get my family involved. It's great that State offers things like that for the community.

Aside from the various opportunities some of the participants took advantage of by visiting campus, they still felt a sense of inclusion to the university just from the many emails they received informing them about what was happening on campus. Even if they could not attend, just extending the invitation for them to attend made them feel involved. Gabby was one of the two participants who never visited campus while enrolled, but she still felt included in the university community. She shared:

I mean, all of the emails made us feel included, just letting us know what was going on campus really made us feel a part of the school. I think they've done a good job of finding a way to make the LPS students feel like we are still part of the NC State.

Tkzari only went to campus a few times for proctored exams but also agreed with Gabby when she said:

I didn't feel excluded. I mean, we got a ton of emails, like all the time. You always knew what was going on. If I had the time and the inclination to be on campus doing things, you know I probably would have.

Lynn was the second participant who never stepped foot on campus until her graduation day. However, she expressed her feeling of inclusion at the university more so from the academic perspective and feeling accepted as an adult learner in the classroom with her younger classmates.

When we would do the discussion boards, I really would [feel included], even being an older student in the class. The younger students wanted to talk, they wanted to pick your

brain about things and so it was pretty interesting for them to want to hear our two cents worth and they appreciated it, so it was awesome.

Other participants mentioned how they also felt included in the classroom, but primarily spoke about the connection to the other adult learners and instructors in their courses who they felt really appreciated and respected their insights from an adult learner perspective.

Summary of Experiences with Student Services

The second research question explored these seven non-traditional online transfer students' experiences with student services through the same emergent themes of access, engagement, and inclusion that were revealed from their initial expectations. The second theme of engagement also uncovered two sub-themes, disconnections and connections that coincided with the EVT (Burgoon, 1995) concepts of violations and confirmations of their initial expectations.

Table 4 outlines the three emergent themes for research question 2 and reveals characteristics under each theme and subtheme as it related to the participants' experiences of student services after transferring into the only online undergraduate program at this research 1 university.

Table 4*Emergent Themes of Participants' Experiences*

Access	Engagement	Inclusion
<p>Consistent email communication</p> <p>Easy to navigate websites</p> <p>Easy to navigate platforms</p> <p>Online tutorials</p> <p>Platform specific to program area</p>	<p>Engaging instructors</p> <p>Like-minded classmates</p> <p>Relevant course content</p>	<p>Email updates of campus resources, events, and workshops</p> <p>Invitations to campus activities</p> <p>Opportunity to participate on campus</p> <p>Opportunity to join student club</p> <p>Veteran's Affairs office activities</p>
	<p>Subtheme: Disconnections</p> <p>Outdated course content</p> <p>Lack of understanding of adult learner characteristics</p> <p>Proctored exams</p> <p>General education requirements</p> <p>Lack of prior learning credit</p> <p>Lack of respect</p> <p>Subtheme: Connections</p> <p>Advising</p> <p>Financial Aid</p> <p>Career Services</p> <p>Quality online instruction</p>	

Research Question 3 Findings: Student Services' Impact on Overall Experience

Research question 3 revealed how interactions with student services impacted the participants' overall experience at the university. Here, a fourth theme of pride emerged and the other three existent themes of access, engagement, and inclusion materialized as subthemes that influenced participants' overall feelings of pride. When asked if they felt included as part of the campus community as an online student, many gave responses on how their access to resources, academic engagement in the classroom, availability of student services professionals, and overwhelming communication and opportunities to visit campus made them feel included and gave them a sense of pride in feeling a part of the university.

This final section of the findings will be presented once again using Polkinghorne's (1995) narratives of analysis as utilized in research question 1. This analysis will narrate participants' reflections from their perspective of how the access, engagement, and inclusion with student services impacted their overall experiences as an online student at this research 1 school that typically caters to traditional-aged campus-based students. I synthesized their interviews to extrapolate their feelings and overall sense of pride of being an alum. Most of these narrations are direct quotes from the interviews. I added a few words for clarity, but did not misconstrue the participant's intended message as confirmed via member checking. This section will also include a mini synopsis from me as the researcher and the participants' advisor providing additional insights and updates from our interview and latter conversations during member checking.

Tkzari

The following is a synthesis of Tkzari's interview responses analyzed into this narrative by me.

I personally identify as a Wolfpack. I bought a NC State class ring and have NC State memorabilia in my office. I think doing this degree at NC State helps me feel more included in my workplace because we have a lot of other NC State grads, so I do feel a part of something that I can identify with. And, I feel like coming from NC State gives a lot of credibility to the degree since it's a known, reputable credential. I also felt like the program was the most supportive, coupled with the incredible financial support I received, in addition to the degree being issued not stated as earned online. That also made a difference!

Synopsis

Tkzari was the most vocal participant about her expectations and experiences, so I was pleased to hear her talk about her connection to the university and the overall impact earning this degree had on her. Knowing the obstacles she faced coming from another country where her past educational courses were not originally recognized when she came to the U.S., and knowing the challenges she endured at the first two four-year institutions where she began her journey for a bachelor's degree seven years ago, I am delighted she had a happy ending.

Bill

The following is a synthesis of Bill's interview responses analyzed into this narrative by me.

I considered leaving LPS one time when the NC Promise came out, for money reasons, but I was so far into LPS and I loved NC State I knew I couldn't leave! I was so happy I can't even explain the feeling when I got my letter to get into NC State. My wife was still in bed and I went and got mail and it's like a Saturday morning. I literally went and jumped on the bed like it was Christmas morning, and she was like, did we win the lottery? I said I did, but you didn't, I got in NC State!! I was super hype to get in, and it was terrific. I have really enjoyed it and I

have thought many times about how I would love to at some point in life or career be involved in the program as a student service or a professor or something like that because I love teaching.

I'm glad to graduate, but I'm saying, I'm saddened to leave a little bit too.

Synopsis

Bill was so excited to be a student at NC State. He shared how he made a day of going to eat breakfast at the farmers market down the street from campus before his proctored tests. Bill is now in an executive Master of Public Administration program at another school in NC, but says he constantly promotes the LPS program to other firefighters on the job or anyone who will listen to him. He noted the work it takes for firefighters to get new trucks, new equipment, pay raises, and benefits, and that all of those changes start in an office or council meeting. With these two degrees Bill says he can get a really good job in government that does not require running into burning buildings, and that is why he promotes the LPS program to so many firefighters.

Gabby

The following is a synthesis of Gabby's interview responses analyzed into this narrative by me.

I felt connected to the LPS program, and we feel like part of the school. You know they [NC State] do a lot of things to make people feel included, but they didn't really come right out and say, distance education you know, and I can see why because we're not on their radar there. But I think you're changing a lot of that. But my experiences with student services were seamless, it didn't put a kink in my life. Overall for me, it was a good experience. I'm glad I did it. I'm glad I chose LPS. I've learned a lot. I've learned a lot of the things that I can use at my job and that's the whole purpose of it— to be able to use it.

Synopsis

Gabby and Lynn were the only two participants who never stepped foot on NC State's campus while they were enrolled. I noted some hesitation in Gabby's voice that did not sound like she really felt connected to NC State, but I soon discovered that she is now enrolled in a master's program at NC State. She was already comfortable and familiar with the online process and was pleased with the student services to continue with NC State a little longer.

Lynn

The following is a synthesis of Lynn's interview responses analyzed into this narrative by me.

