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Nontraditional Aged Reentry Women in Community College

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In partial fulfillment of
the degree of

Doctor of Education
in
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Abstract

This qualitative study explores the experiences of ten nontraditional women who reenter a community college after a prolonged departure.

Experiences are examined through the lens of Tinto's Theory of Institutional Departure, as well as Deci and Ryan's Self Determination Theory. While there is strong desire for educational attainment, early college experiences lack the focus of a defined educational goal and institutional knowledge about basic services. Return to community college results not only from changes in the life course, but a strong commitment to the goal attainment of a college degree. Current college experiences are positive with regard to both academic and social integration; however, they occur in a concurrent manner. Academic and social integration are enhanced by academic competency and belonging to the educational community, and increasing autonomy as they progress toward their educational goal. Integral to persistence is high use of educational resources and an increased sense of institutional agency over time. Challenges to persistence include a continued lack of financial resources, significant health issues, and balancing work, school, and home life.

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Chapter One

Introduction

According to the American Association of Community Colleges (2008), by 2014, the majority of jobs created will require some postsecondary education. Community colleges provide access to affordable education for 11.8 million full- and part-time students across the country, including preparing students to transfer to four-year universities, workforce development and job skills training, and community enrichment programs.

Community colleges are generally known for their student population of underserved students--“low income students, those who are first in their family to attend college, and students of color” (Green, 2006, p. 21); they are also known as institutions which serve a variety of nontraditional learners. Levin (2007) notes that nontraditional students can have many descriptors, including gender, age, parental and occupational status, and physical or mental disability in addition to minority status, low economic status, or immigrant status. In addition, nontraditional students may have experienced limited previous academic achievement and the resultant lack of self-confidence. This personal identity can affect both college performance and college experience. Nontraditional learners may be viewed by the institution as being members of a disadvantaged population; as a result, they are seen as deficient in terms of social and cultural capital in the academic world (Levin, 2007).

In addition to multiple characteristics, nontraditional students have a variety of different goals and motivations for participating higher education,

including job advancement and a desire to increase competence in skills (Levin, 2007). Unlike traditional students, their life experiences and the pressures of work and family motivate nontraditional students. According to Levin (2007), educational goals and performance goals are unique in nontraditional students attending community college:

Educational goals are focused on both learning goals--such as language acquisition--and on performance goals such as a high school diploma or degree attainment. For nontraditional students, learning goals and the process of fulfilling them develop performance goals. While there is considerable body of research that claims student educational goals, such as program and degree completion are major factors in student persistence, for nontraditional students . . . the behaviors and goals setting are neither static nor singular. The accomplishment of learning goals along the path of college attendance can result in the alteration of performance goals. (Levin, 2007, p. 83)

Motivation is a key element to understanding the experiences of the nontraditional learner. In a study of the achievement motivation of traditional versus nontraditional students, Eppler and Harju (1997) use Dweck's model of achievement motivation to understand what motivates students when presented with an academic challenge. Dweck's model is helpful in understanding the effect of motivation on behaviors. Two patterns of behaviors are noted; first, a response based on learning goals that are characterized by a desire to increase competence through the mastery of new skills. An orientation

based on learning goals is closely associated with persistence when faced with obstacles. Second is a response based on performance whereby the focus is on outcome rather than process. A performance-based orientation is associated with the need to have a favorable view of performance by others and avoid negative evaluations. The behavior associated with a performance-based orientation is to choose tasks with a known successful outcome. Nontraditional students were noted to have a higher commitment to the achievement of learning goals than traditional aged students. Although both traditional and nontraditional students had a high levels of commitment to learning goals, nontraditional students endorsed learning goals even more strongly than their younger peers. Although commitment to learning goals was not correlated to academic success, those with the lowest grade point average were noted to have low commitment to learning goals and performance goals. Traditional students who were not academically successful were more likely to exhibit learned helplessness behaviors compared with traditional students who cited long work hours (Eppler & Harju, 1997).

Motivation is comprised of both internal and external factors. Bye, Pushkar, and Conway (2007) studied the affective and motivational components of the academic life of traditional and nontraditional aged students. They found that nontraditional aged students had higher levels of motivation due to higher levels of intrinsic motivation than traditional aged students did. Because of the higher intrinsic motivation, nontraditional aged

students also experience a high degree of positive affect or a strong internal desire to learn.

Johnson, Schwartz, and Bower (2000) note that for women there is almost always a life altering event which precipitates the return to school, such as death of a spouse, job loss, or divorce. Compounding these stressful events, they note that no matter how well prepared or enthused a student was returning to school, it was always an intimidating experience related to fear of failure, an unfamiliar environment, and fear of non-acceptance. Johnson, Schwarz, and Bower (2000) conducted a study of 350 women attending two-year college and found that age, marital status, and the presence of children were significant contributors to the amount of stress women experienced. Nontraditional aged women who reenter college often do so with a variety of life experiences, both personal and educational, that can affect journey toward achievement in higher education. Women may delay, leave, and reenter college for a variety of reasons.

Adult women attending community college, while placing high value on obtaining higher education, also experience significant stress related to attending school and in balancing work and home life. Despite the fact that women experience these stresses, they attend community colleges in large numbers, go on to attain college degrees and become productive members of society. In addition, adult reentry women are not the typical student on a community college, but rather one of many nontraditional groups on a college campus of typically young people.

Much of the research to this point has focused on the barriers that nontraditional reentry female students face and the strategies colleges can use to assist students in order to be successful. In spite of this attention, some schools still norm the college experience around the “normal” student expressed as young, male, and unattached with life responsibilities and do not provide day care, mentoring, or support groups for women attending college. In addition, each of these strategies is extrinsic to the student herself. Research has not examined the internal motivation and characteristics women possess in order to overcome these barriers to completion of a college degree.

Statement of the Problem

Higher education in the United States has always been viewed as a path to economic and social prosperity. Despite this belief, 54 million adults in the American work force lack a college degree, and of those, 34 million have no college experience at all (Plusser et al., 2007). The increasingly competitive global economy and pace of technologic change are transforming the skills and education necessary for individual and national wellbeing.

Michigan is a state with its economic roots in the honorable tradition of manufacturing and entrepreneurship. Michigan’s industrial growth not only propelled the United States as a major economic power in the world by the 1920’s, but shifted the economic power from the east coast to the Midwest (Folsom, 1998). The prosperity of Michigan has largely been built on high paying, low skill jobs. For the last two decades, however, the United States has been undergoing a transition from an industrial to a knowledge-based

economy. Because of the good paying, low skilled jobs, Michigan has enjoyed both market stability despite economic difficulties and higher than average per capita income when compared to the rest of the country for most of the 20th century (Glazer & Grimes, 2009).

