

ABSTRACT

KACHUR, TRACY ANN. A Qualitative Case Study of Adult Learner Experiences at a Community College with an Ongoing Student Success Environment. (Under the direction of Dr. Susan J. Barcinas).

The purpose of this qualitative case study is to learn about, describe, and understand the experiences and perceptions of adult students who attend a community college that has ongoing student success initiatives. The research question addresses how adult learners uniquely perceive their student experiences at a community college immersed in a student success culture? This study utilizes a qualitative case study design. The study took place at a rural community college located in a southeastern state that has an ongoing student success culture and environment that is consistent with various national student success initiatives. Data collection consisted of 14 semi-structured interviews, ten adult learners, and four academic representatives from the research site. Document collection and analysis consisted of the review of various demographic information related to the research site along with documents related to national, state, and institutional-site initiatives, practices, and policies related to student success. The findings indicate that characteristics associated with an institutional student success environment reduce the visibility and mute the voice of adult learners. The institutional framing of student success culture and structures shapes uniform actions and policies, and there is less of a flexible approach to adult learner needs. The findings offer explanations of how adult learners experience community colleges' efforts to balance access and equity for diverse student populations with the implementation of initiatives that promote a thriving student success environment. The universal application of institutional student success practices and policies create many positive support structures for adult learners. At the same time, they create unintentional barriers that lead to tipping points that disrupt an adult learner's work-life balance. Implications for this study call for

additional expanded study on the influence of a student success environment on adult learners, and the prospect of adapting and incorporating Adult Learner Friendly Institution (ALFI) principles into institutions with an ongoing student success ethos. Also, the study suggests that heightened institutional awareness and proactive responsiveness to adult learner positionality within the community college population, as well as awareness of the subtle differences between persistence and student success, are essential elements in crafting policies that serve adult learners.

This dissertation utilizes an alternative dissertation format that is a modification of the three-article format. Chapters 4 and 5 are in the form of journal article manuscripts and Chapter 6 as an implication synopsis of the overall study findings.

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A Qualitative Case Study of Adult Learner Experiences at a Community College with an
Ongoing Student Success Environment

by
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A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty of
North Carolina State University
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

Education Research and Policy Analysis

Raleigh, North Carolina
2020

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to those who struggle with anxiety, depression, and the darkness that sometimes lingers.

I understood myself only after I destroyed myself.

And only in the process of fixing myself, did I know who I really was.¹

I finally decided my future lies beyond the yellow brick road.²

¹ Zabala, S, A, (2016, April). 25 life lessons to learn before you're 25. *Thought catalogue*.
<https://thoughtcatalog.com/sade-andria-zabala/2016/04/25-life-lessons-to-learn-before-youre-25/>

² John, E and Tupin, B. (1973). Goodbye yellow brick road [recorded by Elton John]. On *Goodbye yellow brick road*. [audio file]. Château d'Hérouville, France: MCA – DJM.

BIOGRAPHY

Tracy (Redd) Kachur was born and raised in Indiana, Pennsylvania. She earned a bachelor's degree in Secondary German Education from Indiana University of Pennsylvania (IUP). During her time at IUP, she studied Shakespearian literature at Oxford University and earned 14 credits at the University of Duisburg-Essen, in Duisburg Germany. She earned a master's degree in German Languages and Literature from the State University of New York at Buffalo. She attended the State University of New York at Buffalo School of Law, where she earned a Juris Doctor in 1996.

Tracy is admitted to practice law in the Eighth Judicial District of New York, The United States Federal District Court for the Western District of New York, and The United States Federal Bankruptcy Court for the Western District of New York. During her years as a practicing attorney, she focused her practice on family and matrimonial law, civil litigation, worker's compensation, criminal defense, and bankruptcy. Tracy also served as a law guardian in the New York State family court, representing children in matters related to visitation, custody, abuse, neglect, and termination of parental rights. She was also active in the New York State Bar Association, Volunteer Lawyer Project, and the Aid to Indigent Prisoner's Assigned Counsel Program.

Her interest in postsecondary adult learners arose out of the many rewarding experiences she encountered teaching postsecondary adult learners and their passion for reaching their goals. She has spent a significant portion of her career as a law professor to undergraduate students in Buffalo, New York, and Raleigh, North Carolina. She has also taught undergraduate writing, critical thinking, and freshman experience courses. She served a program director for paralegal students at Miller-Motte College in Raleigh, North Carolina, and Dean of Academics at ITT

Technical Institute in Durham, North Carolina. In 2011, she was one of nine paralegal program directors selected by the American Association for Paralegal Education for group admission to the United States Supreme Court.

During her doctoral studies, Tracy served as a member of her chair's research team and co-presented many conference presentations related to adult postsecondary learners. In 2016, she co-presented and co-authored a conference paper titled, *Adult learner perceptions and experiences in a community college engaged in intensive student success reforms*. She served as the managing editor for the Journal of Transformative Education from 2016 to 2018 and was the book editor from 2018 through 2019. She was a featured presenter on law and legal topics in higher education at professional development institutes sponsored by North Carolina State University for community college deans and administrators

Tracy is an avid runner and has competed in several races, despite battling rheumatoid arthritis. She also enjoys travel, cooking, gardening, yoga, and attending concerts. She is a devoted supporter of causes advocating for persons with rheumatoid arthritis, mental health awareness, social justice, and animal rescue organizations, especially dogs. Tracy loves spending time with her rescue German Shepherd dog, Jake. She resides in Raleigh, North Carolina.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

So many people were instrumental in my journey to get to this point. If I left you out, please know it is not intentional. You are in my heart.

- My parents, Edward Redd (1942-1988) and Kathleen Redd. Thank you for always believing in me, nurturing my curiosity, pushing me to do my best, and teaching me not to take any shit from anyone! You taught me to never use my race, gender, or disability as an excuse and made sure I never forget from where I came. I am who I am because of both of you. I love you both!
- Chris Kachur: Words will never express my love, appreciation, and gratitude. You saw me through the good, the bad, and the very ugly (the eggs), yet you never gave up on me. You have always been by my side even when I didn't believe in myself. Thank you for being my best friend, now and always. I will always remember to 'hear the bells'! And, I promise, this is the last one or your foot will speak!
- My brother, Terry Redd, wife, Tracey, my nieces and nephew Alesha, Evie, Amia, Angel, Avery, and Kendall, and entire Redd and Buggs families - It is an honor to be a part of this special family, My love and gratitude to all of you.
- Charles and Georgann Kachur, and the entire Kachur family – Nick, Traci, Luke, Abby, Andy, and Kate, thank you for always making me feel at home. My love and gratitude to you.
- Susan Barcinas - my dissertation chair, advisor, writing partner, mentor, Polish soul sister, and dear friend. You guided, inspired, and pushed me to be the best version of myself as a researcher and a person. I am forever grateful for the opportunity to learn

from you. Thank you for believing in a researcher who still thinks and writes like a lawyer if I may *opine* (I told you I would get that word in this dissertation somewhere!)

- Chad Hoggan: Thank you for being on my committee. Always the devil's advocate, you push me to do my best. Thank you for the opportunity to work with you at JTED, which helped with writing the articles.
- Alyssa Rockenbach: Thank you for taking the time to serve on my committee. I am grateful for your knowledge, kindness, and support.
- Lisa Chapman: Thank you for taking the time to participate as a committee member. I so appreciate your insight, suggestions, and knowledge of community colleges.
- The adult learner participants from Southeastern Community College -Thank you for taking the time to speak with me for this dissertation. I learned so much from you. I wish you the best on your academic journey.
- The faculty, staff, and administration at Southeastern Community College: Thank you for your kindness, hospitality, and taking the time to participate in the interviews.
- Denis Pratt - Thank you for driving Miss Tracy here, there, and everywhere. Love to Donna, Delaney, Emma, and Kels.
- My axis of sisterhood - Margaret Conover-Cole, Michele Girolami, and Leah Jennings. The three of you are my soul sisters. My life would be incomplete without all of you. Thank you for always being there for me, and your love, friendship, support, and an occasional kick in the butt. I love you!
- The Ladies of November 2019 Suck to Unstoppable cohort - You are what kept me going. Special thanks to Romina, Janelle, Vee, Jenn, JT, Christina, and Mary. I will miss those Pomodoro parties!

- Amy Boyd: Thank you for helping me become a Phinisher and silence the little terrorist in my head! Write the damn dissertation!
- Joe Grabakas - Thank you for helping me on my journey to find my authentic self. I am forever grateful for your kindness and support.
- All of the fantastic students I had the pleasure of teaching over the years. You taught me so much about adult learners, and more importantly, about myself. Remember that you always have the potential for greatness.
- The great teachers and professors who inspired me: Joanne Waltower, Dorothy Lingenfelter, Georgann Kachur, Leonard DeFabo, Karen Ready, James Voelker, the Honorable Kevin Dillon, Charles Ewing, Elizabeth Mensch, and Alan Freedman.
- Thanks also to Duane Akroyd, Kaisu Mällki, Fergal Finnegan, John Dirkx, Lisa Swift-Yong, Jonathan Garrison, Tiffany Ferris, Howard Reeve, Michael Cole, Joe Meskey, Siobhan Finnamore, Ed and Jessica Maniccia, Roland and Jodi Francis, Kathrine Stains, Deanne Tripi, Kelly Zarcone, David and Sarah Whitehead, Jill Kasperzak, Laurel Berry, David Buyer, Lauren Pellegrino, Deena Guido, Heidi McCann, Selena Waite, The ladies at Larkspur, Christina Herdesty, The Cool Kidz Squad-Runner team (Megz, Andrewz, Brad, Casper, Debz, Denise, Gil, Jeff, Joseph, Keith, Laura, Lee, Marcie, Maria, Mark Mel, Nathan, Sandy, and Victor), all of my peeps on academic and running Twitter, and Dakota at Expect Perfection Transcription.
- Elton John - Thank you for the inspiration and for saving my life. I gonna love me again!
- And, thank you, Jake, for being the best emotional support specialist with four paws. You made sure we went for a run or a walk so I could stay sane. I recused you, and you definitely rescued me. Good dog!

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Background

The National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) reported that in fall 2018, 16.6 million students enrolled in postsecondary institutions in the United States (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2020). Of that 16.6 million students, many adult learners chose to seek a postsecondary degree, credential, training, developmental skills, and knowledge for personal enrichment. The NCES defines an adult postsecondary learner³ as an individual who is over the age of 24; has delayed enrollment into postsecondary education; is financially independent of parents; completes coursework part-time; works full-time or part-time while enrolled; has dependents other than a spouse; lacks a standard high school diploma, or is a single parent (Horn & Carroll, 1996, pp. 4-7). Adult learners represented over 60 percent of students who attended postsecondary institutions in the United States between 1985 and 1996. (Horn & Carroll, 1996).

Fast forward to the 21st century, where the number of adult postsecondary learners ages 25 through 34 increased by 35 percent, and those over the age of 35 increased by 13 percent between 2001 and 2015 (Hussar & Bailey, 2018). It is projected that between 2015 and 2026, the number of adult postsecondary learners ages 25 – 34 will increase by 11 percent and those over the age of 35 by 13 percent, respectively (Hussar & Bailey, 2018).

The postsecondary education landscape provides several options for adult learners to pursue postsecondary education. Adult learners choose to enroll in four-year and two-year postsecondary institutions, including public, private, for-profit, and online colleges and

³ The NCES uses ‘nontraditional student’ in place of adult learner (Horn & Carroll, 1996, pp. 4-7).

universities (McFarland et al., 2018). However, a significant number of adult learners choose to attend community college because of its mission to provide open access to and equity in postsecondary education for the community it serves, especially for underrepresented (Bailey et al., 2005; Cohen et al., 2013). Community colleges are easily accessible, cost-effective, flexible in course scheduling, support adult lifestyle commitments, and provide relevant programs to current life needs (Kasworm, 2005; Mellow & Heelan, 2008). Community colleges recognize that adult learners have specific challenges and barriers that interfere with their persistence, which is not often the case at traditional colleges and universities (Kasworm, 2010; Osam et al., 2017). These barriers and challenges include part-time enrollment, family and dependent responsibilities, work commitments, limited financial support, first-generation college student status, a break from formal education, a lack of or lapsed academic skills and knowledge, lower socioeconomic backgrounds, lack of family and peer support, and lower accumulative college course hours (Barcinas et al. 2016; Kasworm, 2002; Kasworm, 2014). For adult learners who are location-bound, a community college may be the only cost-effective way to earn a degree or other credential (Boggs, 2012). In essence, the community college offers adult learners access to postsecondary education while recognizing their unique circumstances, motivations, and barriers.

Despite increases in access to postsecondary education for all learners, evidence shows low completion rates among community college students (Bailey, 2016). According to Bailey (2016), community colleges do an excellent job in their mission to provide open access to postsecondary education; however, the low completion rates for community college students who seek a degree or credential “constitutes a failure for those students to achieve their goals and represents a loss of potential earning power and economic growth and activity for the economy as a whole” (p. 11). To illustrate, Bailey (2016) referenced a 2014 NCES report, which showed

that completion rates moved from 23.6% for the year 2000 to 19.5% for the year 2010 (NCES, 2014). Bailey (2016) also cited data from the NCES National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988, which reported less than 40% of entering community college students completed any degree or certificate from any college within six years.

These concerns led policymakers and education advocates to institute a fundamental shift in the focus and mission at community colleges. This shift, known as *student success*, included data-driven evidence of completion derived from graduation rates, learning outcomes, and labor market outcomes (Bailey et al., 2005; McClenney, 2013; Wyner, 2014). The mandates tasked community colleges with the implementation of institution-wide initiatives that focus on accountability and transparency in tuition and fees, student success, and the availability of such information (Bailey et al., 2005). This shift produced several national student success reform initiatives such as *Achieving the Dream*, *Completion by Design*, and *Guided Pathways*, which have significantly transformed institutional practices and policies at community colleges across the US for almost two decades.

Problem Statement

The adult learner and higher education research literature have contributed significantly to the conceptualization of the unique experiences of adult learners in postsecondary settings. The literature has provided insight into the definition of an adult learner, adult learner attributes and demographics, the different types of adult learning environments; adult learner identity; adult learning theory, intergenerational learning, adult learner persistence, and adult learner patterns in postsecondary education. Except for research in niche areas such as prior learning assessment (Hayward & Williams, 2015; Tannehill et al., 2008), or outcome assessment (Kasworm, 2011), the adult learner and higher education literature has remained relatively

unchanged, despite significant reforms and changes at secondary institutions, and community colleges, in particular. I have not found empirical research or focused studies in the adult learner and higher education literature that specifically address adult learners' experiences at community colleges with an ongoing student success environment. Meanwhile, student success and related completion initiatives and strategies are currently the norms for community colleges with no signs relenting.

An additional concern is a heavy reliance on quantitative evidence of completion and other related outcomes related to student success and completion. Such institutional change is data-driven, which can lead to a one-size-fits-all approach to measure student success and completion. While the adult learner literature has explored various aspects of the adult learner's unique postsecondary needs and motivations, it is unknown, in qualitative terms, how adult learner experiences manifest within a student success environment. It is also unknown how adult learners make decisions regarding their educational experiences, given this new focus on student success and completion. And, it is unknown how adult learners view various student success initiatives and strategies designed for the success of all community college learners. As more adult learners pursue postsecondary education at community colleges, there is a need to understand and describe how their experiences fit within this new paradigm that is student success.

Purpose Statement and Research Question

The purpose of this qualitative case study is to learn about, describe, and understand the experiences and perceptions of adult students who attend a community college that has ongoing student success initiatives. Specifically, the research question addresses how do adult learners

uniquely perceive their student experiences at a community college immersed in a student success culture?

Research Design

This research study used a qualitative case study design. Denzin and Lincoln (2011) defined qualitative research as “a situated activity that locates the observer in the world” by using a “set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible,” which “involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world” (p. 3). The goal for the qualitative researcher is to make sense and find meaning in those things, ideas or phenomena described by those who view them by studying things in their natural setting (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011). Qualitative research seeks “to understand and interpret human and social behavior as lived by the participants in a particular social setting (Ary et al., 2010).

Stake (2003) indicated, “A case study is both a process of inquiry about the case and the product of that inquiry (p. 136). Creswell (2013) noted that a case study allows the researcher to explore real-life cases over time through detailed, in-depth data collection from multiple sources and reports a case description or case themes. Thus, the case study provides a particularistic, descriptive, and heuristic view of the phenomenon under study (Merriam, 2001).

Qualitative research was an appropriate research design because this study’s purpose was to understand the experiences of adult learners who attend a community college immersed in student success. This study provided a holistic and rich description of the characteristics and uniqueness of the adult learners’ experiences within the context of a bounded system, which is a community college immersed in student success. An instrumental case study framed the relationship between adult learners and community college institutionally-driven student success

initiatives, strategies, policies, practices, culture, and environment as the unit of analysis (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Stake, 2003).

Conceptual Framework

There was no available conceptual framework at the time of the dissertation study proposal, which connected the concepts and constructs surrounding this study. Although adult learners are the largest proportion of students attending colleges, they are rarely situated as a unique, stand-alone audience that is regularly studied and explicitly discussed and served via specific policies or environmental features (American Association of Community Colleges, 2019). Therefore, I constructed a conceptual framework that adopted core features and propositions of the context that were drawn primarily upon a Southeastern State's Community College System stated priorities, which was the geographic location for this study. The study's framework included three components of the Southeastern State's Student Success Principles, with an additional overarching inquiry into how adult learners perceive experience and respond to student successes within a community college environment.

Table 1. Original Conceptual Framework using the Southeastern State's Student Success Principles (Southeastern State, 2017).

Student Success Principles	Points of Inquiry	Questions
Defining Student Success	What does student success mean to community college adult learners?	<p>What are adult learners' unique perceptions, awareness, and expectations of student success and of being an adult learner?</p> <p>How do adult learners perceive (if at all) the community college's (institutional) definitions and efforts related to student success?</p>

Table 1 (continued).

Students should make informed decisions.	How do adult learners define what it means to make informed decisions with respect to their student needs?	What are examples of situations that provide insight into how adult learners describe and perceive making informed decisions regarding their student experiences and goals?
Students progress through effective learning pathways that lead to credentials of economic value, without unnecessary detours.	How do adult learners describe their academic journey, particularly in relation to their goals of acquiring credentials or their experiences in navigating barriers?	What are examples of the nuances of adult learners' credential pathways and navigation of detours?
Students are provided integrated, targeted supports and interventions when they are most effective.	How do adult learners describe the support they receive to meet their adult learner needs?	How do adult learners perceive the support, strategies, and interventions that they receive or the absence of desired supports? What awareness and experience do adult learners have with adult learner friendly practices such as prior learning assessment or other accepted adult learner supports?

The first component of the framework considered how adult learners define student success. The point of inquiry provided an umbrella for the remaining three components. The adult learner point of inquiry considered what student success meant to community college adult learners through the lens of an adult learner's unique perceptions, awareness, and expectations of student success. This inquiry also considered how adult learners perceive or do not perceive the community college's institutional definitions and efforts related to student success. The remaining three components were suggested strategies for student success, as provided by Southeastern State's Community College System.

I submitted the original framework during the dissertation proposal presentation and defense. My dissertation committee determined that the original framework had significant

breadth and depth that it could produce several studies. At the suggestion of my committee, I selected to focus on one component of the framework for the final dissertation. I chose to focus on the first component of the framework and its interrelationship between student success and the adult learner.

Table 2. Refined Conceptual Framework with a focus on defining student success.

Student Success Principles	Points of Inquiry	Questions
Defining Student Success	What does student success mean to community college adult learners?	<p>What are adult learners' unique perceptions, awareness, and expectations of student success? Of being an adult learner?</p> <p>How do adult learners perceive (if at all) the community college's (institutional) definitions and efforts related to student success?</p>

The revised framework addressed the overarching question of how adult learners define student success as they navigate their academic journey. The definition of student success served as a foundational concept and was fundamental in the overall understanding of student success and the adult learner. The point of inquiry allowed me to examine how adult learners uniquely perceive student success, if at all. The purpose of this question was to explore how adult learners view themselves as adult learners, if at all, within this student success culture on campus. Finally, this point of inquiry sought to understand how adult learners perceive if at all, institutional efforts to promote student success. These questions were addressed broadly by the inclusion of adult learner's perceptions and description of their decision making, their navigation of their educational journey, and the various supports available to them within the student success context. By refining the original framework in this way, I created a foundational

understanding of how adult learners perceive and describe their experiences within the context of student success. This foundation will, in turn, serve as support for future inquiries into the remaining parts of the original framework.

Significance of the Study

The postsecondary adult learner literature contributed significant research and study that shapes our understanding of postsecondary adult learners and their characteristics, learning styles, identity, and persistence. The literature has considered and contributed to our understanding of adult learners within the context of the community college. These topics include, among other topics, race (Acevedo-Gil et al., 2015; Kasworm, 2002; Paulson & Boeke, 2006, Ross-Gordon, 2005; Wood & Turner, 2011), adult women, (Cox & Ebbers, 2010; Deutsch & Ta, 2015; Deutsch & Schmertz, 2011; Hardin, 2008; Peterson 2016), community college parents (Peterson, 2015), and veterans (Dillard & Yu, 2016; Griffin & Gilbert, 2015; López et al., 2015; Schiavone & Gentry, 2014; Wheeler, 2012). Long-standing research indicates that an adult learner has needs, motivations, and challenges that differ from their traditional student peers and necessitate a more adult learner friendly atmosphere and environment that understands and embraces their uniqueness (Bohonos, 2014; Capps, 2014; Clark, 2012; Nakajima et al., 2012). Adult learner identity at community colleges and four-year universities provide a lens to view how adult learners see themselves, their fellow adult learners, and their interactions with traditional-age learners as well as faculty, staff, and administrators (Kasworm, 2005, 2010; Norris, 2011; Witkowsky et al., 2016). Nevertheless, except for research in niche areas such as prior learning assessment (Tannehill et al., 2008), or outcome assessment (Kasworm, 2011), the literature regarding adult learners in postsecondary institutions has remained relatively unchanged.

The dearth of research regarding adult learners, explicitly studying at community colleges immersed in student success, highlights specific research gaps. First, our understanding of the adult learner developed before the implementation of student success. For unknown reasons, there is little empirical evidence that describes and explains how an adult learner's experiences and decision making translate into student success in light of our concept of adult learners. This is despite the fact that student success is a significant part of the higher education landscape. While community colleges are still focused on and committed to access and equity, the new dimension of student success as a function of completion dominates (Bailey, 2016). Student success continues to evolve and grow with the introduction of new initiatives and research. Our prior understanding and assumptions regarding adult learners must also evolve in light of these changes and reforms.

Second, the practices and policies of community colleges have evolved to where success equates with completion. Today's community colleges measure success by learning outcomes, guided pathways to completion, and attention to labor market outcomes. While these measures provide valuable evidence of success, it provides a one-size-fits-all view of community college students. The literature describes the adult learner as having different needs, motivations, and barriers than the traditional-age student (Osam et al., 2017). We do not know how this focus on student success explains, in qualitative terms, the adult learner experience at a community college immersed in the student success environment. For example, it is unknown how the Guided Pathways align with an adult learner's goals (Capps, 2012; Clark, 2012; Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL), 2020). It is unknown how the initiatives that keep students on the pathway match with the type of supports that adult learners need (Capps, 2012; Clark, 2012; CAEL, 2020). It is also unknown if adult learners believe that they are receiving

instruction that meets their learning style (Bohonos, 2014; CAEL, 2020; Capps, 2014; Clark, 2012; Nakajima et al., 2012). There is some guidance regarding serving the adult learner population concerning student success. The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning's (CAEL) (2020) *Ten Principles for Effectively Serving Adult Learners* provides a starting point in the explanation of how the adult learner's experience in the student success environment compares with the student success initiatives. The *Ten Principles for Effectively Serving Adult Learners* shifts the conversation to focus on ways in which postsecondary institutions can challenge their assumptions regarding adult learners and create or realign policies and initiatives geared toward their success (CAEL, 2020). However, as of this writing, there are no studies that explore how adult learners describe their experiences using the CAEL guidelines.

This research is significant because the reach of these student success reforms affects the largest proportion of community college students, the adult learner. Their voice, their uniqueness must be included in the framing of policies geared toward student success. This research will provide institutions with valuable qualitative evidence that will not only influence current policies and reforms but will aid in future student success initiatives. This research's significance lies in taking our existing knowledge and assumptions about the adult learner in postsecondary education and compare and contrast them against student success.

Definitions

Some specific terms and concepts describe adult learners and the student success reforms at community colleges. The study relied on the following definitions.

- **Adult Learner** – An individual who is over the age of 24, married and/or has dependents, is financially independent their parents, have life responsibilities outside of their studies, such as family or employment, may or may not be a full-time

- student, and is active military or a veteran.(CAEL, 1999; Horn & Carroll, 1996; Witkowski et al., 2016).
- Completion – Completion refers to a student finishing one of the following at the community college level: (1) an occupational certificate with labor market value; (2) a two-year associate in science (A.S.), associate in arts (A.A.), or another similar credential, or (3) transferring to a postsecondary institution that grants a bachelor’s degree (Pennington, 2010).
 - Guided pathways – A pathway that guides the student from the inquiry into the institution, through a program, and ultimately to the successful completion of a credential, transfer to a bachelor’s program, or employment (Completion by Design, 2016.).
 - Labor market outcomes –Data and other information that chronicles employment trends, employment rates, and earnings that help postsecondary institutions align their program offerings with projected labor market needs (The Aspen Institute, 2016).
 - SS Guided Pathways for Student Success – A Guided Pathways model implemented by the Southeastern State Community College System (Southeastern State,2017).
 - Nontraditional Learner - An individual who is over the age of 24, and has one or more of the following characteristics: delayed enrollment into postsecondary education, attends part-time, financial independence from parents, works part-time while enrolled, has dependents, is a single parent, or does not hold a standard high school diploma (Horn & Carrol, 1996).

- Persistence – A student maintains continued enrollment (Crawford, 1999) and the actions taken by a student to continue enrollment until successful completion of the program or course (Cunningham, 2010).
- Persistence model – A theoretical construct that describes the institutional and social support structures that aid in a student’s persistence at a postsecondary institution (Chaves, 2006).
- Student Success – Student success refers to the various educational strategies and initiatives that postsecondary institution can do to aid students in accessing and completing a postsecondary credential, which includes, but is not limited to the following:
 - Student achievement levels, first-year retention, student persistence, and increased content knowledge that fosters academic and personal success.
 - Access to affordable postsecondary education that leads to the completion of a high-quality postsecondary degree or credential that leads to gainful employment and earning, and
 - Initiatives and measures that target access and equity for underrepresented populations and close achievement gaps (Kinzie & Kuh, 2016).
- Student Success as defined by Southeastern State Community College System – A student success refers to (1) Students making informed decisions, (2) student progress through effective learning pathways that lead to valuable credentials without unnecessary detours, and (3) students are provided integrated, targeted supports and interventions when they are most effective (Southeastern State, 2017).

- Student Success Reform – Student success reform is an umbrella term that refers to the various reforms and initiatives that focus on student success and completion in postsecondary education, i.e., *Achieving the Dream, Competition by Design* (Bailey et al., 2015; McClenney, 2013; Wyner, 2012).
- Traditional-age learner – A traditional learner is one who is between 18 and 23 years old, newly graduated from high school, is financially dependent on parents, and attends classes full-time (Donavant et al., 2013; Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011).

Chapter Summary and Organization of Study

This chapter outlined the roadmap of this research study by presenting the growth of adult learners attending postsecondary institutions and how that growth is most evident at community colleges. Moreover, the chapter provided a brief overview of the reasons that adult learners choose community colleges to pursue their educational goals. The introduction also discussed the student success reform movement and how community colleges have shifted their focus to student success and completion. The problem statement indicated that while there is literature regarding the adult learner in postsecondary institutions, the literature is stagnant in light of the continued evolution of student success reforms that have dotted the community college landscape. The purpose statement and research question addressed this problem with a conceptual framework to anchor it with Southeastern State's Community College System stated priorities and relevant adult learner literature. This qualitative research design included an instrumental case study method to conduct the research. Finally, the chapter expressed the how this study was of significance not only for those who research adult learners in postsecondary institutions, but to the community college administrators, policymakers, leaders, faculty, and staff whose interaction and decisions impact adult learners.

Dissertation Outline

Chapter 2 of this dissertation presents a review of the adult learner literature. The review will cover the definition of the adult learner, the adult learner within the postsecondary education context and, the adult learners within the community college environment. The chapter will continue with an analysis of the student success reform movement within the community college sector, adult learner-focused student success initiatives, and the state of adult learner discourse in the literature. Chapter 3 presents the methodology, research design, data collection and analysis, ethical considerations, and the limitations of this study.

Alternative Dissertation Format

This dissertation utilizes an alternative dissertation format. The plan for this research was an adaptation of a three-article dissertation (Freeman, 2018; Thomas et al., 2016), which included Chapters 4 and 5 are in the form of journal article manuscripts and Chapter 6 as an implication synopsis of the overall study findings.

Chapter 4: The unique experiences of adult learners at a community college with a student success-rich culture

Upon successful completion of the dissertation, I intend to submit this manuscript to *Adult Education Quarterly* (AEQ). The journal's aim and scope are to promote and advance the understanding and awareness of adult and continuing education with topics that are of interest to those in research and practice. (Adult Education Quarterly, 2020).

Chapter 5: Adult learner experiences in a student success-rich environment within a community college context

Upon successful completion of this dissertation, I intend to submit this manuscript to the *Journal of Continuing Higher Education*. The journal's aim and scope promote current research,

theoretical models, and conceptual treatment of adult learners, nontraditional learners, and post-traditional learners in various learning contexts (Journal of Continuing Higher Education, 2020).

Chapter 6: Implications Synopsis

Upon advice and consent of my dissertation committee, Chapter 6 consists of an implications synopsis that summarizes and discusses the conclusions and implications of this study for research, theory, practice, and future research in place of the proposed executive summary. This decision reflects the desire to emphasize the various implications of the research and future research considerations.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review paints a picture of the adult learner within the context of postsecondary education. Section one of this review examines the various terminology and definition used to define adult learners in postsecondary literature concerning age and adult responsibility. This section also discusses the challenges with the use of these terms and definitions in the research and practice. Section two explores the various characteristics attributed to adult learners, such as demographics, decision making, motivation, barriers, and work-life balance.

Section three highlights the enrollment patterns of adult learners at various postsecondary institutions with a specific focus on adult learner enrollment in community colleges. Section five provides an overview of the rise of the student success movement at community colleges and the various national initiatives attributed to student success. Section six examines the adult learner's position within the student success movement and the extent to which adult learners factor in national student success initiatives. Section seven reveals research related to adult learner student success in postsecondary environments and various frameworks and initiatives that advocate for adult learners.

Section eight describes the state of adult learner discourse with a focus on a meta-analysis that chronicles the prominence of postsecondary adult learners in the literature. The chapter closes with a summary that presents my closing remarks on the status of adult learners within the research literature, particularly concerning student success.

Terminology and Definitions

Various Terminology

A loosely-based definition of a traditional postsecondary student is a learner between 18 to 19 years old, newly graduated from high school, mostly from families of medium-high socio-cultural status, and attends classes full-time (Donavant et al., 2013; Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011). However, four-year and two-year postsecondary institutions see a steady increase of students who do not fit this definition. These individuals have an array of definitional criteria that is difficult to assign a label or define characteristics as well as where to place them among groups used for enrollment and other metrics. The literature presents these individuals as nontraditional students, adult learners, and post-traditional learners, and other variations of these terms. The research literature has not reached a consensus in the use of adult learner, nontraditional learners, or another term/label that designates a postsecondary student who does not fall under the traditional learner umbrella.

Kasworm's (2018) historical review of the changes in terminology in the adult learner and higher education literature explores the complexities with loose terminology and how to best serve adult learners, given the inconsistent terminology. Soares et al. (2017) examined the various terminology used by various educational organizations that describe students who are not traditional learners and the characteristics that define these students.

Table 3. Terminology and definitions used to define adult learners. (Soares et al., 2017).

Organization	Label	Characteristic Factors
American Council on Education	Post-traditional learners (2013)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Age 25 or above • Are needed wage earners for themselves or their families • Are military-connected • May have dependents • Works full time

Table 3 (continued).

Center for American Progress	Working learners (2009)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Already in the workforce • Lack a postsecondary credential • Are needed wage earners for themselves or their families
Institute for Higher Education Policy	21st-century student (2013)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • First-generation • Low to moderate-income • Age 24 or above • From communities of color • Attending part-time • Taking care of children or other dependents • Working while enrolled • Non-native English speaking • Immigrant • Active duty, military, or veteran
Lumina Foundation	Today's student (2015)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Older than 25 • Working while enrolled • Raising children • Financially independent • Racially diverse • Struggling to graduate
<i>Excelencia</i> in Education	Post-traditional learners (2013)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May need academic preparation or remediation • Enroll at a community college or part-time • Delay entry • Live off-campus with parents or own dependents • First-generation • Latino or African American • Worked over 30 hours each week
Georgetown Center for Education and the Workforce/ACT Center for Equity in Learning	Working learners (2015)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Young or mature part- or full-time workers while enrolled
Center for Law and Social Policy	Nontraditional students (2011)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Older than 25 • Financially independent • Enrolled at two-year college • Minority students • Low-income students • Employed part-time or full time • Student parent

Table 3 (continued).