Oh man it was great! I jumped in and never looked back! I sacrificed so much to get my degree; it makes me appreciate it that much more. The one thing that impressed me the most was that I work in human resources at my agency and I see a lot of the online degrees that people get, and no offense but some of these places, we have a list from the state of whether they qualify as a true degree or not. To know that as reputable as NC State is, you feel a lot of validity in that program. Plus, working in leadership within the public sector I often recall conversations with professors in the program which have been very inspiring in my attempts to make things right for my staff. And the program was convenient and straightforward. I didn't really find myself having to guess a lot about what to do next. All of the tutorials that you guys have on the actual LPS site were great because they walked you through what steps you need to do next. They were awesome. And I don't know how I would have navigated or graduated on track without your assistance. You're definitely priceless.

Synopsis

Lynn agreed with Tkzari that she felt a lot of validity in her degree and the program because she earned it from a reputable school. As she mentioned in her introduction, she now feels better prepared for wherever her career may take her after finally completing her degree through NC State.

Caleb

The following is a synthesis of Caleb's interview responses analyzed into this narrative by me.

I am the first of my family to attend college or hold a degree, so this was a big deal for me, even at 44 years of age. Being an online student, the majority of my college experience was dependent on student services, and I never felt disconnected. I really felt like I belonged to NC State, especially with all the opportunities afforded to me by student services. There was constant communication of opportunities, be it an internship, an additional learning experience, or how to better define yourself and your career goals. It was a wonderful experience, so much that I'm going to continue the online master's program in education at NC State. I was considering another school, but I'm gonna stay with the Pack.

Synopsis

Caleb really maximized his undergraduate experience with the help of Veteran Affairs. He was able to take advantage of many opportunities that otherwise would not have been possible if the Veteran Affairs office did not embrace online veterans just as the veterans on campus. It was the Veteran Affairs office that also encouraged and offered to help supplement Caleb's master's education.

Sarah

The following is a synthesis of Sarah's interview responses analyzed into this narrative by me.

I just thought everything was wonderful. I don't have anything to complain about. All of the services were great. I had a great experience. I think I felt more connected mostly because I made a point to come to campus when I had the chance, just walking through Talley and the bookstore. And I got my brick, I'm just gonna tell you, I'll admit it, I got my brick, so that was really like the cherry on top! And the t-shirts were huge! Loved that! I was like yeah, I can have this from my school and my program. I think the program overall is a big success. I think NC State should pursue looking into offering other [undergraduate] online programs. They could be successful too, since the resources were there. I loved it, it was great and it opens the door up to a whole different population who would be interested in secondary education that otherwise couldn't be.

Synopsis

Sarah was the youngest of the participants, but had non-traditional characteristics that did not allow her to complete her undergraduate degree on campus. Being able to attend a reputable brick and mortar school online was a great way for her to have the best of both worlds. Sarah also mentioned a connection to the university with t-shirts that I had designed for LPS students this year for the first time for the very purpose of them feeling connected. All seven participants actually purchased an LPS shirt when offered.

Dawn

The following is a synthesis of Dawn's interview responses analyzed into this narrative by me.

I had an overall great experience with LPS and NC State. Navigating the services was pretty easy. I never worried about where I needed to find something; it was well organized, so that was helpful. Since COVID when my kids have been home doing school online, theirs is very unorganized, I was like they need Moodle! They need everything in one place. But, overall, I don't think I would have felt as connected without coming on campus, or at least being invited, right. I tried to stay as connected as possible, just in case there is something that I was interested in. So, even though I was not there, they still sent you emails and things like that say, hey this is what's going on. They said you are students even though you're an online student, you're still part of us.

Synopsis

Dawn always dreamed of going to NC State and was excited to have the opportunity to visit campus and share her college experience with her family. She attributed obtaining her current job as a supervisor at a local government organization to LPS and the help of the Career Development Center. The engagement she had with the program curriculum allowed her to see what leadership is and how to run her organization more efficiently by building a strong support system. She was elated to find this program at the school she had always dreamed of attending and was very grateful that the Career Development Center offered services to assist her in advancing in her career.

Summary of Student Services Impact on Overall Experience

The three themes presented in this study: access, engagement, and inclusion, resonated as subthemes in the participants' feelings of how their interactions with student services impacted their overall experience at the research 1 institution and revealed a fourth theme of pride. More so than anything, at some point all the participants expressed how proud they felt having the

opportunity to complete their bachelor’s degree from a reputable school, even though it was online. The access, engagement, and inclusiveness of the online student services they received while enrolled attributed to this undeniable sense of pride.

Table 5

Emergent Themes of Participants’ Overall Impact of Experiences

Access	Engagement	Inclusion	Pride
Reputable school	Learned relevant content	Opportunities to participate	Reputable degree
Online resources to easily navigate the program	Made connections with faculty/staff	Welcomed to campus clubs and organizations	Brick and mortar school
	Made connections with other students		Felt connected
			Felt included
			Purchased alumni swag

Table 5 outlines the four emerging themes for research question 3 and example characteristics under each theme as it related to how their experiences with student services impacted their overall impression of their collegiate experience after transferring into the only online undergraduate program at this research 1 university.

Chapter Summary

This chapter presented findings from data collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews with seven non-traditional undergraduate student participants. This narrative study sought to understand their expectations and experiences of student services before and after they

transferred into the only undergraduate online degree-completion program at a research 1 institution that primarily caters services to the traditional-aged campus-based student.

The seven participants had various life experiences that led them to earning their undergraduate degree online a number of years after completing high school. As previous online transfer students, mostly from community colleges, the participants did not have explicit expectations of student services once they transferred into the large research 1 institution online. However, stories of how their previous educational experiences led them to transfer into an online program included broad expectations that emerged into three overarching themes across all three research questions: (1) access, (2) engagement, and (3) inclusion.

The findings for research questions 1 and 3 were presented using Polkinghorne's (1995) narrative of analysis where the participant's voice told their story to value their individuality and unique experiences from their own perspective and not just an overall interpretation. The findings for research question 2 were presented using Polkinghorne's (1995) analysis of narratives where commonalities were inductively derived to highlight the vast similarities and minimize redundancy, although some individual stories were shared to provide a well-rounded account of the participants as individuals and not make them feel invisible or unheard by reducing their personal experiences.

The participants' varied stories revealed they had "access" to more services than expected that were offered constantly, shared via email communication, navigated easily through online tutorials and websites created for them. They experienced "engaging" encounters with like-minded classmates, course content that was relevant to their career, and instructors within their program area who provided effective teaching strategies and course designs. However, they also experienced some "disconnections" in courses that had outdated lectures or instructors who they

felt did not understand adult learner characteristics. Yet, they shared many unexpected positive experiences and “connections” with advising, financial aid, the career center, and quality online courses from other instructors throughout the university who put forth a lot of effort in providing quality online education. Moreover, they were presented with many opportunities or invitations to be a part of the campus community physically by attending events or joining clubs and organizations, virtually through online services or workshops, and within their class discussions with younger classmates, which ultimately contributed to their sense of “inclusion” at the university.

Taken as a whole, the overwhelming access, engagement, and inclusion the participants experienced with academic and non-academic student services contributed to their overall sense of belonging and pride in being an alum of the university, even as an online student. The services provided and offered to the participants made them feel like they were a part of a larger community they are proud of and willing to boast to others. As a result, a fourth theme of pride emerged to reveal the overall feeling the students had based on the impact student services had on their collegiate experience and the institution.