The last decade has been a time of economic turmoil for both the United States and in particular, the State of Michigan. Currently, the unemployment rate for the State of Michigan is 7.5%, the fourth highest in the nation, compared with a rate of 6.1% for the rest of the United States (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014). From a historical perspective, the Michigan unemployment rate in January 1999 was 4.0%. In December 2009, the unemployment rate in Michigan was 14.6 %, the highest in the nation, compared with an overall rate of 10% for United States (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2010). In addition, metropolitan areas in Michigan have an even higher unemployment rate: The Detroit-Warren-Livonia metropolitan area has an unemployment rate of 14% Flint has an unemployment rate of 16.1%, and the unemployment rate of Muskegon-Norton Shores area is 15.7% (U. S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2010). Rural areas are not exempt from high rates of unemployment, including the Northeast Lower Michigan counties of Alcona, Alpena, Cheboygan, Crawford, Iosco, Montmorency, Ogemaw, Otsego, Oscoda, Presque Ile, and Roscommon counties, which have a combined unemployment rate of 15% (State of Michigan Department of Energy, Labor and Economic Growth, 2009).

Women have been a persistent component of the national workforce. Since the end of World War II, labor force participation of women has steadily

increased. According to the Bureau of Labor (2014), in the years following World War II, less than one third of women were in the workforce, steadily increasing in the 1960s through the 1980s. The labor force participation of women peaked in 1999 with 60% of the work force being comprised of women. As recently as 2012, 57.7 percent of women participated in the workforce compared with 70.5 percent of men. In addition, women are more likely to participate in educational opportunities that assist them in obtaining employment. In 1970, of women ages 25 to 64, only 11% of women held college degrees, compared with 38% in 2012. Women are also less likely than men to drop out of high school and more likely to enroll in college. Among 2012 high school graduates, 71 percent of young women were more likely to enroll in college, compared with 61% of men. Despite the fact that women are more likely to obtain a baccalaureate degree than men are, their earnings are still only 81% of what men earn among full time salary and hourly wageworkers (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014).

Gender differentials at home and Work

Despite the rising participation of women in both the workforce and in higher education, women continue to earn less than men and more readily found to be living below the poverty level. In particular, households headed by single women are more likely to be poor than those headed by single men. This is due to not only lower earnings for women, but that women are more likely than men to have custody of children in divorce or non-marital birth (Christopher, England, Smeeding, & Phillips, 2002). In addition, although

poverty rates declined between 2005 and 2006, women are more likely to be living below the poverty level than men are (DeNavas-Walt, Proctor & Smith, 2007). According to the American Community Survey, in Michigan 15.4% of women live below the poverty level compared with 11.7% of men living below the poverty level (United States Census Bureau, n.d.).

Blank and Shierholz (2006) noted that in the last 25 years, the participation of women in the workforce has risen sharply, while men's participation in the workforce fell slightly. At the same time, the wage gap has narrowed. The increased labor market experience and participation on the part of women, as well as an increase in educational degree attainment, has contributed to this trend (Leigh & Gill, 1997). Furthermore, according to Gill and Leigh (2000), the narrowing of the wage gap between the genders can be attributed to the participation of women in community college with strong vocational orientation. On the other hand, since 1979 while wages for more skilled women and men have risen substantially, wages for less skilled women have remained stagnant (Blank & Shierholz, 2006).

The economic downturn in Michigan and in the United States has had different implications for men versus women in the workforce. While the unemployment rate for both men and women has been increasing, in July 2008, the unemployment rate for men was 6.4% rising to 9.8% by July 2009, compared with an unemployment rate of 5.4% rising 7.5% for women (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2009). Sahin, Song, and Hobijin (2010) note that the disparity in rates of unemployment between men and women can be attributed

to two factors: first, the fact that men were more heavily represented in goods producing industries, which saw the greatest downturn, specifically manufacturing and construction. Secondly, men whose family experienced a decline in overall household income decided to re-enter the workforce, and yet were unable to find work accounted for the higher rate of unemployment in men. Women are more heavily employed in industries that have fared better in this recession, (e.g. health care and education). According the Department of Labor (2008), the leading occupations for women include registered nurses, secretaries, elementary and middle school teachers, home health aides, retail sales workers, and childcare workers. Some of the occupations, such as home health aides, retail sales workers, and child care providers could most accurately be described as low status, low wage positions.

Over the last decade in Michigan, there has been a significant decline in high school dropouts. In 1990, 76% of people living in Michigan had a high school diploma, but only 17.4% had a bachelor's degree, whereas in 2006, 87.2% had a high school diploma, but only 24.5% had a bachelor's degree (United States Census Bureau, 2007). In 2006, Michigan had an enrollment of 222,777 full and part-time students at two-year public institutions, with men comprising approximately 42% of the student body compared with 58% composed of women. On the other hand, of the almost 19,000 degrees conferred by two-year institutions in Michigan in 2006, women were twice as likely to graduate as men (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2006).

Anderson, Bisel, Sorenson, Wacalawek, and Stocking (2008) note that the Michigan economy is the result of many complex issues. While Michigan has made gains in the number of high school and college graduates, it continues to lag behind the country. Young people who do attain college degrees are inclined to migrate out of state, resulting in the loss of human capital. Lack of gains in the knowledge economy and continued dependence on manufacturing leaves low waged workers susceptible to job loss. In an analysis of per capita income, Glazer and Grimes (2009) note that high prosperity states have one thing in common--people with bachelor's degrees in broadly diversified sectors of the economy. Employment from low education attainment industries has risen just 15.7%, while employment from high education attainment industries has risen 32.4 %. As recently as 2000, Michigan ranked 16th in the nation in per capita income, but 34th in bachelor's degree attainment. Since 2007, Michigan ranks 33rd in per capita income, which equates to a significant 11% below the remainder of the country and the lowest ranking for Michigan since data began to be collected in 2007 (Glazer & Grimes, 2009). Michigan continues to have only 24.7% of persons 25 and older with bachelor's degrees and ranks 34th in the nation (United States Census Bureau, 2007).

The United States is moving toward a new global economy. Nowhere is that more apparent than in Michigan, where the economy has experienced unprecedented upheaval in the transition from manufacturing toward a knowledge-based economy. This economic transition also requires a paradigm

shift in terms of the mindset of the workforce in Michigan. In order for Michigan to survive the transition to the knowledge-based economy, more education will be required.

Women continue to be a steady component in the nation's workforce. More than half of the workforce is made up of women. In addition, women are more likely to take advantage of the educational opportunities that assist them with gaining employment. Women are less likely than men to drop out of high school and more likely to enroll in higher education and graduate with a certificate or degree. The career choices of women, however, are more likely to be low skill, low paying jobs in childcare, health care, and education. While these types of positions tend to be protected from downturns in the economy, women continue to earn less than men, and therefore continue to be financially disadvantaged (Sahin, Song, & Hobjin, 2010).