National Center for Education Statistics	Nontraditional undergraduates (1996)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Delays enrollment • Attends part-time for at least part of the academic year • Works full time (35 hours or more per week) while enrolled • Financially independent • Has dependents other than a spouse • Is a single parent • Has either not finished high school or has an equivalency
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In addition to the terminology listed in Table 2, the research literature uses the terms *nontraditional* and *adult learners*, interchangeably. For example, Flowers et al., (2014), Gilardi, and Guglielmetti (2011), Gully (2016), Kortesoja (2009), Markle, (2015), and Oden (2011) reference the term *nontraditional*. Yet, Deutsch and Schmertz (2011) use and reference the terms *nontraditional* student and *adult student*. Chen (2017) uses *nontraditional adult learners* and cites the NCES definition. Kasworm (2002; 2004; 2005;2020; 2014; 2018) is relatively consistent with the use of *adult learners*.

The American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) (2019) uses the term *Adult Learner* to describe students who are not traditional postsecondary students. The AACC relies on definitional language from the NCES National Postsecondary Student Aid Study, which uses age and other criteria to determine whether a student is financially dependent or independent for enrollment purposes (American Association of Community Colleges, 2019). In that report, the NCES uses age and dependency as controlling factors.

A...factor associated with aid eligibility is the student's family income, which is determined by the student's dependency status. For financial aid purposes, dependent students are undergraduates under 24 years of age who are unmarried, do not have dependents, are not veterans or on active military duty, are not orphans or wards of the

court, are not homeless or at risk of homelessness, and have not been deemed independent by a financial aid officer. All other undergraduates... are considered independent. (Radwin et al., 2018, p. 2).

The use of age, marital status, and dependency status mimic the NCES definition cited earlier in this chapter. Interestingly, the NCES definition does not include veteran status; however, it does include veteran status for financial aid reports.

Lack of Consensus in Terminology

The lack of consensus with the terminology used by educational organizations and researchers creates some confusion, as the terminology itself can have various meanings that may not fully encompass students who do not fit the traditional definition of a postsecondary student. For example, the word *adult* presumes chronological age; that is, the person has reached the age of legal majority. Therefore, it stands to reason that any student over the age of 18 is an adult. The postsecondary world, however, sees the economic dependency on parents or other legal guardians to define student adulthood. Only when chronological age plus another factor, i.e., marriage, dependents, military, will an institution deem one independent or an adult.

The use of *nontraditional* can represent the different paths that learners take in their pursuit of postsecondary education, such as a delay of more than two years, earning a GED, or military service before enrollment. It also represents the circumstances, behaviors, and responsibilities that traditional learners do not often face, i.e., dependents, full-time employment, and financial independence. The age characteristic is not readily apparent, which may not necessarily demonstrate who is truly nontraditional. For example, an early college student attends high school and postsecondary school simultaneously. These learners are younger than traditional college-age students but similarly seek postsecondary education (Miller et al., 2013).

Nontraditional may paint students in a negative light and can adversely affect their persistence and success (Gully, 2016). According to Gully (2016)

Referring to our students as nontraditional puts them at a starting line behind other college enrollees -- not only in their sense of self but also in the minds of fellow students, faculty members, administrators, and policy makers. Using such language basically says, "We are going out on a limb by letting you attend college because this place is not really designed for you, and you really should not be here." (para. 5).

Gully (2016) suggests labels such as nontraditional marginalize one's participation in postsecondary education. A learner may question if he or she is worthy of student success in a growing completion-agenda environment (Gully, 2018)t. With a more diversely-aged student demographic in higher education, it may be time to remove the distinction, rethink our assumptions of the students who attend postsecondary institutions (Gully, 2016).

As this literature review will demonstrate, there are differences among traditional and nonrational learners that help us understand how to meet their needs and address the challenges for these students. Older students' learning style, identity, and persistence have contributed to our understanding of how researchers and the greater postsecondary arena view these students. To separate these students and to study their uniqueness gives greater insight into their academic needs, which can affect intuitional policies that better serve them. This oneness of a student body follows the one-size-fits-all view of student success and the polices associated therein. While the overall inclusion of all students provides a community mindset, there are still differences within a community that warrant attention.

Finally, the label, *Working Learners*, devised by Center for American Progress and the Georgetown Center for Education and the Workforce/ACT Center for Equity in Learning

presumes that the student is engaged in the workforce (Soares, 2017). Milheim & Bishcel, 2007 indicate that many low-income and unemployed adult learners receive some form of public assistance and are currently unemployed. These individuals pursue postsecondary education as a means to move out of poverty and into a more financially sustainable career and improved life for their families (Milheim & Bishcel, 2007). Excluding these individuals from the definition takes away from the essence of learning as an adult.

While *adult* and *nontraditional* do present some aspects that define a student who is not a traditional learner, such as age and responsibility, there are still issues with context. To discard all labels for the vision of a homogeneous student body may lead to a decreased focus on the unique needs of students who do not fit the traditional model. This unique is what makes this population who they are. It is their essence. To serve and address their needs, respect much be given to that uniqueness and how they view the postsecondary world.

Therefore, to narrow and focus on a label to use in this study, this researcher sought commonalities in the descriptive characteristics used in the various label to derive not only a label but descriptive characteristics that best suit this group of learners. All the labels share two main characteristics. Each sets a chronological age as a diving line between traditional and those who are not traditional. Additionally, each label uses descriptive characteristics that describe behaviors, responsibilities, and circumstances that not commonly found among traditional learners. These main categories present sub-characteristics that further describe each category. This researcher submits that *adult learner* is the term of choice for this research. The next section will demonstrate the reasoning behind this choice.

Descriptive Factors that Define Adult Learners

Age of an Adult Learner

One variable used to determine who an adult learner is a connection between age and adulthood. When one considers what it means to be an adult, one often uses chronological age. The US legal system defines one as an adult or has reached the age of majority when the person has reached age 18 or emancipated by a court of law. As a legal adult, the person is responsible for all legal actions, civilly, criminally, and under contract law (Black's Law Dictionary, 1990). In the postsecondary education literature, '*adult*' does not include learners who have reached the age of majority. Instead, a traditional learner is one who is between 18 to 19 years old and 22 to 23 years old (Osam, Bergman, & Cumberland, 2017; Deutsch & Schmertz, 2011; Hardin, 2008; Donavant et al., 2013; Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011).

In comparison to adult learners, the age range is broader in scope. The age range for adult learners runs from 24 to 25 years of age until one is post-retirement age. A 2015 CDC report indicates that the average life expectancy rates for adult males in the United States are 76.3 years and 81.2 for females (National Center for Health Statistics, 2017). Based on these numbers, an estimated age range for the adult learner is 56.5 years⁴, compared to a mere five years for traditional learners.

The use of age as a sole criterion for the boundary between traditional and adult learners raises some questions. First, at what age do we draw the line between traditional learners and adult learners? Is it 24 years old or 25? The literature has presented mixed results and is overall inconsistent. Many in the literature use age 24 as a cutoff between traditional and adult learners because the students who enter college in this age group have a different set of life

⁴ Using age 24 as a cutoff between traditional and adult learner.

responsibilities than traditional learners (Deutsch and Schmertz, 2011). Other researchers have used age 25 as the cutoff point between the traditional and adult learner (, Bean & Metzner, 1987; Choy, 2002; Witkowsky et al., 2016) as well as Center for Law and Social Policy, the Lumina Foundation, and the American Council on Education (Soares et al., 2017). A few have indicated that students who fall outside the traditional college ages of 18 to 22 as adult learners, thus age 23, is where one is considered an adult learner (Osam et al., 2017; Deutsch & Schmertz, 2011; Hardin, 2008). To add to the various cutoff points between traditional and adult learners, AACC *Fast Facts* (2019) bracket students into three age groups for reporting purposes, under 21 years old, between 22 and 39 years old, and 40 years and older.

The presence of different lower-cutoff ages presents a challenge from a research standpoint. The reason for the lower-cutoff age has little to do with the chronological age itself. Rather, it refers to the responsibilities that one encounters once they reach that age, such as work and family (Kim, 2002). If we accept that premise, then do we exclude a learner who is 24 years old who has similar responsibilities? If age 25 as the cutoff, we are potentially missing individuals who are actually adult learners. This does not provide the richest picture of who is an adult learner. The use of age as a sole criterion is not the most effective means of determining who is an adult learner without the inclusion of other criteria.

Lack of Disaggregation for Age

The lack of disaggregation for age presents another challenge in the use of age as a sole criterion. A 24-year-old has different motivations and needs that a 32-year-old, a 45-year-old, and so on. As indicated by Kasworm (2005), there is not a “monolithic adult student identity” of adult learners with the intergenerational community college classroom (p. 16). To use one label that encompasses a large group does not take into account the difference that exists within the

age sub-groups. It leads to the assumption that all adult learners have the same motivations and needs in postsecondary education. For example, Cummins (2014) illustrates this point in her studies of older workers over the age of 55 who are seeking postsecondary education. Adult learners in this group seek credentials due to changes in workforce demands, such as technical skills, as well as to retrain for employment losses as a result of the 2008 recession (Cummins, 2014). Older adult workers require focused career assessment and counseling to accommodate years of employment and skill acquisition (Cummins, 2014). An older adult may require technology training, outreach programs, job placement assistance, and counseling to deal with the effects of ageism, which does not impact younger adult learners as significantly.

A way to address the issue of disaggregation is to look at adult learners in a generational context. Generational theory seeks to view the behaviors of various groups or ‘generations,’ i.e., Baby Boomers, Generation X, Generation Y (Millennials), Generation Z, linked with U.S. history and culture, (Howe & Strauss, 1992; Milanowski, 2019). Clemente (2010) suggests that generation characteristics can provide a lens to view the various needs of adult learners, as each generation has different behaviors, life experiences, expectations, and motivations that have an impact on their learning and success in the classroom.

Chronological age alone does not fully represent how age fits in the definition of an *adult learner*. What age means to adulthood creates confusion between the legal and traditional view of adulthood with the financial dependence that many college students face when they reach the age of majority. Chronological or generational adulthood is a vast category that does not sufficiently address variations in age or the difference in needs and motivation for postsecondary education. While age does define and describe adult learners in some ways. Other descriptive words and phrases are needed to make the definition of *adult learners* complete.

Adult Learner Life Responsibilities

Merriam and Brockett (2007) suggest that in addition to age, the adult learner can be defined, in part, as participation in “activities intentionally designed for the purpose of bringing about learning among those whose age, social roles, or self-perception define them as adults” (p. 8). Activities that are commonly associated with adulthood include financial independence, full-time employment, married or head of a household that has dependents. These activities call for independence from the parental unit and the need to juggle these activities while engaged in educational activities.

In their *Conceptual Model of Nontraditional Undergraduate Student Attrition*, Bean and Metzner (1985) relied on three definitional variables to determine who is an adult learner. Although age is a factor, standing alone, is insufficient to define an adult learner and should not only be used in the chronological sense. Instead, age should refer to the level of self-control and maturity that comes with adulthood (Bean & Metzner, 1985). Moreover, age also represented adult responsibilities such as family and employment as older students are more likely to experience those responsibilities (Bean & Metzner, 1985). The second variable, residence, implied that adult learners are more independent than traditional students (Bean & Metzner, 1985). Adult learners do not usually live at home with parents and must commute to their classes; thus, they are less likely to engage in social activities on campus or interact with other classmates and faculty outside of class (Bean & Metzner, 1985). The third factor, enrollment, assumes that adult learners are more likely to enroll part-time due to family and employment responsibilities, which limits their time on campus to engage socially with other students or faculty (Bean & Metzner, 1985).

The NCES applied the Bean and Metzner (1985) view of who is the adult learner in their definition of nontraditional learner (Horn & Carroll, 1996). The NCES complied with six surveys and three studies that considered adult learner participation in higher education and the trends therein (Merriam et al. 2012). In 1996, *the National Postsecondary Student Aid Study* examined the enrollment trends of nontraditional students for three years (1986-87, 1989-90, and 1992-93). This analysis included data from the *Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Survey*, which examined the persistence of nontraditional students (Horn & Carroll, 1996). The NCES cited Bean and Metzner's (1985) definition of a nontraditional learner to determine who fell under that category. The NCES noted that

Age acts as a surrogate variable that captures a large, heterogeneous population of adult students who often have family and work responsibilities as well as other life circumstances... Other variables typically used to characterize nontraditional students are associated with their background (race and gender)," residence (i.e., not on campus), level of employment (especially working full time), and being enrolled in non-degree occupational programs. (p. 3)

To that end, the NCES uses the term *nontraditional* to describe a student who meets one or more of the following characteristics: (1) has a delay in enrollment into postsecondary education, (2) attends part-time, (3) is financially independent, (4) works full time while enrolled, (5) has dependents other than a spouse, (7) is a single parent, or (8) does not have a standard high school diploma (Horn & Carroll, 1996, p 5). To date, the NCES continues to use *nontraditional* in its reporting of the enrollment status and patterns of students who fit their definition (e.g., National Center for Education Statistics, 2020).

While the NCES follows with much of the research literature in the definition of as an adult learner at age 24, the age variable encompasses those responsibilities associated with an adult such as financial independence, working full time, dependents, single parent, or the need to attend full time (Horn & Carroll, 1996). The addition of specific circumstances that characterize adult learner choices and behaviors, such as enrollment patterns, financial status, and high school graduation status, also set them apart from traditional learners (Horn & Carroll, 1996).

Researcher's Position

This researcher contends that the term *adult learner*' and criteria set forth by the NCES present suitable terminology and definition of a postsecondary learner who is not a traditional learner. First, *adult learner* recognizes that age can represent chronological or generational age. One who does not fit the traditional age for college enrollment fits that description while excluding those who are traditional age. Second, the inclusion of adult responsibilities allows for the inclusion of those who do not fit the age variable. A traditional-age learner who has adult responsibilities is an adult learner. Third, *nontraditional learner* includes early college – high school students who do not meet the age or adult responsibility requirements. It can also include traditional learners who meet nontraditional categories such as the low income of students of color. Finally, the NCES use of *nontraditional* is similarly problematic; however, it does provide many variables that define adult responsibilities and creates more inclusion of potential adult learner demographic not associated with traditional learners. Therefore, this dissertation uses *adult learners* and the NECS definition to define and describe potential participants for the research study and related manuscripts.

Specific Adult Learner Demographic Groups

There are unique characteristics that help describe adult learners that go beyond age and adult responsibilities. These specific groups of adult learners have demographic characteristics that not only set them apart from traditional students; they also set them apart from other adult learners. These unique demographic characteristics present an additional layer that includes barriers that impact an adult learner's educational journey.

Differences among Genders

While both genders report that each is responsible for balancing family and home while in pursuit of postsecondary education, these responsibilities often fall along gender lines (Deutsch & Schmertz, 2011; Osam et al., 2017, Widoff, 1999). According to Deutsch and Schmertz (2011), these differences reflect life pathways where male pathways traditionally are focused on work while female pathways focus toward home and family.

The women's movement increased the number of women participating in higher education (Kimmel et al., 2014). As a result, the literature has cited numerous studies that discuss female adult learners' academic journey and experience (Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002; Cox & Ebbers, 2010; Deutsch & Schmertz, 2011; Deutsch & Ta, 2015; Hardin, 2008; Peterson 2016; Plageman & Sabina, 2010). Many female adult learners indicate that they pursue postsecondary education because of a significant life change, such as a divorce or the death of a spouse, which often changes their financial situation (Hardin, 2008). Many women pursue postsecondary education after children have entered elementary school or started college (Hardin, 2008). Some enter postsecondary education to improve their lives and the lives of their dependents (Deutsch & Ta, 2015). Although more women choose to pursue higher education, Deutsch and Schmertz (2011) indicate that "despite cultural shifts and gains in equity, women's

pathways to school are still shaped by their gendered positioning” (p. 479). This depiction reflects the societal and cultural expectations in which women bear more responsibility for family and children (Deutsch & Schmertz, 2011). Thus, female adult learners, particularly single parents, report challenges with balancing work and family obligations in addition to the postsecondary studies (Deutsch & Schmertz, 2011; Peterson, 2016). As a result, female adult learners tend to experience more inter-role conflict in the form of guilt as time spent on their engagement in higher education takes time away from caring for the family (Markle, 2015). These responsibilities often result in female adult learners stopping and starting their education (Deutsch & Schmertz, 2011).

Unfortunately, there is little research on male adult learners (Coffman, 2016; Widoff, 1999). The literature does suggest that male adult learners pursue postsecondary education because of a career change, the opportunity for increased income, and financial stability for their families (Coffman, 2016; Widoff, 1999). This contention supports Deutsch and Schmertz's (2011) assertion that work roles are traditionally central to men's pathways. On the other hand, Osam et al. (2017) indicate that male adult learners experience situational barriers that also impact their pursuit of postsecondary education. Brock (2010) and Elman and O’Rand (2007) indicate that married male adult learners experience male cultural barriers that view the man as the breadwinner who must provide for his family. This perception creates a situational barrier in which a married male adult learner starts and then stops their education to provide for the financial stability of the family (Kimmel et al., 2014; Osam et al., 2017).

Regardless of whether a male or female adult learner is responsible for family and home responsibilities, these situational barriers that are common to adult learners have an impact on

the adult learner's postsecondary education experience (Kerka, 1989). Often, the adult learner must make a difficult choice without knowing what options exist for continuing their education in light of barriers. The availability of support systems, options for returning after an interruption due to a situational barrier, and programs that meet the needs of adult learners may be a possible first step to provide opportunities for adult learners to meet their educational goals.

Race and Ethnicity

Adult learners of color account for four out of 10 adult learners in postsecondary institutions (Flowers, Harper, & Lopez, 2014; Paulson & Boeke, 2006). Ross-Gordon's (2005) study indicates that adult learners of color are an overlooked and underrepresented population within the adult learner population. As with traditional learners of color, adult learners of color have similar motivations for their pursuit of higher education; however, spiritual and cultural motivations play a significant role in the decision to pursue and persist in a postsecondary setting (Ross-Gordon, 2005). Kasworm's (2002) comparative study of adults who attend four-year institutions and community college presents insight into the obstacles that African American adult learners face in the university environment. Race serves as an additional layer to that of age and adult responsibilities that the adult learner of color face (Flowers et al., 2014).

Viewing their academic world with a racial lens adds a new dimension to the adult learner experience in which the learner experience prejudice and discrimination in the classroom or campus environment (Kasworm, 2002). Johnson-Bailey and Cervero's (1996) study of female African American reentry students revealed that African American women's racial and gender identities are "ethgender" (p. 154). Their racial and gender identities are intertwined within the conscious mind rather than viewed as separate entities (Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 1996). Female African American adult learners view themselves as separate from other women and

Black males (Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 1996). They report feeling isolated and separate from their classmates as well as viewed as less capable as opposed to their classmates ((Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 1996). Also, Walpole et al. (2014) indicate that African American women are more likely to begin their postsecondary education at community colleges; however, they are less likely to complete a degree or credential compared to other women. This is due in part to situational barriers (i.e., childcare, employment, finances); psychological barrier (i.e., fear of failure, lack of self-esteem, and institutional barriers (i.e., alienation from institution, overt or covert discrimination, and lack of support from faculty and staff) (Ross-Gordon, 2005).

African American male adult learners are often viewed as underprepared, have low enrollment rates, and have poor completion rates, which deem them as at-risk students (Coffman, 2016; Wood & Turner, 2010). They also experience similar issues about identity and self-efficacy as African American female adult learners, as well as share the same motivations and needs for pursuing postsecondary education (Ross-Gordon, 2005). Unfortunately, there is sparse literature about African American males who attend community colleges regardless of age, as the bulk of literature focuses on traditional African American male students who attend four-year universities (Wood & Turner, 2010). Adult male African American learners were often part of studies that focused on African American adult learners as part of a larger ethnic group or referenced in conversations around male adult learners (Coffman, 2016; Flowers et al., 2014; Ross-Gordon, 2005; Widoff, 1999; Wood & Turner, 2010). One exception is an NCES report by Spradley (2000), which provides suggestions to improve persistence for African American adult learners. In this report, Spradley (2000) suggests that male African American adult learners participate in peer support, study groups, and campus involvement tied to the learner's community, which can improve overall persistence and success. Male African American adult

learners want to believe that faculty treat them with fairness, dignity, and respect in and out of the classroom (Spradley, 2000).

Hispanic and Latino/Latina adult learners are a growing demographic to participate in higher education; however, the literature on these learners, either adult or traditional learners, is limited (Speight et al., 2008). For Hispanic and Latino/ adult learners, the emphasis on culture and its ties to home, family, and children have a substantial impact on the learner's educational pursuits in that family members are actively involved in the learner's educational journey (Speight et al., 2008). Similar to other adult learners, Hispanic/Latino-a adult learners have similar barriers to their student success; however, the added layer of age and adult responsibilities play a role in their motivation and persistence.

For the adult learner of color, the layer of race and ethnicity can play a significant role in their overall success. Institutions must only be aware of their unique needs as an adult learner, but also their cultural identity as an adult learner of color. Situational, psychological, and institutional barriers magnify their cultural reality. It is necessary for colleges and universities to develop an awareness of the unique challenges for adult learners of color and to ensure that initiatives are in place to promote success.

Low Socioeconomic Status

While financial constraints can be an issue for many adult learners, finances present a more significant constraint for low-income adult learners, mainly rural and urban adult learners (Milheim & Bishcel, 2007; Prins et al., 2015). Low income often refers to an individual whose income is 125% below federal income guidelines (Choy, 2000; Milheim & Bishcel, 2007). Low-income adult learners are more likely to be single parents, work part-time, are unemployed or underemployed, and have limited financial resources to cover needs such as childcare (Milheim

& Bishcel, 2007; Prins et al., 2015). They are more likely to receive not only financial for their education but other forms of government aid (Milheim & Bishcel, 2007). In some cases, low-income adult learners do not employment benefits or sufficient flexibility to pursue post-secondary education (Milheim & Bishcel, 2007).

Many adult learners see postsecondary education as a means to a job with higher pay, career advancement, or improved overall financial stability for the family. However, for low-income adult learners, the movement out of poverty and improved financial circumstances takes on a more considerable significance (Milheim & Bishcel, 2007).). Thus, access to financial aid takes on greater significance (Milheim & Bishcel, 2007). Although many low-income adult learners chose community colleges as a low-cost alternative; however, limits of financial aid funds to pay for college remains a barrier (Milheim & Bishcel, 2007).

For low-income adult learners, the allocation of what little money exists for education expenses and basic needs adds a layer to the adult learner picture. For example, low income, female adult learners, particularly single parents, must often balance how to pay for necessities and childcare while also paying for educational expenses, especially if there is limited financial aid (Deutsch & Schmertz, 2011). For many low-income adult learners, a lack of affordable housing or legal issues can inhibit their starting or continuing a postsecondary education program (Hardin, 2008).

It is these financial constraints that cause many low-income adult learners to stop and start their education (Prins et al., 2015). Even the most dedicated student can feel the pressure of financial strain, which can harm persistence and student success (Fairchild, 2003). For the low-income adult learner, a lack of financial support means that he or she may not have the ability to

start or complete a program, particularly if that program has a set pathway or timeline for completion.

Active Military and Veterans

The enactment of the Serviceman's Readjustment Act, known as the GI Bill, in 1944 provided one of the most extensive financial aid packages to individuals who seek postsecondary educational opportunities in the US (Cohen et al., 2014). The GI Bill provided paid education living expenses for every qualified veteran (Cohen et al., 2014). Before the enactment of the GI Bill, a college education was seen as an opportunity for the middle and upper class, as only one in seven individuals attended college in the middle part of the 20th century (Cohen et al., 2014). The GI Bill made college accessible to a new demographic of individuals, produced a large pool of trained professionals, and changed the educational goals of the US (Kiestler, 1994).

The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan produced the highest number of active duty and veteran adult learners since World War II (Dillard & Yu, 2016; Griffin & Gilbert, 2015; López et al., 2015; Schiavone & Gentry, 2014; Wheeler, 2012). In August 2009, the Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act (Post- 9/11 GI Bill) provided 100% of in-state tuition, as well as an allowance for housing and books (Schiavone & Gentry, 2014). As a result, colleges and universities sought to create a veteran-friendly environment through the establishment of veteran's offices, streamlining admission and registration processes, expanding counseling opportunities, establishing mentoring programs, providing training for faculty and staff (Schiavone & Gentry, 2014).

Veteran and active duty adult learners bring real-world experience, maturity, and often have specialized skills that make them well suited for academic life (Dillard & Yu, 2016). Veteran students enter college with knowledge, skills, and experiences acquired during their

service. The challenge for these students and for adult learners who are similarly situated is that many colleges do not that recognize training obtained or credits earned during active duty (Sitzes, 2015). In a study conducted by Sitzes (2015), North Carolina colleges and universities fall below the national average for credit for prior learning experiences or credit by examination opportunities. Unfortunately, that forces veteran adult learners and other similarly situated adult learners to take additional credits, which, in turn, results in duplication of knowledge already learned and prolonged the student's time to complete a program or credential (Sitzes, 2015).

Additionally, veterans and active military experience challenges in their overall completion. According to Dillard and Yu (2016), the graduation rate among these adult learners is still below that of traditional learners. Much of this is due to obstacles such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), traumatic brain injury (TBI), and family and work responsibilities (Dillard & Yu, 2016). For the active-duty adult learner, managing deployments with their education goals present significant challenges (Dillard & Yu, 2016). Despite these challenges, veteran and adult learners are highly motivated, have strong self-discipline, and strong self-efficacy toward student success (Dillard & Yu, 2016). Colleges must recognize and value the experiences that these learners bring to the classroom. Unfortunately, as indicated by Dillard and Yu (2016), such experiences, like many adult learners' prior experiences, are often devalued in the classroom and by the institution. Persky and Oliver, (2010) suggest that institutions should create a military-friendly environment that builds trust and provides constant and ongoing support for military and veteran adult learners. Professional development can give insight and strategies to address the unique needs of active military and veterans (Persky & Oliver, 2010). In essence, active military and veteran adult learners need an environment that supports their unique needs and recognizes their strengths as students with a plan will aid in their overall success.

Unique Characteristics of Adult Learners

Adult learners navigate a complex matrix of decision points before enrollment and throughout their entire academic journey (Merriam et al., 2012). This decision-making process is a personal decision that is unique to the individual adult learner. The literature has explored what factors motivate adult learners to start postsecondary education and the various challenges and barriers that impact adult learner's overall persistence (Merriam et al., 2012). We have seen how this research has provided postsecondary institutions information that can better serve adult learners in the classroom and provide supports to aid with adult learner barriers. (Merriam et al., 2012). The research continues to challenge our assumptions of adult learners' need to navigate their educational journey (Merriam et al., 2012).

Motivation to Enroll in Postsecondary Education

Motivation is what drives or pushes one to engage in some activity and is intrinsic or extrinsic. The definitions of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, simply stated, is the difference between wanting to do an activity versus having to do an activity. Adult learners are intrinsically motivated by the pursuit of a challenge or goal, curiosity about something, and the mastery of a task (Bye et al., 2007). This intrinsic nature leads adult learners to exert autonomy, engage in higher-order – content to enhance thinking, and prefer self-directed and hands-on learning (Bye et al., 2007). On the other hand, traditional learners are often extrinsically motivated, meaning the student seeks approval and value from some external source such as a parent or to be part of the social environment (Bye et al., 2007; Liu, 2017). Traditional learners who do not often self-initiate their learning tend to engage in knowledge, comprehension, and procedural questions (Bye et al., 2007; Rabourn et al., 2018).

To further understand the motivation of adult learners to pursue postsecondary education, Houle (1961) sought to identify the underlying factors in the *Inquiring Minds: A Study of the Adult Who Continues to Learn*. The fundamental question raised by Houle (1961) was, “what kinds of men and women retain alert and inquiring minds throughout the years of their maturity?” (p. x). To answer this question, Houle (1961) conducted interviews with 21 adult participants to understand their experiences with learning, including their prior educational history, factors that led them to engage in their current learning, and how they saw themselves as learners. Houle (1961) determined that the number of education matters when an adult chooses to engage in continuing education and “...the most universal important factor is schooling. The higher the formal education of the adult, the more likely it is that he will take part in continuing education” (p. 7). Once the adult has decided to pursue education, Houle (1961) determined there are various reasons for this decision. While it is true that some choose to improve their employment skills or status, adults saw their education as meeting some type of goal or need. According to Houle (1961), “They all had goals which they wished to achieve, they all found the process of learning enjoyable or significant, and they all felt that learning was worthwhile for its own sake” (p. 15). This revelation led Houle (1961) to devise a *Concept of Learning Orientations*, in which adult learners fall into one of three categories. Goal-oriented learners pursue learning to attain a goal or a clear purpose in their educational pursuit. Activity oriented learners pursue learning to engage in social activities, such as to make friends or to satisfy emotional needs. Learning oriented pursue learning for the sake of learning and self-improvement (Houle, 1961). How an adult learner perceives their education experience connects to one or more of these goals, and their success and completion.

Transitions that Motivate Adult Learners

The motivation for adult learners is often due to a transition in their lives. Transitions are periods of change that interchange with periods of stability and are part of what it means to be an adult (Aslanian & Brickell, 1980; Merriam, 2005; Tønseth, 2018). These changes can be predictable and linear or unpredictable and nonlinear (Merriam, 2005, Tønseth, 2018). Adults experience anticipated and planned life transitions, which are events that affect an adult learner's life, such as marriage, parenthood, retirement, or a change in career (Aslanian & Brickell, 1980; Merriam, 2005). A life transition can also be unanticipated and unplanned, such as illness, job loss, or unexpected financial gains (Aslanian & Brickell, 1980; Merriam, 2005). Regardless of the life transition, the transition serves as “benchmarks in the human life cycle,” that give “shape and direction to the various aspects of a person's life” (Danish et al., 1980: p. 342).

Anticipated and planned life transitions such as marriage, parenthood, or a change in job or careers, which Neugarten (1976) indicates, are “socially prescribed timetable for the ordering of major life events” (p. 16). Although these experiences may vary in the timing and manner in which they occur, the changes are “normative pattern is adhered to, more or less consistently, by most persons within a given social group” (p. 16). Unanticipated and unplanned events include illness, winning the lottery, losing a job, illness, or death of a family member. These events are often a source of significant stress; however, “their potential for stimulating learning and subsequent development may be greater than for the more normative, anticipated life events (Merriam, 2005, p. 5).

Nonevent transitions are those events that were anticipated but did not occur, such as a marriage or a job offer that did not occur (Merriam, 2005). These nonevents are interesting in that adult learning is stimulated through four “hidden nonevents” (Schlossberg et al., 1995, p.

30). First, personal nonevents are events that the person anticipates, but the event does not happen, such as a canceled wedding or denied a promotion (Schlossberg et al., 1995; Merriam, 2005). Second, ripple nonevents are “unfulfilled expectations of someone close to us, which, in turn, alters our roles, relationships, and assumptions,” such as the spouse that does not get the promotion or job offer (Schlossberg et al., 1995, p. 30). Third, resultant nonevents are those events that do not occur and have an effect on another person such as someone who chooses not to be a parent; thus, the effect is that someone does not become a grandparent (Merriam, 2005). Finally, a delayed nonevent are those events that could happen even though the event has not happened yet, such as pregnancy after a couple stops trying (Merriam, 2005). Schlossberg et al. (1995) also identify sleeper events, which are events that are dormant for a while. Still, its manifestation results in a change, such as a relationship demise or an improved sense of confidence and self-concept.

For many adults, changes in employment are life transitions that lead adult learners to pursue postsecondary education (Aslanian, 2001). The desire to improve skills or learn new skills for a promotion or a change in careers describe anticipated life transitions. In their study, Johnstone and Rivera (1965) sought to understand what factors or reasons lead adult learners to participate in formal and informal education activities. The study also sought to understand adult work experiences, attitudes, and opinions about education, as well as the education entities that provide educational opportunities for adult learners (Merriam et al., 2012). An adult was an individual over the age of 21, married or the head of a household (Johnstone & Rivera, 1965; Merriam et al., 2012). Johnstone and Rivera (1965) defined educational activities as the acquisition of some knowledge or practical skill that involved some form of instruction, including self-instruction. The results of the study indicated that 22% of adults in the United

States participated in some form of learning (Johnstone & Rivera, 1965). Moreover, these results suggested that adults engage in educational activities to learn a practical skill as opposed to academic knowledge (Johnstone & Rivera, 1965). These practical skills improved their current skill set or to learn new skills for future career opportunities (Stein et al., 2011).

Employment transitions can also be unanticipated and unplanned. The 2008 Economic Crisis resulted in the worst financial downturn since the Great Depression. The recovery created a new normal in which the U.S. saw “increase in the natural rate of unemployment, permanent job losses in sectors that employ the less-educated, and an ever-increasing demand for better education credentials and upskilling across an array of new fields” (Carnevale et al., 2013, p. 4). As indicated by Carnevale et al. (2010), “postsecondary education provides entry to the jobs offering the most employer-provided training, plus access to the most powerful, flexible workplace technology. This is reflected in the positive correlation between employer-provided training and employee education levels” (p. 1). As a result, many adult learners were motivated to enroll in community colleges to have the skills, training, and education needed to move into the 21st-century employment market as the U.S. has moved from industry to service-oriented economy (American Association of Community Colleges, 2014; Carnevale et al., 2010).

Adult learners’ Work-Life Balance

Adult learners have multiple responsibilities, i.e., home, work, and family, which they must balance with their education. They navigate a personal, “complex and unique relationship between their perceptions of the personal benefits and personal costs of learning” (Kantar Public and Learning and Work Institute, 2018, p. 20). Kasworm (2001) states that

Being an adult student is fraught with time and resource issues related to actively pursuing homework assignments and final projects, getting to and from courses and the

library, typing papers, collaborating with study groups, and engaging in other activities to support academic success (p. 33).