The second theme of engagement also uncovered the two subthemes of disconnections and connections that surfaced from the unexpected negative and positive experiences the participants had with student services, which related to the theoretical framework used in this study, EVT (1995). According to the theory, negative experiences were considered violations to their expectations which should decrease their attractiveness to student services, while the positive experiences were considered confirmations which should increase the attractiveness of student services. With the participants’ overwhelming sense of belonging from their met

expectations with student services, it was clear that the vast connections outweighed their disconnections and impacted their overall positive experience and pride.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

The final chapter focuses on conclusions made from the key findings and provides further discussion on each of these findings by each emergent theme while offering related implications for practice. The chapter will also provide the limitations of the study and will propose implications for research and recommendations for future research. The chapter will conclude with my reflections on the overall experience of conducting this study and completing this dissertation.

Introduction

The purpose of this narrative analysis was to understand non-traditional undergraduate students' expectations and experiences with student services when they transferred into the only online undergraduate program at a research 1 university that typically caters services to the traditional-aged campus-based student. This study was guided by the following three research questions:

- 1) What are non-traditional students' expectations of student services before they transfer into the only online undergraduate program at a large research 1 land-grant university?
- 2) What are non-traditional students' experiences with student services after they transfer into the only online undergraduate program at a large research 1 land-grant university?
- 3) How do non-traditional students feel their interactions with student services impacted their overall experience at the large research 1 land-grant university?

The conclusions from this study followed the three research questions and the findings led to the development of four emergent themes: (1) access, (2) engagement, (3) inclusion, and (4) pride; as well two subthemes, (1) disconnections and (2) connections. These findings are in line with the literature, but mainly serve as a response to several previous works that suggested

educators and administrators in higher education should gain a better understanding of non-traditional online transfer students to cater to their educational experience (Boudreaux & Schoenack, 2016; Chen, 2015; MacDonald, 2018; Schlossberg et al., 1989; Schuh et al., 2016). These findings can be added to the ranks of literature from other institutions that have taken heed of these suggestions and researched the effectiveness of their student services for different student populations (Chen, 2015; Compton et al., 2006; Dirr, 1999; Gast, 2013; LaPadula, 2003; Miller 2013; Owens, 2010; Smith, 2016). Moreover, this study will also add to the body of literature about the expectations and experiences of undergraduate non-traditional online transfer students as one single population as opposed to others who have researched these populations separately.

The first three themes in this study were common across all three research questions and the fourth theme emerged in research question 3. Each emergent theme will be discussed briefly as it related to the broader literature while including implications for practice.

Discussion of Key Findings

Access

The theme of access explored the various services that were accessible to the participants before and after they transferred into the only undergraduate online program at a research 1 institution. This theme first represented the access adult learners now have to universities that are gaining popularity by creating more online degree offerings, which is consistent with the literature (Gast, 2013; Schuh et al., 2016; Smith, 2016), and a concept many more public institutions should consider. The participants were all drawn to the LPS program primarily because it was offered at a reputable state institution they could not attend otherwise. As reiterated in the literature, adult students are a growing population looking for degree programs

from in-state schools because they are more affordable, credible, and offer the flexibility they need to manage their adult-life responsibilities, such as work and family obligations (Boudreaux & Schoenack, 2016; Britto & Rush, 2013; Layne et al., 2013; Ross-Gordon et al., 2017). Sarah felt that NC State should consider offering more online undergraduate degrees for other adult students like her who do not have other opportunities locally, especially considering the school has needed student services in place. Students like Gabby preferred to attend a university that was relatively local just in case they need to handle business in-person. On the other hand, students like Lynn, who wanted a degree from a reputable in-state brick and mortar school, did not have any local colleges or universities in her area to consider, so online was her only option. In addition, her employer required her to obtain a relevant baccalaureate degree to maintain or advance in her current career, which the literature agrees is becoming a necessary requirement for many employees (Britto & Rush, 2013; Layne et al., 2013; Smith, 2016). With the increase of technology, online programs are becoming a viable and convenient option for adults to obtain these needed credentials (Choy et al., 2002; Kasworm, 2010; Merriam et al., 2007). Bill and Lynn were both restricted in their previous positions because they needed a bachelor's degree to be promoted, but their non-traditional characteristics and physical location limited their options; therefore, research 1 institutions who offer a variety of undergraduate online degree programs will present a more competitive and appealing option to adult students, thus increasing enrollment as many public institutions ultimately desire.

Secondly, research indicates it is essential to provide online students the same access to services as students taking courses in traditional formats, such as orientation, library resources, and advising (Choy et al., 2002; Crawley & Howe, 2016). The theme of access included the ease of navigation the participants in this study experienced with student services as they applied and

matriculated as online adult students. The participants reiterated the availability of user-friendly websites that provided step-by-step directions or video tutorials, which are essential to online adult learners. Most adult students have families and classify themselves as employees (Compton et al., 2006) who limit the amount of time they set aside to focus on school requirements, which could be during the day or in the middle of the night. Additionally, online students are not always local and often live in different time zones from the schools in which they enroll, especially military personnel and their families when they deploy. Literature confirms that having accessible online services can help retain students when students are provided resources with clear instructions not requiring them to click from page to page or decipher confusing information where they then need to contact a student services professional during business hours for clarification (Britto & Rush, 2013; Crawley & Howe, 2016; Dumais et al., 2013; Prescott, 2008; Smith 2016). However, providing access to knowledgeable and responsive student support specialists during and after hours is also a necessity when considering the needs of online adult students (Hadfield, 2003). As reiterated in the literature, institutions offering online courses and programs need to adapt all student services to accommodate online students' unique circumstances, which allow them to have the same opportunities and services as students in traditional classes (Chen, 2015; Choy et al., 2002; LaPadula, 2003).

Engagement

Non-traditional undergraduate students also have unique learning characteristics and needs when transferring into online programs, such as needing to connect their life to their academics (Chen, 2015; Kasworm 2003; Panacci, 2015), needing educational support and programs from their institution to be successful (Chen 2015; Dumais et al., 2013), and needing access to student services after traditional business hours (Erisman & Steele 2015; Gast, 2013;

Hadfield, 2003). The second theme of engagement included participants' expectations and experiences being enrolled in a degree program that pertained to their current or future career path, which included faculty and staff who understood their unique characteristics as adults. This theme also presented two subthemes, disconnections and connections, which violated the participants' initial expectations negatively and positively.

Engaging with the curriculum content is an important factor for adult students as noted by one of Knowles' (1984) principles of adult learning that adults are most interested in learning subjects that have immediate relevance and impact to their job or personal life. For this reason, it is essential for institutions to offer degree programs for adults with curricula that are not just theoretical based, but also include course content that can be immediately used in practice.

According to Erisman and Steel (2015):

Much of what we know about adult learners, in general, is not new. The problem is that this knowledge about the differences between traditional college students and adult learners has not been factored into the pedagogy and operations of nearly enough colleges and universities. (p. 1)

This notion of factoring in adult learner needs into the pedagogy coincides with quality online course design and instruction for the population in this study. The core instructors in the LPS program all participated in Quality Matters, a nationally recognized standards-based program focused on continuous improvement of online and blended courses and programs. With this foundation, the LPS instructors make a concerted effort to ensure their course requirements are up-to-date and closely aligned with course objectives which result in relevant course assignments. Adult students like Dawn appreciated being in a program where they could not only engage with other students professionally, but also where there could also engage in relevant

course content in their field. These interactions and exposure to applicable course content gave Dawn the confidence and practical knowledge she needed to apply for and obtain her current position.