In the last several decades, women have clearly understood the imperative for education as a gateway toward a better future. While women are less likely to drop out of school and more likely to attend either a two-year or a four-year institution and persist to degree attainment, they are still deeply affected by the downturn in the economy in Michigan. Although women in high skill, high demand positions are less likely to experience unemployment in the current economy, they continue to be employed in low prestige positions that are associated with low wages. In addition, although the unemployment rate has not affected women in the same way as men, earnings for women continue to lag behind and therefore ultimately influence the status of women as the

Michigan workforce transitions to the knowledge based economy needed in the new global economy.

Community colleges have had a long tradition of providing education to nontraditional and low-income learners. At no time has the need for the educational opportunities available at community colleges been more important to address the need for workforce development. Community colleges are uniquely positioned as a catalyst for change in transitioning unskilled workers to high-skill, high-demand jobs.

Purpose of the Study

Adult women are one cohort of nontraditional students attending community college. Women comprise the largest demographic on college campuses. Most nontraditional aged women who enroll in community college have not followed the usual trajectory in order to achieve higher education. Age is not the only characteristic that sets nontraditional aged women apart from their traditional aged counterparts. Another characteristic is the varied journeys of why and how they came to seek higher education; One nontraditional aged woman may have entered the workforce directly after high school and then finds she is suddenly without a job due to downsizing. Another may have attended college after high school, but drops out for a period of years in order to marry and have children. A third may have a college degree, but choose to be a stay at home mother, and re-enters college in order to refresh job skills after the kids are grown. For nontraditional aged women students, community colleges provide quality affordable education, as well as provide the

opportunity to balance family and work responsibilities. When adult women return to school, however, they invariably face stress related to managing family, job, and school (Johnson, Schwartz, & Bower, 2000).

Nontraditional aged women attending community college, while placing high value on obtaining higher education, also experience significant stress related to attending school and in balancing work and home life. Despite the fact that women experience these stresses, they attend community college in large numbers, go on to attain college degrees, and become productive members of the workforce. In addition, nontraditional aged women are not the typical student on a community college, but rather one of many nontraditional groups on a college campus typically comprised of young people. Even the term “nontraditional student” can lead to a sense of certain invisibility within the larger college community. Women, and in particular nontraditional women, are an important element of the community college learning environment that has often been an overlooked area of research.

The purpose of this study is to explore the nature of the relationship between nontraditional aged reentry female students and their community college experiences. The study seeks to understand the woman’s previous educational experiences as well as to understand why she chose to return to college at this point in her life. The study will also explore the nontraditional aged women’s perceptions of social and academic experiences within the community college environment. Once the woman decides to resume postsecondary education, what are the perceived benefits, as well as the

challenges brought about by attending community college? Finally, the study will explore the goals and motivations of nontraditional reentry women and how these affect their educational experiences.

Research Questions

Prior to nontraditional women entering college, they have had previous life experiences, which may affect their current college experiences. For example, the reasons for entering community college, whether planned or due to an alteration in life, circumstances, as well as the support of family and friends in the decision to return to college, may affect the community college experience for nontraditional women. Once nontraditional women have reentered college, other factors that may affect their experience are acceptance from teachers and other student colleagues, difficulty with technology, and the ability to manage school, work, and home. The basic inquiry of this qualitative study will be to examine the educational path of nontraditional aged reentry women, as well as what factors motivate nontraditional women to persist in their endeavor to complete a degree or certificate at a community college. According to Miles and Huberman (1994), research questions represent the variables that the researcher wants to examine. In researching the experiences of nontraditional women in community colleges, the proposed study poses the following questions:

1. What are the lived experiences of nontraditional aged women prior to entering community college?

2. What causes the nontraditional aged woman to depart from postsecondary education?
3. What are the motivating factors and goals which result in a nontraditional aged woman's decision to reenter to community college?"
4. What personal characteristics do nontraditional aged women describe which allowed them to persist in attending community college despite the barriers they encountered?

Significance of the Study

This exploratory qualitative study aims to understand the experiences of nontraditional aged women who return to attend college, as well as to expand the knowledge regarding a group of individuals on a college campus who are overlooked. Nontraditional aged women continue to be employed in low wage and low prestige positions, also facing low status and low recognition as learners on the community college campus when compared to traditional learners. Nontraditional women, specifically those who return to postsecondary education at a community college, need to have their journey toward higher education acknowledged so that educational leaders have a broad understanding of the stresses, challenges, and barriers that women face as they attend community college.

Women are the majority of students on the community college campus. This mirrors the majority of participants in the workforce, and yet their experiences are not understood or valued as unique in higher education. Despite the fact that women and in particular nontraditional women continue

to be a significant portion of the students found on a community college campus, they are often overlooked. Irrespective of the numbers of women on community college campuses, educational leaders need to understand this unique group of learners.

It is the goal of the educational leader to contribute to the body of knowledge, which includes an understanding of the diversity of learners, especially nontraditional learners. Often a disconnect occurs between educational leaders understanding of the campus climate and administrative practice. Educational leaders, through heightened awareness and understanding, can affect the educational trajectory or pathway for nontraditional reentry women, as well as allowing women to gain a greater sense of agency through the pursuit of higher education. It is important for all student members of the community college learners to feel acknowledged and accepted.

In addition, it is important to recognize the distinct position of the community college as a catalyst for change in the emerging global economy. Allowing nontraditional women to tell the story of their educational journey, particularly as they progress in the current economic environment in the State of Michigan, is fundamental to giving these women a sense of agency and empowerment.

Nontraditional aged women who find themselves on a community college campus after a period of years, perhaps because of job loss or the need to obtain additional job skills in order to support their family, may have

experienced the sense of fear and vulnerability that comes with the unfamiliar environment of a college campus. Women who attend community college often do so in addition to their other roles and responsibilities at home. In this environment, they are not simply students who are there to learn or retool job skills, but also frequently have the multiple roles of wife, mother, employee, caregiver to elderly parents in addition to the “student” role. Nontraditional aged women find their educational experiences shaped by their adult life experiences and family and workplace responsibilities. In addition, nontraditional aged women often do not experience a typical path to college; rather their experiences may be one of beginning to attend college after high school graduation, drop out of college, get married, and start a family and then return to school after a significant life experience. It is important for educational leaders to have a broad understanding of the meaning and impact of these experiences and life roles on the nontraditional aged woman.

Definition of Terms

Thorough and detailed definitions of key components are important to the overall understanding of the proposed study and illuminate key conceptual underpinnings of the theoretical framework.

Academic integration is defined as the sense satisfaction with the academic experiences based on academic performance and interactions with faculty (Tinto, 1993).

Attrition is defined as any student who enrolls at a post-secondary institution one semester, but does not enroll in a subsequent semester. According to Bean and Metzner's (1985) conceptual model of nontraditional undergraduate student attrition, attrition can be defined as a student who drops out, stops out, or transfers to another institution. Attrition is typically associated with but not limited to, a number of factors including poor academic preparedness, excessive work, family responsibilities, and lack of commitment on the part of the student (Schuetz, 2008).