Adult learners weigh the personal benefit of postsecondary education with the personal cost to their personal lives and responsibilities. (Kantar Public and Learning and Work Institute, 2018). This process is continuous throughout the adult learner's academic journey and often leads to feelings of guilt, anxiety, and frustration as well as stopping and restarting their postsecondary education (Bergman et al., 2014).

Barriers to Education

Adult learners also face barriers and challenges that may tip this balance between personal benefit and personal cost in a way that may interfere with their persistence and completion (Kantar Public and Learning and Work Institute, 2018). These barriers are unique to the individual adult learner as no two adult learner's circumstances are the same. The impact of the particular barrier varies among adult learners. It is here where we see that adult learners are a heterogeneous group of students that go beyond age and adult responsibilities. The literature has cited three categories of barriers that affect adult learners (Bergman et al., 2014; Goto & Martin, 2009; Kerka, 1989; Osam et al., 2017; Serowick, 2017). These barriers also play a significant role in an adult learner's choice of a postsecondary institution. They want to attend a postsecondary institution that recognizes and accommodates their unique circumstances (Laderman et al., 2018).

Situational

Situational barriers are challenges related to an adult learner's life, work, economic/financial concerns, (Bergman et al., 2014; Goto & Martin, 2009; Kerka, 1989; Osam et al., 2017). Erisman and Steele (2015) cited their 2012 survey of perceived barriers to adult

learner degree completion indicated family responsibilities, work responsibilities, and cost of postsecondary education, all situational barriers, were the top reasons for adult learner attrition. Situational barriers do not occur singularly; instead, there is a cumulative nexus of conflict that “tended to interact with each other, magnifying and confounding the challenges” of the adult learner’s academic journey (Goto & Martin, 2009, p. 14).

Situation barriers are a delicate balance for adult learners. They must weigh the time and financial constraints with their family, work, and educational responsibilities and can complicate the demands of their educational responsibilities such as due dates for assignments, meetings with faculty and staff, or use of support services (Goto & Martin, 2009; Kantar Public and Learning and Work Institute, 2018). Often, it is a concerted effort among an adult learner's family and friends to help coordinate family responsibilities (Kantar Public and Learning and Work Institute, 2018). In some cases, an adult learner is discouraged or maligned by family and friends for their decision to pursue post-secondary education because of limited or decreased time spent with those individuals (Goto & Martin, 2009; Kantar Public and Learning and Work Institute, 2018). Adult learner parents contend with the availability of trustworthy, reliable, and cost-effective childcare, which has a significant impact on their persistence (Peterson, 2016). In addition to family responsibilities, an adult learner’s obligations to their employer also raise time constraints (Osam et al., 2017). Although many adult learners seek postsecondary education to obtain new skills or seek a new career, an adult learner will maintain their employment status as they are the primary or sole source of income for their families. Even with employer flexibility, an adult learner must compromise their education for the sake of the work responsibilities (Fairchild, 2003).

Because adult learners are financially independent of the parental unit and are often responsible for their dependents, financing their education and other responsibilities is of paramount concern (Hardin, 2008, Osam et al., 2017). For some adult learners, there are employer tuition reimbursement programs to pay for postsecondary education (Brown, 2012). Brown (2012) indicates that most programs are reserved for employees in professional occupations and have restrictions on the number of credits or the grade earned in a course. Therefore, many adult learners must seek federal or state-funded financial aid, which has its own set of challenges. There is no age limit for federal student aid through Title IV of the Higher Education Act. However, some restrictions may limit receipt of aid because an adult learner must work full time as opposed to less than full-time (Laderman et al., 2018; Taliaferro & Duke-Benfield, 2016; U.S. Department of Education, Federal Student Aid Information Center, 2016). Adult learners who choose to attend part-time find that financial aid is difficult or impossible to obtain because many need-based programs target traditional-age students and disqualify older students (Laderman et al., 2018). Unfortunately, federal and state programs have not changed or are slow to change their guidelines despite the growth in the adult learner population seeking financial aid (Taliaferro & Duke-Benfield, 2016). Even if an adult learner is eligible for financial aid, many find the process confusing and anxiety-ridden. They may have little or do not know what aid is available or if they are eligible in the first place (Laderman et al., 2018). Although several white papers provide policy guidance on how to include adult learner-specific needs in financial aid programs, particularly at the state level, there is little data-based evidence of their effectiveness (Laderman et al., 2018; Taliaferro & Duke-Benfield, 2016).

Institutional

Institutional barriers are policies and procedures that interfere or prevent adult learners from participating in postsecondary education or completing their educational journey (Osam, 2017; Bergman et al., 2014). The decision to pursue postsecondary education is a complex process in which adult learners weigh many factors such as family, work, financial, and other responsibilities against an institution's program offerings, a timeline for completion, full time or part-time status, etc. (Erisman & Steele, 2015). Therefore, adult learners need and want relevant information, including programs, purpose, logistics, services, and so on, to make informed decisions, set reasonable goals, and assess how pursuing postsecondary education will fit into their life (Petty & Thomas, 2014; Wonacott, 2001). Erisman and Steele (2015) indicate that the initial contact with an adult student, either in person or by phone, can set the tone for how an adult learner perceives his or her educational experience with an institution. In some instances, admission staff at postsecondary institutions lacked sufficient training in responding to adult learner needs, or there were significant delays in response time to inquiries (Erisman & Steele, 2015). Erisman and Steele (2015) suggest ongoing training of front line staff regarding adult learner specific inquiries or, for larger institutions, adult learner specific admission counselors to help adult learners navigate the early stages of the admission process.

Unfortunately, many postsecondary institutions have either not addressed the needs of adult learners in their policies or what policies are in place negatively impact adult learners, which results in obstacles to completion (Erisman & Steele, 2015; Hardin, 2008). Some adult learners return to college with prior college credit, or they have relevant work experiences or employer-sponsored training in which they have developed skills that are worthy of college credit. In the case of credit transfer, many institutions do not evaluate prior credits until after the

student has enrolled (Erisman & Steele, 2015). If the credits are not accepted, this can extend the amount of time it will take to complete a program (Erisman & Steele, 2015). The adult learner must reassess the financial and personal costs of the delay in completion. The need for transparency in the credit transfer process before admission allows the adult learner to make informed decisions about the education path.

Adult learners bring a plethora of experiences to the classroom (Knowles, 1984). Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) allows adult learners to obtain credit based on their work experiences and training. PLA requires evaluation of the adult learner's work experience to determine if said experience meets the outcomes for the college course (CAEL, 2016). The assessment is accomplished by either passing a standardized exam, i.e., Advanced Placement Exam (AP Exam) or College Level Examination Program Exams (CLEP exams). Another option is an individualized assessment, which includes a portfolio of their learning experiences, which is viewed by a faculty member who is a subject matter expert. Other options include a challenge exam created by a faculty member or the institutionally, a fee-paid evaluation conducted by the National College Credit Recommendations Service (NCCRS), or the American Council on Education (ACE). The latter organizations provide credit recommendations for successful evaluations and assess proficiency (CAEL, 2016).

According to CAEL (2016), adult learners who receive PLA credit have higher graduation rates than those who do not. Moreover, adult learners who receive PLA credit see a reduction in the cost of their program (Erisman & Steele, 2015). Hayward and Williams (2015) indicate that community college adult learners who receive PLA credit were twice as likely to complete their degree programs. The value in providing PLA for adult learners appears as a win-win for the student and the institution, as students will complete faster, and the institution has the

opportunity to increase enrollment. As more institutions seek to understand better as well as expand PLA, there is no national standard for these evaluations (CAEL, 2016).

Additionally, CAEL (2016) found that PLA data is often not maintained with student information data, the application of PLA guidelines varies, or there is no data at all. For its efforts, CAEL has provided institutions with guidelines and best practices for implementing or improving PLA (Kasworm, 2018). However, there are still questions regarding the success rates of adult learners based on the PLA method. Barriers may exist in adult learners that prohibit access to documentation related to PLA, especially active military and veterans. PLA evaluations may be cost-prohibitive for some adult learners to obtain PLA evaluation. Also, there may be challenges with the connection of PLA to student success and performance outcomes (CAEL, 2016; Hayward & Williams, 2015; McDonald, 2016).

Psychological- Disposition

Psychological or dispositional barriers refer to an adult learner's feelings, emotions, and inner dialogue. They describe the views and perceptions an adult learner has about himself or herself and their postsecondary experience (Osam et al., 2017). Anxiety, fear of failure, lack of confidence, lack of belief in the ability to succeed, perceptions of faculty, lack of preparation, or ability to re-engage with skills, and perceptions of age within the classroom environment are common (Osam et al., 2017; Serowick, 2017).

A sense of isolation can occur as an adult learner transition from career to the student-role, as their new position is dependent on the interaction with other similarly situated adult learners (Hardin, 2008). As indicated by Hardin (2008), as adult learners transition to their new student role, there is an identity crisis in which an adult learner must reconcile their new student role with their role as spouse, parent, and employee. Additionally, Impostor syndrome creates a

sense that one does not belong or has to ‘fake it until you make it,’ which may lead some adult learners not to seek help. Adult learners perceive that as adults, they should know and have command of specific skills, particularly in writing and math (Jameson, 2019; Passmore, 2019). These feelings and emotions are often higher; the more time the adult learner is away from the postsecondary learning environment (Osam et al., 2017; Serowick, 2017). Finally, family members or friends who demonstrate a lack of encouragement, harsh words, or a lack of acceptance of an adult learner’s choice to pursue education contribute to low self-esteem among adult learners (Goto & Marin, 2009). Prior poor educational experiences or bad memories may cause also cause low self-esteem, a lack of motivation, or avoidance of the subject related to the memory (Goto & Martin, 2009).

Many adult learners will use prior experiences, a lack of support or low self-esteem, and use their pursuit of education to reject negative messages and persist (Goto & Martin, 2009). Adult learners do experience a high degree of self-confidence and self-worth with each success in their academic journey, which provides momentum and persistence (Bombardieri, 2017; Serowick, 2017). There is a sense of self-discovery, a sense of strength and belief in oneself (Goto & Martin, 2009). Self-actualization in reaching the intrinsic goal, sheer determination, and resilience drives the adult learner through those periods in which psychological barriers interfere with success (Karmelita, 2016; Kasworm, 2010). These positive emotions and momentum increased when faculty and staff provide support and understanding of adult learner needs and concerns (Clark, 2012). Additionally, an adult learner’s psychological barriers will decrease, and their likelihood of persistence will increase when they feel a sense of belonging, and the institution values their presence on campus (Clark, 2012).

Adult Learner Persistence

Persistence reflects a student's continuous enrollment and postsecondary institutions use various retention strategies that enhance the likelihood of overall student persistence (Chaves, 2006). However, the vast majority of study on persistence has focused on traditional students at four-year institutions, and do not include adult learners (Chaves, 2006). Chaves (2006) describes various retention strategies for community college students; however, these strategies often do not include adult learners (Chaves, 2006). According to Chaves (2006), to understand the nature of adult learner persistence, institutions must understand the factors that impact adult learner persistence. Institutions should consider how a sense of identity, a sense of mattering and validation, gender identification, and cultural identity play a significant role, both positively and negatively, in an adult's persistence journey within the community college environment (Chaves, 2006). Institutions must be aware of the situational, institutional, psychological, and educational barriers that impact adult learners and translate that awareness to structures that support persistence.

Tinto's Interactionist Theory

Tinto's (1987) Interactionist Theory provides that the extent to which a student integrates into the higher education environment measures student persistence. Tinto (1987) indicated that "interactions among different individuals within the academic and social systems of the institution and communities which comprise them lead individuals of different characteristics to withdraw from that institution before degree completion" (p. 113). Tinto's model is a psychological model of student persistence that emphasizes the impact of individual abilities and dispositions upon departure (Cunningham, 2015). In essence, it is the shortcomings of the individual student that result in attrition (Tinto, 1987). According to Tinto (1987) the student and

the institution interact both in an educational and social context, and persistence “hinges on the construction of educational communities in colleges, programs, and classroom levels which integrate students into the ongoing social and intellectual life of the institution” (p. 188). Tinto (1987) suggested that “engagement in the community of the classroom can be a gateway for subsequent student involvement in the academic and social communities of the college generally (p. 82).

Bean and Metzner’s Nontraditional Undergraduate Student Attrition Model

Tinto’s (1987) model provided predictive variables for determining persistence; however, this model focused on traditional students at four-year institutions and did not specifically include adult learners (Chaves, 2006). Bean and Metzner (1985) theorized that while persistence models hold value, their focus and consideration of learner engagement are misplaced as they do not represent an adult learner’s experience. The Nontraditional Undergraduate Student Attrition Model was built on previous persistence models and suggested while social interaction is a factor in persistence, its impact on adult learners is minimal (Bean & Metzner, 1985). Attrition, intent to leave, student background, and environmental variables and the interactions among these variables were more significant on adult learner persistence than prior models that rest on the effect of academic and social integration (Oden, 2011). The interaction between the environment and academic variables showed that the environment is more important than the academic (Oden, 2011). An adult learner will persist if the academic and environmental factors are positive; however, if both factors are negative, persistence will not occur (Burns and Durojaiye, 2017; Sorey & Duggan, 2008). An adult learner will not persist if the academic factor is positive, but the environmental factor is negative. On the other hand, persistence is likely if the environment

is positive, but the academics are negative because there are supports services in place to guide the adult learner to completion (Burns & Durojaiye, 2017; Sorey & Duggan, 2008).

The adult learner will persist when the interaction between the academic and psychological variables are both are positive, and will not often persist when both are negative, (Burns & Durojaiye, 2017). When an adult learner experiences situational, institutional, or psychological barriers, they will not persist even with a high academic performance (Burns & Durojaiye, 2017). On the other hand, if an adult learner feels supported by the institution, this does not always impact persistence despite poor academic performance (Capps, 2012; Garner, 2019). An adult learner with high academic performance persisted if the institution provided positive support (Capps, 2012; Garner, 2019). The impact of the Bean and Metzner (1985) model provides valuable quantitative data about adult learner persistence and points toward the development of appropriate strategies that aid in that persistence.

Other Adult learner Persistence Models

The Bean and Metzner's model, as well as Tinto's model and other persistence models, provide valuable quantitative data about adult learner persistence and the development of strategies that support and encourage adult learner success. However, these models do not provide a holistic view of the adult learner experience as he or she navigates their academic journey at a community college. Clark's (2012) study applied the various variables from the Bean and Metzner model as a basis for qualitative data about adult learner persistence. Clark (2012) relied on Schlossberg's (1989) Theory of Marginality and Mattering and Rendon's (1994) Theory of Validation to explore adult learners' self-perceptions of factors that positively impact their persistence at ta community college. Using small focus-groups, Clark (2012) found that students experienced a sense of belonging through shared experiences with other adult learners,

which aided in their overall persistence, as indicated by Tinto's (1987) Interactionist Theory. Adult learners believed that the support of faculty and staff was a positive factor in the persistence, which was in line with Schlossberg's (1989) Theory of Marginality and Mattering (Clark, 2012). When students feel marginalized or feel that they do not matter, this negative feeling impacts the student's ability to socially engage in their new educational environment (Chaves, 2006). In order for adult learners to feel that they matter to faculty and staff, faculty and staff needed to demonstrate that they cared about an adult learner's success, and their presence in the campus environment mattered (Chaves, 2006). Finally, adult learners could visualize that value and self-worth through the development of self-confidence and improved self-esteem (Clark, 2012). This is in line with Rendon's (1994) Theory of Validation, which indicates that validation must be provided to adult students to encourage their participation with the institution (Chaves, 2006). The likelihood of increased persistence occurs when adult learners feel valued and encouraged to participate with their peers.

Adult Learner Postsecondary Enrollment

The data surrounding adult learner enrollment patterns presents a synopsis of the various institutions that serve adult learners and the proportion of adult learners that seek various institutions for postsecondary education. The US Department of Education' (DOE) indicated in *The Condition of Education: Characteristics of Postsecondary Students* (2019) that 16.8 million students enrolled in postsecondary institutions for fall 2017, which is a 7% decrease from the 18 million students enrolled in 2010. Projections estimated that undergraduate enrollment would increase by 3% between 2017 and 2028 (McFarland et al., 2019).

The breakdown by age showed that undergraduate enrollment for students under age 25 increased by 15 percent from 2005 to 2015, while those aged 25 and over increased by 13

percent (McFarland et al., 2019). The data shows that students between 25-34 represented 8 percent of full time and 25 percent of part-time enrollment at public, four-year institutions when disaggregated by type of institution, enrollment status, and age (McFarland et al., 2019). Those aged 35 and above represent 2 percent of full time and 17 percent of part-time enrollment. For students enrolled in two-year public institutions, adult learners age 25-29 represented 14 percent of full-time enrollment and 22 percent part-time enrollment. Those over the age of 35 represented 7 percent of full-time enrollment and 17 percent of part-time enrollment (McFarland et al., 2019).

Private, four -year nonprofit institutions reported students between 25-34 represented 8 percent of full time and 29 percent of part-time enrollment. In comparison, those aged 35 and above represent 5 percent of full time and 33 percent of part-time enrollment (McFarland et al., 2019). Adult learners attending four-year, for-profit colleges and universities report adult learners ages 25-34 represented 33 percent of full-time enrollment and 19 percent of part-time enrollment (McFarland et al., 2019).

Two-year private, nonprofit institutions show adult learners age 25-29 represented 32 percent of full-time enrollment and 34 percent part-time enrollment. In comparison, those over the age of 25 represented 7 percent of full-time enrollment and 28 percent of part-time enrollment (McFarland et al., 2019). Finally, for-profit institutions account for 34 percent of full-time adult learners age 25-29 and 38 percent of part-time enrollment. Those over the age of 35 represented 21 percent of full-time enrollment and 28 percent of part-time enrollment (McFarland et al., 2019).

In addition to the traditional brick and mortar institutions, there is a growing interest in distance education. In fall 2017, 2.2 million undergraduates were enrolled in some form of distance education, either a course or a full degree program (McFarland et al., 2019).

Adult learners find those postsecondary institutions that are entirely online appealing because these institutions provide a convenient way for adult learners to meet their educational goals and their unique circumstances simultaneously (Bourdeaux and Schoenack, 2016). These institutions are available 24/7 and provide flexible or accelerated programs (Bourdeaux and Schoenack, 2016). Online colleges and universities enrolled 5.5 million students in fall 2017, with 2.2 million students enrolled in undergraduate programs (McFarland et al., 2019). Of the 2.2 million undergraduate students, 1.7 million students enrolled in 100% online colleges and universities within their state of residence. Private, for-profit, four-year institutions saw the highest figures, with 66% of students enrolled, followed by 16% of private, nonprofit, and 8% of public institutions, respectively (McFarland et al., 2019). Two-year institutions reported the second-highest enrollment with 41 % of students, followed by 13% of public and 5% of private, for-profit institutions, respectively (McFarland et al., 2019). The DOE did not provide disaggregated data based on age for an online college or university enrollment.

Adult Learners Enrollment at Community Colleges

Of the various enrollment options, a significant number of adult learners choose to attend community colleges (AACC, 2019). The open-access mission allows adult learners to fulfill their unique academic, career, and personal goals. Moreover, the community college is easily accessible, provides relevant programs to current life needs, is cost-effective, is flexible in course scheduling, and is supportive of adult lifestyle commitments (Kasworm, 2005; Mellow & Heelan, 2008). In addition, the community college, unlike the traditional university environment,

recognizes those factors that interfere with adult learner persistence including but are not limited to, part-time enrollment status, family and dependent responsibilities, work commitments, limited financial support, first-generation college student, a break from formal education, underprepared or unpracticed academic skills and knowledge, lower socioeconomic backgrounds, lack of family and peer support, and lower accumulative college course hours (Barcinas et al., 2016; Kasworm, 2002; 1983, Kasworm, 2014; Kowalski & Cangemi).

Currently, there are 7 million students credit programs and 5 million pursuing non-credit programs (American Association of Community Colleges, 2019). The AACC *Fast Facts* (2019) reported that 38% of students ages 22 and older, and 9 percent of students over age 40 attended community colleges. However, the DOE reports that full-time students under age 25 accounted for 79 percent, 14 percent were aged 25 to 34, and 7 percent were over age 35. Part-time enrollment showed 61 percent were young adults under age 25, 22 percent were aged 25 to 34, and 17 percent were over age 35, respectively (McFarland et al., 2019).

As the statistics illustrate, there is conflicting data in the adult learner metrics. As previously discussed, the inconsistent age definition does not present a clear picture of adult learner enrollment at community colleges. It is rather difficult to determine not only who is an adult learner attending community colleges, but how many individuals represent adult learners. What is unknown is the impact of this inconsistency has on overall community college enrollment. Enrollment numbers are tied to state-mandated performance funding, which is a major funding source for institutionally-driven or state-mandated initiatives (Tschechtelin, 2011). These initiatives are often traditional learner-focused or designed to support underrepresented students under the *nontraditional student* label, which often includes adult learners. These initiatives often do not factor adult learner needs in the overall conversation

related to student success (Stein et al., 2011). We do not know how new initiatives such as student success impact the number of adult learners at community colleges or other institutions.

The Student Success Reform Movement at Community Colleges

During the early-2000s, there was a call by the DOE for postsecondary institutions to rethink how they educate students, show accountability for completion rates, and assess overall institutional effectiveness (Bailey et al., 2005). The DOE believed that colleges and universities must be more transparent in reporting tuition costs, student success outcomes and provide more information to students and families regarding the institution's overall performance and effectiveness (Bailey et al., 2005). Also, colleges and universities should prepare students for 21st-century careers within a changing global economy (American Association for Community Colleges, 2014). For community colleges, this meant a focus on student success, improving learning outcomes, and completion, as well as institutional effectiveness and accountability (McClenney, 2013). To that end, several national initiatives provided guidance and strategies for community colleges, which shifted the focus and mission from one of access and equity to student success.

The reasoning behind the change

Since its inception, the mission of community colleges is access and equity. This mission stems from public education policy rooted in post-World War II veteran's use of Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944 (also known as the GI Bill) as well as the Pell Grant under the Higher Education Act of 1965. The Civil Rights Act of 1965 and other state initiatives figured prominently in this mission (Bailey, 2016). Bailey (2016) described the community college's mission as

Reducing the cost of college to the student and, in the case of community colleges, established open access, and flexible, convenient colleges in reasonable proximity to a large majority of the population, including especially groups traditionally underrepresented in postsecondary education (p. 12).

Bailey (2016) further noted that these initiatives “contributed to increases in college enrollment, such that by the turn of the century, over 75% of high school graduates had attended some postsecondary institution by their mid-20s (p. 12).⁵ Although the increase in access to postsecondary education for all learners is positive, evidence shows low completion rates among community college students (Bailey, 2016). Bailey (2016) submitted that

While community colleges are successful in providing access to postsecondary education, the low number of community college students completing a degree or credential “constitutes a failure for those students to achieve their goals and represents a loss of potential earning power and economic growth and activity for the economy as a whole” (p. 11).

To illustrate this point, Bailey (2016) referenced NCES 2014 report, which shows that completion rates for three years went from 23.6% for the year 2000 to 19.5% for the year 2010 (NCES, 2014). Furthermore, Bailey (2016), relied on data from the NCES’s National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988, which cited that less than 40% of entering community college students completed any degree or certificate from any college within six years.

These concerns led policymakers and education advocates to redefine the focus at community colleges to include completion as a function of student success. Student success means that a community college student completes a degree or credential, where data derived

⁵ Baily (2016) bases these calculations on data from the Education Longitudinal Study of 2002, (National Center for Education Statistics 2002).

from learning outcomes, graduation rates, and labor market outcomes are evidence of completion (Bailey et al., 2005; McClenney, 2013; Wyner, 2014). Also, community colleges must focus on institution-wide accountability/transparency initiatives by providing accurate information regarding cost, student success, and the availability of such information (Bailey et al., 2005). Furthermore, community colleges must seek remedies to the barriers that interfere with student completion. Changing the structure of programs from a flexible, cafeteria-style selection of courses to a streamlined pathway alleviates poor decision making on the part of the student and ease of transfer to four-year institutions (Bailey, 2016).

Student success is an integral part of the equation to reform community colleges with completion as part of its core (Bailey, 2016). The evidence of that success is data-driven and outcome-determinative, which in turn, calls on community colleges to create a culture in which outcomes result in continuous improvement and implementation of reforms that continue or improve upon student success outcomes (Bailey, 2016). As indicated by Bailey (2016), “comprehensive reform requires the three elements that form the conceptual foundation of this volume: a focus on measurable student success, a culture of evidence, and an intentional and cohesive package of programmatic components” (p. 17).

Various Student Success Reforms and Initiatives

As a result of this shift in focus from access and equity to include student success as a function of completion at community colleges, several national initiatives and collations sought to create various models to improve student success.

Achieving the Dream

In 2004, the Lumina Foundation took the first significant step in addressing community college reform with *Achieving the Dream* (ATD) (McClenney, 2013). *Achieving the Dream*

emphasizes institutional driven initiatives that focus on student learning outcomes and pathways to completion as a function of student success. At the heart of ATD are the guiding principles of committed leadership; use of quantitative evidence to improve programs and services; broad engagement of faculty, staff, governing boards, and community; and systemic institutional improvement; with the preservation of equity and access added several years into the initiative (McClenney, 2013). Additionally, ATD seeks to help more community college students, particularly students of color, nontraditional students, and low-income students, complete their programs (Boggs, 2011).

A five-step model serves as the foundation for institutional change. First, institutional leadership must commit to system-wide change, which includes allocating the necessary resources for that change. Leadership must implement a team of administrators, faculty, staff, and community members who will engage with these new initiatives (Rutschow et al., 2011). Second, the community college identifies gaps in student achievement through the review of longitudinal student data and other relevant data sources to provide evidence that interventions and change are necessary for the success of the students and the institution as a whole (Brock et al., 2007). Moreover, community colleges should also analyze data by race or ethnicity, income, and other background characteristics to identify groups that may need extra support or intervention (Rutschow et al., 2011).

Third, the community college must seek buy-in from faculty, staff, and other stakeholders and develop strategies that identify barriers to student achievement and interventions for addressing those barriers (Rutschow et al., 2011). Fourth, administrators, faculty, and staff should use the evidential data to implement initiatives that are the most critical to the institution, ongoing assessment of those initiatives, and evaluate their effectiveness (Brock et al., 2007).

Such initiatives would include freshman orientation programs, early academic alerts, intrusive advising, and the expansion and modification of curricula (Brock et al., 2007). Finally, institutions should establish a culture of continuous improvement and a commitment to incorporate those initiatives that work into the institution's overall strategic plan (Brock et al. 2007). Said initiatives are subject to regular program review, planning, and budgeting in which decisions regarding these initiatives are evidenced-based with a standard of what is best for the student (Rutschow et al., 2011). Additionally, professional development opportunities for faculty and staff are encouraged to ensure continued knowledge and skill improvement (Rutschow et al., 2011).

Completion by Design

Completion by Design (CBD) seeks to improve graduation rates while holding down costs and maintaining access and quality through the use of institutional reform of policies and practices (Grossman et al., 2013). Funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, CBD uses a three-prong approach: incorporate a student-centered, performance-oriented environment, an emphasis on best practices that lead to completion, and ensure students receive information that supports persistence while addressing those barriers that impact completion. The institution engages a community partner who has a commitment to workforce growth through policies and initiatives that support student completion (Pennington & Millron, 2010). CBD recommends eight principles that are essential in the establishment of a student success environment.

- Accelerated entry into coherent programs of study.
- Minimize the time required to get college-ready,
- Ensure that students know the requirements to succeed,
- Customize and contextualize instruction,

- Integrate student supports with instruction,
- Continually monitor student progress and proactively provide feedback,
- Reward behaviors that contribute to completion, and
- Leverage technology to improve learning and program delivery (Grossman et al., 2013).

CBD rests on a framework based on loss of momentum during the student's academic life cycle, which consists of four critical points: connection, entry, progress, and completion (Pennington & Millron, 2010). These critical points are an opportunity for the community college to reach out to the student and direct them toward completion initiatives and practices that are best suited for that particular community college (Pennington & Millron, 2010). CBD aids community colleges recognize those critical moments where a student encounters a barrier during their academic lifecycle and provide interventions to maintain the student's academic momentum to completion (Pennington & Millron, 2010). The ultimate goal is that success equals completion, with completion meaning finishing a credential, whether it is a certificate, associate degree, or transfer to a four-year postsecondary institution (Pennington & Millron, 2010).

Guided Pathways

Guided Pathways is a transformation of the *Completion by Design* (Completion by Design, 2006.). The guided pathway is simply that; a pathway that guides the student from an inquiry into the institution, through a program, and ultimately to successful completion of a credential, transfer to a bachelor's program, or employment (Completion by Design, 2006.). The *Guided Pathway* begins with a structured onboarding of students in which students receive accurate and thorough information that helps them make informed decisions as they begin their academic journey. Academic maps provide the student with a detailed roadmap of a program,

which contains specific requirements for completion, as well as transition into a four-year program or the workforce. Intrusive academic and career advisement provide a point of contact at each critical point in the student's academic journey or where barriers may interfere with the student's completion. Early alerts ensure that the student is staying on track to completion. Finally, there is instructor support and other activities that are geared toward the student's program of interest to keep the student engaged (Completion by Design, 2006). The idea is to keep the student on track to success and completion while avoiding as many roadblocks and barriers as possible. And, as with the original CBD and ATD initiatives, it is an institutional-wide initiative that has everyone from leadership to faculty to staff engaged with the student's pathway to success. With the academic side and the student services side of the institution working together, policies and best practices guide the student to successful completion while also improving overall student outcomes and completion rates (Completion by Design, 2006.).

The Aspen Institute for Excellence

The purpose of the *Aspen Institute for College Excellence* and its *Aspen Prize* is to identify community colleges that define excellence by presenting a clear definition of student success and have proven policies and practices that are worthy of replication at other institutions (Aspen Institute Website, 2018). The Aspen Institute identified four domains that make a community college excellent. The first domain, *Completion/Transfer* outcomes, represents the "proportion of students who complete an associate degree, earn a certificate of one year or greater in length, or transfer to a four-year college" (Wyner, 2012, p. 15). As with *ATD* and *CBD*, the focus of this domain is the completion of a degree is part of the greater need of more college graduates to meet the needs of the 21st-century workforce that is knowledge-based, as well as being an opportunity for upward social and economic mobility (Wyner, 2012). Unlike

enrollment numbers, which do not provide much information about student success, graduation/completion rates can be easily quantified by an institution, thus making it a secure and reliable metric (Wyner, 2012). Institutions measure completion at critical points throughout a student's academic journey, such as completion of a course, a sequence, or a credential that leads to a degree (Wyner, 2012). Institutions can use that information to monitor and modify practices and policies quickly and effectively (Wyner, 2012).

The second domain, *Learning Outcomes*, seeks effective strategies and best practices to improve student learning outcomes (Wyner, 2012). Wyner (2012) indicates that “degrees are only as valuable as the learning they represent,” therefore, all postsecondary institutions must incorporate learning outcomes that are rigorous and instructors that engage students in the learning process (p. 16). Therefore, professional development for faculty can aid in presenting effective teaching strategies that promote successful learning outcomes (Wyner, 2012).

It is the inclusion of *Labor Market Outcomes* as the third domain that distinguishes the Aspen Institute from *ATD* and *CBD*. The increase in the amount of student loan debt and the debt-to-income ratio of recent college graduates called for community colleges to emphasize the relationship between labor market outcomes and its effect on completion of a degree or credential (Wyner, 2012). As indicated by Wyner (2012), “it is not enough for a college to make sure students learn and graduate; they also should care about students’ post-graduation success” (p. 17). Thus, the focus on labor market outcomes forces the community college to look at the community that they serve and ensure the degrees and certificates offered can benefit the overall economic stability of the community (Aspen Institute, 2016).

The fourth domain, *Equitable Outcomes*, seeks to improve the success rates of those who are underserved, including, but not limited to, students from low-income backgrounds;

minority/persons of color (Wyner, 2012). Wyner (2012) indicated that community colleges must recommit to their mission of open access and equity ensures success for underrepresented students. At the same time, community colleges must do a better job of tracking at-risk students, particularly those relegated to developmental and remedial courses, where there is a low potential for success (Wyner, 2012). In this domain, it is not enough to provide equity and access to postsecondary opportunities but to provide the necessary tools for successful completion to those most at risk of stop-out or swirling patterns.

Reclaiming the American Dream

AACC published *Reclaiming the American Dream* (AACC, 2012), which echoed concerns about low completion rates and low employment preparation at postsecondary institutions, including community colleges. Community colleges encouraged “enrollment growth, though frequently without adequately supporting that growth, and largely without incentives for promoting student success” (p. viii). Community colleges must rethink and redesign their definition of success for themselves and their students to adequately prepare for a 21st-century economy and to reap the benefits of past generations’ prosperity (AACC, 2012).

As evidence of a broken system, *Reclaiming the American Dream* cited that community college:

- Allow a sea of unusable credits that do not add up to a credential or a degree,
- Have a lack of required orientation and advising to create an academic plan for success,
- Fail to inform the student of their progress throughout the term, but to also notify of poor performance and provide interventions,

- Have developmental courses that are often a means to an end and provide services that lack structure and consistency (AACC, 2012).