Some institutions that have implemented adult-focused curriculums and programs on campus have experienced an increase in their retention rates and their students' commitment to the university (Austin, 2006; Fincher, 2010; Grant-Valona et al., 2003). For that reason, institutions designing online programs should consider specifically targeting non-traditional students with dedicated faculty and staff who understand their unique characteristics and can supplement that knowledge with quality online instruction. If adult students can experience this type of engagement while earning a practical degree with support from faculty and staff who understand them, it will increase their commitment to the program and university, thus increasing retention and graduation rates (Levine, 2007; Kasworm, 2008; Scholossberg, 1989; Zirkle, 2006).

Disconnections

On the other hand, the participants noticed a difference in courses required in their major program area versus the general education courses required by the college and university for degree completion. They noted that some of the general course instructors did not put much effort into ensuring relevant course assignments, which attributed to their disconnection with the academic side of student support and was different from what they expected. According to Sajiene and Tamuliene (2012), student support in higher education institutions enables successful integration into the institution, creates conditions for a positive educational experience, and helps to ensure a smooth transition from a higher education institution into the workforce. Tkzari and Gabby were two participants who emphasized that the general courses, or the specific

requirements in them, did not create a positive experience and did not prepare them for anything useful in their workplace. Tkzari noted how some requirements were a waste of time and money requiring her to memorize items for an exam that she will never use again. Gabby mentioned she felt more distanced and lonelier in some of her general education courses as opposed to her LPS courses where she felt more connected and understood. It is common for online students to experience feelings of isolation and disconnectedness from unresponsive environments, which often lead them to withdraw and transfer to another online program that meets their needs (Kurucay & Inan, 2017; Major & Sumner, 2018; Smith 2016; Visser & Visser, 2000; Zirkle, 2004).

Given that LPS is currently the only undergraduate online degree-completion program offered at this university, many of the general online instructors may not be aware of the demographics of the LPS students and instead design their courses with the traditional-aged student in mind. Additionally, with the increase of technology, many institutions trying to keep up with the distance education trend require traditional instructors to develop and teach their existing courses online without proper training on quality online course design and instruction (Chiasson et al., 2015). For adult learners seeking formal online education at research 1 universities, both justifications will present them with negative experiences when the instructors are not engaged in understanding their unique characteristics that differ from traditional-aged students or when they do not provide quality online instruction. Research concludes that instructor support is one of the leading resources for adult learner success (Boudreaux & Schoenack, 2016; Visser & Visser, 2000), so it is important for them to be aware of how to effectively teach intergenerational students in the online environment considering the dramatic demographic shift in the undergraduate classroom (Donovant et al., 2013). To support all age

demographics of students, universities that offer online programs to adults must first inform and then require all online instructors to receive training for quality online instruction taking in account mixed-aged populations.

Inclusive student support services for online students should unquestionably require support from top administrators and a change in the way many offices on campus do business (Dirr, 1999). This lack of recognition, and consequently university support, is where the disconnection for many LPS students stemmed. Many online instructors at the university are not aware that the LPS program exists or of the student age demographics in order to provide them with the adequate support and academic services they expected.

Connections

The literature reiterates how critical it is for institutions to foster connections at all stages of the online adult student journey, from first inquiry through graduation by establishing support mechanisms both academically and non-academic (Chen, 2015; Coomes & DeBard, 2004; LaPadula, 2003; Wyatt, 2011). Unfortunately, the participants did have some unpleasant experiences with general education courses which violated their expectations and created the first subtheme of disconnections. However, they also had unexpected positive experiences with online courses and student support services that created the second subtheme of connections. One key positive experience was with me as their academic advisor. According to Crawley and Howe (2016), academic advising is the service most online students want to have access to, which is a primary role the department incorporated when implementing the LPS program. Fortunately, all of the participants in this study began the program after I began taking additional courses to learn more about adult student characteristics and their unique needs.

As the only advisor for this program, I assist all prospective, current, and graduating students to matriculate through every process. I have spent dedicated time creating resources and informing essential campus support offices about their needs to ensure they do not have major issues navigating certain services. I also modified my schedule to be available after normal business hours to accommodate their needs as working adults. As Schuh et al. (2016) noted, student affairs professionals must show commitment, dedication, and skills to develop strong relationships with students, advocate for them as decisions are made, and design programs and services to promote their development, which many of the participants recognized and appreciated. Sarah and Lynn commented on how everything they needed was already anticipated and made available to them when they began the program. Many of the resources the participants described using were created by me based on information I learned in my coursework and from listening to the needs of my students and implementing solutions.

In designing online programs catered to adult students, it is important to have staff working directly with this population who understand their unique needs and offer the necessary resources clearly and succinctly on their websites (Choy et al., 2002; Dirr, 1999; Visser & Visser 2000). As a previous advisor for traditional-aged campus-based students, I know that the advising practices and resources needed to assist each population differ considerably. Advising online adult students requires additional knowledge and training on how to connect with them and meet their needs effectively. Modifying typical prescriptive advising practices, and learning how to use a variety of instructional technologies for advising are basic adjustments that advisors of online adult students should implement.

Additionally, the participants in this study were not only online adults, but they were all transfer students who expected a knowledgeable advisor to assess prior course credit and assist

them in virtually navigating a new campus environment (Laanan, 2001). Providing course evaluations prior to admission, offering personalized orientations to discuss individual transfer credits, and offering strategies for successful transition are ways to provide exceptional customer service to transfer students (Laanan, 2007; Rosenberg, 2016). During our initial one-on-one advising appointment, Tkzari was very grateful I was able to personally review her transfer credits and have most of them count toward needed requirements in our curriculum. She also appreciated my referral to the head of our foreign languages department who was able to verbally assess her native language and give her credit for the required course. This assessment typically requires students completing a placement test on campus. However, as the only online undergraduate program catered to adults, I met with the head of the department and asked if they could provide an alternate assessment for my students who often worked during the day when the tests were offered and mainly for those who did not live in the area, state, or country. Another consideration is offering prior learning assessments for adult transfer students like Bill who have years of experience in their careers but are required to take courses for degree-completion that they are probably qualified to teach themselves (CAEL, 2018; Chen, 2017; Erisman & Steele 2015; Ross-Gordon, 2011). Providing these types of services can help to increase satisfaction and persistence of transfer students (Miller, 2013; Rosenberg, 2016; Tobolowsky & Cox, 2012; Wang & Wharton, 2010). Also, having an advisor with a good understanding of the university's transfer credit policies will provide online adult students with the additional support they need.

Student services staff working with online adult transfer students may not need to gain extensive formal education as I did, but attending workshops, reading literature, or speaking with other knowledgeable people who have worked with these populations individually or collectively

would be beneficial. Ultimately, engaging and connecting with these students begins with listening to their concerns and understanding how they are trying to juggle their various life roles along with the additional title of student (Chen 2015; Fairchild 2003). When student support specialists can fully grasp who they are, they will be instrumental resources who provide appropriate services to aid in the online adult transfer student's transition and overall success (Chen, 2017; Dirr, 1999; LaPadula, 2003; Smith, 2016).