Community College is defined "as any institution regionally accredited to award the associate in arts or the associate in science as its highest degree" (Cohen & Brawer, 2008, p. 5).

Individual departure is defined as the process by which an individual comes to voluntary withdrawal from an institution of higher learning. Furthermore, individual departure can be seen in two ways: first, when an individual departs from the institution; second, an individual who departs from the wider system (Tinto, 1993).

Nontraditional Aged Woman is defined in one of three ways; first, it can be defined as a female student over the age of 25 years who has never attended college before and is attending for the first time. Secondly, it can be defined as a woman over the age of 30 who may have attended college at one time, but left prior to obtaining a degree and is reentering college in order to gain additional job skills as a result of a job loss or displacement, including work as a stay at home mother. Third, it can be defined as a woman over the age of 30 who may have a college degree, but is reentering college in order to obtain new employment skills after a job loss, job displacement, or major life event, including death of a partner or divorce.

Persistence is defined as degree or certificate seeking attendance at a community college having either full or part-time status for two successive semesters with significant progress toward either a certificate or an associate degree. Significant progress is defined as either 15 credit hours toward a certificate or 30 credit hours toward an associate degree. Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) note that persistence is the progressive reenrollment in college, whether continuous from one semester to the next or attendance that is temporarily interrupted and then resumed. In a four-year college, student persistence would normally be defined from one fall semester to fall semester, but due to the irregular and occasional enrollment patterns of community college students, persistence is defined from one semester to the next (Bers & Smith, 1991).

Reentry is defined as a student who returns to an institution of higher learning after leaving for one or more semesters without completing a degree or certificate program.

Social integration is defined as the sense of social community in an institution of higher education, which is the result of participation in extracurricular activities and peer group interactions (Tinto, 1993). Furthermore, it can be seen as a sense of comfort and belonging to the campus community as well as enjoying time spent in college and in classes (Karp, Hughes, & O’Gara, 2008).

Empowerment is the process through which one gains authority or control over one situation on the individual or community level (Johnson-Bailey, 2010).

Limitations and Delimitations

Adler and Clark (2003) note that in some ways, qualitative data leads to theories that more accurately describes and addresses real world problems than quantitative data. However, social inquiry is not without limits. The interviews may generate themes or patterns that do not fully align with the preliminary overarching theoretical frameworks guiding this study. This research utilizes purposive sampling. The purpose of this study is to examine the experiences of nontraditional aged women who left community college, and how they navigated the return to learn as nontraditional aged collegians at a two-year college, rather than women or men or nontraditional learners as distinct on a community college campus.

This qualitative study of nontraditional reentry women in community colleges will not study male students. Although they have an important place in higher education, they will not be the focus of this study. The experiences of men and women in the labor market and the workforce are unique, and therefore it makes sense that their experiences in higher education are distinct as well. In addition, traditional aged college students, as well as those who attend four-year institutions will not be the focus of this study.

Chapter Two

Review of Literature

The purpose of this review of literature is to note the purpose and mission of community colleges and to reflect on the ways that this has changed into the institution of higher education of today. In addition, an overview of community college students will be provided, as well as of nontraditional learners within community college, and finally women as learners within higher education and as reentry nontraditional students.

History of Community Colleges

Community colleges have always played an important part in postsecondary education in the United States. According to Cohen, Brawer, and Kisker (2013), a community college is “any institution regionally accredited to award the associate in arts or the associate in science as its highest degree” (p.5). This definition includes not only comprehensive, public two-year universities, but technical schools, both public and private as well.

Community colleges were founded at the turn of the twentieth century in response to changing social forces in the United States, including a need for more technologically skilled workers and the belief that education would lead to social equality (Beach, 2012; Cohen, Brawer, & Kisker, 2013). Because of the passage of the Morrill Act of 1862 and 1880, four-year colleges and universities were established in every state in the union. Initially, many of colleges were founded as agricultural institutions or teacher colleges, which gradually grew to include an increasing number of subjects including business, forestry,

journalism and social work because of the demand for programs that are more diverse and career goals (Cohen, Brawer, & Kisker, 2013).

At the time they were established, junior colleges, as they were originally known, were considered a radical innovation in higher education. Initially established to remove the burden from colleges and universities, junior colleges became a new type of institution that offered both college preparatory curricula, as well as terminal vocational programs in an ever-increasing variety of subjects (Baker, 1994; Beach, 2012). Initially the community college served the population by increasing the idea of education as a vehicle to success in America. Education was viewed as the ideal way to increase democracy where success could be obtained not only from hard work but also through higher education. According to Brint and Karabel (1989), “the vast and expansive system of educational pathways to success that has been constructed in this country is both the institutional embodiment of the commitment to the ideology of equality of opportunity and a constant source of reinforcement of this ideology” (p.5).

Prominent educators, beginning with Henry Tappan, president of the University of Michigan in the 1850s, through Nicholas Murray Butler from Columbia University, David Start Jordan at Stanford University and William Rainey Harper from the University of Chicago in the 1870s, viewed the first two years of postsecondary education as unnecessary in university level instruction (Baker, 1994; Beach, 2012; Cohen, Brawer & Kisker, 2013). They began a movement to relinquish the responsibility of educating adolescents in freshman

and sophomore classes and relegated this responsibility to a new type of organization known as junior college. This would allow universities to concentrate on education based on research and professional development (Brint & Karabel, 1989).

In 1892, Harper separated the University of Chicago into two divisions: the first two years would be taught in the “junior college,” while the remaining two years would be known as “senior college.” Students who completed junior college were awarded an associate’s degree with the explicit hope that students would give up the idea of pursuing college work at the end of the sophomore year. In addition, it was expected that only the most gifted students would continue to pursue the more academically rigorous tasks of research and advanced professional training. In 1900, the first associate’s degree was awarded from the University of Chicago (Brint & Karabel, 1989).

Harper’s vision of change in institutions of higher education extended to the belief that universities should stop offering lower division courses all together and turn this function over to high schools and colleges, which offered only associate’s degrees. As part of a collaborative effort between Harper and Joliet High School principal, J. Stanley Brown, the high school’s curriculum was expanded to include college level courses with advanced standing at the University of Chicago. In 1901, Joliet Junior College, the nation’s first independent junior college, was opened (Brint & Karabel, 1989; Frye, 2014). Over the next 30 years, junior colleges spread across the country, with California, Illinois, Michigan, and Missouri enrolling nearly three fifths of all

public junior college students by 1930 (Brint & Karabel, 1989; Frye, 2014). For the first thirty years of their existence, junior colleges exclusively maintained the transfer function to four-year universities, where they were viewed as allowing thousands of worthy students the opportunity to obtain higher education. Under this system, many small communities in the United States established junior colleges (Callan, 1997). At the same time, there was recognition that some promising students would be capable of transferring to a university, and many would not, and so the concept of higher education as widely available to all held a paradox. Should junior colleges be allowed to educate students knowing that not every student was capable of successful transfer to a university?