The AACC concluded that none of these strategies helped ensure that a student is successful in achieving a credential, degree, or transfer to a four-year institution. Also, students did not have the necessary skills to prepare and compete for 21st careers (AACC, 2012),

To resolve this issue, *Reclaiming the American Dream* suggests that community colleges employ a “framework for change” to improve completion rates (AACC, 2012, p. ix). This framework rests on a completion agenda with two premises. First, the United States needs more college graduates to stay economically competitive in the global economy, Second, completion aids in avoiding the growing income inequality that is preventing future generation from doing better than the previous generation (Harbour & Smith, 2016). This framework indicates that community colleges must incorporate the following strategies to embrace completion:

- From a focus on student access to a focus on access and student success.
- From fragmented course-taking to clear, coherent educational pathways.
- From low rates of student success to high rates of student success
- From tolerance of achievement gaps to a commitment to eradicating achievement gaps.
- From a culture of anecdote to a culture of evidence.
- From individual faculty prerogative to collective responsibility for student success.
- From a culture of isolation to a culture of collaboration.
- From an emphasis on boutique programs to effective education at scale.
- From a focus on teaching to a focus on learning.

- From information infrastructure as management support to information infrastructure as learning analytics.
- From funding tied to enrollment to funding tied to enrollment, institutional performance, and student success (AACC, 2012, p. xi-x).

The framework includes seven recommendations that consist of the *Three R's*, which are to “*redesign* students’ educational experiences, *reinvent* institutional roles, and *reset* the system to create incentives for student and institutional success (AACC, 2012, p. x). The purpose of *Redesign* is for community colleges to “improving completion rates and helping improve the college readiness of students, especially for low-income students and students of color who have too frequently been left behind” (AACC, 2012, p. x). To accomplish this, community colleges should increase completion rates of students earning a credential through the implementation of structured, guided pathways, the promotion of transfer to four-year institutions, and the creation of policies that assist students in converting high numbers of credits into a credential (AACC, 2012). Next, community colleges should redesign developmental courses that prepare students to complete college-level work, define specific expectations for what college-level work that aligns with Common Core standards and to work collaboratively with those in the K-12 system to create a college readiness atmosphere (AACC, 2012). Finally, community colleges should create stackable credentials that build on skills needed for 21st-century careers and identify untapped or emerging market needs (AACC, 2012). They should streamline programs to reflect those needs, and develop partnerships with community, private sector, and government organizations at the local, state, and federal level to target skills gaps, emerging opportunities, and alternatives to obtaining credentials (AACC, 2012).

The concept, *Reinvent*, asks for community colleges to “first, refocus institutional mission and roles on 21st-century education and employment needs [and] second, develop support structures that help multiple institutions meet local, state, and national needs” (AACC, 2012, p. 28). Community colleges should redefine their mission from serving the needs of the local community to becoming a “broker of educational access, connecting students to learning opportunities available through multiple providers and multiple modes of delivery” (AACC, 2012, p. 28). Those in leadership roles, governing boards, college presidents, faculty leaders, and partners must have an honest and frank discussion about what the overall mission the community college will present given the demands of 21st-century career and employment demands (AACC, 2012). Finally, community colleges must invest in structures that support the collection of data, education management, and institutional research and assessment, while implementing credentialing programs that assess and document student skills (AACC, 2012).

Finally, *Reset the system*, urges community colleges to use “strategic investment to promote student progress and to ensure rigor, transparency, and accountability in the community college sector” (AACC, 2012, p. 29). Community colleges should consider performance-based funding incentives that focus on completion and student success, evidence-based data on success and completion, and incorporate policies that promote transparency, rigor, and accountability for all data regarding the overall success of the community college (AACC, 2012). Realign, Reinvent, and Reset serve as a means for community colleges to invest in their students and their future role in a global economy and nurture the American Dream for underrepresented populations who depend on community colleges for their education (AACC, 2012).

Redesigning America's Community Colleges

Bailey et al. (2015) proposed in their book *Redesigning America's Community Colleges: A Clearer Path to Student Success* to improve student success and completion, community colleges must restructure its overall design, developmental education programs, student support services, curriculum and learning, and the overall student experience from inquiry to completion (Kinzie & Kuh, 2016). The issue, according to Bailey et al. (2015), is that community colleges offer students too many choices of courses and programs with very little guidance on how to choose, navigate, and complete. Students enter community college with no clear idea or plan on how to start or where to go, which negatively impacts disadvantaged students (Jenkins, 2014). Without a guided path that aligns with a student's goals, the student ends up taking courses that may or may not lead to a credential or even transfer to a four-year institution (Bailey et al., 2015; Jenkins, 2014).

Additionally, developmental education courses are a dead-end for many community college students as such courses do not adequately prepare students for college work (Bailey et al., 2015). Overall, community colleges do not adequately monitor and track student progress in a manner that encourages successful completion. Instead, students are "lost in a maze" and must result in self-advising in an attempt on how to navigate the community college's policies and programs (Jenkins, 2014, p. 3). All of these factors negatively impact the overall student learning experience and their overall success at community colleges (Bailey et al., 2015).

Bailey et al. (2015), surmised that community colleges should discard the traditional cafeteria-style approach to postsecondary education because it was a disservice to the students. Instead, community colleges need to incorporate a more structured, cohesive, and unified practice to serve community college students and surrounding community member needs (Bailey

et al., 2015). Guided pathways are preferable because they are “relatively easy to understand and follow and that structures student choices” (Bailey et al., 2015, p. 22). When a student selects a program or major, he or she receives a detailed program map that outlines a course sequence and learning outcomes that lead to the completion of a program or university transfer (Bailey et al., 2015). Undecided students can investigate exploratory majors, which lead to a broad set of career options (Bailey et al., 2015). While this platform provides structure, Bailey, et al. (2015) indicates that student choice remains intact, in that they can change programs and customize their pathway. There are default pathways that lead students to a defined program, which eliminates the accumulation of credits without anything to show for their time, money, and effort (Bailey et al., 2015).

Institutions must commit to a new leadership structure and culture that calls for administrators, faculty, and staff to work collaboratively to deliver effective instruction and student services to foster a success-driven environment for students (Bailey et al., 2015). Administrative leadership levels must prioritize student success and guided pathways in their decision-making and restructure committees to prioritize student success rather than bureaucratic issues (Bailey et al., 2015). Leadership sets the tone for a student success environment and should hire faculty and staff who will commit to the institution's student success mission (Bailey et al., 2015). The guided pathways model is successful when every individual at the community college, administrators, faculty, and staff, are presenting the same message, which is that almost every student is on the path to completion of a program or transfer to a four-year institution (Bailey et al., 2015, Harbour, 2016).

Faculty should provide instruction that does not disseminate information but applies collaborative learning techniques, strategies that prioritize critical thinking, and soft skill habits

and behaviors (Harbour, 2016). Pathway maps should reflect these skills and apply them to a particular credential or degree. Community colleges should establish articulation agreements with four-year institutions for students who wish to transfer (Bailey et al., 2015). Faculty administrators must provide ongoing support and professional development for their faculty to help engage students, as well as opportunities for faculty to collaborate across disciplines to promote student success (Bailey et al., 2015).

Academic and career advising support services during the onboarding process should include a detailed explanation of guided pathways and career/transfer options (Bailey et al., 2015). Academic and career staff should incorporate intrusive advising protocols to monitor a student's progress at all points of their academic journey, identify barriers and challenges, and incorporate interventions to help the students stay on the pathway to success (Bailey et al., 2015).

In essence, *Reclaiming the American Dream* suggests that incorporation of a change framework, related recommendations, and student success initiatives facilitates improvement for the economy and promote and improve upward mobility for those who desire to move into the middle class (Harbour & Smith, 2016). Moreover, community colleges will also see an increase in completion rates while staying true to their mission of providing access and opportunity for those who seek higher education (Harbour & Smith, 2016). Individuals choose to attend community for reasons other than to earn a degree or transfer to a four-year institution. Often individuals look to the community college to prepare for a career, to take a course or two to improve a skill set or for personal enrichment (Boggs, 2011). And, many of these individuals are adult learners, whose reasons for attending a community college do not necessarily include earning a degree or credential. In abandoning those programs and services that empower students and their communities, it cuts at the heart of the community college's role of providing access

and helping the needs of the *community* it serves (Harbour & Smith, 2016) [Emphasis added].

The difficulty with incorporating the completion agenda reforms at community colleges is reconciling *who* they are and not *who* they should be (Dougherty & Townsend, 2006).

Student Success Efforts and Adult Learners

Although student success initiatives do not explicitly target adult learners, to some extent, the language in these initiatives recognizes the adult learner position within the context of student success at community colleges. For example, *ATD* recognizes that there is no typical adult learner and seeks to embrace the challenges that impact adult learner success and that traditional learner pathways to completion do not work for the majority of adult learners (Pusser et al., 2007). The *Emerging Pathways Project* determined that although institutions that serve adult learners are more cognizant of the unique needs and characteristics of adult learners, policies do not reflect these needs, or are evidenced-based (Pusser et al., 2007). Therefore, institutions must make a conscious effort not only to understand the complexity and uniqueness of the adult learner, but there is no one-size-fits-all policy for adult learners (Pusser et al., 2007). Moreover, institutions should be more transparent in the dissemination of information regarding degree programs, financial aid, credit for prior learning, and student services (Pusser et al., 2007).

No specific initiatives or best practices address adult learners' unique needs. It is up to the community college to be aware of the adult learners who attend their institutions, understand their unique characteristics and needs, and address them accordingly. Community colleges nominated for or have won the *Aspen Prize*, provide examples of meeting the Aspen Institute's definition of excellence. However, they do not share any specific guidance or initiatives in their definition of student success excellence that relates to adult learners and their success.

Adult Learner Specific Initiatives

The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL)

CAEL indicates that while many postsecondary institutions recognize that not only do adult learners represent a significant population on their campuses, but this population can aid in bridging enrollment gaps due to a lower traditional student population (CAEL, 2018). Although postsecondary institutions recognize the various motivations, learning styles, and barriers that impact adult learner persistence, these institutions misunderstand the nature of adult learners and misplace their focus on adult learner needs and challenges (CAEL, 2018).

CAEL's (2018) *Adult Learner 360* initiative provides postsecondary institutions with "a method to assess the perceived quality and effectiveness of an institution's programs, services, and policies for adult learners" and provides tools "to improve practices, set goals for improvement, and create new programs that impact adult learners' enrollment, persistence, and success" (p. 2). Initially developed in 2003 with its *Adult Learner Focused Toolkit*, the revamped *Adult Learner 360* provides surveys, one for institutional administrator and faculty and one for adult learners that rate each group perceived view of the effectiveness and importance of campus programs and services (CAEL, 2018). The data derived from these surveys is to give institutions a view of any disconnect or misalignment of policies and means to make better decisions that impact their adult learner population (CAEL, 2018). Moreover, institutions receive benchmarking tools that allow them to compare their efforts against other similarly situated institutions (CAEL, 2018).

Additionally, CAEL's (2018) *Ten Principles for Effectively Serving Adult Learners* "provide a framework for institutions to develop programs and policies that help adults reach their educational goals" (p. 2). These principles serve as guidelines that will provide insight into

the adult learner experiences, assess their institution's response to adult learner needs, and focus their attention to adult learner success and completion.

The first principle, *Adaptivity*, refers to postsecondary institutions not only to adjust to shifting market forces but also to adapt to the changing needs of those stakeholders that they serve by understanding their needs and using creative solutions to meet those needs (CAEL, 2020). *Assessment of Learning Outcomes* asks institutions to define, assess, and award credit for both curriculum knowledge, skills, and competencies, but knowledge, skills, and competences acquired from life and work experience in a manner that has the appropriate level of rigor for postsecondary study (CAEL, 2020). *Financing* gives adult learners multiple options to finance their postsecondary education, which balances an adult learner's financial flexibility with sensitivity to equity/access for underrepresented adult learners (CAEL, 2020).

Life & Career Planning encourages adult learners to define their life and career goals before enrollment and to evaluate them at every stage of the adult learner's academic journey CAEL, 2020. *Outreach* asks institutions to reach out to adult learners in a manner that overcomes barriers and creates ongoing access to postsecondary education (CAEL, 2020). *Technology* calls for institutions to use technology in a manner that provides the release of information in a relevant and timely manner that enriches learning (CAEL, 2020). *Strategic Partnerships* recommends that postsecondary institutions seek and engage in strategic partnerships with employers and community organizations to enhance education opportunities for adult learners (CAEL, 2020).

Student Support Systems provides academic and student support mechanisms that assist adult learners throughout their education journey and enhance their overall educational experience (CAEL, 2020). *Teaching-Learning Process* recommends that postsecondary education

faculty use various teaching and learning methods, including methods geared toward adult learners, which connect that curriculum to the real-world application and experiences (CAEL, 2020). Finally, *Transitions* provides for the use and support of guided pathways in a manner that ensures that learning will be useful, relevant, and applicable to the adult learner's academic and career goals (CAEL, 2020).

Shasta Community College Case Study

An example of a community college that embraces CAEL's policies and tools is Shasta College, which is part of the California community college system (CAEL, 2018). As a participant in the *Lumina Foundation's Community Partnership for Attainment*, Shasta sought to increase "high quality the proportion of Americans with high-quality postsecondary degrees and credentials to 60% by the year 2025" (CAEL, 2018, p. 11). During the college's review of demographic data and degree attainment, Shasta learned that they had a significant adult learner population that did not complete a degree or credential (CAEL, 2018). To improve the number of students completing high-quality degree or credential, In 2016, Shasta determined that they would take steps to focus and address the needs of its adult learner population. The first step was to come up with the definition of an adult learner. The group responsible for this task realized that they could not meet the needs of adult learners because they didn't know *who* the adult learners on their campus were (CAEL, 2018). Their definition of an adult learner and corresponding survey of college professions revealed that Shasta's focus out of sync with actual adult learner needs and challenges. Shasta, like many community colleges, presumed that adult learners want more access to childcare, parking, and transportation. Instead, adult learners at Shasta wanted the college to focus on "the availability and frequency of required courses offered at times that work for nontraditional students, the accessibility of services to accommodate adult

students who work full-time jobs, and the availability of prior learning assessment options' (CAEL, 2018, p. 12).

In their evaluation of the findings, Shasta realized a few important considerations for adult learners. First, the elimination of many evening courses for more online courses during lean economic times did little to improve adult learner completion. The increase in online courses was not due to demand that platform; it was the only option. The had a disparate impact on those adult learners who prefer face-to-face classes (CAEL, 2018). Second, access to transportation that would aid in attendance was not the concern of adult learners; it was access to classes at times that were convenient and contusive to an adult learner's schedule, which often does not allow for daytime classes (CAEL, 2018). Third, the lack of adult learner use of campus supports and services was not due to lack of knowledge or interest; instead, such services were only available during business hours (9-5), which again is not conducive to an adult learner's schedule (CAEL, 2018). Fourth, Shasta's failure to recognize and give credit for adult learners' PLA indicated no form of PLA available for adult learners and demonstrated a lack of institutional understanding of PLA (CAEL, 2018). To that end, Shasta revised the course offerings to include more evening, face-to-face courses, incorporable extended evening hours for campus services and supports, and engage in an instructional plan that addresses both prior learning assessment and credit by examination. Childcare, transportation, and other false narratives that represent adult learner needs, and the inability to financially provide those services, was not the main cause for the lack of adult learner degree or credential completion. It was access to the means and supports that served as barriers to completion. (CAEL, 2018). This evaluation process enlightened and changed Shasta's perception of adult learners and knowledge of the actual needs of their adult learner population, Shasta developed a series of initiatives and efforts that changed

adult learners' experiences and bolster the overall campus environment, which improved student success (CAEL, 2018).

Adult Learner Discourse in the Literature

The adult learner and higher education literature have contributed significant research to the conceptualization of postsecondary adult learners. The literature considers how adult learners are defined and described. We understand the various learning environments that adult learners pursue and the various motivations and challenges they face. The literature has focused on the diverse adult learner demographic group to focus on their specific needs, i.e., adult learners of color, parents, veterans. Nevertheless, the level of attention given to postsecondary adult learners suggests there is a lack of focused attention, and current conversations remain stagnant despite significant changes in the higher education landscape.

Meta-Analysis of Adult Learners in the Literature

Donaldson and Townsend (2007) conducted a meta-analysis of the higher education literature to determine the frequency in which adult learners appear in the literature and to examine the academic discourse about adult learners. The analysis consisted of a two-step process. In step one, Donaldson and Townsend (2007) selected seven U.S. higher education research journals⁶ from 1990 through 2003. They sought articles that focused on undergraduate students in the U.S. and defined an adult learner as an individual over the age of 22. The words, *adult(s)*, *mature*, *older*, *mixed-age or nontraditional age*, and *nontraditional*, narrowed the search. Of the 3200 articles found, 41 articles, which represented 1.27%, dealt with adult learners in postsecondary education in the United States. The majority of these articles were in

⁶ Higher education journals (Journal of Student Development; NASPA; Community College Review; Community College Journal of Research & Practice; Journal of Higher Education; Research in Higher Education; and Review of Higher Education)

community college journals, with fewer in higher education journals (Donaldson & Townsend, 2007).

In step two of the analysis, Donaldson and Townsend (2007) devised six categories or topics within the 41 articles: *Student retention, Needs of adult learners, Classroom behavior and perceptions, New perspectives on adult students, Professional development of instructors of adults, and Other*. Themes emerged that showed how the adult learner is discussed and portrayed. Adult learners were classified as invisible, acknowledged, but devalued, accepted, or embraced within the postsecondary environment (Donaldson & Townsend 2007).

In a continuation of the Donaldson & Townsend (2007), Barcinas et al., (2017) conducted a meta-analysis of the higher education and adult learner literature⁷ from 2004 through 2016. Barcinas et al. (2017) used age 24 as the starting point for adult learners and used the same keywords in the previous article but included “intergenerational,” “older/senior/middle-aged,” and “veteran.” Replicating the same research protocol as Donaldson and Townsend, Barcinas, et al. (2017) found 195 articles, or 3 %, of the total articles found, which were primarily adult and community college journals. There was a shift in the topics covered in this analysis, i.e., PLA, CBE, parenting, academic preparation, the treatment of adult learners in the literature is still sparse (Barcinas et al., 2017).

These meta-analyses demonstrated that postsecondary adult learner research is sparse despite adult learners’ increased presence in higher education, especially at community colleges. This shortage of research attributes to several factors. First, the lack of consensus and consistency with terminology and definitions creates confusion as it does not encompass adult

⁷ Adult Learning; Adult Education Quarterly; Studies in Continuing Education; PAACE; Review of Higher Education; Journal of Continuing Higher Education; Community College Review; Community College Journal of Research & Practice; Journal of College Student Development; and Journal of Higher Education

learner attributes. As previously indicated, “nontraditional” can include students who are not necessarily adults, i.e., early college students. Thus, the adult learner merges into the definition of nontraditional (Kasworm, 2018; Barcinas et al., 2017). Second, the lack of disaggregation based on age does not provide any additional information other than adult and non-adult (Barcinas et al., 2017). Without additional descriptive categories, i.e., veteran, parent, a full picture of the adult learner is not realized. Third, even if there is an agreement that the age variable plays a role, the lack of consensus of what age defines the adult learner can provide incomplete data. The research literature is inconsistent with the use of a definitive age of an adult learner⁸.

Fourth, entities that collect data on adult postsecondary learners use different age criteria do not use consistent age-brackets or cut-off points. For example, NCES uses age 24 as the starting point of who qualifies as an adult learner. However, the American Association for Community Colleges uses a disaggregated summary of under age 21, 22 through 39, and over age 40 (AACC, 2018). This skewed data does not provide a clear picture of who qualifies as an adult learner and may exclude adult learners. Fifth, Adult learners are an often under-served population due to institutional policies and initiatives that are traditional learner-focused (Donaldson & Townsend, 2007; Kasworm, 2010). This underrepresentation is particularly the case at research universities whose policies, procedures, and culture are more traditional learner-focused. These institutions often do not adequately support the adult learner despite calls for these institutions to promote a diverse campus culture and prepare all students for the workforce (Kasworm, 2010).

⁸ See Witkowsky, Mendez, Ogunbowo, Clayton, Hernandez, 2016, Choy, 2002, Bean and Metzner, 1987 use age 25. Osam, et al., 2017, Deutsch & Schmertz, 2011; Hardin, 2008 use age 23.

Sixth, the community college student success environment implements policies, initiatives, and supports that are often one-size-fits-all. They do not take into account the specific needs of adult learners (Erisman & Steele, 2015). Additionally, adult learners are often categorized as *nontraditional students*, which fails to account for an adult learner's positionality among nontraditional students (Kasworm, 2018). Adult learners cut across several nontraditional categories, such as students of color, first-generation, and low-income, that also include traditional-age learners. Finally, Donaldson and Townsend (2007), indicate that there is the perception of a lack of rigor and quality in the study of adult learners and the context in which the literature presents adult learners. Adult learners are "different but not positively different" or merely accepted (Donaldson & Townsend, 2007, p. 45).

Unfoundedly, the literature continues to treat adult learners as different or marginalized. This view fails to account for opportunities to expand our understanding of adult learners in new and dynamic ways. Postsecondary intergenerational learner research is an area that is ripe for exploration and may cultivate a wealth of data that advances our understanding of adult learners and offers practitioners with information and best practices. Sánchez and Kaplan (2014) suggest that interactions between adult and traditional learners are an opportunity for social and academic growth for both groups.

Where Do We Go From Here?

The adult learner discourse shows that the shortage of research related to adult learners within the context of the student success movement raises concerns. There is a presumption that the existing conceptualization of adult learners applies to the student success culture and environment. Yet, this premise remains untested and unchallenged. The study of adult learners as a separate entity should continue, particularly in light of such phenomenon as student success,

the establishment of prior learning assessments/credit by examination, and new adult learner demographics, i.e., undocumented students. Our discourse must evolve with the willingness to embrace new frameworks and theories that challenge our existing knowledge. This evolution can not only expand our understanding within the research context but can influence policy and practices that impact adult postsecondary learners. The increase in multiple generations enrolled in postsecondary education, especially at community colleges, underscores the value of services that recognize the needs and challenges of each generation in a meaningful learning environment (Clemente, 2010; Milanowski, 2019).

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

This chapter focuses on the study's methodology, including the choice of qualitative case study as the research design. Next, I discuss my researcher positionality, which describes how I see myself, my experiences, and my views toward the outside world as part of the research process. The chapter continues with a discussion of the conceptual framework and the specific parameters for the research design that guide the research project. Next, the chapter discusses the proposed data collection methods and the handling of data. The chapter also includes a section regarding data analysis and issues of rigor. Finally, the chapter covers the limitations and strengths of the study.

Qualitative Research

Denzin and Lincoln (2011) defined qualitative research as “a situated activity that locates the observer in the world” by using a “set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible,” which “involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world” (p.3). By studying things in their natural setting, the goal of the qualitative researcher is to make sense and find meaning in those things, ideas or phenomena described by those who view them (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). The qualitative researcher focuses on “how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 15). In other words, the qualitative researcher must understand and appreciate the phenomenon from the participant's perspective, not from their own (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The research is learning from the experiences of the participants. Thus, the qualitative researcher is the primary instrument of data collection and analysis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Qualitative research relies upon an inductive process to build themes, theories, and concepts based on what is shared and observed (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Those themes,

theories, and concepts are analyzed and presented using thick, rich description that evokes a picture of the observed experiences of the participants or phenomenon (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Through this research process, the qualitative researcher provides a synthesis of the lived experiences of those who may not have a voice, addresses a complex problem or phenomena that require understanding or intervention, or provides causal links to theory, develops a new theory, or further explains a theory (Creswell, 2012; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

When embarking on qualitative inquiry, Creswell (2012) indicated that the researcher in qualitative inquiry begins with an assumption or assumptions that link to an interpretive framework. The researcher presents a research problem where the goal is to offer and analyze meanings that individuals or groups give to that problem. Our philosophical assumptions are rooted in the interpretive framework chosen for qualitative research. In understanding the role of the interpretive framework, one must look at the nature and use of the framework and the philosophical assumptions that link to that framework (Creswell, 2012).

As a constructivist, I seek to understand the world in which others work and develop the subjective meaning of their experiences. I rely on inductive reasoning to generate a theory. I believe multiple realities exist within the participant's lived experiences, and those meanings are co-constructed with the participant and as viewed by the participant. The ability to understand and honor the value of the participant's beliefs links my axiological belief. Finally, I use different methods to acquire information, e.g., interviewing, observations, to inductively present the participant's experiences (Creswell, 2012). This research attempted to interpret findings and make sense of where or how they fit in a participant's world.

Qualitative research was appropriate for this study. This study delved into the essence, the heart, of student experiences within a distinct situation and context. Qualitative research

provided an opportunity to explore the rich and unique experiences of adult learners immersed in a student success environment at a community college. I used a qualitative research design and various methods to collect and analyze data to gather information in a setting, the community college, where adult learners experience their academic journey within a student success environment. Qualitative research also allowed me to understand the meaning behind adult learner experiences and present them in a holistic, rich, and detailed description.

Case Study Research

Case study methodology is the most frequently used methodology in education research (Yazan, 2015). There is no consensus in the design and implementation of the case study method (Yazan, 2015). Education researchers most often cite three primary sources concerning case study design, Yin, Merriam, and Stake, who each provided guidelines for the design, implementation, and analysis of case study (Yazan, 2015). Each of the authors of these approaches has epistemological worldviews that expressly and implicitly impact the design, approach, and analysis of a case study (Yazan, 2015). The approaches by Stake and Merriam are often described as constructivist, which views truth as relative and is dependent on the construction of meaning (Baxter & Jack, 2008).

Although Baxter and Jack (2008) viewed Yin's approach as constructivist, some researchers such as Yazan (2015) suggested a positivist worldview. Yazan (2015) pointed to Yin's "four yardsticks" in which researchers should "maximize four conditions related to design quality: construct validity, internal validity, external validity, and reliability, how investigators deal with these aspects of quality control" (Yin, 2002, p. 19). Yazan (2015) surmised that this aligns with Crotty's (1998) view of positivism, which indicated that the findings from research yield "established facts or at least as close to established fact as [their] research has enabled

[them] to reach” (p. 41). Regardless of the choice of case study approach, a researcher should examine and understand where their epistemological views fit within each of these case study approaches for alignment in guiding their research decisions. When these guidelines are followed, the research produces a robust, holistic, an in-depth investigation (Tellis, 1997).

Tellis (1997b) indicated if a researcher seeks to conduct a holistic, in-depth investigation, a case study is a suitable choice. The hallmark of the case study is that it focuses on a holistic system of understanding of a cultural system of action, which refers to sets of interrelated activities engaged in by the actors in a social situation. The inclusion of multiple perspectives in the case study allows the researcher to present not only the participant’s view but those who interact with the participants (Tellis, 1979b). The researcher can use multiple lenses, multiple data collection methods to explore and create a rich, holistic description that provides a greater understanding of that phenomenon. Hence, case studies have the qualitative characteristics of describing, understanding, and explaining a phenomenon or concept (Tellis, 1997b).

Yin (2003) defined a case as “a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between a phenomenon and context are not clear and the researcher has little control over the phenomenon and context” (p. 13). The case seeks to address the why and the how of a phenomenon (Yin, 2003). Stake (1995) referred to a case study as “the study of the particularity and complexity of a single case, coming to understand its activity within an important circumstance (p. xi). The researcher is interested in the case because of its uniqueness, common traits, their stories, and understanding how the case functions in their experiences and pursuits, while the researcher sets aside her own assumptions and biases about the case in order to learn from the case (Stake, 1995).

The case study considers multiple perspectives, which includes not only the participants but those who interact around and with those participants (Tellis, 1997a). As Tellis (1997b) indicated, the multiple perceptive aspects of a case study allow those who do not have a voice, those who are powerless, an opportunity to be heard. Thus, a case study can be characterized as holistic, empirical, interpretive, and emphatic, which reflects how research considers the interrelationships, observations, interactions, and experiences with the participants and the phenomenon (Yazan, 2015). This also ties in with Merriam's (2001) description in which the case study has particularistic, descriptive, and heuristic characteristics. Particularistic means that the study focuses on a specific situation, event, or phenomenon as the study can reveal a great deal about what is the subject of the study (Merriam, 2001). A case study is descriptive because it provides a thick, rich, and complete description of the phenomenon (Merriam, 2001). Finally, a case study is heuristic as it heightens the reader's understanding of the phenomenon by providing an explanation, summary, and discussion about the experiences or meaning of the study (Merriam, 2001).

Tellis (1997b) indicated that a case study focuses on the investigation of one or two central issues under examination. A case study must have a specific unit of study that is unique and finite; the case is the unit of analysis (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). A case must be bounded, meaning that the researcher places boundaries on the case to ensure that it is not too broad and encompassing (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Baxter and Jack (2008) suggested that binding a case is accomplished by time and place (Creswell, 2012); time and activity (Stake, 1995); or by definition and context (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The boundaries of a case require that a phenomenon must be identifiable (Ary et al., 2010).

The type of case study also guides the research design (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Stake (1995) identified three types of case study, intrinsic, collective, and instrumental. A researcher uses an intrinsic case study when the interest is the case itself, whereas the collective case study involves multiple cases. Stake (1995) referred to a case as an instrumental case study if the researcher is trying to understand more than just the case itself (Stake, 1995). Or, the researcher wants to understand a situation or refine a particular theory (Baxter & Jack, 2008). The instrumental case study calls for the researcher to conduct an in-depth examination, analysis, and detail of the case so that she can pursue an outside interest or issue (Stake, 1995).

Critics of case study research point to the incorporation of more quantitative measures of analysis would make the case study design a more scientific approach (Tellis, 1997b). Critics also take issue with using a single case to draw a general conclusion regarding the phenomenon (Tellis, 1997b). However, a case study is not sampling. Rather, the boundaries of the case study are based on the overall goal of that study, meaning that if a single case meets the objectives of the study, then the boundaries are met (Tellis, 1979b). The boundaries set in the case study allow the researcher to learn as much about the phenomenon as possible (Tellis, 1997b). Concerning the generalization claim, Yin (2011) indicated that analytic generalization allows for previous theory to serve as a template to compare the findings of the case study, which develops and explores how the findings inform a concept or theory and have implications for an improved understanding of that concept or theory. Stake (1995) submitted that generalizations are more intuitive or naturalistic, referring to the relationship between the reader's experience and the case so that the reader has a better understanding of the phenomenon.

A qualitative case study was a reasonable qualitative approach for this study as it was in line with the overall purpose of the study, which to understand adult learner experiences at

community college that is immersed in student success by painting and analyzing a holistic picture of those experiences. Because I subscribe to the constructivist worldview, I believe, as indicated by Cohen et al., (2007), that “the social world can only be understood from the individuals who are part of the ongoing action being investigated” (p. 19). The choice of case study allowed the development of subjective, varied, and multiple meanings from the experiences of the participants, and further provided inductive contributions towards a working theory of the meaning behind those experiences (Creswell, 2012). The constructivist carries epistemological assumptions where she sees reality constructed between the researcher and the participant, which shaped their experiences (Creswell, 2012; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). As a researcher, I interpreted what I found and try to make sense of where or how it fits in the broader context.

The case study design was instrumental as it examined how the adult learner fits within an institutional framework of student success. Adult learners were instrumental in framing their experiences in the overall context of a student success environment and culture. Adult learners were bound by their conceptualization in the research literature, their position as students enrolled at a community college fully immersed in ongoing student success efforts that were in line with national and state student success initiatives. The study was also particularistic, in that it focused on a specific phenomenon, the adult learner within the context of a community college student success culture. The use of a case study revealed specific information about how the adult learner described and navigated the experiences and offered insight into how the community college environment contributes to those experiences. It allowed me to bring the participants’ views to light through the use of multiple lenses and multiple data collection methods and to gain as much information about the case as possible.

Researcher Positionality and Subjectivity

There are many layers in which I approached my role in the research process. Much of what I do as a researcher stems from my background, my education, and my prior career roles as a college instructor, college administrator, and a lawyer in private practice. My awareness of myself, my experiences, and my views toward the outside world also guided the research process.

I grew up in a small town in a rural part of western Pennsylvania. My parents were working-class; my father had a high school diploma, and my mother dropped out of college after three semesters to help her family after her father died. Growing up, I experienced significant prejudice because I am biracial, female, have a visual disability, and was from a working-class family who lived in the part of town that was considered the ‘hood.’ There was a sense of implied discouragement to pursue academic success from those outside my community. There were low expectations for academic success, as many people believed upward mobility was a pipe-dream. Despite these challenges, I graduated from college, earned a master’s degree and a law degree. I am a successful lawyer and educator. I attribute much of my success to my parents’ nurturing of my love for learning and their support and encouragement when others told me that I would not succeed. I also credit my stubbornness and uniqueness to accept “I can’t.”

I have empathy for those who struggle and deal with hardships and prejudice. I am sensitive to the challenges faced by students who were not encouraged or supported in their academic pursuits. Many of the students that I have encountered as a former instructor, department, and dean, did not have academic role models. They have people who tell them that they will not succeed because of race, ethnicity, gender, disability, or economic status. I spent my legal career helping those who do not have the opportunities and privileges that others have. I

believe in using my knowledge for the good of others who don't have that voice. These experiences shaped who I am and what I believe – that all individuals have a potential for greatness; some need a guide to show them their potential.

This dissertation research put me in a unique position - I was an adult learner studying adult learners. As an adult learner, I understood the challenge of balancing academics with this thing called life. I understood what it meant to struggle with a subject because I had not used those skills in many years. I understood the family and economic pressure that comes with being an adult learner. I felt the positive and negative emotions that adult learners face. At the same time, I have spent the last few years immersed in the adult learner literature and assisting with adult learner research. That research shaped my thoughts, views, and future research agenda.