Inclusion

The next theme of inclusion had components that also overlapped with the themes of access and engagement. The students felt a sense of inclusion to a university that was only available to them through an online program. Additionally, they felt connected to their peers in the program who had similar career goals and other non-traditional characteristics. However, the participants in this study experienced a sense of inclusion that differed from what most of the existent literature suggested. Given that all of the participants lived in the same state as this institution, many were able to take advantage of visiting campus and participating in sporting events and campus activities. Much of the literature that offers suggestions to provide an inclusive environment for online students consists of having instructors use a learner-centered approach that includes active classroom instruction such as virtual introductions, chat sessions, and organizing learning communities (Anderson, 2004; Angelino et al., 2007; Huang 2002). These strategies are common practices most instructors implement in their online classes, and they were also made available through the online advising page created just for the LPS students to connect with one another.

It is significant to note that the participants in this study were initially drawn to the LPS program because it was offered at a brick and mortar school they had access to travel to on their

own time if necessary. Tinto's (1975) theory of college student departure highlighted the role of the institution in creating environments that are conducive to student success, which will contribute to college student retention. Offering more online programs at state institutions that welcome non-traditional students on campus will create such an environment. Dawn and Sarah specifically indicated they may not have felt as included to the campus community if they did not have the opportunity to visit campus. Bill also pointed out that visiting campus was a major incentive for him to choose this institution over others.

The participants also confirmed their sense of inclusion came from the various emails received inviting them to participate in on-campus or online activities, or informing them of upcoming events and updates around the campus community. Caleb was the only military participant, and he was able to visit the Veterans Affairs office and participate in their activities which would not have been possible or the same if he were attending a school that was not local or did not have an actual campus. He was also impressed with the overwhelming amount of student services and resources that were available online when he was not able to make it to campus.

These types of experiences that contributed to the participant's sense of inclusion are noteworthy for more research 1 institutions to consider when offering online degree programs that cater to non-traditional students. It is necessary for faculty and student services staff to implement virtual opportunities to connect with students in an attempt to create a sense of belonging. Yet, it will never compare to the additional option to step foot on campus and participate in campus life if more state institutions would provide the opportunity by offering online programs for adult students and welcoming them to the campus environment.

Pride

The last theme of pride emerged from research question 3 as the overall feeling the participants had after their experiences being enrolled in the only online undergraduate program at a research 1 university. The prior themes of access, engagement, and inclusion became subthemes used to express why participants were proud alum of this university, which was because of the overwhelming support services they received. The participants mentioned how they have purchased memorabilia from the university since graduating and plan to matriculate into online master's programs at the same institution because of the familiarity of the support services available. Additionally, many alums like Bill have been major advocates for LPS by promoting the program to other family, friends, and co-workers they know who wish to pursue careers in the public sector and need the flexibility to do so online. When students have satisfying experiences at their universities it evokes this sense of pride that is likely to translate to them becoming supportive, active, and financial alumni contributors that many institutions may not consider when they overlook the needs of non-traditional online students (Jacobs et al., 2010).

Many participants agreed with Caleb who expressed how much earning this degree meant to him in his 40s. The level of pride extended further than just receiving a piece of paper from a reputable school. It also represented the hard work and sacrifices they each made to accomplish their goals as non-traditional students, which will have an impact on each of their futures, and be an accomplishment that they are able to share with others, especially their children. Jacobs et al. (2010) explained that there is a lack of analysis in the role higher education settings play in the lives of alumni. A study that explored online students' interest in becoming engaged alumni revealed that online students would be inclined equally if not more than traditional face-to-face

students to mentor and donate to their university after graduation (Whitby, 2014). Considering many institutions depend on alumni donations to support their budget, they may miss out on sizable donations by not targeting non-traditional online students upon graduation and by not supporting and prioritizing their needs to provide an inclusive environment prior to graduation.

The participants in this study are now all graduates of the LPS program and continue to ask how they can remain connected with current students and other alumni in the program as well as with the university. Jacobs et al. (2010) reiterated how the university has the potential to transform a student's life by providing them with resources, support, and a network of like-minded peers that will last a lifetime through alumni networks. Gabby volunteered to attend a Zoom session for current LPS students to give advice and answer questions from an alumni perspective, which the current students appreciated. All of the alumni of the LPS program now have the opportunity to interact with current students to provide advice and encouragement through a networking circle created for LPS students to remain connected.

It is not enough for online programs to foster access, engagement, and inclusive environments for current students, but those connections should also extend to the alumni of the programs and schools to advance the sense of pride many alumni have for their schools. The lack of this type of support within higher education can have a significant impact on non-traditional distance education students (Boudreaux & Schoenack, 2016; LaPadula, 2013). However, these connections cannot be implemented from the faculty and staff of the online programs alone. The entire university has to embrace non-traditional online students and provide a welcoming inclusive environment that helps validate their importance to the university climate and foster their sense of pride.

Expectancy Violations Theory

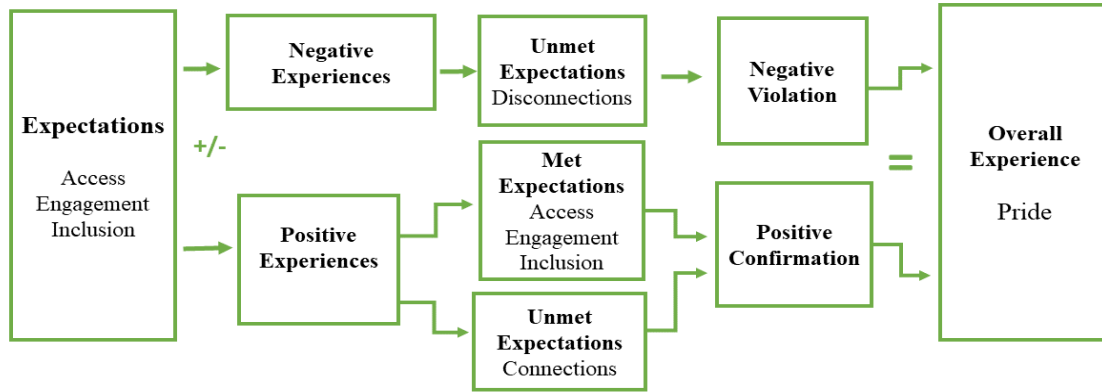
EVT (Burgoon, 1978) provided the framework for this study. EVT started as an interpersonal communication theory that attempted to explain people's reactions to anticipated and unanticipated behavior. Over the years, the theory evolved and was revised to extend to other nonverbal behaviors and communication outcomes and has been applied to other contexts (Burgoon, 2015). The revised theory was an appropriate framework for this study to determine if the experiences of non-traditional undergraduate online transfer students aligned with what they expected, while also investigating if a positive violation of an expectation produced a more desirable experience. In this study, a positive experience was an unmet expectation that was classified as a positive confirmation with a student service, which would increase the student's outlook of student services. A negative experience was an unmet expectation that was classified as a negative violation a student had, which would decrease their outlook of student services.

The second theme of this study, engagement, uncovered the two subthemes of disconnections and connections that surfaced from the unexpected negative and positive experiences the participants had with student services. Given the participants' overwhelming sense of belonging from their met expectations with student services, it was clear that the vast connections outweighed their disconnections and impacted their overall positive experience and last emergent theme of pride.

Figure 4 illustrates the emergent themes of the study as it related to the theoretical framework. The figure includes the negative disconnections and positive connections to provide a visual of how the overarching themes of access, engagement, and inclusion from the participants' expectations and experiences of student services resulted in the overall impact of their experience and sense of pride at the university even as an online student.