While early innovators from universities introduced the idea of community colleges to divert students away from higher education, others within the junior college movement, namely Leonard Koos and Walter Crosby Eells, promoted the idea of vocational training to academically oriented junior college administrators, faculty, and students. In the 1930s, junior colleges embraced a new mission, a separate vocational education track with the purpose of providing social mobility and opportunity through a different level of education (Brint & Karabel, 1989; Bragg, 2001).

Two events in the early twentieth century influenced the purpose and trajectory of community colleges. First, as World War II ended, institutions were filled with returning war veterans on the G.I. Bill, which allowed the financial means for more education to a larger number of students. In addition,

post war prosperity was fueled by not only economic growth but also an increased tolerance for the upward mobility aspirations of working class people. A growing economy required more people with college level training.

The second event was in 1947 when the Truman Commission on Higher Education published its landmark report, *Higher Education for American Democracy*. The commission recommended expanded educational opportunities for all citizens to include the fourteenth grade as well as emphasized the benefit of the terminal education offered at junior colleges. The commission recognized that the expanding economy required new categories of semiprofessional employees, such as dental hygienist, medical secretary, and electrical technician, and that the most appropriate institution to provide this education was the junior college. The Truman Commission also recommended the name “community college” be adopted to recognize the increasing presence of the two-year college in small communities and to reflect the educational needs of the local community (Brint & Karabel, 1989; Cohen, Brawer, & Kisker, 2013). While the Truman Commission solidified the mission of the community college, moving it from the marginalized edge of higher education and into the fold of respect and legitimacy, the vocational mission of community college also reflected a continuation of the stratified and hierarchical class system in the United States.

In 1968, the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching established a commission whose mission was to review the structure, policies, and financing of higher education. The Carnegie Commission on Higher

Education was led by University of California president Clark Kerr, who was a key force behind California's three-tiered system of education. In June 1970, The Carnegie Commission on Higher Education published its second report of its findings entitled *Open Door Colleges: Policies for Community Colleges*. Among the recommendations of the commission was the suggestion that community colleges follow the California model; open door policies that would allow all students over the age of 18 to be admitted as long as they showed the ability to benefit from continuing education and low tuition rates. They also recommended that community colleges follow a comprehensive curriculum with both transfer and occupational offerings, noting that students should be encouraged to transfer and should not view occupational programs as simply terminal programs. In favoring a hierarchical system of education, the Carnegie Commission placed the community college on the bottom rung of the educational ladder, whereby students would be channeled upward (Brint & Karabel, 1989; Katsinas, 2003; McCormick & Zhao, 2005). Furthermore, the Carnegie Commission legitimized the expanded mission of the community college to include general education, vocational education, adult education, and community engagement (Beach, 2012).

The 1970s were another turning point for the community college as an institution. From 1970 to 1980, community colleges were transformed from colleges that primarily served in the capacity of transfer function to a four-year institution to organizations whose curricular offerings revolved around occupational training. This shift in mission was due to a changing economic

landscape, which saw declining labor markets for graduates of four-year universities as well as external pressures from private foundations, the federal government, and the business sector.

The Carnegie Commission, however, could not have foreseen the economic downturn of the early 1970s when many college graduates lost their jobs due to decreased demands. In the April 1973 when they issued the report *College Graduates and Jobs*, the commission noted the disparity between supply and demand for college graduates as a reason for social tension and unrest as people became either unemployed or underemployed. Prior to the 1970s, students attending community college arrived with high academic expectations and intention to transfer to a four-year institution; however, the decline in marketability of baccalaureate degree holders, combined with the surge in occupational programs, caused a surge in community college enrollment. While acknowledging that higher education was a pathway to better life, students began to believe that that a bachelor's degree was not necessarily the purpose of attending the community college, and thus the push toward the vocationalization of community colleges was completed (Brint & Karabel, 1989).

Societal factors have also played a role in the enrollment levels of nontraditional learners. Since World War II, women have not been exclusively limited to the traditional roles of nurse, secretary, teacher, and childcare worker, but have entered educational and professional areas that were once only open to men, and as a result, now constitute the majority gender on all

college campuses. In addition, there have been changes to the structure of the American household, in that most couples see the need for two incomes for personal and financial reasons, and therefore enroll in programs they believe will lead to higher paying jobs. In addition, couples have few children, allowing more discretionary income to be spent on their need for continuing education, as well as their children's educational need (Bean & Metzner, 1985).

Community colleges not only saw increased enrollment due to a proliferation of vocational programs, but they also moved away from a traditional curriculum to a more diversified one, and in doing so diversified the population of students they served. Community colleges began to offer community and continuing education, senior citizen institutes, and high school diploma completion courses (Cohen, Brawer, & Kisker, 2013). For example, open enrollment allowed students take a foreign language class when planning a trip out of the country or a course on the "history of jazz" for personal interest. They also encouraged enrollment by offering classes at night, on weekends, in workplaces, and at off campus centers. Community colleges became adept at new program development in emerging markets; in some cases, specifically customized programs were developed to meet to the needs of a business or industry within the community. Low cost tuition and the wide availability of financial aid also affected enrollment at community college (Brint & Karabel, 1989). All of these factors shifted the demographic mix of community colleges, and as a result saw an increase in the enrollment of adult women, part-time attendees, senior citizens, and minority students. Open door

enrollment allowed students to drop in and drop out of programs in order to attend at their own pace, while the revolving door allowed students to return for more specialized training or another degree (Brint & Karabel, 1989).

An increase in the numbers of community college, as well as enrollment in the 1970s also saw a shift in the identity and mission of the community college (Beach, 2012; Cohen, Brawer, & Kisker, 2013; Meier, 2013). Higher education embraced the community college as the comprehensive institution to provide not only general education, community service, adult and basic education, counseling, transfer and vocational education, but leading the cause in helping advance the cause of disadvantaged students in basic skills and opportunities (Beach, 2012).

Throughout the 1980s and 90s, community colleges saw continued enrollment growth despite a decline in the number of 18 year old students within the overall population in the United States. As a result, community colleges worked actively to expand programming for older students in order to compensate for the decline in traditional student populations. As the population of older students increased, the number of credit hours declined as older student opted for part-time enrollment (Cohen & Brawler, 2008). In addition, community colleges began to see an increase in the need for remedial or developmental education, as older students needed “brushing up” on collegiate level skills. Community colleges have often been seen as having dual missions, both the transfer function and terminal degree attainment through occupation or vocational education. Community colleges continue today in the

tradition their inception to be recognized as a beacon of democracy to all through the policy of open access. The more disadvantaged the nontraditional student, the more validation for the need of community colleges to exist. When students arrive at the community college with low income and poor high school performance and yet make significant gains, this should be recognized as an institutional success.