Because of this balance, it was critical for me as a researcher to consider my positionality and to intentionally design and implement a process that mediated my positionality. I had to be mindful of how my positionality influenced all phases of the research process. I balanced my positionality, expertise, experiences, and knowledge with how I created my protocols, my approach to data collection, and data analysis. This balance ensured a solid research plan and placed limits on the research process. I relied on my law school training and practiced as an attorney, which provided me with the skills to maintain a balanced approach to each task in the research process. Those experiences also shaped how I address any biases. As an attorney, I view the world from multiple perspectives, not just the one that suits one's belief system. I must use effective listening skills to capture various perspectives.

Conceptual Framework

According to Miles et al. (2014), “a conceptual framework explains, either graphically or in narrative form, the main things to be studied—the key factors, variables, or constructs—and

the presented interrelationships among them” (p, 20,). It is the researcher’s roadmap of how she conceptualized the building of theory and subsequent research (Ravitch & Riggan, 2016).

A review of the adult learner and higher education literature did not provide a framework that focused on adult learner experiences within the context of a community college with an ongoing student success environment. Few empirical studies explicitly demonstrate how adult learners uniquely perceive postsecondary student success. Tinto’s (1987)’s Interactionist Theory, Schlossberg’s (1989) Theory of Marginality and Mattering, Bean and Metzner’s (1985) Nontraditional Undergraduate Student Attrition Model, and other persistence models provide a lens into how adult learners navigate postsecondary education. Yet, they do not address or measure how adult learners navigate their academic journey within a student success environment in which specific targeted initiatives and supports may influence an adult learner’s success and completion.

Because there was no distinct framework, I proposed a self-constructed framework based upon core features and propositions drawn primarily upon a Southeastern State Community College System stated priorities. Adult learners are the largest population of students who attend community colleges, yet are rarely positioned as a unique, stand-alone audience to be regularly studied and explicitly discussed and served via specific policies or environmental features (American Association of Community Colleges, 2019). That said, community colleges have seen significant changes in the manner in which they operate (Bailey et al., 2005). Completion is largely the metric and definition of student success. However, it is unknown how the proposed student success culture and strategies align and integrate with adult learner needs and community college experiences. CAEL’s *Ten Principles for Effectively Serving Adult Learners* and Erisman and Steele’s (2012). *From contact to completion: Supporting returning adult students in*

obtaining a college credential are nationally proposed guidelines for serving adult learners.

These guidelines offer a lens for understanding how community colleges could optimally serve adult learners and their experiences during their academic journey. There is little empirical research on the application of these frameworks in a student success context.

At the time of the dissertation proposal, the framework consisted of defining student success at the institutional level and three components of a southeastern state's student success principles. The framework included an additional overarching inquiry that considered how adult learners perceive experience and respond to student successes within a community college environment.

Table 4. Original Conceptual Framework (Southeastern State, 2017).

Student Success Principles	Points of Inquiry	Questions
Defining Student Success	What does student success mean to community college adult learners?	<p>What are adult learners' unique perceptions, awareness, and expectations of student success and of being an adult learner</p> <p>How do adult learners perceive (if at all) the community college's (institutional) definitions and efforts related to student success?</p>
Students should make informed decisions	How do adult learners define what it means to make <i>informed</i> decisions concerning their student needs?	What are examples of situations that provide insight into how adult learners describe and perceive making informed decisions regarding their student experiences and goals?
Students progress through effective learning pathways that lead to credentials of economic value, without unnecessary detours.	How do adult learners describe their academic journey, particularly concerning their goals of acquiring credentials or their experiences in navigating barriers?	What are the examples of adult learners' credential pathways and navigation of detours?

Table 4 (continued).

Students are provided integrated, targeted supports and interventions when they are most effective	How do adult learners describe the supports they receive to meet their adult learner needs?	How do adult learners perceive the support, strategies, and interventions that they receive or the absence of desired supports? What awareness and experience do adult learners have with adult learner friendly practices such as prior learning assessment or other accepted adult learner supports?
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These student success principles served as a foundation in the exploration of the student success culture at a southeastern state community college selected for this proposed study. Each of the core areas of inquiry served as a basis for the various data collection methods that I initially proposed for use in this study, i.e., topics for interviews. Finally, the questions served as key issues that are supported by the adult learner literature and national literature and initiatives surrounding the success of adult learners, i.e., CAEL, University Professional & Continuing Education Association (UPCEA).

It was determined by my committee that the proposed framework had significant breath for one study. At their recommendation, I decided to focus on one aspect of the framework.

Table 5. Refined Conceptual Framework (Southeastern State, 2017).

Student Success Principles	Points of Inquiry	Questions
Defining Student Success	What does student success mean to community college adult learners?	What are adult learners' unique perceptions, awareness, and expectations of student success and of being an adult learner How do adult learners perceive (if at all) the community college's (institutional) definitions and efforts related to student success?

It is assumed that institutional definitions of student success align with adult learner motivation and goals. However, the data regarding student success is not disaggregated based on age. It is unknown if this assumption and the lack of disaggregation for age are consistent with adult learner conceptualization in the literature. Therefore, I chose to focus on one aspect of the framework, defining student success. I submit that how adult learners define student success is a foundational principle for understanding the other components. I used the components of the original framework to support and illustrate adult learner definitions and descriptions of student success and further bolster the findings of the study.

Research Design

Data Collection

Effective data collection is vital to the success and quality of qualitative case study research (Yin, 2003). Therefore, it is necessary to use more than one source of data collection to develop an in-depth understanding of the case (Creswell, 2012). In case study research, multiple data collection methods are the key to bringing credibility to the study (Baxter & Jack, 2008). The information gathered from multiple data collection sources is akin to pieces of a puzzle where each piece contributes to the overall picture that is unveiled (Baxter & Jack, 2008).

Site Selection

This research study was dependent on the identification of a Southeastern State community college that was fully vested in the student success culture, as outlined by national and state student success initiatives. ‘Fully vested’ meant that the community college had the following characteristics:

- Self-identified as it maintained a “success-oriented” environment for a minimum of three years.

- “Success-oriented” referred to the implementation of the explicit initiatives in which student success is the primary stated focus; and
- “Success-oriented” evidenced by the college’s overall mission, campus environment, and identity.

The location of the community college provided context as to how student success strategies were a reflection of the community that the community college serves.

Research Site

Southeastern State’s concern regarding low completion rates at its community colleges resulted in its State Community College System (SCCS) to enhance efforts to improve student success. SCCS received grants from several national and state consortiums to fund a State Student Success Center that was part of a nationwide network of 14 student success centers. SCCS’s Student Success Center promoted and continues to promote a success-based framework where all community colleges within the state system focused on a common purpose - to improve persistence and completion (Southeastern State, 2017). Southeastern State’s Student Success Center’s mission is to improve student persistence and completion by improving professional development, supporting organizational development, providing best practices, and brokering technical assistance (Southeastern State, 2017). To foster a culture of data and inquiry, data management, outcome assessment, metrics, and other associated initiatives provide the means for continuous improvement (Southeastern State, 2017).

Southeastern State’s Student Success Center aligns with the Guided Pathways model. The *Guided Pathways* model is a framework rooted in research from the Community College Resource Council (CCRC) with input from the AACC (College Research Center & American Association of Community Colleges Pathways Project, 2016). The evolution of *Guided*

Pathways arose out of prior efforts such as *ATD* and *CBD*, with the incorporation of some of the guiding principles from *ATD* and *CBD* included in *Guided Pathways* (Community College Research Center & American Association of Community Colleges Pathways Project, 2016). *Guided Pathways* provides community colleges with a highly structured framework that guides and supports students from onboarding to completion (Southeastern State, 2017).

I consulted a senior administrative representative from Southeastern State's community college systems office for recommendations of a community college that would meet the above-referenced criteria. Southeastern State Community College (SCC) was recommended.

Southeastern State Community College (SCC) is a mid-sized community college located in Southeastern State. SCC has three campuses that serve two rural counties. At the time of the study, SCC's population consisted of 64% female, and 36% male students. Full-time students accounted for 27% of enrollment, and 73% represent part-time enrollment. Forty-four percent of students were first-generation college students. The average age of students was 24 years of age, with students ranging from 16-89 years of age. There was almost equal student enrollment in curriculum and continuing education courses. There were over 170 programs of study at SCC, 60-degree programs, 26 diplomas, and 87 certificate programs. Online courses accounted for 28% of courses at SCC. College transfer, nursing associate degree, and business administration were the most popular degree programs at SCC.

SCC's mission is to provide an open-access community college that promotes student success and lifelong learning through high-quality, flexible, affordable, comprehensive education programs and services responding to economic and workforce development needs (SCC, 2018). SCC defined student success as graduation with an emphasis on successful course completion and progression toward graduation through their *Student Persistence and Success Plan* (SPSP)

(SCC, 2018). SPSP provides faculty and staff with tools for early intervention in instances and risk factors that can hinder academic performance and success (SCC, 2018).

SCC's based its priorities in *ATD* principles, which include increasing the percentage of new students completing developmental education courses, improving the achievement gap for male, African American students, improving developmental education courses, and improving overall term to term persistence and completion for all students. Through *CBD*, SCC engaged in a one-year focused study of institutional data deficiencies and strategies to overcome them. In year two, the college implemented those strategies. The third-year consisted of evaluating progress and policy implications while scaling up policies and practices that meet or exceed national standards. SCC is one of the first cohorts to participate in Southeastern State's *Guided Pathways* model and currently uses the framework.

SCC's demographics presented a favorable site to attract a pool of potential adult learner participants. The age and enrollment status of students at SCC was consistent with various terms and definitions within the literature that describes a student who is not considered traditional (Soares et al., 2017). SCC's established a student success environment that mirrors national efforts regarding community college student success practices and policies (Bailey, 2016). SCC has maintained a thriving student success-oriented culture that is evidenced by its mission, campus environment, and identity. I met with a senior leadership representative from SCC to discuss the parameters of the study and obtained institutional board approval to recruit participants and conduct interviews with adult learners and college professionals.

Recruitment and Selection of Participants:

Qualitative research uses purposeful sampling to provide sufficient and maximum insight into what is being studied (Ary et al., 2010). Additionally, Merriam (2001) indicated that

purposeful sampling requires the researcher to select a sample in which there is the potential to learn about the topic under study. Because this was a case study, the sample requires bounding (Creswell, 2012). For the purposes of this study, I used the following criteria to select adult learner participants.

- Adult learner participants who were either:
 - Age 24 or older; and/or
 - Had one or more of the following adult roles and responsibilities:
 - Dependents, i.e., child or parent; and/or
 - Has an interruption of three years or more between high school and college; and/or
 - Were a veteran or active military (Horn & Carroll, 1996).
- Adult learners enrolled in curriculum programs that led to an associate degree or transfer to a four-year postsecondary institution or career-technical programs that were longer than nine months to completion.
- Adult learners who attended the selected community college for a minimum of one academic year, either full time or part-time.

I used Listserv sites, bulletin boards, and student service announcements as a means to contact eligible students. I placed flyers advertising the study in public areas where students were likely to gather, such as the library and student lounges. Academic representatives interviewed for this study also distributed flyers advertising the study to students with whom they had direct contact. The information posted on these sites indicated that I sought adult students to participate in face-to-face interviews voluntarily. The flyers contained a link to a Qualtrics survey used to screen potential interview participants. Participants were asked if they met the above-referenced

criteria. If the participants met the criteria, they were directed to email me at an email address designated for the study. Once the participant contacted me, the date and time were set and confirmed for the interview. All correspondence with participants took place via email or phone and text message using a Google Voice phone number set up by me and provided to the participants after initial contact. In total, ten students agreed to participate in in-person, one-on-one interviews.

In addition to student participants, I also interviewed academic representatives from SCC. These representatives were recruited using snowball sampling, in which participants were recruited by an interviewee (Ary et al., 2010). The first academic representative was recommended by a senior leadership representative, who was the initial point of contact at SCC. The first academic representative recommended the second representative, and so on. Four academic representatives agreed to participate in an in-person interview.

Interviewing in Qualitative Research

Interviews are commonly used in qualitative research within education (Merriam, 2001). Ary et al. (2010) indicate that “interviews are used to help understand the experiences that have and the meaning they make of them” (p. 438). Moreover, Seidman (2013) provided a very clear explanation of the use of interviews in qualitative studies:

The purpose of in-depth interviewing is not to get answers to questions, nor to test hypothesis, and not to “evaluate” as the term is normally used. At the root of in-depth interviewing is an interest in understanding the lived experiences of other people and the meaning they make of that experience (p. 9)

Interviews are appropriate when we cannot observe or interpret how others make sense of the world around them (Merriam, 2001). Interviews allowed me to connect to the lived

experiences of the participants, as described by the participants, for I to understand how the participant sees their experience. Interviews allow one to probe, clarify, and to seek an understanding of another's experience or behavior (Seidman, 2013). I used semi-structured interviews to elicit information for a specific purpose beyond a yes-or-no response (Ary et al., 2010). While the protocol sought to ask all interview participants the same questions, there was some latitude in the semi-structured format that allowed me to probe, seek clarification, or to go deeper within a participant's given response (Ary et al., 2010). The semi-structured interviews permitted me to focus on a specific topic while allowing each participant to provide a more in-depth explanation of their adult learner's experience.

Interview Participant Protocol

Adult learners

Adult learner participant interviews had a conversational tone and lasted approximately one hour in length. There was minimal interruption by me except to clarify, probe, or seek additional information from the participant (Seidman, 2013). The interviews focused on their perceptions of what student success meant to them and how they perceived their college maintained student success culture. I asked the adult learner participants about their awareness and experience with various campus student success initiatives. Finally, adult learner participants shared their perceptions of what an adult learner means to them and how their motivations, challenges, and influences impact their overall success. Following the interview with each adult learner participant, I completed a timely transcription of the interview. I provided each participant with a copy of the transcript as a form of member checking. Member checking ensured that the information in the transcript was an accurate representation of the participant. Appendix A contains the interview protocol used for adult learner participants.

Academic representatives

The academic representative interviews were semi-structured and lasted approximately one hour in length. The academic representatives discussed their direct knowledge and observations of the student success initiatives, culture, and environment within the context of a community college. I asked the academic representatives to define student success, personally, professionally, and at the institutional level and how each believed students perceived the student success efforts and environment at SCC. I inquired how each representative defined, described, and perceived adult learners and the uniqueness of adult learner experiences with student success at a community college. I provided timely transcription and distribution of the interviews to the academic representatives for review, comment, or changes. Appendix B contains the interview protocol used for the academic representatives.

Document Analysis

Document analysis consists of written, physical, and visual artifacts that aid in understanding the experiences and/or phenomenon that is the subject of the research (Yin, 2003, Ary, et al., 2010). The use of documents in conjunction with other data collection methods can put the information that the participant provides into context. It allows for additional questions to be asked in an interview; it can supplement one's knowledge; it can show how a process or phenomenon changes over time; and it can verify and triangulate information provided by other sources (Bowen, 2009).

Document collection, review, and analysis consisted of five phases. First, I familiarized myself with the environment at SSC. I reviewed demographic information about SSC from their website as well as information provided by SCC academic representatives to present a detailed picture of the campus environment and population. I also reviewed documents related to SSC's

Student Success and Persistence Plan (SSPS), which outlines SSC's institutional definition of student success. Additional documents included SSC's involvement in various national initiatives, such as *ATD* and *CBD*. Also, I reviewed documents related to the description and application of SSC's academic advising and student success courses, including course syllabi for the student success courses. I took copious notes regarding specific nuances within these documents that connected to the conceptual framework.

The second phase of document collection and analysis consisted of a review of documents and statistical data regarding postsecondary adult learners and, more specifically, adult learners who attend community colleges. I reviewed the Department of Education's NCES publication, *National Postsecondary Student Aid Study*, for definitions of a postsecondary adult learner used for statistical analysis. I consulted the NCES website and their publication, *Condition of Education*, and the *National Student Clearinghouse Research Center* for statistical data regarding postsecondary adult learners enrollment across all institutions from 2010 to 2019 to show the progression of adult learners. I cross-referenced that data with data regarding community college learners compiled by the AACC in their Fast Facts publications from 2010 to 2019. The purpose of the cross-reference was to show the similarities and differences in reporting adult learner enrollment.

The third phase of document review consisted of reviewing documents related to student success at community colleges. The analysis began with a review of reports and other materials that chronicled the drive toward student success. This included AACC's (2012) *Reclaiming the American Dream*, and Bailey et al. (2015) *Redesigning America's Community Colleges: A Clearer Path to Student Success*. Next, I designed a timeline of the impetus, designed, implementation, and evaluation of the various national student success initiatives from *ATD* to

current efforts, such as *Guided Pathways* and the *Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence*, as well as recommended frameworks outlined in *Reclaiming the American Dream* (2012) and *Redesigning America's Community Colleges: A Clearer Path to Student Success* (Bailey et al., 2015). Next, I documented and charted the various components of each initiative to visualize the similarities, differences, and nuances among initiatives. I consulted documents such as white papers, implementation guides, and evaluative reports as well as information on their respective websites. To cross-reference information, I consulted reports and implementation from the CCRC and the AACC regarding the *Guided Pathways* project.

The fourth phase consisted of review documents related to Southeastern State's community college system. I reviewed statistical reports regarding full-time equivalency (FTE) calculations, performance, equity, success and completion measures, and curriculum outcomes to paint of picture of the community college system in Southeastern State. Next, I reviewed Southeastern State's efforts to implement student success initiatives. This review consisted of viewing strategic planning reports, state performance measures reports, and reports related to the implementation of the state's *Guided Pathways* plan. Furthermore, I reviewed newsletters, strategic plans, and other related documents from Southeastern State's Student Success Center. I charted this information in the same manner as the national student success efforts.

The final phase of document review consisted of the collection and analysis of reports related to serving adult learners. I reviewed reports from the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning, including benchmarking reports, strategic plans, and case studies. I also reviewed published reports from Erisman and Steele (2012; 2015), which provide best practices for adult learner completion and the creation of an environment that accounts for adult learner needs. Reports from *The American Council for Education* (Soars 2013; Soars et al., 2017) provided

additional context for serving adult learners within a student success environment. Finally, I reviewed web posts, news articles, and other related documents that document adult learners within the context of community colleges and student success. I compiled the information into a matrix to use for comparison and contrast with the above-referenced documents.

The use of these documents in juxtaposition with the adult learner interviews provided an extra layer of understanding regarding where adult learners fit in the student success paradigm. Also, it served to connect what I uncovered in the interviews and what is known from the literature.

Handling of Data

It is necessary to obtain the required permission from various institutions, to ensure the confidentiality of the participants, and the handling and storing of data obtained through the collection process. To maintain the highest ethical standards, I used several tools to ensure the proper handling and securing of all forms of data. Also, I took steps to ensure the confidentiality of the participants.

Confidentiality

Confidentiality and taking proper steps to respect participant confidentiality is often of vital importance in qualitative research (Mertens, 2005). The recruitment process I used ensured that participants could voluntarily self-identify for participation in the study. Once selected, each participant chose his/her pseudonym for the interview portion. I maintained an electronic and a paper copy of the pseudonyms. I was the only person who knew the connection between real name and pseudonym. Each participant received a written consent form that explained the purpose of the study. It stated that participation was voluntary, and the participant may end the interview at any point and cease their participation, I took steps to ensure that there is no undue

harm or risk to the participant. I also reiterated the consent verbally at the beginning of the interview process. Upon completion of the interview transcription process, I provided a copy to each participant to ensure that it was accurate or requires clarification as part of the member checking process. These steps ensured that there is no deception on my part and that the participant has full disclosure, and their views were an accurate representation.

It is important to note here that I was mindful and took care to respect any cultural, religious, or other differences, as well as power positions that may present during the interview process (Creswell, 2012). As indicated in Chapter 2, the community college serves the community. There are individuals from diverse ethnic, religious, racial, socioeconomic, and cultural backgrounds. As an outsider who may present as a person in a position of power, I took steps to respect the participant's position and diverse background and garner their trust throughout the process.

Storage and Transcription of Data

I used two electronic recording devices to safeguard that all information is captured and to avoid any equipment malfunctions. I used a recording app that is connected to my iPad to interview the participants. In addition, I used a hand-held audio recorder as a backup during the interviews. I saved the recordings via iCloud, which was password protected and updated regularly. Also, I downloaded the recordings from the cloud and saved them on my laptop. I also saved the data on a USB drive and an external drive that was separate from any information or files unrelated to this study. I stored all data, including but not limited to recordings, transcripts, research journals, and other documents on both of these devices. I stored all devices in a fireproof safe located in a locked closet in my home. Finally, as suggested by Creswell (2013), I

maintained a master matrix of the type of data, how it was gathered, and the location of that data. This information was kept along with the above-referenced items.

I took steps to safeguard all participants, administrators, and the community college site remained anonymous as a means to protect their identity throughout the research process. No link existed between the identities of participants, administrators, and the community college and the data. All participants, administrators, and the community college received a pseudonym that was only be known by me. Because adult learner interviews took place at a time and public place selected by the participant, I took steps to minimize any breach of privacy and anonymity. All electronic and paper data, material, notes, etc. were kept in the same above-referenced locked, fireproof box. I will maintain and store all data, material, notes, etc. for five years. After five years, I will properly delete and destroy all electronic files and backup drives. I will shred and properly dispose of all printed materials after the dissertation and publishing process for those chapters submitted as manuscripts to the journals listed in Chapter 1.

Coding structure

According to Stake (1995), “Good research is not about good methods, as much as it is about good thinking” (p. 19). By “good thinking,” Stake was referring analysis, in other words, how we *think* about the data that is collected and what it represents. In thinking about the data, qualitative research calls for analysis that is recursive and dynamic (Merriam, 1998). Coding was an analysis that allows me to think deeply about the data’s meaning (Miles et al., 2015). Thus, coding is also heuristic in that the research is discovering ideas based on thinking and reflecting on a particular piece of data (Miles et al., 2015).

Some researchers use a start list of preliminary codes or a priori codes derived from a conceptual framework, research questions, or other variables (Miles et al., 2015). Saldaña (2016)

indicated that using the researcher created codes as part of the qualitative data analysis as a means to symbolize and interpret the meaning to information gained through data collection, which is used to find themes, patterns, and theory development. Saldaña (2016) further states that “Some methodologists advise that your choice of coding method(s) and even a provisional list of codes should be determined beforehand to harmonize with your study’s conceptual framework...to enable an analysis that directly answers your research questions and goals” (p. 71).

On the other hand, Creswell (2012) suggested that the use of a priori codes alone can limit the researcher to those codes and not the voice of the participant. To avoid this limitation, researchers use open coding, which are codes that emerge during the coding process (Miles et al., 2015). Whereas the development of a theory using a priori coding is deductive, open coding is an inductive process in which the theory arises as a result of what emerges from the codes (Miles et al., 2015).

The coding structure for this study consisted of a priori codes derived from the conceptual framework and common language used to describe adult learners.

Table 6. A priori codes and definitions.

Advising/advisors (AA)	People or processes that help students or provide advice at all stages of the student’s academic journey
Adult learner (AL)	Student who meets the study’s definition of an adult learner or meets one of the definitions found in the literature
Adult responsibilities (AR)	Any reference to those tasks that are associated with being an adult
Age (AGE)	Any reference to chronological age
Barriers (BAR)	People, institutions, or beliefs that interfere with a student’s education
Community college (CC)	A public two-year institution that grants degrees, credentials, or types of educational opportunity.
Informed Decision (DEC)	The student received accurate and relevant information to make an educated and independent decision.

Table 6 (continued).

Faculty (FAC)	Instructors engaged in presenting information for the student that leads to a degree or credential.
Community college (CC)	A public two-year institution that grants degrees, credentials, or types of educational opportunity.
Informed Decision (DEC)	The student received accurate and relevant information to make an educated and independent decision.
Faculty (FAC)	Instructors engaged in presenting information for the student that leads to a degree or credential.
Information (INFO)	Any printed or electronic materials or material that is communities verbally by another person or party
Intrusive advising (IA)	Mandatory meeting with an academic advisor for registration, scheduling, perceived at-risk behavior by faculty/staff, etc.
Pathways to a credential/degree (GPCD)	The formal process established by the community college that leads to the completion of a degree or credential.
Student Success (STSS)	The definition is given by NCCCS or some other source that indicates that the student has met a particular goal or benchmark.
Support (SPRT)	A person, place, or other entity that helps the student navigate their educational journey
Targeted interventions (TARIN)	A person, place, or entity that steps in at critical points in the student's journey when there is perceived or actual difficulty.

I also used open coding to include those codes that emerged during the coding process. Open coding allowed for the discovery of themes or concepts that may provide greater insight into the adult learner experience. The codes that emerged also reflected the participant's views (Creswell, 2012).

Data Analysis Process

The data from this study was guided by Baptiste's (2001) four phases of data analysis. The first phase, defining the analysis, requires the researcher to define the goals of the analysis, determine what is appropriate and how best to capture, record, and convey the information (Baptiste 2001). Not only does analysis begin immediately after each data collection activity, i.e., interview transcription, document review notes, but it is continuous throughout the entire

research study (Baptiste 2001). This also means paying close attention to one's positionality throughout the entire research process, as well as an awareness of one's philosophical assumptions (Baptiste 2001). As part of the first cycle of analysis, I drafted memos after the interview to capture my thoughts, reflections, and epiphanies during the data collection process. These memos were part of an overall research journal used to document the entire data collection and analysis, as well as all thoughts, codes, and related information s surrounding this study.

The second phase, classifying data, consists of tagging the data and then grouping the tagged data into categories (Baptiste 2001). This required reexamining the data for data that best supports and responds to the research questions presented in this study. I reviewed and clustered the initial data into pattern codes that represented commonalities, repetitive words, and phrases as well as instances in which there were different accounts or explanations among participants (Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, 2014). The pattern codes also served to ensure that there was alignment with data derived from the document analysis. I drafted memos to the research journal during this process to reflect on the coding process itself, as well as capturing my thoughts about emerging themes, unanswered questions, or frustrations with the process (Saldaña, 2016). This phase of analysis yielded the following themes.

Table 7. Themes and definitions

Theme	Definition
Adult learner definition of student success	Personal, self-defined goal
Adult learner descriptions of student success	Completion occurs at various points during a student lifecycle and is learner specific, learner constructed
Adult learner description of their experiences as a learner in a student success-rich culture	A desire to be viewed as a student, yet maintain a separate identity when perceived that adulthood is challenged
Adult learner experiences with institutional student success initiatives	Appreciation of available supports but concerns about intrusiveness and decision-making autonomy

The third phase of data analysis consisted of relating concepts to each other and then connecting them to existing theory or creating a broad, yet profound, connection of the experiences to a framework (Baptiste, 2001). According to Baptiste (2001), “the point of research is not to tell people what they already know. The point is to help our subjects and readers understand more broadly and deeply their experiences” (para. 31). During this phase, I conducted a comparison-contrast. I tested the parameters of the themes with the data derived from the document review of national, state, and institutional student success initiatives and definitions of student success. The analysis compared and contrasted the adult learner themes against each entity (national, state, and institution). Then each entity was compared and contrasted with another entity (national vs. state, state vs. institution, national vs. institution). Additionally, the analysis consisted of a comparison/contrast of the adult learner themes and the above-referenced entities with existing adult learner conceptualization in the literature. The results of this phase showed the analysis of the four entities for an understanding of the contextual data gathered.

Table 8. Alignment of student success definitions, descriptions, driving force, and actions.

	Adult learner	Institutional	State System	National
Definition of student success	Completion of a goal that is personal to the adult learner	Graduation, which includes successful completion and progress to graduation (Research Site, 2018).	Completion of a degree or credential meets state priorities for higher education goals, economic indicators, and workforce development	Completion of a degree or credential that are data derived from learning outcomes, graduation rates, and labor market outcomes
Description of student success	Success occurs at various points in the student life cycle.	Balance institutional and state priorities vs. success during the student life cycle	Completion of degree/credential or transfer by ensuring that students remain on their path from year 1 to year 2	Completion of degree/credential or transfer

Table 8 (continued).

Drivers of success	Student with input from personal/family relationships;	Institution with some student input	Institution-based on state priorities	Institution adoption and implementation
Actions that promote student success	Specific, intrinsic motivation that is unique to the student while navigating challenges and barriers	Student success and transfer courses, faculty and staff support, and mandatory advising.	Information regarding pathways that lead to completion with unnecessary detours while proving targeted support	Pathways that lead from entry to completion focusing on learning outcomes and targeted supports

In the final phase, I compiled all connections, concepts, and codes into a matrix that presents the data in a meaningful way (Baptiste 2001). The final phase consisted of a comparison-contrast among the adult learner and an overarching ‘institutional’ category. This analysis connected the categories to the data, conceptual framework, research questions, and purpose statement in a clear, logical manner that all readers can understand, and that reflected my audit trail in my researcher journal. The analysis condensed the results into findings, which express six adult learner perceptions of student success juxtaposed against institutional perceptions of student success

Table 9. Adult learner perceptions of student success juxtaposed against institutional perceptions.

Student Success	Adult learner	Institution
Who defines?	Student verbalizes with input from personal relationships and admission/academic advising,	Institution or state systems office design influenced based on national initiatives, best practices, and research.
Overall meaning of success	Completion of a self-defined, personal goal where the degree/credential is a secondary or concurrent goal.	Completion of a degree or credential for all students and a learner’s personal goal is secondary unless those in direct contact have an interest.

Table 9 (continued).

Application of definition	Broadly defined but applied narrowly	Narrowly defined but applied broadly
Motivation for student success	Completion of a degree/credential is secondary/concurrent to a higher intrinsic purpose. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attain a goal • Find one’s life purpose • Satisfy an emotional need • Self-improvement • Improve family life • Life transition 	Completion of a degree/credential is a primary extrinsic purpose: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase of individuals with a degree/credential. • Improved employment and career options, • Labor market outcomes
Challenges in achieving student success.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access to information about timing, relevance, and readiness of programs and pathways • Work/life balance • Relevant information to make informed decisions based on personal/situational goals • Avoid overreaction to a perceived loss of adult learner identity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clear information and pathways, which lead to completion without unnecessary detours. • Targeted interventions and supports that help students stay on their path to completion. • Create an environment that promotes equity, especially for underrepresented populations
Influence of the student success definition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ignore mandates/supports if perceived as a threat or out of alignment with personal goals • Initiatives viewed as intrusive, or a distraction is tuned out • Minimalization of autonomy and decision making creates tension with adult identity • Increased clarity and resources on guided pathways and increased offerings of select success supports 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creation of clear and measurable student success requirements. • Scaled-up educational experience that is outcome-based • Focus on logistics and planning of the broader student experience

Issues of Rigor

Rigor asks the researcher to assess and evaluate the overall validity and quality of the research design (Creswell, 2012). At its core, validity asks whether or not the information is truthful. The traditional view of validity describes four components. Internal validity explains how the researcher findings match reality. External validity asks if the research transfers to other contexts. Reliability considers whether the process used in the research design is consistent. Finally, objectivity determines if the study is relatively free of bias and expressed in a neutral stance (Miles et al., 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Several authors have devised different perspectives and terminology to describe validity. These authors base validity on one's philosophical assumptions and worldviews (Merriam and Tisdell, 2010). For example, Lincoln and Guba (1985) used a naturalistic approach that connects credibility, trustworthiness, dependability, and conformity to define validity. Wolcott (1994) used understanding instead of validity because the latter does not serve as a guide to rigor in qualitative research. In the late 1990s to the 2000s, creditability, transferability, dependability, and conformity were the guiding markers for validity in qualitative research (Miles et al., 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Guba & Lincoln, 1981). Lichtman (2013) postured a return to the traditional notions of validity, viewing the process as a continuum that recognizes the role of the researcher, whose views are influenced by worldview, power, and politics. Patton (2015) provided various points of consideration based on the type of research form the scientific, constructivist, and critical paradigms.

For this study, I relied on the traditional view of validity and rigor. I relied on the following preconditions described by Baxter and Jack (2008), who reference Russell et al., (2005) view of validity in a case study research design.

Researchers using this method want to ensure enough detail is provided so that readers can assess the validity or credibility of the work. As a basic foundation to achieve this, novice researchers have a responsibility to ensure that: (a) the case study research question is clearly written, propositions (if appropriate to the case study type) are provided, and the question is substantiated; (b) case study design is appropriate for the research question; (c) purposeful sampling strategies appropriate for case study have been applied; (d) data are collected and managed systematically; and (e) the data are analyzed correctly (Baxter & Jack, 2008, p. 556).

Rigor uses different strategies in case study research (Creswell, 2012). Baxter and Jack (2008) indicated that

Case study research design principles lend themselves to including numerous strategies that promote data credibility or “truth value.” Triangulation of data sources, data types, or researchers is a primary strategy that can be used and would support the principle in case study research that the phenomena be viewed and explored from multiple perspectives (p. 556).

Triangulation was a critical tool used to ensure the rigor and validity and reliability of the data collected in this study. In using triangulation, the researcher relies on multiple resources and corroborating evidence (Creswell, 2012). To triangulate this study, I first ensured that I included my positionality in the final written version of the study, by including my biases, past experiences, and connections with the research topic that may impact the inquiry (Merriam, 2001). Second, I used member checking with the research participants regarding their views on the credibility of the findings in this study. This critical piece of the data analysis phase required that I allowed the participants to review the data analysis, interpretation, and conclusions and

determine their credibility (Creswell, 2012, Lincoln & Guba, 1985). It is that thick, rich description that is an essential part of the presentation of case study research (Merriam, 2001).