Figure 4

Theoretical Framework with Emergent Themes



The use of the EVT allowed a provision to actually hone in on participants' positive and negative experiences of their expectations while allowing them to provide a rationale as to why those expectations were violated. Most importantly, it also allowed the participants to offer recommendations of possible solutions to their violations so other students do not face the frustration of unmet expectations with student services, which should encourage persistence and an overall pleasant experience for other non-traditional transfer students enrolled in online programs. Building on the works of Boudreaux and Schoenack (2016), Chen (2015), and LaPadula (2003), the use of EVT in this study also helped to provide the below implications for practice for administrators and student service personnel working with online adult transfer students in higher education to consider in order to provide students with the appropriate resources and experiences.

Implications for Practice

The above discussion of the key findings includes implications for practice by each emergent theme and subtheme. The following sections highlight each theme and provide corresponding implications for institutions to consider when making provisions for non-traditional online transfer students.

Implication for Practice #1: Access

Public universities, including NC State, should offer more online programs targeting non-traditional students who are looking for reputable in-state schools to meet needed credentials by employers. These programs should also provide online access to typical services (i.e. orientation) via user-friendly websites and video tutorials to allow non-traditional students the opportunity to access needed services on their own time.

NC State in particular should consider modifying their admission requirements to allow students who earn an Associate of Art or Science degree from any community college outside of North Carolina the opportunity to waive their general education course requirements. This change would be comparable to students who earn the same credentials from a community college in NC. Additionally, NC State and the LPS program could increase their enrollment by creating bilateral agreements with community college programs that offer degree programs specifically in the public sector to allow students to transfer in with fewer than the current 60-hour requirement.

Implication for Practice #2: Engagement

Universities should offer relevant programs and curricula with content non-traditional students can put into practice immediately in their workplace. Many non-traditional students are seeking undergraduate degrees to supplement or retain their current careers, not necessarily to

gain employment. Additionally, these programs should provide online opportunities for students to connect with one another formally and informally to enhance their engagement with the curriculum, their like-minded peers, and the university.

Implication for Practice #3: Disconnections

Universities offering online courses and programs must provide training for quality online design and instruction for all instructors while encouraging instructors to design and teach courses that will appeal to intergenerational or mixed-aged student populations. Instructors must respect adult learners as such to make them feel valued and inclusive in the online undergraduate classroom. Institutions should also consider offering prior learning credit to non-traditional students who have years of relevant work experience in the intended degree field.

Implication for Practice #4: Connections

Institutions offering online courses and programs must inform the entire campus community of non-traditional online transfer student enrollment and educate the campus on their unique learning characteristics and needs. Institutions must also hire knowledgeable student services professionals with an understanding of this population who can create strong relationships and innovative services for the students in the degree programs. These professionals must be knowledgeable on university and transfer policies to assist students in navigating the needed resources virtually. To foster connections, they need to show commitment and dedication, and advocate for and listen to student needs.

Implication for Practice #5: Inclusion

Universities should include non-traditional online students on university email updates, advertising campaigns, and invite them to participate in campus events and activities both virtually and in person. When these students arrive, they should feel welcomed and not out of

place. Activities and spaces should be created for them to feel included and apart of the larger campus community.

Implication for Practice# 6: Pride

Recruiting non-traditional online transfer students should be a university-wide initiative that includes the alumni office and highlights the benefits of becoming alumni of the university. The university, alumni office, and degree program should also provide opportunities for non-traditional online students to remain connected to the degree program and their fellow peers, as well as present opportunities to give back to the university and campus community.

Implications of Research

Non-traditional online transfer students are not a target population with established resources and services at the particular research 1 institution in this study. For that reason, this research sought to explore students' expectations and experiences to confirm if the student services provided were sufficient or if they needed to be restructured to better fit the needs of these students. The findings from this study will assist the LPS program in adding additional resources and services to help aid in increasing access, engagement, inclusion, and overall sense of pride for LPS students. As the researcher and advisor, I have implemented some of these initiatives as a result of the conversations with participants and the preliminary research findings throughout the duration of this study. For example, the LPS program is now hosting regular Zoom sessions to allow students to connect in an informal setting; they have established a networking circle for current students and alumni to share resources and offer assistance; and the first program t-shirt was designed to allow students to proudly represent their program and school. The department is also increasing their recruitment efforts by allowing alumni to assist in advertising the program in their workspaces. As a result of this research, additional initiative to

come include working with the distance education office to notify all online instructors at the university of the LPS program noting the differences in LPS student age demographics and learning needs in an effort to increase the academic engagement in the general college and university required courses.

For other institutions, this research is especially timely with the existence of COVID-19 and many schools transitioning courses and student services to online delivery. The emergent themes of this study can be used as guiding principles to focus on when implementing online resources for all students. However, this research initially intended to first encourage more research 1 institutions to establish online degree programs targeting non-traditional students and for the findings to serve as a template of recommendations to consider from the students' perspective of how to best meet their unique learning characteristics and needs. Most importantly, as reiterated throughout this study, this research is another recommendation for student affairs professionals working at institutions with online degree programs to also take the time to focus on assessing and evaluating their services in order to demonstrate that the efforts are worthwhile for their students enrolled.

Limitations of Research

Limitations to all studies include choices made by the researcher and how the researcher chooses to research, analyze, and present their findings. This research was intended to explore and narrate the expectations and experiences of a small number of students enrolled in the only online undergraduate degree program at a research 1 university. Therefore, the conclusions drawn may not be generalizable and present limitations of the use of this data and findings by other institutions. Additionally, based on the population sample of qualified students eligible to participate in the study, there was a lack of diversity in terms of ethnicity and geographic

location. All qualified participants self-identified as white and resided in the same state as the institution while they were enrolled, which did not account for expectations or experiences of students who did not have the opportunity to visit to campus if they wanted to.

Given I served as the researcher and academic advisor for the target population of non-traditional online transfer students, the most significant limitation in this study was the researcher-advisor-student relationship. Given the established rapport, some responses were not as elaborate due to the prior knowledge the participants and I already shared about their experiences. Additionally, the decision to provide the interview questions to the participants prior to the interview may have limited the opportunity for them to share their raw thoughts and emotions because they narrowed them down to a predetermined response or experience. Moreover, the participants may not have completely remembered all of their expectations of student services prior to enrolling given they were all graduates or upcoming graduates of the program at the time of the interview. Some of these limitations may also impact the possible transferability of the findings.

Recommendations for Future Research

Some of the recommendations for further research stem from the implications and limitations of this study. Provided this research was conducted at one university with one online program, a notable recommendation is to replicate this study recruiting participants from various online programs at different research 1 institutions. A research study with a more diverse set of participants in terms of sample size, ethnicity, and geographic location of where the student resides as opposed to where they are enrolled may allow for more generalizable findings.

A national quantitative study would also be recommended to compare the expectations and experiences of non-traditional online transfer students at institutions that are 100% online as

opposed to online students at traditional brick and mortar schools. This would assess if either school presents services that are more or less attractive to non-traditional transfer students.

Suggestions for additional comparison studies include examining traditional-aged student experiences with student services as an online student during COVID 19 versus non-traditional students to gauge if these expectations and experiences were proprietary to their non-traditional characteristics or overall undergraduate student preferences. This same comparison study can also include graduate students.

Lastly, further research is also needed to assess the experiences of online instructors and student services professionals who work with traditional and non-traditional transfer students. This research would provide evidence if they note any differences in the different student needs and if they intentionally make accommodations to better serve both populations.