Overview of Community College Students

It is important to understand who attends community college and the unique student development needs of two-year collegians. Over time, the population of students attending community colleges has both increased and diversified. The traditional undergraduate student is typically a student who graduates from high school, goes directly to a four-year college, depends on parental support in order to meet financial obligations and either works part-time or not at all while attending college (Choy, 2002). Community college students, on the other hand, are a varied group of individuals with multiple life roles, responsibilities, and characteristics.

According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (Choy, 2002), between 1970 and 1999, the enrollment at community college has grown 72 percent from 7.4 to 12.7 million students. In 2009, community colleges saw another significant increase in enrollment in part due to the recession that began in 2007. The number of students enrolled in courses for credit at a community college in the fall of 2009 increased by 11.4% from the fall of 2008, and 16.9% over fall of 2007, representing a 24.1% increase in enrollment in a

two-year period of time (Mullin & Philippe, 2009). According to the American Association of Community Colleges (2014), the average age of student attending a community college is 28 years of age, 30% are 21 years old or younger, 57% are between the ages of 22 and 39, and 14% are over the age of 40. In addition, 57% of community college students are women, compared with 43% of men (AACC, 2014). In addition to age and gender, a community college student more likely to be part of a minority group. As of the fall of 2013, 51% of students were White, 19% were Black, 14% were Hispanic, 6% were Asian, and 1% were American Indian. Further, thirty-six percent of all community college students are the first generation in their family to attend community college, while 17% are single parents (AACC, 2014). A community college student is more likely to be low income with 26% living below the poverty level (Horn & Griffin, 2006).

Figure 1. Demographic Descriptors of Community College Students

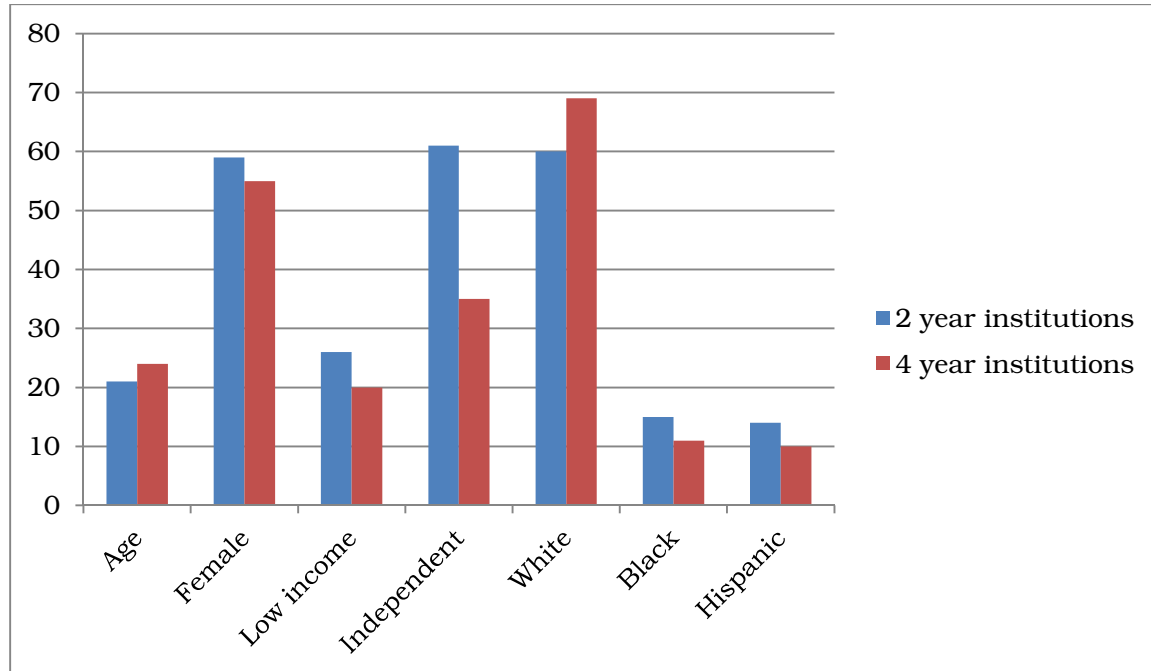


Figure 1 Demographic characteristics of undergraduates enrolled in community college and 4-year institutions: 2003-04. Adapted from “Profile of Undergraduates in U. S. Postsecondary Education Institutions: 2003-04 with a special analysis of community college students” by L. Horn & S. Nevill, June 2006.

The research on the economic effects of community college attendance is varied (Dougherty & Kienzl, 2006). Dougherty (1987) notes that for those students who enter a two-year community college with the intent of transferring to a four-year college earn less than those who directly enter a four-year college. Conversely, those entered a community college with the intent to attain a sub-baccalaureate or vocational degree earns more than they would have if they had attended a four-year college. More recently, Marcotte, Bailey, Borkoski & Kienzl (2005), using data from the National Education Longitudinal Survey, found that the average wages among young men and

women who attended community college and earned associate degrees were higher than those with a high school education. The increase in earnings, however, was attributed to annual salary rather than hourly wages, indicating that the increased difference was due to more hours worked.

Dalgar and Weiss (2012), note in a study of the attainment of short-term certificates, long-term certificates and associate degrees of study across a variety of fields of study, found that earning an associate degree lead to an increase in wages, but that it was field dependent. This was most pronounced for women who pursued associate degrees or long-term certificates in high return fields such as nursing and allied health, versus degrees in humanities or social sciences. For men, the attainment of an associate degree was resulted in higher wages, but this was seen as an increased ability to obtain employment and longer hours worked. For those graduates, earning a short-term certificate had no impact on wages compared with those who earned some credits, but left short of degree completion.

Students who attend community college are a heterogeneous population in terms of age and race. Although the reasons for attending community college are varied, there is financial gain from obtaining an associate's degree over a high school diploma. While those who attend a two-year community college will earn less than those who attend a four-year college, there is a financial benefit for those who obtain vocational degrees.

Nontraditional Learners in Higher Education

In reviewing the literature pertaining to higher education, age and gender are frequently cited as variables for study. The changing demographics of adults in the United States, as well as the imperative toward lifelong has resulted greater scrutiny of adult learners within higher education. In addition, the rapid pace of technological change has resulted in occupational obsolescence. Educators and employers understand that it is no longer possible to educate a student for a job role in the rapidly changing society. Understanding of the learning goals and strategies necessary to accommodate adult learners across the broad and expanding life span is necessary (Schaie & Willis, 1978).

Nontraditional learners compose a large portion of students in higher education and yet are heterogeneous in terms of characteristics. The complexity of their lives results in a unique college experience that is different than the traditional learner. The decision to attend college later in life or return to college is a multifaceted decision-making process. Return to college is the result of the interplay of two phenomena in the adult learner's life: the goal of returning to school and the life circumstances in which they find themselves. According to Blair, McPake, and Munn (1995), goals can be either short term or long term, and circumstances can be seen in terms of supply or demand. Supply side circumstances can be characterized as the presence of educational institutions, reliable transportation, and adequate childcare. Factors that cause a nontraditional learner to participate in college on the demand side

include family circumstances, previous educational experiences, and employment situation.