Limitations and Strengths of the Study

Limitations

One of the most significant limitations of this study is that I have not found empirical research that addresses adult learners experience in student success environment at community colleges. Although the literature has provided significant research and focused study of adult learners at community colleges and other postsecondary institutions, the adult learner and higher education literature are relatively silent on those experiences in the context of student success, which has led to a gap in the literature. Except for the conference proceedings by Barcinas et al. (2016), which presents adult learner perceptions within a community college environment that has embraced student success priorities, this research is uncharted territory. As of this writing, there are no studies that incorporate the adapted conceptual framework used in this study. There is no framework that studies adult learners as a stand-alone group within the context of student success. I have not found empirical research that applies the principles designed by CAEL and other groups who advocate for adult learners within a student success environment. The framework used in the study may require refinement as additional studies, and empirical research contribute to the conceptualization of adult learners within the student success environment. As a small study, there are limitations to how far that process can move. Tied to this limitation is the fact that I am a novice researcher who chose to conduct a study that some may describe as daunting and a bit ambitious.

This study is limited in scope - one community college with a small sample of participants. Despite efforts on my part and the institution to recruit participants, the high number

of part-time students may have hindered adult learner participation. This reinforces the need for more study using community colleges across geographic locations, size, and student population. The point at which the institution is in its design and implementation of student success initiatives can provide additional insight into how initial and ongoing efforts manifest and develop.

Strengths

To address this limitation, I relied on several strengths from my background. First, I have spent several years as a faculty member, department chair, and academic dean at several two-year institutions that serve adult learners. I am keenly aware of the adult learner demographic, needs, motivations, and barriers. I am comfortable navigating that academic environment. Second, I have spent the last two years working as a research team member researching adult learners within this context. I have presented on this issue at national conferences and have co-authored conference proceedings and am co-authoring journal articles on adult learners in community colleges and postsecondary settings. I am confident that my knowledge and experiences provide me with a solid foundation for embarking on this study.

Third, I believe that my experience as an attorney is useful to my conducting this research. In the same way an attorney designs a case strategy, a researcher must make decisions about the manner to proceed, often when there is little precedent, literature, or framework to support one's contentions. The researcher, much like an attorney, must rely on sound judgment, solid research, and the creation of an effective plan to provide the best outcome.

Similar to interviewing a client or deposing a witness, the research must establish trust, be genuine, and create an environment in which information can be obtained. Having the skills to lead, probe, and go deeper in questioning is essential for a researcher or an attorney. Both roles

must actively listen to what is said but are not said. Observation of nonverbal communication often speaks more than words can and provide deeper meaning.

The second strength of this study is that it is an opportunity to address a topic not yet explored within the literature. This research initiates a long-overdue conversation for research and practice regarding adult learners in all postsecondary environment where student success is the norm. The student success culture continues to evolve and grow as new initiatives and reforms take shape. And, these reforms have fundamentally changed how postsecondary institutions operate. As members of the research academy, we have an opportunity to include our expertise in the overall conversations regarding the establishment of policies that impact adult learners. This study is the overture to a new research stand that is overdue for exploration.

CHAPTER 4: ARTICLE #1**The unique perceptions of adult learners at a community college with a student success-rich culture****Abstract**

This study investigates how adult learners experience a student success-rich culture within a community college. As a qualitative case study, the data includes 14 semi-structured interviews with ten adult learners and four institutional-academic representatives, in addition to document analysis of national, state, and institutional student success initiatives and practices. The findings indicate that characteristics associated with an institutional student-success culture diminishes the visibility and mute the voice of the adult learners at this institution. The findings also indicate that the institutional framing of student success shapes uniform actions and policies, and there is less of a culture with a flexible approach to adult learner needs. Implications for this study call for additional focused study on the influence of a student success environment on adult learners, and the incorporation of Adult Learner Friendly Institution (ALFI) principles into a thriving student success environment.

Keywords: Adult learner, adult learner-friendly/focused, community colleges, student success, postsecondary education, age, intergenerational learning, persistence

Introduction

The purpose of this article is to contribute to a gap in the research literature regarding the experiences of postsecondary adult learners who attend community colleges with a robust student success environment or culture. For almost two decades, community colleges have increasingly embedded student success initiatives into the fabric of the campus environment and culture (Bailey, 2016). At the same time, the postsecondary adult learner research has not explicitly examined adult learner experiences within this evolving environment. This data from this study offers an opportunity to examine the assumption that student success supports and environments, generally speaking, are in alignment with adult learner needs, and to understand the influence that student success approaches may have on adult learner educational experiences.

Literature Review

Adult Learners and Community Colleges

A significant proportion of postsecondary adult learners choose to attend community colleges. For the 2017-2018 academic year, 39% of students ages 22 and older, and 10 percent of students over age 40 attended community colleges, which indicates nearly half of community college students, as defined by age, are adult learners (American Association of Community Colleges [AACC], 2019). Adult learners attend community colleges in large numbers because of their accessibility, flexibility, cost-effectiveness, the relevance of programs and courses as well as an environment that support an adult's life responsibilities (Kasworm, 2005; Mellow & Heelan, 2008). Community colleges are often the only postsecondary education option for adult learners who are location bound (Boggs, 2011). Community colleges also attract first-generation students, students who are swirling, restarting or lack preparation, and those who lack family and peer support in pursuing postsecondary education (Barcinas et al., 2016; Kasworm, 2014).

Adult Learner Community College Experience

Andragogy presumes that adult learners are self-directed, bring prior experiences, desire relevance, prefer applicable subjects, prefer problem-centered approaches, and exhibit a high degree of intrinsic motivation (Knowles, 1984, Merriam et al., 2012). The learning environment should present a physical and a psychological sense of “adulthood” where adults feel “accepted, supported, and respected with “a spirit of mutuality between teachers and students as joint inquirers” (Knowles, 1980, p. 47).

Tinto’s (1987)’s Interactionist Theory is designed to quantitatively predict persistence through a combination of variables, such as a student’s background, socioeconomic status, academic preparation, and a commitment to a goal with a student’s level of academic and social engagement with an institution (Chaves, 2006). The student and the institution continuously engage in both an educational and social context, where persistence “hinges on the construction of educational communities in colleges, programs, and classroom levels which integrate students into the ongoing social and intellectual life of the institution” (Tinto, 1987, p. 188). Tinto (1987) indicated that “engagement in the community of the classroom can be a gateway for subsequent student involvement in the academic and social communities of the college generally (p. 82).

Tinto’s (1987) model, while predictive of persistence, focuses on traditional students at four-year institutions, and does not include variables associated specifically with adult learners (Chaves, 2006). Building on previous persistence models, Bean and Metzner (1984) developed the Nontraditional Undergraduate Student Attrition Model, which theorizes that while social interaction is a factor, it has less influence on adult learner persistence. The model conceptualizes that attrition, intent to leave, student background, and environmental variables and the interactions among these variables holds more considerable significance on adult learner

persistence than the effect of academic and social integration (Oden, 2011). The interaction between the environment and academic variables shows that the environment is more important than the academic (Oden, 2011). Building upon Bean and Metzner, additional empirical research has held that if the academic and environmental factors are positive, an adult learner will persist; when both are negative, they will not (Burns & Durojaiye, 2017; Crawford-Sorey & Duggan, 2008). When academics are positive, but the environment is negative, the adult learner will not be as persistent. Conversely, if the environment is positive, but the academics are negative, the adult learner will be more likely to persist because support is in place to guide completion (Burns & Durojaiye, 2017; Crawford-Sorey & Duggan, 2008).

The interaction between the academic and psychological variables indicates that when both are positive, the adult learner will persist; when both are negative, persistence does not reliably occur (Burns & Durojaiye, 2017). When an adult learner experiences certain types of stress or barriers, an adult learner will not persist even with a high GPA (Burns & Durojaiye, 2017). Conversely, poor academic performance does not necessarily impact persistence if the adult learner feels supported (Capps, 2012; Garner, 2019). An adult learner with high academic performance persists if the institution provided positive support (Capps, 2012; Garner, 2019). The Bean and Metzner (1985) model provides valuable quantitative data about adult learner persistence and points toward the development of appropriate strategies.

Clark (2012) used a qualitative lens to examine adult learner persistence at a community college. Clark (2012) built upon Schlossberg's (1989) Theory of Marginality and Mattering and Rendon's (1994) Theory of Validation to explore adult learners' self-perceptions of factors that positively impact their persistence. Small focus groups of adult learners described a sense of belonging, through shared experiences with other adult learners, which aided in their overall

persistence (Clark, 2012; Tinto, 1987). Clark (2012) concluded that an adult learner is likely to persist when faculty and staff demonstrate that the adult learner's presence and contributions mattered, which is consistent with Schlossberg's (1989) theory. Conversely, when an adult learner perceives their identity as adult learners do not matter to faculty and staff, this negatively influences an adult learner's desire to engage with the learning environment, and ultimately it impedes success (Chaves, 2006; Clark, 2012). Adult learners feel validated when faculty and staff take affirmative steps to ensure a learning environment in which an adult learner visualizes their value and self-worth, which is consistent with Rendon's (1994) theory (Chaves, 2006; Clark, 2012). Although persistence models provide predictive variables and holistic factors that positively and negatively attribute to adult learner persistence, Erisman and Steele (2015) indicate that many, if not most, postsecondary institutions do not have explicit policies or practices in place that specifically target adult learners. The policies and practices that are in place can contribute to adult learner barriers that complicate success and completion (Erisman and Steele, 2015).

The Move toward Student Success at Community Colleges

The mission of open access and equity at community colleges began in earnest during the post-World War II era and the establishment of the GI. Bill (Cohen et al., 2013). This mission provided access to higher education for millions of individuals excluded from participating in postsecondary education (Cohen et al., 2013). Over time, the mission expanded to include continuing education, developmental education, vocational training, and serving their communities (Brint & Karabel, 1989).

For the past two decades, a dramatic shift in community colleges has redefined their commitment to access and equity to support underrepresented populations, align programs with

21st-century careers, and increase institutional transparency (Bailey, 2016). Community college completion rates depicted “a failure for those students to achieve their goals and represents a loss of potential earning power and economic growth and activity for the economy as a whole,” which was the root cause of this shift (Bailey, 2016, p. 11). This shift and redefinition, referred to throughout this article as *student success*, is characterized by a data-driven culture of success that is measured and evidenced by degree or credential completion rates, learning outcomes, and labor market outcomes (Bailey et al., 2005; McClenney, 2013; Wyner, 2014). To that end, national initiatives such as *Achieving the Dream*, *Completion by Design*, and *Guided Pathways* have influenced the development and implementation of a success-rich campus environment at community colleges. These initiatives address institutional barriers that interfere with a student’s completion, such as redefined and streamlined programs and pathways, ineffective advising/support, unreliable or irrelevant information, guiding more effective decision-making on the part of the student, while also addressing institutional effectiveness and accountability (Bailey, 2016; McClenney, 2013).

There is general agreement that community colleges are diverse environments that attract students from various demographic groups who have different academic, financial, and personal challenges, as well as educational goals. This widely diverse environment has a significant influence on an institution’s performance, completion, and success metrics (Bailey et al., 2005). Today, student success, literally and figuratively, is an integral part of the mission and culture at many community colleges. It dominates many national professional association dialogues and priorities, with well-publicized examples of flourishing student success environment (The Aspen Institute, 2019).

Guiding Principles for an Optimal Adult Learner Environment

Studies by Chickering and Gamson (1987) and Mancuso (2000) indicate that institutions must create an overall system of beliefs, values, and ethos in which leadership, faculty, and staff operate, think, and engage with adult learners in mind. Mancuso (2000) reflected that "Adult learner-centered institutions have a culture in which flexibility, individuation, and adult-centered learning drive institutional practice" (p. 252). Institutions should move from a traditional learner, student-first approach to an integrated adult-centered environment, to meet the needs of adult learners (Mancuso, 2000).

The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning's (CAEL) (1999) benchmarking study identified best practices used by colleges and universities that effectively focused adult learners. *An Adult Learner Focused* institution demonstrated "a culture in which adult-centered learning, sensitivity to learners' needs, flexibility, and communication drive institutional practice" (CAEL, 1999, p. 4). The findings further defined how each element reflects an institution's mission, decision-making, admissions practices, educational planning, faculty roles, teaching and learning practices, curriculum design and instructional delivery, student services, adjunct faculty, information technology, and affordability (CAEL, 1999).

This benchmarking study is the foundation for CAEL's (2020) *Ten Principles for Effectively Serving Adult Learners*. These principles provide institutions with a consistent and understandable framework that conceptualizes adult learner experiences, institutional response to adult learner needs, and adult learner success and completion. (CAEL, 2020). The framework differentiates what CAEL calls *Adult Learning Focused Institutions (ALFI)* from current institutional efforts (Erisman and Steele, 2015). Initiatives such as CAEL's (2018) *Adult Learner 360* use the framework to help institutions assess whether their environment qualifies as an AFLI

and offers tools and best practices to implement ALFI principles. However, few institutions engage in this benchmarking, even those who self-define as welcoming to adult learners (Erisman and Steele, 2015). Erisman and Steele (2015), suggest there is a lack of buy-in by institutional leadership, mainly due to a lack of awareness or perceived difficulties in implementation. In turn, a lack of knowledge and professional development on ALFI principles for faculty and staff hinders the ability to effectuate a change in institutional culture (Erisman and Steele, 2015).

Adult Learners within Student Success Context

Although postsecondary institutions have improved in their recognition of the various motivations, learning styles, and barriers that impact adult learner persistence, misunderstanding of the depth of the factors and a misplaced focus remain in policies and practice (CAEL, 2018). Institutions must make a conscious effort to understand the nature, complexities, and factors that impact adult learner persistence and completion (Chaves, 2006; Pusser et al., 2007). The student success environment assumes that wrap-around strategies will lead to success and completion for all students because the strategies approach students equally and applied in an equitable manner (Bragg & Durham, 2012). However, this contention presumes that all students, including adult learners, seek completion of a degree or credential, and learn at the same pace and in the same manner, which is not often true of adult learners. These student success strategies enmesh adult learners with other learners without conscious regard for their unique and distinct motivation, challenges, and learning styles.

At present, no empirical or best practices framework addresses adult learner experiences within an ongoing student success culture. Quantitative persistence models such as Bean and Metzner (1985) do not address adult learners as specifically nested within student success

cultures. Qualitative frameworks that investigate an adult learner-focused or adult learner-friendly environment and culture have not yet analyzed adult learner experiences within the context of a student success-rich climate. For this study, the analysis of adult learner experiences utilized a broad cross-referenced lens of student success practices as designed, defined, and shared at national, state, and institutional levels. Therefore, the research question for this study addresses how adult learners describe their experiences at and concerning a community college with an established and thriving student success environment.

Methodology

This instrumental case study focused on investigating and understanding the unique experiences of adult learner participation and engagement with campus-wide student success initiatives, activities, and supports at a community college with an ongoing and thriving student success culture and environment (Tellis, 1979b). An instrumental case study is appropriate when the researcher seeks to understand more than just the case or something that is not obvious to the researcher as an observer (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Stake, 1995; Tellis, 1979a). It can serve to refine a theory or provide insight into an issue or phenomenon (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Stake, 1995). Given the slender literature dedicated to this specific topic, an instrumental case study is an opportunity to lay a foundation for future studies by providing insight and analysis of adult learner experiences within the context of a community college immersed in a student success environment (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Stake, 1995).

Site Selection

The site screening process sought a community college that, a) self-identified as ‘student success’ focused; b) had evidence of student success initiatives, policies and practices (consistent

with state and national definitions); and, c) immersed in student success goals and methods for a minimum of three years.

Southeastern Community College (SCC) is a medium-sized community college that serves two rural counties in a southeastern state. SCC was an ‘early adopter’ and participated in several funded national student success initiatives and presented an engaged culture based on its alignment with an explicit definition of student success, and a distinct ongoing student success-focused climate and environment (Bailey, 2016, McClenney, 2013). SCC implemented institutional strategies such as intrusive advising, mandatory student success courses, and guided pathways to completion.

SCC’s demographics included a significant number of part-time students and an average student age of 24. The average age somewhat skewed the impression that adult learners are a significant part of the SCC student body when in actuality, their presence was prevalent. Adult learners, students over the age of 25, represent 38% of enrollment. Students under the age of 24 represented 64% of enrollment (SCC, 2018). When disaggregated, the enrollment at SSC presented a lower average age because of students under age 24 consisted of traditional-age learners, 18-24 years of age, and early college/career learners who were under age 18. Lastly, SCC has 170 programs with an almost even distribution of enrollment between curriculum and continuing education divisions.

Data Collection

Data collection consisted of participant interviews and document analysis. Adult learner participants were selected using purposeful sampling. The researcher sought individuals who were at least 24 years old and also met one of the following criteria: (1) married, (2) have legal dependents (example: children), (3) a veteran student, or (4) have at least a 3-year interruption

between earning a high school diploma or GED. The definition of adult learner as described by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) was the basis for the sample criteria for adult learner participants (Horn and Carrol, 1996). Snowball sampling identified academic representatives as study participants whose professional practice evolved around the nuances of a student success agenda, had experience with and responsibility for the student success initiatives at SCC, and regularly engaged with students. The selected academic representatives had 10 to 24 years of experience as higher education professionals. In total, fourteen participants, ten adult learners, and four academic representatives participated in the research interviews.

Interviews were semi-structured and averaged approximately one hour in length. The interview style included interviewer participation in instances that called for elaboration, clarification, or to elicit more information from the participant (Seidman, 2013). The researcher developed interview protocols based on cross-referencing student success and adult learner literature. The researcher concentrated on participant discussions of what student success meant to them, and how they perceived the college's efforts in maintaining a student success culture. Further, interviews included discussion of participant awareness, knowledge, and experience with various campus student success initiatives. Adult learners shared their ideas of what it means to be an adult learner and how their experiences as an adult learner influenced their overall student experience. Adult learner participants shared their descriptions of student success definitions, terms, and the context of their experiences within that lens. Academic representatives' interviews concentrated on the participant's observations and conceptualizations of student success philosophies and operations within the context of a community college setting. Academic representatives described and discuss nuances of how student success is institutionally, individually, and student defined and implemented. They discussed their framing

of a ‘student success environment.’ They also shared their beliefs regarding student perceptions of campus student success initiatives. Additionally, the academic representatives responded to questions about how they define, describe, and perceive adult learners and the distinctiveness of adult learner experiences.

Each participant received a verbatim transcription of their interview and had the opportunity to comment, elaborate, or make corrections to their comments. All participants indicated their comments were an accurate representation of the thoughts and comments; therefore, the interview transcripts remained unchanged (Creswell, 2012; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Baxter & Jack, 2008).

Document collection and analysis served as a strategy to create an overall understanding of student success environments. The first cycle of analysis consisted of online and printed documents related to SCC’s demographics to build a perspective of the student population, culture, and climate. The second cycle consisted of the analysis of online and print documents that detailed policies, practices, and data related to the relationship between SCC’s demographic population and the spectrum of national, Southeastern state, and SCC student success initiatives. Specifically, documents included public documents such as white papers, executive reports, implementation guides, and evaluative or project-based reports that described the inception, design, examples of, and evolution of student success initiatives.

Data Analysis

The first phase of data analysis consisted of a thorough reading and manual coding, tagging, and labeling of a priori codes based on the conceptual student success and adult learner principles. Open coding identified concepts that emerged outside of the student success and adult learner a priori categories. Second, the researcher devised pattern codes during the second coding

cycle, which revealed similar and repetitive words, phrases, and concepts, as well as comments and explanations that differed among participants (Miles et al., 2014). Lastly, the researcher conducted a comparison-contrast and cross-referencing analysis and examination among emergent themes, the analyzed document data derived from national, state priorities, and institutional definitions of student success and related student success initiatives. The analysis folded an overarching *Institution* category, into a category that represented existing conceptualizations of adult learners in the literature. In the final phase of data analysis, the researcher conducted three sub-phases of analysis. For each phase, adult learner themes were disaggregated and compared and contrasted with each specific entity, institution and student success, and adult learner literature category and then re-analyzed from a holistic or integrated perspective.

Finding #1: Community colleges, college professionals, and adult learners perceive the definition of student success in diverse, and at times divergent ways.

Community colleges measure student success with data-driven evidence of completion of a degree or credential. Institutions use this data to meet mandates for completion, labor market outcomes, as well as performance funding. SCC's definition of student success *seeks to increase a student's successful course completion, progress toward graduation, and graduation, which also includes interventions and support services to help at-risk students maintain a path to success* [Italics added] (SCC, 2018). Academic Representative #1 described how it is a challenge to measure student success with a diverse population of learners with different reasons for enrollment.

We're measured as being successful as a community college at the state level. We have performance measures where the students, especially in transfer, if they transfer to a

university, or how many classes they take, or if they get a credential. We have a large population of older students who will come and take pottery classes. Well, because of the rules at the state level, I have to keep signing off for these students to take that class, because after they repeat the same class four times, we don't get to earn FTEs for this student. But they're just here for the joy of taking it. They prefer to take this curriculum class with our instructor than a con-ed class, which would be more suited, really, for what their desire, than that con-ed class. [And] some of our students, they come out of high school, and they've got the goal of getting some foundation classes, and then moving on to the university. We're almost, on some levels, seen as not meeting—that student wasn't successful because they left us without a credential.

The adult learner participants in this study defined success as meeting their goals for their betterment or benefiting their careers before their enrollment at SCC. Thus, the adult learner participants reconciled or integrated their perception of success with any SSC student success definitions. Coley, a retired and disabled military veteran, used his 9/11 education benefits to pursue lifelong learning for his benefit.

After being retired from the military, I was able to use my 9/11 GI bill [educational benefit]. These [degrees] are just for me. It's knowledge. It was interest. I was able to take, with general education especially, a lot of political sciences, histories, biologies, lots of stuff that I had been interested in or that I hadn't been able to do before.

Deyannia, a stay at home mom for five years, wanted to return to the workforce but with a different career focus that would bring her personal fulfillment.

When I tried to look for a job, they kept asking me about my last five years of experience. And since I was home, everyone was telling me you have no experience. I have a

bachelor's degree from my home country, but at that time I was young, and I didn't know what I wanted to study...so now I really want to do something I enjoy, and I love kids...so that's why I got into early childhood education.

Edwin described his goal was to complete his community college degree and transfer to a university to earn a teaching degree. However, his desire to complete a degree rested in his reasons and self-defined goal for attending a community college.

I was in the job force for 15 years. I worked in a restaurant in the kitchen. It just wasn't for me anymore. I always excelled at math. I actually got a job in school last year and helped tutor and found that I really enjoyed working with the kids and teaching them math. So, that really helped me decide what I wanted to do. It was cheaper for me to start at the community college and transfer than it is to go straight to a university. *Student success ultimately is about achieving your personal goal scholastically and for your career.* [Emphasis added]

There is an agreement among adult learner participants and academic representatives that the definition of student success meant the completion of a goal. However, the way that goal was measured differed, which confounded the meaning of success, depending upon positionality. Adult learner participants described their goal as both intrinsic and extrinsic and had wider variation in the extrinsic goals such as partial credentials, short term credentials, or explicit stop and start intentions. While recognition of degree completion is an extrinsic goal, there is also a deeper intrinsic motivation that has merit and isn't solely a strategy leading towards any focus on the extrinsic.

For adult learners in general, open access is what defines community colleges, and the reach of open access goes beyond initial enrollment to include flexibility, ease of making

changes in their study pace, or goals and feeling welcomed as ‘mainstream’ as a learner that doesn’t fit one prescribed norm. It is the reason they choose to enroll. Open access allowed the adult learner participants to pursue their goals, and the community college’s commitment to open access made wide variations of success possible for the adult learner participants. On the other hand, the community college site, and community colleges, in general, have narrowed this framing and view completion extrinsically and is a function of student success. There was a commitment to access and equity within student success environment at SCC, which was to ensure access and equity for all students, especially those from underrepresented populations. There are various initiatives and support services at community colleges, including SCC, such as mentoring and advising for first-generation and students of color help bridge the achievement gap for vulnerable populations, which have demonstrated some successful outcomes. Yet, for community colleges, including SCC, completion on a specific timetable remains the extrinsic motivation. The academic representatives at SCC struggled with how to reconcile an adult learner’s view of student success with SCC’s current interpretation of student success.

Influence of Student Success Definitions

In a student success-rich culture, there is a dynamic as to who defines or shapes an adult learner’s student success. Many community college students know what their goal is when they enroll; however, many do not. Definitions of student success intend to help undecided students make informed decisions about their goals. For those students who are sure of their goal, the student success definition gives them a roadmap to ensure sound decision making. Academic Representative #1 described how streamlined programs and the academic professional’s role in decision-making helps students be successful.

[The] definition of success... really falls in line with all of the missions of the Guided Pathways project. [SSC] jumped in to be part of the first cohort, so that we can meet the needs of our students and help them to be successful. Those who come and they—"Here's what I want to do." I know what you're saying. I know it would be beneficial to get the two-year degree at [SSC], but here's what I come to do." We met that student's goal. But so many of the students come to community college because they don't know what their goals are. So, that's part of our goal, also, is to help students find what they want to do. Because sometimes, even if they come with that goal in mind, or think that they know what they want to do, that's not it once they take those first classes. So, we help them to make those informed decisions. We're trying to narrow our choices and pathways now so that they don't have so many decisions to make along the way. We're trying to make those decisions for them.

The adult learner participants expressed a desire to maintain their standing and sensibility as definers of their success once they begin their studies within a student success culture. They did not wish SCC to claim or define their ownership of 'what is success,' even when there is obvious alignment between their goals and SCC's defined goals for student success. The adult learner participants wanted SCC professionals, advisors, faculty, and others with whom they have direct contact, to more overtly and frequently recognize their desire to decide their own unique success goals. They wanted affirmation for their choices, without any withdrawal of encouragement or academic support as contingent upon SCC's student success definitions.

Milagros: I'm a new student who is an adult, and I was a stay at home mom. I don't have to be intimidated, and this this is my degree, not his degree. [My advisor] encourages me to make my plan, not just his plan.

The adult learner participants felt disaffirmed and marginalized in their ability to make autonomous decisions as an adult when they sought guidance about their goals.

Marie: She was not helpful at all. I had a list of questions and information, but I just remember I ended up leaving crying. I really want to be a writer, and I want to get a degree in English. But she looked at me and said, “It seems like that’s not something you should do.” It’s my decision to make my career choices.

The experiences of adult learner participants Milagros and Marie describe how flexibility and the affirmation of adult learners’ goals impact an adult learner’s relationship with community college professionals and view of success. When there are affirmations and flexibility with their goal and recognition and support of that goal, Milagros described feeling confident, valued, and a sense of belonging at SCC. When there was a lack of support or marginalization of Marie’s goal and a push by SCC professionals to substitute or usurp Marie’s ownership of decision making, Marie described feeling frustrated and her ability ‘to adult’ questioned. In those instances, the data suggests that an adult learner will turn their focus inward, which can diminish their drive to succeed.

The community college professionals who are in direct contact with adult learners grappled with wanting to recognize and support an adult learner’s desire to set their own goals. This occurred even in the application of SCC’s definitions and practices that define what it means to be successful as a community college student. Academic Representative #1 described how sometimes the adult learner’s goal is minimalized and replaced by SCC’s goal for student success.

I think we have student success when the student meets their goal. That doesn’t always match up with we’re measuring as being successful at a community college. *Sometimes*

student success, they might get their goal, but it wasn't their goal to begin with. On some levels, we are seen as the student is not successful. We have students who leave without completing a credential, but that was their goal. I thought we were successful with the student if they met their personal goal—[Emphasis added].

This dynamic illustrates challenges with how to define and shape student success in an environment with a diverse population of learners with different goals and motivations. The adult learner participants felt equity and open-access promoted student success with SCC's role to facilitate and serve them on an individual basis and holistic manner. In some cases, the adult learner participants found solace in SSC professionals who recognized that they were not traditional age or early college students and had their own unique positionality. At the study site, the overall balance was at risk or off-balance in terms of either the academic representatives' professional responsibility to SCC, to adult learners, or both. Community college professionals may need to identify ways to work within the system to address student success mandates while simultaneously honoring an adult learner's goals and maintaining a role as supporter and guide.

Finding #2: Community colleges' streamlined operations that ensure success for all students minimize the visibility of the adult learner audience

Full-time and Part-time Pathways to Completion

The academic representatives discussed the various efforts to streamline programs and courses into pathways that meet the *Guided Pathways* plan for student success. The concept is to change myriad prior programs into calibrated roadmaps. These roadmaps consist of specific course requirements and sequences that provide all learners with the same journey from start to completion (Community College Research Center & American Association of Community Colleges Pathways Project, 2016). This initiative was a significant overhaul and challenge for

community college professionals. Still, as Academic Representative #1 explained, it was worth the effort as she believed that students would benefit from the ability to make informed decisions about their education and ensure that students would stay on track to completing their program.

There's so many things that happened [here]. In Fall 2014, there was a new version of the Comprehensive Articulation Agreement. In the Arts and Sciences division, it was very painful on [the] associate dean, and with the dean, and for the faculty to go through, but we trimmed out over 100 classes in this division, and we streamlined very closely so that we match what the curriculum standard is. So, to help the students not lose credit when they went to the university, to make sure they were on a good path, and to streamline their choices so that they were making better choices. We're trying to narrow our choices and pathways now so that they don't have so many decisions to make along the way.

A few of the adult learner participants found the guided pathways helpful in planning their education. They liked the idea of a visual timeline and a 'guarantee' of sorts that the pathways strategically poised them for completion. Edwin, Deyannia, Kay, and Kristy discussed that their ultimate goal was to transfer to a four-year institution. They believed that a clear path and easy path to complete their two-year degree meant that they were not losing daylight because they were older. For the participants who were part-time adult learners, it was not as simple. They wanted to engage in a college environment just as thoroughly as their full-time peers. Dario, a part-time student, talked about the wait for credits to build so that he can transfer to a university.

I think the hardest thing is just the time, waiting to see those credits accumulate and build towards something, take it somewhere else. Then it could be a little more immersive if I was a full-time student. So, it's limiting in a sense because I can't take any classes with

some other people. [I'm] definitely part-time. I won't get that transfer degree or regular degree as soon as some of the other people. I have to take it as I can. Because if I overload myself and I'm overstressed, then I won't be able to.

In general, the part-time adult learners in the study were not pleased with the message that part-time pathways were outside of a recommended pathway. They felt a sense of pressure associated with it, even though SCC's reputation for flexibility was a part of what drew them there to study. In that vein, the environment creates a heightened sense of restlessness based on always being labeled or judged as 'behind' the recommended pathway translating to being viewed as less successful. For part-time adult learner participants like Dario, the perceived stigma was not a motivating catalyst to speed up. Conversely, it detracted from his focus and commitment. Dario perceived that his peers and the college professionals at SCC did not value the challenges that he faced as a part-time student or have confidence in his part-time performance.

Student Success Courses

An integral part of the student success environment are courses designed and featured to help students acclimate to the college and have a successful college experience. SCC's student success course syllabus indicates that the purpose of the course is to provide information necessary for the development of clear academic and professional goals (Southeastern State Community College, 2019). Academic Representative #2 explained that the mandatory student success course helps students navigate the college, set goals, and, most importantly, familiarize themselves with the various support services available.

Our Student Success Courses gives them a lot of information upfront. Whether it's a GPA, or you're in the right program, knowing what the institution is requiring from you

as far as GPAs, knowing what courses that they want required from you. We really help them to know what track they want to pursue instead of taking on necessary courses that they don't need to make them stay here longer. We cover all of our college resources in both explaining the importance of utilizing those resources, talking about grit, talking about being persistent, and how you have to make those decisions to get help if you see that you need it. They have that information to make a good, informed decision. So, they may not have a barrier now, but down the road, they may come across a barrier that might prohibit them from being successful.

Only a few of the adult learner participants took the course, as it was only made mandatory in summer 2018 for all incoming students. The adult learner participants who took the course agreed with SCC professionals that overall, they found the student success course helpful. Kristy explained how her initial impression of the course changed.

I'm taking the SS class right now that helps you with your transfer, and I realized that to be successful, you have to have the information you need and the knowledge. Because if not, you might get through and think now I can transfer, and there's three or four more classes that they require that you didn't know about. I thought it was going to be just one of those boring classes that I have to take, I'm required to take, but it actually was helpful.

Kristy's feelings about the student success course were not uncommon among adult learners.

Academic Representative #2 explained that adult learners benefit from the information and support that is part of the student success course.

[A lot] of the adult learners that are in [the] transfer programs, at the very beginning, a lot of them feel like they know everything, that they're not sure why they have to take the course, "What is the course going to teach me?" This is for the adult learners, you know,

which is not the majority of them. But the adult learners, a lot of them feel like they know what they want to do. But it's funny to see the shift at the end of the semester when... a lot of them will say, "At first, I thought this class might be a waste of time, but I realized how much I have learned and didn't know. I'm so glad that I took this class."

Deyannia was happy to learn that the course would be required because she felt adult learners would benefit from receiving information at the beginning rather than later.

I just finished it [student success course] this semester before graduation and really for me was not helpful because everything they teach in that class I already knew. It teaches you how working on Blackboard, all of the stuff that you need when you just come to the college and when you are a new student. Especially when you are an adult learner, then you have all the information. My opinion is that it is a class to take in the first semester before anything else

On the other hand, many of the adult learner participants also discussed how it would be valuable significant to have the opportunity for a stand-alone, adult learner-focused student success course or a separate adult learner-focused orientation.

Edwin: I know that they have freshmen seminars and stuff like that but have one of those—something for adult learners. Just a quick blurb of "We understand that you have full lives already, but we are here to help, etc.", and basically tell you everything. "We're here to help. Reach out to us. We understand how it is" ... We know you work 40+ hours a week and are juggling family life outside of that, but you want to go back to school, carve out this hour and talk to us. I would have. It's [also] a good resource for potential study groups because, no offense to them, but I won't want to sit down with five 18 year-olds and go do a study group.