The suggested studies can provide additional recommendations for higher education institutions to consider when implementing and designing online programs for non-traditional transfer students. More broadly, these types of studies can increase the awareness of administrators, instructors, and student services professionals working with this growing population of students.

Chapter Summary

Non-traditional undergraduate online transfer students are an increasing student population that institutions of higher education should begin to recognize. Many are faced with the need for education credentials to maintain or advance in their current careers and they are looking for reputable in-state brick and mortar schools to provide these educational services for the convenience, flexibility, and affordability. This new population creates an intergenerational undergraduate student population that many institutions are not used to servicing. According to

the seven participants in this research study, when adult students transfer into online courses and programs they are expecting access, engagement, and inclusion from academic and non-academic student services professionals to help aid them through their collegiate journey which will help foster their sense of pride as they become alumni.

This narrative research served as a response to much of the existent literature that suggested educators and administrators in higher education settings gain a better understanding of non-traditional online transfer students to better cater to their educational experience. This research also provided another recommendation for more public institutions to consider offering online programs to accommodate the educational needs of adult transfer students, as well as practical considerations on how to best serve them once they are enrolled. Most importantly, the experiences shared by the participants were meant to inspire current student services professionals working with undergraduate online adult transfer students to make the necessary accommodations to ensure they align with their students' needs and to also assess their current practices. However, the main point of this study was to recognize the value student support services have on undergraduate non-traditional online transfer student satisfaction and overall success. This population has unique circumstances but need the same services as the traditional-aged face-to-face student.

This final chapter provided a discussion of the key findings by emergent theme and subtheme while offering relevant implications for practice. The chapter concluded offering implications and limitations of the research followed by recommendations for future research. The final section in this chapter will highlight my reflections of the study and overall thoughts on completing this dissertation.

Researcher Reflections

I began my doctoral program seven years after beginning my role as the academic advisor for the only online undergraduate degree-completion program at a research 1 university. Working with this population inspired my desire to return to school and research this topic as I noticed a considerable difference from previously advising traditional-aged campus-based students. As the only undergraduate advisor for online adults at this university, my advising practices and concerns for my students often differ than those of other advisors. I have the pleasure of learning how my students' prior life circumstances got them to where they are now in their educational journey, and how their current life experiences affect how and when they can fit school into their already busy lives. These stories always lead into why these students need the flexibility to complete their degree online and what resources they need to make that goal more manageable.

As my students' primary point of contact to the university, I also serve as their spokesperson advocating for the needs they express to me. When choosing my research topic, I knew I wanted them to share their experiences as undergraduate online adult transfer students for themselves instead of me interpreting their thoughts as usual, thus my choice to use narrative methodology. I feel that hearing people's stories changes the hearts and minds of others. The participants were honored to speak with me and appreciated someone recognizing their differences as online adult transfer students and allowing them a platform to be heard. Aside from sharing their stories, they offered many recommendations of other services that would benefit the program and our students. From the early stages of embarking on this research, I could not wait to implement additional resources and services to better serve our students and I

incorporated many new ideas both gleaned from the literature and from my participants throughout this doctoral process.

Conducting this research was restorative of my passion of working in higher education and assisting students who may need individualized guidance as my online adult advisees. I am looking forward to what the awareness of this research may bring for our university and other institutions who may be inspired to implement or change services at theirs. My final words from my personal statement reflected here in my biography still remain: my ultimate goal is for this research to advocate for all adult learners in distance education, and that my future work will continue to make an impact on this growing community.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

Participant Recruitment Email

Hello, LPS students!

As some of you may know, I am also a doctoral student at North Carolina State University in the Educational Leadership Policy and Human Development program. I am currently working on my dissertation “Being Seen from behind the Screen: Narratives of Non-Traditional Undergraduate Online Transfer Students’ Expectations and Experiences of Student Services” under the direction of my committee chair, Dr. Michelle Bartlett.

To complete this dissertation, I must complete a research project, and I am seeking your help! I need to interview between seven and ten students, preferably recent or upcoming graduates, on your expectations and experiences with student services before and after you enrolled at NC State. I am seeking to understand what services you expected to have access to as an online student while also exploring your experiences with those services once you enrolled. Additionally, I want to know how those interactions (or the lack thereof) shaped your impression or overall experience of the university and our program as an online adult student.

For this project, I am using this definition of student services: “the system of services provided by a higher education institution, which fulfills students’ emotional, academic and social needs and is a precondition for increasing student’s individual welfare and academic success”. This is inclusive of academic and non-academic student support such as, but not limited to, admissions, cashier’s, bookstore, tutoring, advising, faculty availability, university office hours, disability support, informative websites, financial aid, counseling, IT help desk, registration, and records, etc.

My findings will be presented in a narrative format that will use direct quotes and stories from participants about your expectations and experiences. However, I will protect your identity by using pseudonyms throughout the data analysis process.

If you are interested and available to participate, I would love to schedule a recorded one-hour interview with you over Zoom during a day and time that works best for you.

If you are willing, can you please take about 5 minutes to complete this general demographic questionnaire to collect basic data on the selected participants and for me to reach out to you to schedule the interview?

Thank you so much! I look forward to hearing from many of you soon.

If you have any questions about the study before deciding to commit, please feel free to email or call me at ldwters@ncsu.edu or 919-513-4330.

Thanks!
LaShica

Appendix B

Pre-Interview Demographic Questionnaire

Student Services Interview Participant Questionnaire

Thank you for your interest in participating in my study!

The purpose of the interview is to talk about your expectations and experiences of student services as an online adult student at NC State.

For your reference, I would like to disclose information about Human Subjects documentation:

There are no risks or benefits of participating in the interview. Your name and other identifying information will not appear in any publications or documentation. Your identity will remain protected throughout the entire process. Only I will have access to the transcripts and audio and video recordings of the interview and will assign you a pseudonym when analyzing the data.

You have the right to withdraw from the interview and study at any time.

The below questions include general demographic information relevant to the study. This data will also provide background information to include as I narrate your story in my findings. They are mostly open-ended, so you can be as detailed in your responses as you like. The more information provided will only enhance YOUR story!

Completing the below questions will serve as your consent to participate in the study. However, I will reconfirm your consent to participate verbally before the scheduled interview begins.

Thank you!
LaShica

1. First and Last Name
2. What pseudonym would you like to be referred as during the data analysis process?
3. What was your age at the start of the program?
4. What was your age when you completed the program?
5. What is your gender?
 - a. Male
 - b. Female
 - c. Other
6. Are you Spanish, Hispanic, or Latino or none of these (select all that apply)
 - a. Spanish
 - b. Hispanic
 - c. Latino
 - d. None of These
7. Choose one or more races that you consider yourself to be:
 - a. American Indian or Alaskan Native
 - b. Asian
 - c. Black or African American
 - d. Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
 - e. White
 - f. Other (Specify)_____
8. What was your marital status when enrolled?
9. How many children, if any, did you have while enrolled?
10. What was your employment status while enrolled?
e.g., full-time, part-time, unemployed looking, unemployed not looking, disabled, or a combination?
11. Were you ever employed at NC State while you were enrolled?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
12. Were you primarily enrolled in the LPS program full-time or part-time?
 - a. Full-Time (12+hrs)
 - b. Part-Time (below 12 hrs)
 - c. A combination of both
13. Did you ever sit out a semester, and have to reapply to return to the LPS program?
 - a. Yes. If yes, why? _____
 - b. No
14. Were you military affiliated while enrolled?
e.g., active duty, veteran, retired, spouse, dependent or n/a
15. What schools were you previously enrolled before transferring to NC State?
16. Did you complete online courses elsewhere before enrolling in the LPS program?
 - a. Yes
 - b. NO
17. Did you earn an Associate's Degree?
 - a. Yes
 - b. NO