Kasworm (2008) describes the adult collegiate learner as having four distinct challenges to the adult collegiate learner's development of a successful student identity. The first challenge is to the adult learner's sense of competency insofar as the demands of navigating the both the campus environment and the classroom. The feelings of uncertainty can be compounded by the life crisis that has caused them to seek higher education later in life. The second challenge is engagement with the college environment, since adult learners often have competing obligations. This challenge requires that the adult learner constantly renegotiate or adapt in multiple areas of everyday life. The third challenge for the adult learner is the integration of collegiate learning and real life knowledge. The final challenge the adult learner faces is gaining a valued sense of self within the culture of higher education. Each of these challenges contributes to the complexity of the adult learner.

Nontraditional learners are more likely to have varied enrollment patterns, including delayed enrollment, history of drop out, stop out, and bounce back. In a study of students who delayed enrollments, Rowan-Kenyon (2007) found that among students who delayed enrollment 1 year (52%), those who delayed enrollment 1-2 years (10%), and those who delayed longer than 2 years (38%), those who delayed enrollment the longest were more likely to be African American, have lower socioeconomic status, and have lower levels of academic preparedness.

Bozick and Deluca (2005) found that on average, students who experience varied life experiences in young adulthood and delayed postsecondary enrollment do so for a variety of different reasons. Young adult males were more likely to delay postsecondary enrollment, with Hispanic and African American men delaying an average of 10 and 11 months respectively when compared to white and Asian males who averaged eight months. The study noted that for every month of delayed enrollment, the odds of degree completed decreased by 6.5%, while those who delay enrollment into postsecondary education from high school for a year are 78% less likely to complete a bachelor's degree than those who enroll immediately after finishing high school. Students who did enroll on time were more likely to have completed high school with a diploma, have higher standardized test scores, and were unlikely to have dropped out of school. Students who received a GED were more likely to either delay enrollment, if they attended college at all. In terms of the institutional type, students who not only delayed enrollment, but enrolled in less than four-year schools were significantly less likely to complete a degree than those who enrolled from high school into a four-year college (Bozik & DeLuca, 2005).

Nontraditional learners in particular often have multiple demands on their time and attention due to not only the responsibility of work, but their partnered relationships and have dependent children. Life circumstances and the accumulation of social roles appear to affect both male and female students as they enroll and persist to degree completion. While women are more likely to

enroll on time when compared to men, if they enroll at all, students who married or became parents were on average delaying enrollment for 38 months after marriage and 41 months after becoming a parent. In addition, students who have children before or during postsecondary enrollment are less likely to complete a degree or program, while students who marry before are less likely to complete a degree than those who marry during college enrollment (Bozik & DeLuca, 2005).

In a comparison of the engagement styles and college attrition among first year traditional and nontraditional students in a university, Gilardi and Guglielmetti (2011) note that employment; either full or part-time significantly decreases year-to-year persistence in both traditional and nontraditional students. With regard to interaction styles, nontraditional students who were more actively engaged in classroom activities experienced a protective factor from attrition, while traditional experienced the same protective factor from informal contact outside formal teaching situations.

Adult men and women who attend college often have different goals and experiences, which affect the higher education experience. A study comparing the goals and experiences of 746 adult college students attending a public four-year university found several difference between male and female students (Malin, Bray, Dougherty & Skinner, 1980). Women were more like to plan careers in service areas such as education, social services and health care, as well as seeking a job immediately after graduation. Men, on the other hand, were more likely to plan to use their education to advance their career as a

manager or scientific professional. Higher satisfaction and better academic performance were associated with being female, older, in a higher income bracket, and longer time out of school (Anderson & Darkenwald, 1979).

In addition to differences between traditional and nontraditional students' goals and experiences affecting college life, Justice and Dornan (2001) studied the influence of metacognition and motivation on academic performance between traditional and nontraditional aged students. Justice and Dornan (2001) studied both male and female traditional and nontraditional students and found that nontraditional students were more likely to use higher order skills, such as generation of constructive information and hyperprocessing, as activities to enhance academic performance. In addition, nontraditional aged students were more likely to self-initiate activities in order to process difficulty materials when compared to traditional students. Furthermore, women were more likely to use these activities than their male counterparts and report more intrinsic motivation within the course.

Because of their work and family life commitments, nontraditional learners have had to develop a variety of time management skills in order to be successful in higher education. A study of 293 first year psychology students examined the time management skills of traditional aged students, those less than 21, borderline mature students, those between the ages of 21 to 25, and mature students, those older than 25 years. The authors found that women reported greater time management skills than male students. They also found that the older mature students reported significantly better time management

skills than either of the other two groups. These improved time management skills, however, did not translate into improved academic performance, as mature students performed no better academically than traditional aged students (Trueman & Hartley, 1996). As a way of managing time, women were more likely to positively rate their online learning experiences than men (Sullivan, 2001).

Another enrollment phenomenon is that of students who “stop out.” This can be defined as students who return to school after a substantial period spent not enrolled because of employment, family rearing, military service or other activities deemed important by the adult student (Smart & Pascarella, 1987). In a study of both male and female adult students who left college, the intention to return to college is triggered by a series of events, which includes previous college experience, the nature of the organizations in which they are employed, and the satisfaction they derived from their early career experiences. Both men and women are strongly influenced by their unfulfilled degree aspirations to return to college especially if they have had previous positive experiences in school. In similar results, Shields (1995) found that among male and female nontraditional reentry students, leaving college is viewed as having been a failure while returning to school is viewed as a an achievement event. Students more frequently attributed leaving school because of an external cause, whereas they cited internal causes for return to college, although the external factor determinants were greater. In addition, students reported higher

self-esteem and levels of association with the student identity when they perceived their return to school as a means of occupational advancement.

A more recent phenomenon in higher education is the reverse transfer in which a student having been previously enrolled from a four-year institution, transfers back to the community college to earn a degree. According to Kalogrides and Grodsky (2011, p. 869), between “1972 and 1996, the proportion of students who began at a four-year college and transferred down to a community college, nearly tripled from 4% to 11%”. This is thought to be the result of a lack of preparedness on the part of students who begin at a four-year institution, as well the strong desire for the attainment of a baccalaureate degree by both parents and educators. In an examination of 2000 postsecondary students, they note that students who transfer back to a two-year institution after previously having attended a four-year institution fared better with regard to graduation and employment than those who failed to attain a degree at a four-year institution. In a quantitative study of 47 traditional and 47 nontraditional aged students ages 24 to 57, who were matched for demographics, significant differences were found in how students perceived academics, peer and social relations, family, autonomy and responsibility, and intimacy. Traditional aged students were found to be more concerned about academic performance when compared to nontraditional aged students, whereas nontraditional aged students were more likely to enjoy classroom experiences, including homework. Peer groups and social activities were more likely to affect the lives of traditional students, compared to

nontraditional students who were more concerned with family responsibilities at home (Dill & Henley, 1998).