Renee: The only thing that I would recommend... but would be for students that are not coming straight from high school into college, even if they're 20 years old and they've been out of high school for two years, I would recommend they do a[n]...orientation. It [would teach] about the library and what's all in college. They would see that there's other adult students coming with them because like that first day. I didn't want to come because I thought God, I'm going to be the oldest one besides the teacher, and I might be older than her. But it would make them feel more comfortable because they know there's other people there their age or older.

The adult learner participants saw value in student success courses as offered. However, Edwin, Renee, and other adult learner participants further expressed a desire for a 'stand-alone' course or incorporation of topics that focused on subjects and explained in ways that were explicitly tailored to adult learner needs. Topics for a focused 'adult' student success course would address issues that traditional-age learners do not typically experience. It would include strategies that adopt adult-focused pedagogical approaches and offer refreshers such as the use of technology. The course would directly relate the learning environment to adult intrinsic motivations and concerns and offer suggestions for communicating with faculty and advisors about adult learner needs. Participants also requested more time spent on specific strategies that address balancing commitments to education and life and work responsibilities and navigate situations where there is a conflict between those commitments.

Even with busy schedules, the adult learner participants wanted an opportunity to reflect on the significance and deep meaning of their return to school as it connects to career and goal planning, and to build coping skills associated with a significant adult life transition. They wanted recognition woven into the content about how their student status impacted loved ones as

well as themselves. They perceived these as success strategies because they could not be successful in their role as adult learners if they were not able to sustain and affirm their adult lives and responsibilities at the same time. Finally, the suggested course would symbolize that SCC and other community colleges recognized adult learner visibility and contribution to the community college environment.

Conversely, the academic representatives perceived that the information provided in the student success courses uniformly benefited all students. The student success course exposes all students to Learning Management Software (LMS), student email, and the college's web-advisor platform. The student success course addresses time management, academic and career goal setting, and career and transfer options (Southeast State Community College, 2019). In their view, navigation of the college environment, successful study skills, and career and goal planning had a universal application, and students could adjust and tailor the message to meet their specific needs or circumstances. The academic representatives were not confident that they could navigate the college structures to offer specialized adult learner sessions. Academic Representatives #1 raised concerns that logistical and other challenges were already difficult with the current version of the student success course.

We've got to look at it logistically of, if we require [the student success course] the first semester, do we have enough instructors who could teach it? And then what do those instructors do the second semester? Because we don't have as many new students in the spring and balancing it out as we try to definitely get it in [the student's] first year.

Discussion

This study addresses how adult learners uniquely experience an environment at a community college with a student success-rich culture. Community college personnel have made

an incredible effort to transform their colleges to a student success environment and to be intentional in the use of well-thought supports to leverage student completion. While it is a classic dilemma that adult learners have historically been ‘out of sync’ with higher education environments, community colleges have traditionally been a welcoming place. Community colleges offer flexibility, a recognition that ‘one size does not fit all’ and an environment that extends appreciation and consideration for adult students’ unique needs and challenges. The findings indicate that although the research study site tried to balance well-intended efforts that provide access, equity, success, and completion for all students, there is an unintended consequence as the adult learner audience is lost or muted. This unintended consequence places institutions, community college professionals, and adult learners in an unspoken dynamic of tension over the definition of student success and how student success divergent definitions influence the environment for adult learners. Arguably, the question of how adult learners influence the student success environment and whether their presence potentially adds value to other students is an essential factor that did not surface during this study.

The findings from this study suggest that adult learners struggle with how to reconcile the student success environment with their expectations of community colleges as more purely open access and flexible. The adult learner participants in the study described student success in broad terms that a personal goal, professional goal, life transition, personal benefit, family benefit, or self-improvement integrate holistically. At the same time, the adult learner participants in this study described frustration in asserting their autonomy and well-earned independence.

The adult learner participants in this study clearly appreciated the community college professionals' efforts to provide a supportive environment and were aware of student success language, initiatives, and climate. The relationship between adult learners and community

college professionals has always thrived on high quality and open communication that recognizes an adult learner's needs (CAEL, 1999). In this case, there is an implicit message that positive support is relative to an adult learner's assimilation into the student success culture. The adult learner participants felt that the student success environment came at a high cost -- the loss of their identity, uniqueness, and visibility, and a reduction in their ability to advocate for their needs. This is an important consideration for future research and best practice – assuming that community colleges desire to meet the needs of a significant proportion of their students. How do adult learners cope and adapt to an environment that is assumed to be tailored to their needs yet is not designed for their successful completion?

CAEL and other organizations that advocate on behalf of postsecondary adult learners envision an enhanced version of student success that gives voice and recognition of adult learner visibility. And, these principles are designed to support adult learners' needs, flexibility, and communication preferences, and preferred learning style (CAEL, 1999, 2020; Erisman and Steele, 2015). It could be that the ascendance of the student success environment has somewhat eclipsed the concurrent advocacy for adult learners in professional associations and by academic professionals.

ALFI principles strive for an adult learner-centered environment in which there is a culture with an embedded belief system, and core values about adult learner philosophy and principles are paramount (CAEL, 1999, 2020). An adult learner-centered environment ensures effective communication between the adult learner and college professional, reliable information to make informed decisions related to academic and career goals, and a teaching and learning experience that is student-centered, collaborative, and relevant. Faculty and staff play a pivotal role as facilitators, mentors, and a person-to-person touchpoint for academic and support

services. Many community colleges assume that the inclusion of student success initiatives automatically meets the principles and core tenets of an ALFI, though perhaps it is viewed as an administrative advising and onboarding function rather than one of teaching and learning and faculty-student relationships. Student success and ALFI principles have the potential for tremendous alignment and synergy. In practice, however, it is not yet realized.

The adult learner participants favored the guided pathways as clear and structured plans gave them a roadmap that was a guarantee – these are the courses to take in this time frame, and you finish. The fixed paths allow adult learners to plan their work-life balance around their pathway with some assurance that nothing will drastically change. For part-time adult learner participants, fixed pathways were a constant reminder that ‘you can’t be successful if you can’t follow this path.’ In this study, it served as much as a barrier as it did as a support structure. A combination of fixed and flexible pathways serves a diverse student population (CAEL, 1999). Flexible options allow an adult learner, with the guidance of his or her advisor, to design a plan that takes into account an adult learner’s goals.

It is possible that institutional language that emphasizes inclusion and engagement for all students may use the same vocabulary but in practice have subtle differences in meaning from the time the models evolved until the present (Tinto, 1987; Bean and Metzner, 1985; Clark, 2012; Baily, 2005). Future research calls for focused study on how to reconcile the student success environment with ALFI principles. Small, focused studies related to ALFI principles used in specific settings such as academic advising and student support services, can also provide valuable insight into how ALFI principles manifest in an intergenerational environment.

Additional qualitative studies that seek to understand how adult learners experience student success can provide more in-depth analysis and holistic description. This study was

limited to one community college with a small sample. An additional study that accounts for a geographic area, size of community college, and community location can provide additional depth and context. More commitment and clarity is necessary to address adult learners as a large and important, and distinct audience within a postsecondary education environment where student success is the norm and continues to evolve. The evolution must not lose the adult learner's unique and distinctive voice.

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CHAPTER 5: ARTICLE #2**Adult learner experiences a student success-rich environment within a community college****context****Abstract**

This study investigates adult learners' perceptions of their experiences with a student success-rich culture at a community college. As a qualitative instrumental case study, the empirical data draws upon interviews with 14 participants, comprised of 10 adult learners and four institutional academic representatives, and document analysis of national, state, and institutional student success initiatives and practices. Study findings offer explanations of how adult learners experience community colleges' efforts to balance access and equity for diverse student populations with the implementation of initiatives that promote a thriving student success environment. In this study, the research site actively supports all students through specific success initiatives; albeit, the designation of *nontraditional* rather than *adult learner* diminishes the adult learner's presence and identity. The findings indicate a universal application of institutional student success practices and policies unintentionally create barriers that disrupt an adult learner's work-life balance and serves as a barrier to successful completion. Findings further indicated that adult learners experienced tipping points when they tried to balance institutional efforts that aid in their success and completion with their desire for recognition and inclusion of their adulthood and adult identity. The research suggests that heightened institutional awareness and proactive responsiveness to adult learner positionality within the community college population, as well as awareness of the subtle differences between persistence and student success, are essential elements in crafting policies that serve adult learners.

Keywords: Adult learner, community college, student success, motivation, decision making, persistence

Introduction

This article presents qualitative research findings regarding adult learner perceptions of studying within a community college student success laden environment. The existing empirical research offers essential foundational knowledge about adult postsecondary learners. However, there is little research that considers contexts such as student success-driven college cultures, which may specifically influence adult learner experiences (Osam et al., 2017). Although it is assumed, empirical data regarding whether or how student success initiatives agree with adult learner goals and correspond with the supports that adult learners need is sparse (Bohonos, 2014; Capps, 2014; Clark, 2012; Council for Adult and Experiential Learning, 2020). It is unknown if, or to what extent, adult learners are positioned within a student success environment and how or if their positionality influences adult learners as critical environmental drivers at their campus. These unknowns are significant, given that proportionally a majority community college students are adult learners (American Association of Community Colleges, 2019). As such, their uniqueness and learning experiences should be present in community college policies and practices as they frame and build student success cultures.

Literature Review

Challenges with Terminology

Kasworm's (2018) historical review explored the complexities with loose and inconsistent terminology and definitional boundaries in differentiating adult learners from younger learners within the adult and higher education literature. The lack of disaggregation for age does not account for developmental changes, maturity, and life responsibilities (Cummins, 2014; Kasworm, 2018). Further, as more traditional-age learners choose postsecondary options such as online universities that attract adult learners, *nontraditional learner* serves as an all-

inclusive term to define any student who does not follow the traditional learner path regardless of age (Kasworm, 2018). The use of the term *adult learner* is associated specifically with criteria such as age and adult responsibility, along with other factors such as an extended delay in enrollment, veteran status, financial independence, and dependents (Soares et al., 2017). These elements provide a foundational working definition of an adult learner. Additionally, factors such as learning style, barriers and challenges, and motivation for learning also play a significant role in adult learner identity (Bohonos, 2014; Capps, 2014; Clark, 2012; Nakajima et al., 2012, Osam et al., 2017). In addition to *adult learner* and *nontraditional, post-traditional learner, working learner*, and other terminology are used in the literature and practice to signify and define a postsecondary learner who is not traditional (Soares et al., 2017). The lack of consensus in the use of consistent and definitive terminology and descriptions of adult learners creates scarcity of comparable data, misunderstanding, misconceptions, or assumptions about adult learners that may diminish their presence as learners. In turn, this leads to policies and practices that approach adult learners as learners who happen to be adults rather than a student population with unique distinguishing adult needs, challenges, and requirements for targeted supports service that promote their success and completion.

Postsecondary Adult Learner Identity

Adult learners pursue postsecondary education for extrinsic purposes, such as improving employment skills. Yet, research consistently finds that their motivations are primarily intrinsic as adult learners see education as meeting a personal goal or need, engaging in social activity, or for lifelong learning and self-improvement (Houle, 1961, Merriam et al., 2012). Before application and enrollment, adult learners research prospective institutions, including programs, purpose, logistics, services, etc. and they generally make informed decisions, set reasonable

goals, and assess how pursuing postsecondary education will fit into their lives (Petty & Thomas, 2014; Wonacott, 2001). Once they have sufficient relevant information, adult learners report that they weigh the benefits of postsecondary education against the challenges of their life situations (Kantar Public and Learning and Work Institute, 2018. Kasworm, 2005).

Adult learners often view their decision making as part of their identity as an adult; thus, their autonomy and responsibility for their own decisions fundamentally define their adulthood and shape a holistic approach to their student roles (Donavant et al., 2013). Adult learners engage in a complex and tangled web of relational, situational, and emotional dimensions as a part of their decision making, and it influences their ongoing student experience (Kantar Public and Learning and Work Institute, 2018). Situational, institutional, and psychological difficulties often tip the balance between personal benefit and personal cost estimates (Osam, et al., 2017). Situational barriers are challenges related to an adult learner's life, work, economic/financial concerns, time management, and other related conflicts and are personal and unique to the adult learner (Bergman et al., 2014; Osam et al., 2017). Institutional barriers are policies and procedures that interfere or prevent adult learners from participating in postsecondary education or completing their educational journey (Bergman et al., 2014; Osam et al., 2017). These include, but are not limited to, institution's program offerings, a timeline for completion, full-time or part-time status, etc. (Erisman & Steele, 2015). Psychological barriers are associated with negative self-esteem and self-concept, fear of failure, prior educational experiences, changing relational issues, and lack of self-confidence (Kasworm, 2005; Osam et al., 2017). This balancing and weighing of responsibilities, situations, and emotions continue throughout the adult learner's academic journey, leading to feelings of satisfaction, accomplishment, guilt, anxiety, and frustration as well as stopping and starting, swirling in their postsecondary

education (Bergman et al., 2014). Positive self-efficacy and self-concept can alleviate psychological barriers that hinder adult learner success (Chemers et al., 2001; Karmelita, 2016). Some adult learners will demonstrate a strong sense of resilience when faced with psychological barriers, which develops into a new sense of self-discovery (Goto and Martin, 2009). Positive experiences that increase feelings self-confidence and self-worth along with a sense of self-discovery, a sense of strength, and belief in oneself provide adult learners with momentum toward success in their academic journey (Bombardieri, 2017; Goto and Martin, 2009; Serowick, 2017).

Community College Adult Learners

A significant proportion of postsecondary adult learners choose to attend community colleges. For the 2017-2018 academic year, 39% of students ages 22 and older, and 10 percent of students over age 40 attended community colleges, indicating that nearly half of community college students, as defined by age, are adult learners (American Association of Community Colleges, 2019). Adult learners attend community colleges in large numbers because they are easily accessible, have relevant programs and courses, are flexible and cost-effective, and have environments that support an adult's life responsibilities (Kasworm, 2005; Mellow & Heelan, 2008). Community colleges are often the only postsecondary education option for adult learners who are location bound (Bogg, 2012). Community colleges attract first-generation students, students who are swirling, restarting or underprepared, and those who lack family and peer support in pursuing postsecondary education (Barcinas et al., 2016; Kasworm, 2014).

Student Persistence

Empirical models such as Tinto's (1987)'s Interactionist Theory, Schlossberg's (1989) Theory of Marginality and Mattering, and Bean and Metzner's (1985) Nontraditional

Undergraduate Student Attrition Model indicate that persistence is decisive when a student is engaged academically and socially with the institutional, educational environment. While Tinto's (1987) model provides predictive variables for determining persistence, it focused on traditional-age learners. Bean and Metzner's (1985) model contends that while persistence models hold value, their focus and consideration of learner engagement are misplaced as they do not represent an adult learner's experience. Instead, variables such as attrition, intent to leave, student background, and environmental factors and interactions among these variables hold greater significance on adult learner persistence than the effect of academic and social integration (Oden, 2011). Persistence is positive if the academic and environmental factors are positive; however, if both factors are negative, persistence will not occur (Burns & Durojaiye, 2017; Crawford-Sorey & Duggan, 2008). If the academic factor is positive, but the environmental factor is negative, an adult learner will not persist. On the other hand, an adult learner will persist if the environment is positive, but the academics are negative because of the ability of supports services in place to move the adult learner to completion (Burns & Durojaiye, 2017; Crawford-Sorey & Duggan, 2008).

Persistence occurs when the interaction between the academic and psychological variables are both are positive, and will not occur when both are negative, (Burns & Durojaiye, 2017). When adult learners experience situational, institutional, or psychological barriers, they will not persist even with high academic performance (Burns & Durojaiye, 2017). On the other hand, if an adult learner feels supported by the institution, this does not always impact persistence despite poor academic performance (Capps, 2012; Garner, 2019). An adult learner with high academic performance would persist if the institution provided positive support (Capps, 2012; Garner, 2019). The Bean and Metzner (1985) model provide valuable quantitative

data about adult learner persistence and aids in the development of appropriate strategies that aid in that persistence. Although quantitative models provide insight into adult learner persistence, few qualitative models take a holistic approach to adult learner experiences. Clark (2012) uses Schlossberg's (1989) Theory of Marginality and Mattering and Rendon's (1994) Theory of Validation to explore adult learners' self-perceptions of factors that positively impact their persistence at a community college. Students experience a sense of belonging through shared experiences with other adult learners, which aides in their overall persistence (Clark, 2012; Tinto, 1987). Institutional support from faculty and staff is also a positive factor in persistence because adult learners sense that their presence mattered, and faculty and staff genuinely care about their success (Clark, 2012; Schlossberg, 1989). When the institution and its efforts validate adult learners, they feel greater self-confidence and improved self-esteem, which encourages their participation with the institution (Chaves, 2008; Clark, 2012; Rendon, 1994).

Student Success

For the past decade, a dramatic shift in community colleges has redefined their commitment to access and equity to support underrepresented populations, align programs with 21st-century careers, and increase institutional transparency (Bailey, 2016). The basis of the shift is rooted in concerns that community colleges' completion rates depict "a failure for those students to achieve their goals and represents a loss of potential earning power and economic growth and activity for the economy as a whole" (Bailey, 2016, p. 11). This shift and redefinition, referred to throughout this article as *student success*, is characterized by a data-driven culture of success that is measured and evidenced by degree or credential completion rates, learning outcomes, and labor market outcomes (Bailey et al., 2005; McClenney, 2013; Wyner, 2014).

National initiatives such as *Achieving the Dream*, *Completion by Design*, and *Guided Pathways* have influenced the development and implementation of a success-rich campus environment. These initiatives address institutional barriers that interfere with a student's completion, such as redefined and streamlined programs and pathways, ineffective advising/support, unreliable or irrelevant information, guiding more effective decision-making on the part of the student, while also addressing institutional effectiveness and accountability (Bailey, 2016; McClenney, 2013). Researchers, theorists, and practitioners in adult and higher education generally agree that the environment at community colleges represents a diverse demographic of learners who have different academic, financial, and personal challenges, as well as educational goals. This widely diverse environment is a significant influence when measuring an institution's performance concerning completion and success (Baily, 2005). Today, student success is a strongly integrated part of the mission and culture at many community colleges. It is dominating many national professional association dialogues and priorities, with well-publicized examples of flourishing student success environment (The Aspen Institute, 2020).

Although persistence and student success are related concepts, they are differences in their definition and approach. Retention connects to persistence through institutions seek strategies that promote continuous enrollment (Crawford, 1999). Persistence models such as Tinto (1987) and Bean and Metzner (1985) have and continue to reference adult learner's navigation through postsecondary undergraduate education. Although these models hold significant value and address factors related to undergraduate adult participation and engagement, they do not address how student success initiatives, structures, and cultural-environment influence adult learner success and completion.

Student success is equated with data-driven evidence of completion and concentrates on critical points in the student lifecycle where there is the potential for loss of momentum (Bailey, 2016; Community College Research Center & AACC Pathways Project, 2016). Student success frameworks promote equity practices at the national, state, and institutional that close the gap among underrepresented students the populations such as students of color, first-generation, and low-socioeconomic status that were not addressed by persistence models (Kinzie and Kuh, 2017). Implementation of high-impact practices such as guided pathways, changes in campus culture to reflect the needs of underserved learners, and the use of data to ensure the visibility and equitable participation by underrepresented learners are believed to bode well in the advancement of success and equity (Kinzie and Kuh, 2017). Finally, student success, unlike persistence models, goes a step further with an added focus on labor market outcomes and gainful employment after successful completion. Labor market outcomes allow institutions to track graduate placement, employment, and earnings, evaluate employment trends in their respective communities, and cultivate strategic partnerships to strengthen the community and reduce ‘brain drain’ (Wyner, 2012).

While community colleges remain focused on student success initiatives, the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning, (2018) submits that many institutions recognize the barriers that inhibit success and the mechanisms that promote success for adult learners; however, these institutions do not know if they are meeting the needs of adult learners or are not purposeful in how to serve and support this population. Bergman et al. (2014) indicate when institutions meet the unique needs and barriers of an adult learner, these initiatives minimize attrition and promote success. Few studies provide empirical data that explicitly demonstrate how adult learners uniquely perceive the postsecondary student success environment.

Methodology

This instrumental case study focused on understanding and describing the unique experiences of adult learners within a student success culture in which adult learners engage in interrelated student success initiatives, activities, and supports within the greater community college environment. (Tellis, 1979). A case study is instrumental if the researcher seeks to understand more than just the case itself, a particular situation, or refine a specific theory (Stake, 1995; Baxter & Jack, 2008). An in-depth study of adult learner experiences is instrumental in understanding their perceptions of a student success-rich culture at community colleges (Stake, 1995; Baxter & Jack, 2008). The findings add a dimension to the conceptualization of postsecondary adult learner experiences within the context of an evolving environment at community colleges.

Site Selection

This study was conducted at a community college that was fully vested in the student success culture. Fully vested is defined in this case, in that the community college self-identified as strongly ‘student success-oriented’ for a minimum of three years, allowing sufficient time for student success initiatives to become a part of its environment; and, it implemented explicit initiatives in which student success was the primary stated goal. Additionally, the study site connected its working definition of student success to state and national mainstream student success principles. For example, a student success principle is to provide students with targeted, integrated supports and interventions when needed. Southeastern State sustained continuous participation in ongoing national formal student success initiatives. Community college leaders familiar with the ongoing student success efforts in Southeastern state recommended Southeastern Community College (SCC). Taken holistically, this college was immersed in

student success in terms of language and practices that lead students to completion from the first year to the second year, with graduation as the goal. (Research Site, 2018).

SCC is a mid-sized community college with three campuses that serves two rural counties. SCC enrollment has an almost even distribution between curriculum and continuing education programs of study. The average age of students is 24 years, and the majority of students attend part-time. SCC's demographics for student age and enrollment is consistent with various terms and definitions within the literature that describes a student who is not considered traditional; therefore, it was deemed a suitable site to attract a pool of potential adult learner participants. (Soares et al., 2017).

Data Collection

This study utilized two methods for data collection, participant interviews, and document analysis. The predominant data source for interviews was two-pronged: adult learners (the main focus of the study) and academic representatives (providing institutional context). The researcher used purposeful sampling to recruit adult learner participants who meet the definition of adult learner as described by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (Horn and Carrol, 1996). The researcher also used snowball sampling to recruit academic representatives. All academic representatives were experienced with SSC's student success initiatives and regularly engaged in what they considered to be a strong student success environment.

The data collection strategy consisted of 14 face to face interviews. There were ten adult learners whose ages ranged from 24 to 54 years old. Four academic representatives with 10 to 24 years of experience in higher education also participated. The interviews were approximately one hour long, semi-structured, and allowed for light researcher participation to seek clarification, elaboration, or to guide a thoughtful, focused conversation between researcher and participant

(Seidman, 2013). Interview protocols focused on participant perceptions of what student success meant (to participants), how they perceived their college sustained a student success culture, and their awareness and experience with various campus student success initiatives. Also, adult learner participants were asked to share thoughts about what being an adult learner means to them and how their motivations, challenges, and influences impact their overall success, how they defined success, and what was the nature of their student experience. Academic representative interviews focused on the participant's observations and conceptualizations of student success operations within the context of a community college. Academic representatives were asked to describe and discuss nuances of how student success is institutionally, individually, and student defined and implemented. The researcher asked the academic participants to share their beliefs regarding student perceptions of campus student success initiatives. Additionally, the academic participants were asked to discuss how they define, describe, and perceive adult learners and to discuss the uniqueness of adult learner experiences with student success at a community college.

Data collection additionally included the collection and analysis of print and online documents. First, the researcher reviewed demographic information regarding SSC from their website as well as information provided by SCC academic representatives to paint a detailed, well-rounded picture of the campus environment. The second phase of document review consisted of the collection and analysis of policies, practices, and data related to the nature and scope of national, Southeastern State, and SSC student success initiatives within the context of SSC's demographic environment (Owen, 2014; Bowen, 2009). Documents subject to review included white papers, strategic plans, executive summaries, implementation guides, and evaluative reports from national organizations that developed student success initiatives. These

documents facilitated comprehension of the nature of student success and the evolution of various state and localized initiatives and guiding principles.

Next, the researcher searched and reviewed various reports, strategic plans, presentations, implementation guidelines that detail state, regional, and location-specific priorities, which were juxtaposed against national initiatives. Finally, the researcher reviewed reports, strategic plans, implementation guides, handouts, and bulletin board notices that represent SSC's specific narrowly focused student success policies and practices. All documents were organized into matrices and charts, which analyzed how student success was defined and enacted at the micro, meso, and macro-level. Contextual Information collected was factored into the data analysis and interpretation.

Each participant received a copy of their transcribed interview and had an opportunity to share comments, corrections, and suggestions. All participants communicated that they were satisfied that their interview was an accurate reflection of their thoughts and comments; therefore, no changes were made to the transcripts. The transcripts, documents, research memos, and journal notes were further reviewed and triangulated for information that corroborated as well as disaffirming evidence (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Creswell, 2013, Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Data Analysis

Data analysis began with verbatim transcription, reading, tagging, labeling, and first-level manual coding of all participant interviews in a serial fashion. The conceptual framework served as the basis of the initial coding of a priori codes. In addition, open coding analysis identified and earmarked concepts and interactions that emerged during early coding, which fell outside of the student success framework. In the second coding cycle, the researcher reviewed and clustered the initial data into pattern codes that represented commonalities, repetitive words, and phrases as

well as instances in which there were different accounts or explanations among participants (Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, 2014). Empirical themes that emerged from the analysis related to adult learner definitions and descriptions of student success, adult learner description of their experiences as a learner in a student success-rich culture, and adult learner experiences with institutional student success initiatives.

The analysis continued and involved comparing, contrasting, and testing the discrete and integrated boundaries of the interview-based themes with data derived from the document review and analysis of national, state priorities, and institutional definitions of student success and related student success initiatives. The analysis continued with a comparison, contrast, and examination of the adult learner themes against one entity, i.e., adult learner set against national initiatives. Then, each entity was compared and contrasted with another entity, i.e., national set against state, state set against institution, etc. The final phase consisted of an analysis of the four entities for an understanding of the contextual data gathered. The analysis condensed the integrated data into findings, which express various adult learner perceptions of student success.

Finding #1: The evolving student success culture, the ideal and the ‘real’ environment, and the visibility and identity of an adult learner subculture are out of sync.

Within a student success environment, the community college culture includes a perception that to promote equity among learners; institutions *should* view all students as the same with little to no distinction. This approach to framing success strategies is consistent with state and national student success efforts, which emphasize institution-wide equitable and inclusive practices that improve student success for underrepresented students. When student success metrics specifically encourage examining disaggregated completion data, it tends to consider categories of race, income, or first-generation status. The academic representatives were

aware of the diversity of their student populations and viewed students based on their enrollment status and the established student success data categories.

Academic Representative #1: We don't really use adult learner as much. But I mean, I know what you're saying, and that is use, but it's more the traditional, nontraditional. But with our average age being 24, 25, we're more nontraditional than we are traditional now. And with our percent being more part-time, you've got to look at that with the lens that that's skewed, those numbers are skewed because of our growing high school population. It's hard until you see it desegregated to know that.

The academic representatives also reported that they view all students, including adult learners, as learners who are already adults. As such, they did not necessarily recognize unique characteristics that distinguished an adult learner from a traditional-age learner or adult learner as a unique group. The academic representatives shared that they had intentionally compartmentalized observations to avoid making a distinction based upon the contextual expectation that they *should* view all students as adults and integrate many adult learner characteristics as a part of the larger data category or label of nontraditional. Their belief was that streamlining or simplifying success strategies for all students led to greater overall success—that adherence to the student success structures as a guiding force connected to their professionalism.

Academic Representative #4: I don't know that their age defines them as an adult learner because technically, anyone coming to the college for curriculum classes is classified as adults.

Academic Representative #2: [W]e have such a diverse population that we really have to be flexible on how we meet the needs of our students. Our traditional students that come right out of high school, and of course, our nontraditional students that come back. I mean, they're adult learners to me. And what's unique about them is I don't look at them as differences.

The adult learner participants identified students by what they do at SSC – study. They appreciated the efforts of college professionals at SSC to treat *everyone* like students, including adult learners,

Milagros: I wanted to go to school. I always have, but I've always been in the mommy box. I really enjoy it because I'm actually getting some adult interaction. I just see myself as a student. They treat everybody equally, and I like that.

At the same time, the adult learner participants were adamant about the gap or disjuncture created when they were not overtly referred to and recognized as adult learners. Kay described how adult learners identify other adult learners and recognize their differences, yet they still predominantly see and respond to each other as adult learners

Two of us were over 45, and the others were 20's. So, the two of us migrated to each other. We did study together. We would study in the lunch hall with other programs that had older people too. We would talk about the struggles; how hard it is because we are older. But we get it. With adults, older adults, and especially in our groups, we're very vastly different people, different walks of life, but none of that mattered because we were adults. With us, that's why we're here. It was just natural. We learned so much from one another because our belief systems were different, and you're more open as an adult. We appreciated one another, which is so needed.

The academic representatives appeared proud and dedicated to their desire to serve the needs of all students in a college environment that promoted open access and equity for all students, without differential success strategies. This appeared, in part, to be a function of a high degree of confidence in the strength and effectiveness of proven success strategies and its positive impact on all learners. The investment in and alignment of the research site's local policies with formal state and national initiatives added to the academic representatives' confidence in adopting a fixed approach. As the academic representatives described, in student success professional development, the importance of distilling down to streamlined strategies is emphasized. Thus, the academic representatives were more comfortable with *nontraditional* as both a label and a practical way to acknowledge adult learners. This included the development and implementation of support policies and practices as well as in the documentation of student success metrics and measures tied to prioritized strategies. *Nontraditional* served as an umbrella *clustered* term to include adult learners and other traditional, early college high-school-aged students, or students with characteristics such as first-generation and socioeconomic status. To illustrate the impact of this kind of grouping, imagine suggesting that an early college 15 years old student and a 45-year-old adult learner have parallel 'outlier' needs. And, their categorization as nontraditional is sufficient recognition of their differential student experiences and of the adoption of institutional strategies for ensuring their successful learning. SCC perceived nontraditional students, and adult learners needed the same environment, student success learning strategies/supports, and advising culture. Academic representatives, when specifically asked, recognized adult learner presence and many reported specific adult learner professional knowledge or 'know-how,' but the student success culture overwhelmingly shaped the dynamic in a different direction. The interviews revealed a culture of normality by defining adult learners

as readily observable, as clearly present in large numbers, yet seemingly unseen in terms of a legitimate need for unique policies or affirmation.

The adult learner participants in this study described a more dualistic identity. First, the adult learner participants shared a *student identity* as what they do at the community college, as their role and purpose with the college. Second, they perceived their *adult learner identity* as the essence of who they are and integrated it into how they approach and experience their student role. Hence, while adult learner participants navigated their dual identities and roles, the institutional climate at SCC site did not. This is in keeping with previously existing research studies on adult learner identity and roles (Kasworm, 2005). The environment at SCC subtly shaped an expectation that adult learners do not ask nor expect this duality to be an explicit part of their success environment. Institutional representatives rebuffed attempts by the adult learner participants to distinguish their learning experiences and opt-out of student success strategies. This left the adult learner, and institutional participants with parallel interpretations that adult learners were risking their potential success or completion if they did not align with the student success supports as designed.

Finding #2: Student success strategies geared towards efficiency indirectly create work-life balance barriers that serve as a potential negative tipping-point for adult learners.

Adopted national student success initiatives intend to transform the entire community college environment and culture. Leadership commits to a fundamental and systemic shift in vision and belief about the student experience. This transformation creates a culture where everyone within the institution is “on the same page” with the college’s commitment to and belief in the student success policies and strategies. McClenney described these efforts to transform and maintain a student success culture as an “altered culture is one in which new ideas

can be tested, new policies can be implemented, and interventions can be piloted, evaluated, and scaled-up to serve large numbers of students” (2013, p. 13). Academic Representative #1 described the college’s commitment to and participation in various student success initiatives.

We're one of the first cohorts in the SSC *Guided Pathways to Success*. SSC jumped in to be part of the first cohort, so that we can meet the needs of our students and help them to be successful. We've been a part of *Achieving the Dream* for a long time, and *Completion by Design* has kind of morphed into that to a point where we're a Leader College now.

We have a college that supports initiatives and supports what faculty want to do from the top-down. It's been rare that you take an innovative decision to our executive council, which is our president and all of the VPS, and they say no, or, "We can't do that." It's more about, "Let's find a way to make it happen." [Italics added]

SSC implemented various student success strategies, including streamlined pathways to completion, intrusive advising, integrated and mandatory support services, and universal policies and practices, which are consistent with various national student success initiatives and strategies. These strategies are universally applied to all students, regardless of their status, to promote equity and fairness (Grossman et al., 2013; Rutschow et al., 2011). These strategies were also carefully designed to provide students with tools and support that will lead to successful program completion and success in the workforce or other academic pursuits.

One strategy, intrusive advising practices, require students to meet with an advisor to ensure that students are on the path to completion without any unnecessary detours or delays. In summer 2018, SSC incorporated mandatory advising for all incoming students. As is often the case with new policy implementation, current students were not required but were strongly encouraged to see an advisor before scheduling. Academic Representative #1 was a strong

supporter of mandatory advising and felt that the change to mandatory advising should have included all existing students, not just incoming students or younger learners. She explained how, in her view, mandatory advising benefits adult learners.