18. How many years, if any, did you take off before beginning your college career after completing High School or its equivalent?
19. How many years, if any, did you take off before enrolling in the LPS program after transferring from your last previous school?
20. Where were you primarily located when you completed the LPS program?
Please include all cities, states, or countries you may have moved to or traveled to extensively while enrolled.
21. Did you ever physically visit a student service center on NC State's campus while enrolled?
Examples, but not limited to: Admissions, Financial Aid, Cashier, Academic Advisor, Tutoring, Faculty Member, Campus ID, Library, Bookstore, Career Services, etc.
 - a. YES
 - b. NO
22. What days/times are most convenient for you to schedule the recorded one-hour Zoom interview with no distractions?
I am available after 5 pm in the evening and on weekends, if most convenient for you.
23. What is your email address?
What is the best phone number to reach you?
24. Please use the space below if you have any questions about the study, this questionnaire, or want to provide any additional information about yourself before the interview.

Appendix C

Interview Protocol

Pseudonym: _____

Date of Interview: ____/____/____

Time Started: _____

Location: _____

Hi!

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview with me. The purpose of this interview is to talk about your expectations and experiences of student services as an online adult transfer student at NC State.

I would like to remind you that this interview is being recorded and I want to take this time to reiterate information about Human Subjects documentation that was included in the questionnaire. There are no risks or benefits of participating in this interview. Your name and other identifying information will not appear in any publications or documentation. Your identity will remain protected throughout the entire process. Only I will have access to the transcripts and audio and video recordings of this interview and will assign you a pseudonym when analyzing the data. You have the right to withdraw from this interview and study at any time.

Do you agree to continue to be recorded and continue with the interview? Yes _____ NO _____

Great, thanks!

I expect this to last about an hour. Before we begin, I want to remind you that when I ask questions about student services, I define them as academic and non-academic student support like, admissions, cashier's, bookstore, tutoring, advising, faculty availability, university office hours, disability support, informative websites, financial aid, counseling, IT help desk, registration and records, etc.

Do you have any questions before we get started?

This interview has three parts; I am going to start by talking about your life prior to enrolling at NC State. Then, we will discuss your time during your enrollment at NC State, and then we will finish up with some questions about your overall thoughts.

I have about 20 questions for all of my interviewees; however, some of your responses may prompt additional follow-up questions. As I mentioned before, this is a narrative study so you can talk freely, and it would be helpful for you to be as detailed in your responses and include as much information as you remember.

PRIOR TO ENROLLMENT

1. Tell me about how your life experiences influenced your educational journey up until you began the LPS program.
 - a. You can start at any point in your life.
2. Academically, how would you describe yourself when you began the program?
3. Why did you apply to an online program?
4. Why did you choose to apply to the only online undergraduate program at NC State?
5. What did you know about the LPS program before you enrolled?
6. What online resources and services did you know were available for students before you applied?
 - a. Library services, academic advising, tutoring?
7. What were you most looking forward to when enrolling in an online program at NC State?
 - a. What were you not looking forward to when enrolling in an online program?
8. Talk to me about the people or departments you had to contact when applying/enrolling.
9. How did you figure out how to navigate what you needed as an online student at NC State?
10. What, if anything, would you change about your experience transferring into and enrolling in this online program at NC State?

DURING ENROLLMENT

11. What resources or offices have you utilized while enrolled?
 - a. Can you tell me about any of those interactions?
12. Describe a time when you had difficulty navigating the online program?
 - a. What was difficult about it?
 - b. What steps did you take to figure out what to do or how to manage the difficulty?
13. Can you tell me about an interaction with a person or department that you were not expecting, either positive or negative? Someone went out of their way to assist you or maybe very rude.
14. What resource did you most appreciate during your time in the online program?
15. What factors contributed to you successfully completing an online program?
16. What barriers, if any, did you have to overcome...how?
17. Is there a requirement or process you had to complete as an online student that you would change? How would you change it?

OVERALL THOUGHTS

18. Did you feel included in the Wolf Pack community as an online adult student?
19. How would you describe your overall experience as an online student based on student services?
 - a. Easy, organized, convenient, difficult, challenging, frustrating?
20. Is there anything else you'd like to share about your overall experiences as an online student at NC State?
 - a. (Misunderstood, supported, respected, treated differently, overlooked, isolated, inclusive, valued, undervalued?)

Those were all the questions I had. I will turn the recording off now. Time: _____

Thank you so much for your time today. I greatly appreciate it. The next step is for me to transcribe this interview verbatim and begin the analysis process, which, of course, will not include your name or any identifying information.

After I complete the transcription, would you like to review a copy of it to ensure you are okay with your responses and my preliminary assessment of your expectations and experiences?

Response _____

(If Yes) No problem! I hope to email it to you within the next two weeks.

If you have any questions or think of anything else you'd like to add to your interview responses, please feel free to contact me at any time. Thank you again!!!

Appendix D

Interview Question Alignment with Research Questions

Interview Question	Research Question Answered
1. Tell me about how your life experiences influenced your educational journey up until you began the LPS program. a. You can start at any point in your life.	Other
2. Academically, how would you describe yourself when you began the program?	Other
3. Why did you apply to an online program?	Other
4. Why did you choose to apply to the only to an undergraduate online program at NC State?	1
5. What did you know about the LPS program before you enrolled?	1
6. What online resources and services did you know were available for students before you applied?	1
7. What were you most looking forward to when enrolling in an online program at NC State? a. What were you not looking forward to enrolling in an online program?	1
8. Talk to me about the people or departments you had to contact when applying/enrolling.	2
9. How did you figure out how to navigate what you needed as an online student at NC State?	2
10. What, if anything, would you change about your experience transferring and enrolling in this online program at NC State?	2, 3
11. What resources or offices have you utilized while enrolled? a. Can you tell me about any of those interactions?	2
12. Describe a time when you had difficulty navigating the online program. a. What was difficult about it? b. What steps did you take to figure out what to do or how to manage the difficulty?	2
13. Can you tell me about an interaction with a person or department that you were not expecting, either positive or negative? Maybe someone went out of their way to assist you or maybe very rude.	2
14. What resource did you most appreciate during your time in the online program?	2

15. What factors contributed to you successfully completing an online program?	2
16. What barriers, if any, did you have to overcome...how?	2
17. Is there a process or requirement you had to complete as an online student after enrolling that you would change? a. How would you change it?	2, 3
18. Did you feel included in the WolfPack community as an online student? a. Tell me why or why not.	3
19. Describe your overall experience as an online adult student based on your interactions with student services. Easy, organized, convenient, difficult, challenging, frustrating.	2, 3
20. Is there anything else you'd like to share about your overall experiences as an online adult student at NC State?	3

*Other = Information to learn more about the participant for the narrative.

1- What are non-traditional students' expectations of student services before they transfer into an online undergraduate program at a large research 1 land-grant university?

2- What are non-traditional student experiences with student services after they transfer into an online undergraduate program at a large research 1 land-grant university?

3- How do non-traditional students feel their interactions with student services impacted their overall experience at the large research 1 land-grant university?