We are instituting this slowly with new students. I think it would be beneficial for us to have mandatory advising for all students. Part of that is helping them make that informed decision...started in, this past summer, mandatory advising for all new students: They don't have an option but to see an adviser. A lot of our students have self-advised in the past, and that gets them off track. Some [adult learners] know what they need to do, and they're on the right path, and they do what they're supposed to do. Some [adult learners] see having to go through these things now as like jumping through hoops. [They will say] why do I have to do this? I know what I'm supposed to do" kind of thing. Sometimes, they feel like they already know because they're an adult, they can read, they know. But they still need that advising. And I don't know that they would always appreciate it because they don't know what mistake it kept them from making. And then once you make the mistake, or not really happy at all. But in hindsight, they should've gone and worked with an adviser.

At the time of their interviews, none of the adult learner participants in this study were subjected to mandatory advising. When asked about how they received information and counsel about their academic progress, the adult learner participants indicated they self-advised using the information found on the college's web-advisor or check-sheets they downloaded from the college website. The adult learner participants appeared comfortable with online access of course information and program requirements as they believed SSC provided clear and accurate information in a way that did not necessitate meeting with an advisor. This was especially

important to their work-life balance given work, children, family, and school. When asked to reflect on how they felt about mandatory advising, the adult learner participants saw the advisor's role is to counsel and confirm, not to give redundant information.

Marie: I just have the sheet for the associate of arts. I like being able to do it myself. I wouldn't want to not have that choice. But sometimes, it is good to have someone to talk to. If I have some questions, I'll go [to an advisor], But I use the [online advising system]. It's all there on the website. [The website advisor] is a good way because it has it all listed out pretty well, the website.

Edwin explained that his time spent with advisors was for a specific purpose related to his goals.

I've reached out a lot to the advising center. I do that every month or so just to see how I'm doing on track [or] things I could be doing to expedite my graduation, things of that nature. I talk to people at the advising center. Nobody specific. I'll go in and just speak to someone. It's their job.

National student success initiatives focus on the time of completion, where efforts such as mandatory advising ensure that students make good decisions that do not cause delays in their completion (Community College Research Center and AACC Pathways Project; Completion by Design, 2016). Self-advising, on the other hand, cannot always guarantee the student will make a good decision that does not delay their timeline.

Work-life balance is a recognized tipping point for adult learners. It has the potential to create an unintended delay in completion or motivation to stop studies based upon the student's belief that the institution is not in alignment with adult learner lifestyles. The adult learner participants believed their ability to access, manage, and make decisions about routine course and program information was no different than their other adult responsibilities. Adult learners

have a heightened awareness of the consequences of their decisions because they see their education as an investment in their future for themselves and their families (Passmore, 2019). Thus, the adult learner participants in this study wanted to reserve the time investment of advisement meetings for personalized guidance related to their specific and individual needs and concerns that cannot be streamlined or handled via homogenized tools.

A second student success practice is the mandatory use of academic and student service support mechanisms. Unlike prior instances in which institutions made students aware of support services in a passive manner, student success initiatives actively incorporate targeted support services within the curriculum. Students are exposed to support services well before there is a defined challenge and are encouraged to use supports to address challenges proactively. Institutions like SSC use required tutoring as part of the curriculum in some courses so that students will not only use services but see their value as a tool in their overall success, as Academic Representative #1 explained

But one of the things that we've really got to work on in this division, and as a college as a whole, is getting the students to take advantage of the support we have. One of the parts of student success here was to provide them integrated, targeted support and interventions along the way. We have so many resources to our students, but right now, as I mentioned, students don't do optional. Well, they're not going to go to the writing center if it's not a part of the required components of the course. We make it to where it's so integrated into the classroom that they don't even realize it was an option. [Faculty] try to work it in so that students see the advantage of that service.

The adult learner participants agreed with the academic representatives that support services were vital to their success and completion. They appreciated SSC's efforts to inform

students about various support services and how they can help adult learners with challenges and concerns. Sarah found emotional and academic support as a first-generation, adult learner.

I was scared, nervous, being older and out of school for so long. I thought, oh gracious, what am I going to do? What if I'm not smart enough? What if I don't know this? They have a program here [for first-generation students. I joined [it]. My mother didn't graduate high school, and my father had some college but never got a degree. My [first generation] advisor, I've told her a little about my background, and she's always there to help. [She said SSC} offers a learning center and free tutoring. I went and got that help... and I went from a C to an A, so... it worked! I'd say [the support services] helped me a lot. It's helped me build my confidence--like I said, I was worried about coming back to school. [Everyone is] really supportive and helpful, and I appreciate that a lot because there is a lot of worries being an adult learner.

However, other adult learner participants indicated mandatory supports integrated within a course was a concrete challenge to their work-life balance. They questioned if it was necessary to require such supports, especially in cases where an adult learner had professional or life experience in writing or other fundamental subjects, and they wanted to spend their study time beginning from where they were and moving forward rather than going through the motions. Dario explained that even though he saw the value in his instructor requiring students to use the writing center, it was more of a hassle than helpful.

I had to make an appointment with the writing center because the instructor said she wouldn't accept papers that weren't proofread by them. It's just one more thing I have to do. I take very seriously the class and the assignments, but I don't feel I really need someone to tell me. I spent time in... preparatory school. I got used to writing papers, 10

pages when I was in middle school. My time is very limited. The time that I spend here on campus. I think just in classes...I really need to manage with I'm doing with my work and studies... I'll go down there for whatever, [but] it's one more thing.

There is no question that one of the biggest challenges for community college professionals is to ensure that all students are aware of and use support services. The academic representatives saw that integration of support services eliminated invisibility or under-use of available support services. The academic representatives also believed that when support services were required, it was framed as a natural step in the successful completion of an assignment, synonymous with a successful student. The mandatory aspect of interventions and supports promoted equity as all students, regardless of skill level, must participate. The mandatory aspect also assumed that any stigma associated with asking for help was removed and that proficient student could sharpen their skills.

Adult learner participants saw support services as voluntary and a choice. When an adult learner participant perceived that they needed the support, could benefit from the support offered and could add the support into their already busy schedule, they voluntarily participated. When support was mandated, the adult learner participants perceived it as a situational barrier that disrupted an already delicate work-life balance. In the latter scenario, the adult learner participant, Dario, described a choice – *reluctant compliance* or *risky avoidance*. Either alternative carried the risk of disruption in his work/life balance and/or creates an unintended institutional barrier that threatened his student experience, success, and completion. The implicit messaging that avoidance of mandated norms was risky or meant you were a 'bad student' was powerful.

A third student success strategy is the implementation of selected uniform, one-size-fits-all classroom policies and practices. These practices do not distinguish the nuances and build upon a type of barrier (such as attendance or device usage) or the assumed negative effect the barrier has on all learners. Instead, a success strategy relies upon the strength of streamlined, clear expectations, essentially *play-the-odds* in terms of strategy adoption. As Academic Representative #2 described, all students (including adult learners) have barriers to manage and balance with other life responsibilities.

I think...some of them are fresh out of high school, but for the most part, they're all adult learners, really... They all have to come to class. They all have to do work, whether it's different work, different classes. I think about their plates and platters, and we talk about some students have more responsibilities than others. But we all have different plates or platters. That's where we have to learn to manage them. And you're going to have to make sacrifices, and you're going to have barriers and challenges along the way. I think a lot of the adult learners, I think it's learning how to manage time because they do have plates full. I think those barriers; they have to figure out a way to make it work.

The adult learner participants, on the other hand, indicated that they often have individual situational challenges that are unique to their adult responsibilities and whose management is out of their control and vitally important. Coley, a disabled and retired veteran, described:

I have VA appointments for injuries I received during my deployment. I would receive calls [from the VA], and this instructor would holler "No phones in class!" I would leave my phone on vibrate because if the VA would call with an appointment and I didn't answer, I'd wait three months for another appointment. If it vibrated, I would walk out of the class, answer the phone, and come right back. She would get upset because I go out

and answer my phone. After class, we had a discussion. She said, “Well, the syllabus says, and the college says, phones off during class.” The next day, she has a discussion with one of her relatives who was a vet and said that if you miss them calling trying to schedule an appointment, they will call the next person. Next class period, I come in and she calls me off to the side and said: “OK, you can leave your phone on vibrate.” I got upset because she would not take my word for it. She had to go to someone and when they said it. She would believe what I had to say; she had to wait and listen to somebody she knew... You go and serve your country... and you come back and try to tell somebody, and they just don’t want to hear it. We had a very hard time for about three weeks.

Although the academic representative understood and could describe adult learner challenges and barriers, the weight of student success policies, like no cell phone or interruptions, was paramount over adult learner circumstances. Phone calls were seen unilaterally as a barrier to one’s success. There was a perception on the part of the instructor that if an adult learner who is also a disabled veteran needed to take a phone call about a medical appointment during class time, his/her actions posed a more significant risk to student success than any common-sense recognition of the circumstances the adult learner faced. The incident’s influence was magnified by the student’s frustration with the instructor reliance upon a third party to add legitimacy to his explanation to the faculty member about why the call was important enough for him to step out of class – as if as a responsible adult, his commitment to his studies or explanation about the call simply did not matter.

The faculty member defined the judgment of what constituted a barrier and its level of importance, and it was perceived to align with the institutional student success policy rather than

an interpretation that the adult could exercise responsible judgment as a learner-based upon adult responsibilities and expectations. In this case, during the interview, Coley viewed his ability to assess the type and level of urgency of a barrier as something well within his purview as an adult. The level of indifference and minimization of his work-life balance not only created a barrier but further impaired the relationship between him as an adult learner and the college professional, and by extension, SCC as an institution. Instances such as this were a pattern in the study. They represented potential tipping points where adult learner participants lost confidence in SCC's institutional capacity to serve their educational needs without harmful, rather than expected, more normative 'student role' disruptions to their lives.

Discussion

This study addresses adult learners' experiences within an established community college student success environment. As the evolution of student success initiatives grows, there are many questions about how existing understandings of adult learner characteristics and experiences are reflected by community college institutions. While some aspects of the findings are consistent with previous empirical adult learner studies, there are also new considerations relative to student success environments and adult learners that warrant consideration.

The student success movement fundamentally shifted how community colleges frame their responsibilities regarding student experience. The 'new normal' is a purposeful response to legitimate concerns about student completion. It was hard-fought and not easy to effectively shift the culture of postsecondary institutions across the country, to develop new priorities. The student success movement reflects a genuine attempt to continuously apply research-based evidence surrounding issues such as the loss of student momentum and stop or drop-outs at various critical points in a student's education lifecycle (Bailey, 2005, 2016). Building upon

Bailey's metaphor, institutions have, in essence, replaced an a la carte menu with a fixed-price menu. The fixed-price menu devotes a set of select resources intended to increase the odds and timeliness of student completion (Community College Research Center and AACC Pathways Project, 2016). In a conceptual sense, limiting choices means safety and less opportunity for poor, costly decisions (Bailey, 2016). Student success culture provides a sense of safety -when you order from the fixed-price menu, you are almost guaranteed you will receive a good result without unexpected extra expenses or issues. When a fixed price menu is used, all parties implicitly understand there is less flexibility in exchange for certain limited 'guarantees.'

The findings from this study offer data that suggests that adult learner experiences may warrant more in-depth study and understanding in the student success context. Historically, adult learners considered to be relatively invisible as a stakeholder within research or 4-year universities and colleges. The assumption that community colleges, which were established to serve diverse audiences, do, in fact, uniquely address adult learner, needs further examination. The adult learner participants reported that they purposefully select community colleges based upon the assumption that community colleges will meet their unique need for high flexibility in delivery format, timing, preparation, and learning environment and their acceptance by the learning community.

Concurrently to the advent of the student success movement, professional associations and advocates such as CAEL, invested significant effort in creating visibility and tangible frameworks to guide postsecondary institutions in meeting adult learner needs, building mechanisms for collecting institutional data, ensuring adult learner success, and optimizing a high quality, rich student experience. It is perhaps ironic that the student success movement, which has swept community colleges may, in fact, also be homogenizing the adult learner

student experience and moving farther away from historical aspirations of attracting and welcoming diverse learners.

The findings of this study raise key implications as well as questions for further consideration. The first is a question of identity and the extent to which and how student identity matters in the nature and quality of student learning experiences and their ultimate success. The adult learner participants described motivators include extrinsic dimensions, particularly obtaining a credential and increasing labor market outcomes. The student success culture emphasizes streamlined institutional success strategies and, subsequently, the analysis of disaggregated success data to guide a goal of equitable outcomes for students of color, and low-income or first-generation students. In theory, community colleges are poised to enhance their global success strategies with the development of tailored or customized strategies to address inequities among students. Additionally, community colleges can draw upon a historical commitment to offering a flexible, meaningful learning experience and credentials to adult students.

The study findings also indicate that despite student success, institutional improvements such as streamlined advising, improved onboarding, efficient tutoring, or other student supports, that adult learner experiences appear to one of a peripheral presence. Their presence as adult learners did not appear to be recognized as a critical, valuable identity in the larger mix of students that comprised the community college environment in which they were studying. The loss of recognizable identity was reported by the adult learner participants as a tangible barrier to their student experience and completion. It was reported by institutional representatives as an intentional framing, despite their technical professional knowledge about postsecondary adult learners. As such, the learning experiences of these students were dependent upon tangible

institutional recognition of the uniqueness and value of their adult learner presence within the larger learning community. For adult learners who are also students of color, low income, or at risk, their needs are likely heightened even further.

These complex factors intertwined to create tipping points for adult learners that are quite complex to understand and address. The data in this study suggests that institutional representatives are balancing environmental pressures to be dismissive of the informal student feedback received about the critical nature of recognizing adult learner needs despite existing factual knowledge and professional development about adult learners. The academic representatives' professional reward appeared to be more connected to clustering adult learners into the broader, more manageable category of nontraditional students.

The adult learner participants in this study reported encountering explicit student success strategies that added barriers to their student experience. For them, this was an ongoing choice between *reluctant compliance* or *risky avoidance*. This type of systemic squeeze play is not necessarily inevitable. The actual choice points were relatively small, resolvable barriers that present during student life, but the framing, experience of and solution pathways were perceived and processed by adult learner participants as a part of their adult identity, sense of responsibilities, and reflected in need for affirmation.

The second area of future questioning raised by the study findings is one of timing, alignment, and advocacy. At the same time as the larger student success movement built momentum, created valuable structures, and implemented community college reforms, professional associations such as CAEL, invested sustained effort into researching, refining and supporting the implementation of frameworks such as *Adult Learner Friendly/Focused Initiatives*, often referred to as ALFI. The American Council on Education (ACCE), invested

resources and advocacy into crucial policy strands such as competency-based education, prior learning assessment, and other policies aimed at enhancing adult learner success. It is somewhat remarkable to consider that the postsecondary institutional type that is the most aligned with adult learners in terms of mission and presence, community colleges, may seemingly move further away rather than closer to the focused, credible ALFI practices that serve to increase adult learner student success. For community colleges, what is still a significantly high proportion of their audience – adult learners, the data can be obscured with the complex terrain of early college (high school) students and established at-risk categories such as race, income, and first-generation status. Though it is beyond the scope of this study, future study of the intersections of adult learner-focused, inclusion, and student success frameworks hold considerable potential value. This study highlights the importance of thoughtful application of labels, terms, and research categories regarding adult learners and other at-risk students. Further study and reflection of the influence of the usage of the category ‘non- traditional’ student and of balancing institutional and student shared success responsibilities and experiences, and of the vast increase of inter-generational environments within community colleges are supported by this study data as a critical area for future research.

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CHAPTER 6 IMPLICAITIONS

The purpose of this qualitative case study is to learn, describe, and understand the experiences and perceptions of adult students who attend a community college that has ongoing student success initiatives. The findings of this study had implications for discussion that are discussed within chapters four and five article manuscripts as well as this chapter. Within the chapter, they are divided into three areas: Implications for research and theory, Implications for practice, and Implications for future research

Implications for Research and Theory

The implications for research include observations about three central ideas. First, there is much in the classic or historical literature that was generally affirmed in this case study in terms of postsecondary adult learner characteristics and identity. Yet, the findings related to adult learners' intrinsic/extrinsic motivations may manifest themselves differently in this study. This study indicates that the student success environment carries a strong explicit expectation of extrinsic goal setting for all students. It somewhat separates or subsumes the notion of personal growth or more intrinsically oriented goals and motivations as operational strategies for success as opposed to viewing them as inherently intrinsic motivations that stand alone as powerful motivators for adult learner community college students. The study findings indicate that an adult learner's motivation is largely intrinsic or intertwined intrinsic/extrinsic and that their motivations are bound with their identity. This finding warrants a more careful understanding of existing theory and, by extension, how the adult learner experience within student success environments may influence our understanding of the research and theory surrounding student success theory and practice. Additionally, future study of the intertwined complex nature of

intrinsic and extrinsic motivations and how this may influence adult student commitment, motivations, and their shared responsibilities as a part of their studies warrant consideration.

The second central idea related to implications for research and theory builds upon the first. When adult learner motivations are squashed, it influences their sense of value or mattering in their environment, and their sense of balance in juggling work-family-school is disrupted. Thus, in this case, the student success environment appeared to exert a subtle or implied pressure on adult learners to conform to an expression of extrinsic student success goals and strategies. This, in turn, diminished their key strength as an adult learner of intrinsic motivation and supported a habit of avoiding or allowing the institution to take responsibility for being the decision-maker of which supports the student would utilize. This has considerable implications for the interpretation of existing corresponding student success literature and when and how it can be successfully applied as relevant to contemporary community college adult learners.

Persistence models such as Bean and Metzner's (1984) Nontraditional Undergraduate Student Attrition Model, although quite relevant and valuable, do not provide sufficient explanatory power of an adult learner's experience in a student success environment. The study findings suggest that the interaction of environment, academic, social, and psychological variables, as described by Bean and Metzner (1984), point to some similar connections in the student success environment. Adult learner participants described that when college representatives affirmed their decision, they felt supported and confident. When the college disaffirmed their decisions, the adult learner described feeling marginalized. This finding also affirms Clark's (2012) qualitative study, which connected Schlossberg's (1989) Theory of Marginality and Mattering and Rendon's (1994) Theory of Validation to explore adult learner persistence. The adult participants described feeling valued when faculty and staff affirmed their

adult identity. The adult learner participants also described feeling less visible when faculty and staff did not recognize or affirm their adult identity. In those instances, the adult learner participants described feeling less likely to engage with the learning environment. What is unknown is the depth of that lack of engagement and its connection to student success and completion, or what might be missing altogether.

Adult learner participants described that situational barriers tied to student success mandates such as mandatory tutoring left them to choose between *reluctantly compliance* or *risky avoidance*. Bean and Metzner (1984) pointed out that adult learners will not persist in this kind of situation, even if the learner is a good student. The adult learner participants described tipping points that can disrupt their work-life balance. What is unknown is how an adult learner's decision to comply or avoid the mandate impacts their ultimate success and at what risk to their long term work-life balance and quality of life.

Developing an adult learner-focused student success model could build upon the foundational principles from Bean and Metzner (1984); Clark, (2012), Schlossberg (1989), Rendon (1994) to frame adult learner experiences with academic, environmental, social and psychological variables, with holistic aspects of a sense of belonging value, and mattering. The additional focus would include strands that focus on how this intersects with key strategies in guided pathways, student success strategies, and environments.

Finally, the third central area of focus for research and theory implications surrounds the significance of the use of a category of the label of *nontraditional student* and a skewed or imbalanced dynamic concerning the shared investment and autonomy for the institutional agents and learners. Perhaps a renewed interest in considering why or how the term adult learner could become more consistent and valued within the research and practice communities would address

this concept of mutuality. The classic definitions of adult learners often met with criticisms that it did not make enough distinction between a large variation in *adult learners writ large* – whether breaking it down by development/life stage categories or in groupings of age (early, mid-, later in life studies for example), there is a mandate to do this. Ironically, the evolution of the category and label of *nontraditional student* appears to have even further obscured our ability to analyze adult learners and other groups of learners in a nuanced, purposeful manner when it comes to age, life role, and life experiences or learning as it connects to adulthood.

The study findings indicate that the institutional use of *nontraditional* as an umbrella cluster term is a part of a reordering of categories used to label, understand and support groups of learners, particularly those believed to be at-risk. This fits with the equity goal expressed within the student success movement. However, the conscious labeling of adult learners who do not fit the traditional or classic learner definition and the grouping of the vast majority of community college students as nontraditional has unforeseen consequences for all students, their learning experiences, and our ability to understand and support their successes.

This is a study finding that extends beyond semantics and warrants future research and careful thought to examine the influence of the use of this category and term more carefully in shaping administrator and faculty attitudes or perceptions about learners, about adult learner marginalization, and how these tie to institutional environments.

Implications for Practice

This study suggests that in a practical sense, the outcome-determinative nature of student success initiatives somewhat loses sight of the student *learning* experience through institutionally driven strategies and practices at community colleges. Additionally, while on the one hand, the adult standing of all students was emphasized by institutional representatives

within this study, the practice of intrusive or intensively uniform success strategies stands counter to that in terms of making space for adult students to practice important aspects of autonomy and shared learner responsibility.

Instructors and faculty were not a focal point of this study, but it is plausible, given the study findings, that they too, experience some environmental pressures and could benefit from increased flexibility and the time to address specific and unique individual learner needs and challenges at the classroom level, albeit in this case adult learners. This support includes a call for a new or changed environmental discourse, for reconsideration of professional development and policies that reflect increased sensitivity to the teaching and learning environment as adult learners experience it. In practical terms, there is a balance between institutional success strategies and adult learner needs that are being disrupted and creates unintended situational barriers (Clark, 2012; Osam et al., 2017).

As a reasonable starting point for intentionally addressing adult learner needs, the CAEL framework provides strategies practices that are adult learner-centered, flexible, and reflects adult learner's preferred communication and learning styles (CAEL, 2020). Adult learners encounter situational barriers that are often out of their control, and they interfere with their attendance and participation and impact their success and completion. An implication of this study is to develop a strategy is to provide flexible options for adult learner attendance and participation that compliments current elements of student success practice. For example, incorporation of alternative methods of participation via creative scheduling of tutoring, exams, or other key learning events presents a flexible option. The increased integration of tools such as Zoom, Google Hangout, and FaceTime, are also potential options that allow adult learners and all students to continue to participate in educational activities yet reduce situational

transportation and other barriers. As we are currently in the age of COVID-19, adult and traditional-age learners have some familiarity with these platforms. For those learners who do not have a background in these platforms, student success courses are an ideal place to introduce them as part of information technology. This slight change in policy can demonstrate institutional effort in recognizing adult learner needs, with minimal disruption to ongoing student success efforts.

A second strategy involves focusing on professional development training for faculty and professional staff about postsecondary adult learners and intergenerational learning environments. There is much to learn and consider for practical policy or environmental shifts that address adult learner characteristics and needs. In general, Community college professionals have basic experiential and professional knowledge of adult learner characteristics and needs, yet they are not functioning in an environment that explicitly celebrates the value of having a high concentration of adult learners as a part of that learning community. A focused approach in how these needs and characteristics potentially fit within or even enhance a student success culture can create a more favorable environment for adult learners.

The integration of experiential learning and the integration of real-time application of material enhance an adult learner's learning environment. Adult learners connect their learning experience to their prior knowledge and skills and place a high value on application and knowing how information is relevant.

Future Research

This study focused on one community college with a small group of adult learners and institutional representatives. Building upon that, future studies could further explore their experiences with an ongoing student success environment and whether and how they are typical

of other institutions. Future research on adult learner experiences could expand to include additional community college or postsecondary contexts and include a design for cross-referencing of adult learner characteristics with other identities. Additionally, future research could consider the juxtaposition of faculty, institutional, and student perspectives in a holistic manner.

Future research could include a redesign or enhancement of the interview protocol. The interview protocols used in this study connected Southeastern State's specific priorities for student success and completion at community colleges. The questions focused on several topics including, but not limited to how adult learners define student success, their perception of institutional definitions of their perceptions of being an adult learner, decision making, and awareness of targeted support services. Some additional topics are ripe for consideration. First, how adult learners manage and cope in situations where they must 'glow with the flow' to comply with student success mandates and policies and if they believe their educational experience was diminished. Also, how do adults learner process a decision to pause or stop their education due to situational barriers, and how does the institution and its professional staff counsel adult learners in those unique and individual circumstances? What influence, if any, does that influence an adult learner's decision.

The student success environment at community colleges continues to evolve and expand its reach at community colleges and other postsecondary education institutions. If adult learners are to remain a fixture at community colleges, research, theory, and practice must invest in focused study on adult learner experiences in the student success environment so that they remain a fixture in the community college landscape.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

Adult Learner Interview Protocol

A Qualitative Case Study of Adult Learner Experiences with Student Success at North Carolina Community Colleges

Time of Interview – Start: End
Participant Pseudonym:
Date:
Location
IRB Informed Consent Yes No

Project Description:

The purpose of the qualitative study is to understand the experiences of adult learners who attend a community college immersed in the student success culture. Adult learners are the most significant demographic at community colleges because of the college's access, flexibility, and support of adult learner life roles and responsibilities. Significant reforms have changed to face of community colleges in which the focus is student success and completion. Despite these reforms, the research literature has not addressed the adult learner in context of student success. Moreover, many of the initiatives suggested by student success are quantitatively based. It is unknown in qualitative terms, how adult learners' unique learning experiences manifest within a student success environment. This study uses a qualitative case study methodology to develop this research.

Research question:

How adult learners perceive their student experiences at a community college immersed in a student success culture?

Introduction: Thank you for taking the time to participate in this interview. We are going to talk about your perceptions of and experiences with student success as a community college student. Your responses will help me understand the overall picture of adult learner perceptions within the student success environment at a community college.

1. Tell me about yourself, what brought you to a community college as a student?
2. What is it like to be a student? What does your day look like?
3. Can you tell me about how you manage going to college and your other responsibilities?
 - a. Prompt: Can you give me some examples of how you make it work?
 - b. Prompt: Can you share some examples of when it is frustrating?
4. Can you tell me about what support you have as a student outside of school?
 - a. Prompt: For example, family, friends, yourself, an employer?
 - b. Prompt: How do they help you?
 - c. Prompt: Can you tell me about a time when someone outside the college was not supportive of you as a student?
5. What kind of on campus supports are available to help students?
 - a. Prompt: Can you share some examples of how they have helped you?
 - b. Prompt: If you have not used them, can you share with me why?
6. Let's shift gears and talk about some of the decisions that college students have to make about their education. Let's brainstorm and come up with a list of decisions that you have to make as a student.
 - a. Prompt: For example, students have to make decisions about what classes to take or how many credits to take in a semester

7. Now that we have a list of the type of decisions that students make, let's talk about how you go about making those decisions. Can you describe how you do it?
 - a. Prompt: Do you talk to anyone at the college? Family? Friends? No one?
 - b. Prompt: What kinds of information do you look up? Where do you find them?
 - c. Prompt: What kind of things are important to you in making a decision about your education?
 - d. Prompt: How do you handle information that contradictory, like something you read versus something you heard?
8. Can you tell me about a time that you had to make a decision and describe the process of making that decision?
 - a. Prompt: Perhaps something from the list that we created?
9. Can you tell me about a time when you ever had to take a break from your studies or change back and forth from full to part-time (or vice versa?).
 - a. Prompt: How did you go about making that decision?
 - b. Prompt: Who helped you make that decision?
 - c. Prompt: How does that decision affect you as a student?

One of the things that I am curious about is about you and other students who have similar experiences at the community college.

10. Can you tell me if you heard anyone here use the term 'adult learner'? Can you tell about it?
 - a. Prompt: Who said, where did you see/hear, what context?
11. When you hear the term 'adult learner', what comes to mind?
 - a. In what ways are you an adult learner?

- b. Do you think you are the same or different from the other students who attend the college? Can you share some examples?

Another thing that I am interested in learning is something called ‘student success’ and what that means to community colleges and community college students.

12. Have you heard or seen anyone here use the term ‘student success? Can you tell me about it?
 - a. Prompt: Who said it, where did you see/hear it, what context was it said
13. Can you give me some examples of things that you have seen or heard at the college that promotes student success?
 - a. How have these things helped you be successful or not successful as a student?
 - b. As an adult learner? Can you share some examples?
14. When you hear ‘student successes, what comes to mind?
15. I am going to show you a definition of student success. This is how the Southeastern State Community College System defines “student success”. You can take a moment to read it as I read it to you. What do you think of this definition in relation to what you have actually experienced and observed as a community college student?
 - a. *(Show participant the following definition):*
 - i. *Students should make informed decisions.*
 - ii. *Students progress through effective learning pathways that lead to credentials of economic value, without unnecessary detours.*
 - iii. *Students are provided integrated, targeted supports and interventions when they are most effective.*

16. If you were giving advice to an incoming adult learner on how to be a successful student, what would you want to share with him/her? What have you learned?
17. If you had the chance to give feedback to faculty, staff or administration about how this community college has helped you to succeed as a student and as an adult learner, what feedback would you share. What suggestions would you make?
18. Is there anything that I did not ask you that you would like to add generally?
 - a. About the experience of being an adult learner in a community college?
 - b. About being a successful student?

Okay, that is it! Again, I appreciate your help and support. I will begin analysis of this interview shortly. I will contact you to review the transcript of your interview. Before I turn off the recorder, do you have any questions for me?

Appendix B

Community College Representative Interview Protocol

A Qualitative Case Study of Adult Learner Experiences with Student Success at North Carolina Community Colleges

Time of Interview – Start: End
Participant Pseudonym:
Date:
Location
IRB Informed Consent Yes No

Project Description:

The purpose of the qualitative study is to understand the experiences of adult learners who attend a community college immersed in the student success culture. Adult learners are the most significant demographic at community colleges because of the college's access, flexibility, and support of adult learner life roles and responsibilities. Significant reforms have changed to face of community colleges in which the focus is student success and completion. Despite these reforms, the research literature has not addressed the adult learner in context of student success. Moreover, many of the initiatives suggested by student success are quantitatively based. It is unknown in qualitative terms, how adult learners' unique learning experiences manifest within a student success environment. This study uses a qualitative case study methodology to develop this research.

Research question:

How adult learners perceive their student experiences at a community college immersed in a student success culture?

Introduction: Thank you for taking the time to participate in this interview. We are going to talk about your perceptions of student success and adult learners given your role in the community college environment. Your responses will help me understand the overall picture of adult learner perceptions within the student success environment.

1. Tell me about yourself. What do you do here at the community college?
2. Can you describe for me, from your own viewpoint, what 'student success' means? Can you give me some examples?
3. Can you describe your institution's view of what student success means? Can you give me some examples?
4. I am going to show you the definition of student success that is used by the Southeastern State Community College System. (*Show participant the following definition:*
 - i. *Students should make informed decisions.*
 - ii. *Students progress through effective learning pathways that lead to credentials of economic value, without unnecessary detours.*
 - iii. *Students are provided integrated, targeted supports and interventions when they are most effective.*)
5. In what ways do you see this definition reflected at this community college. Can you give me some examples?
6. Can you share with me some examples of any activities or strategies that XXX community college does or uses to promote student success?
 - a. What do you do that illustrates student success?
7. Do you think students are aware of student success initiatives or strategies at this campus? How can you tell?

8. How do you think students perceive or define student success?
9. Community college students have made many decisions every day that influence their role as a student. Let's brainstorm and come up with a list of those types of decisions.
 - a. Prompt if necessary....for example, how many credits to take, what courses, whether to apply for student aid, etc.
10. How do you perceive that students go about making informed decisions about some of the things that we listed?
 - a. Whom do you believe students ask for input on making a decision?
 - b. What kinds of information are available for students? Where do they find it?
11. Can you tell me a little about some of the on campus supports that are place to help students be successful?
 - a. Are there specific supports for full time/part time students, first generation, minority, veterans, etc.?
 - b. How do students access those supports?
 - c. How do you believe student perceive those supports?
12. Can you share the ways in which the community college helps a student make decisions about their programs?
 - a. Prompt: For example: if they need to take a break from their studies; change programs, etc.

We are going to shift our discussion to talk about adult learners at the community college.

13. How do you know if a student is an adult learner?

- a. Prompt: What kind of characteristics would lead one to believe a student is an adult learner?
 - b. What do you notice about adult learners at this college?
 - c. Do you know what adult learners study/major?
 - d. Are you aware of how many adult learners XXX Community College has?
 - i. Prompt: Does XXX Community College keep track of the information?
14. Does your college have area, department, or office that is responsible for adult learners?
- a. How does that work?
15. Are there other words that you or your institution uses other than adult learner?
- a. If there is no definition, use the following and ask what they think about it.
(Use the following definition: An individual who is over the age of 24, is married and/or have dependents, is financially independent their parents, has life responsibilities outside of their studies, such as family, employment, is veteran or active military status, and may or may not be a full-time student.)
 - b. Is this part of the climate or culture at this campus?
16. What are some of the ways that you believe your institution serve adult learners?
17. We discussed that students have many decisions every day that go with being a community college student. What kinds of decisions do you believe are unique for adult learners?
18. We discussed the ways in which the community a student makes decisions about their program. Is there anything that addresses adult learner needs when they must make decisions about their program?

19. If you were sharing feedback with the community college faculty, staff, or admin about how the community college has helped students succeed, what feedback would you share.
 - a. How about those things that help adult learners succeed?
20. What suggestions would you make if you were in charge or if you could make your own decision?
 - a. For adult learners?
 - b. For all students?
21. Is there anything that I did not ask you that you would like to add generally?

I think I have covered everything. Again, I appreciate your taking the time to meet with me today. I will begin analysis of this interview shortly. I will contact you to review the transcript of your interview. Before I turn off the recorder, do you have any questions for me?