Men and women differ on their attitudes toward academic achievement in college. In a study of 314 students attending an urban community college, both male and female students expressed strong support for the value of college and a preference for college attendance over working in place of college. Women were more likely to give a strong endorsement of the value of reading and writing. Men were likely to identify academic activities as masculine as opposed to feminine and did not see college attendance as betraying one's roots (Winter, 2009).

Despite the label of nontraditional learners, older students perform well academically. Kasworm and Pike (1994) studied 500 adult undergraduate students at the University of Tennessee at Knoxville and found that while younger students were more likely have higher family incomes, higher ACT scores and high school GPA, older students were more likely to be married and enrolled part-time. Despite these differences, older students had significantly higher GPA's while in college. In addition, while both groups reported satisfaction with campus involvement, younger students were more likely to be involved in the cultural life of the campus, while older students were more likely to interact with faculty. In a study of 323 undergraduate students at a community college, nontraditional learners, many of whom were older, experienced less situational communication apprehension than traditional learners (Poppenga & Prisbell, 1996).

Miller, Pope, and Steinman (2006) note in a study which compared male and female traits on college campuses that female students used tutoring services infrequently, rarely studied independently, and reported strong use of technology, but not in advanced technical skills. Female students were also more likely to consult with key campus personnel as needed, including advisors and faculty members. Female students consider college an investment and usually budget for tuition in advance. Women students are more likely to work while attending school and are not significantly involved in student activities.

The results of longitudinal studies are mixed in regards to degree obtainment in traditional versus nontraditional learners. Choy (2002) found that nontraditional learners, who began either a baccalaureate degree or associate degree, were less likely to complete their degree. Traditional and nontraditional students earned certificates at the same rate. Calcagno, Crosta, Bailey, and Jenkins (2007) in a large study of community college students in Florida, found that once they controlled for math test scores, older students were more likely to obtain an associate's degree or certificate, however, younger students were more likely to transfer to a four-year university.

Institutional and life factors can affect the successful enrollment and completion of a degree for both male and female students. Students are less likely to enroll and persist to successful degree completion when entering a two-year institution when compared to a four-year institution. Delayed enrollment occurs more frequently with male students than female students;

however, childbearing and childrearing responsibilities factor into delayed enrollment for women. Once attending the institution, adult students are more likely to persist when enrolled in a program that had direct application to employment opportunities. In addition, for adult students, social integration and institutional commitment play a role in whether the student persists within the college environment. Furthermore, while attending college, male and female students have different ways of accessing the support systems available to them to allow them to be successful.

Nontraditional learners as a demographic of higher education are frequently studied in the higher education literature. Nontraditional learners perform well academically, and in fact seem to be learning. While nontraditional students have a variety of enrollment patterns, they persist over time to graduation especially when there is a direct occupational focus when compared to their traditional student peers. The complexity of their lives in terms of multiple roles for both men and women leads to additional stress while attending college.

Nontraditional Learners in Community College

Choy (2002) defines a nontraditional student as having at least one of the following characteristics: lack of a standard high school diploma, delayed enrollment patterns, or part-time attendance at college. In addition, nontraditional students are more likely to be a single parent or have a dependent other than a spouse who may or may not be a child. Nontraditional students are also considered financially independent for determining financial

aid. Furthermore, according to Horn (1996), a student with one characteristic could be described as minimally nontraditional, two to three characteristics as moderately nontraditional, and greater than four characteristics as highly nontraditional. In addition, certain nontraditional characteristics are frequently grouped together. For example, a single parent will always be considered financially independent for financial aid purposes. Full-time employment is frequently found among students who are attending college part-time. The more nontraditional the student, the more likely they are to attend community college (Choy, 2002).

Most nontraditional adult students attending community college have more than one demographic identifying feature that would give them the status of a nontraditional student. According to Choy (2002), 73% of all students attending community college have at least one “nontraditional” characteristic. Age is one of the most common nontraditional identifiers for community college students. In addition, the older the student, the more likely to have other responsibilities and relationships, which accompany older adult life, like employment, partnered relationships, dependent children, and dependent parents. According to the AACC (2010), 16% of community college students are single parents.

For most nontraditional students, the desire to gain skills or earn a degree for career enhancement and personal enrichment are important considerations when deciding to enroll in a community college (Choy, 2002). According to the AACC (2014), 40% of all students attending community college

students are enrolled full-time, compared with 60% enrolled on a part-time basis. In addition to attending school, the majority of community college students are employed. 62% of full-time students work either full or part-time, while 73% of students who are enrolled on a part-time basis, also work in addition to attending college. In a survey of nontraditional students, Choy (2002) found that 67% of highly traditional students prioritized their role as employee first and student second. This can influence continuous enrollment from semester to semester, as well as degree or certificate obtainment if faced with the choice between economic survival and obtaining more job skills.

Another frequently cited reason for attending community college is cost and flexibility. In an analysis of the surge in community college enrollments beginning in 2008, Mullin and Phillipe (2009) note that students choose to attend community college for a number of reasons. Reasons cited for choosing a community college include an increased understanding of the need for post-secondary education, expanded program options, high availability of workforce retraining programs, and partnerships with local business and industry, as well as the low cost of tuition. According to Provasnik and Planty (2008), the cost of full-time attendance at community college is less than that of full-time attendance at a public four-year college or university. In addition, because community colleges are located in most cities and towns, students can live at home while attending school. Classes at a community college are offered during daytime hours, but also at night and weekends, and via a variety of

technologies such as audio, video, or computer. This variety of offerings allows students to work while attending college (Kane & Rouse, 1999).

Traditional community college students tend to have diverse enrollment and degree attainment patterns. According to Adelman (2005), 60% of students who enter community college at age 24 or greater are the first in their family to attend college. In addition to enrolling part-time, older students are more likely to attempt fewer degree credits per semester including developmental credits. Nontraditional students earned 78% of their attempted credits compared with 72% of younger learners who successfully completed their credits (Crosta, Calcagno, Jenkins, and Bailey, 2006). In a study that compared older and younger community college age students using a discrete-time hazard model of first time community college students, Crosta, Calcagno, Jenkins, and Bailey (2006) found that older students are as likely as younger students to graduate despite not enrolling from semester to semester. In addition, older students were less negatively impacted by the need to take remedial courses than younger students.

Nontraditional students in a community college tend to attend part-time while working and see themselves as an employee first and as a student as a secondary role. While they attempt fewer credit hours, they are more likely to complete these credit hours than their traditional counterparts. Despite varied enrollment patterns, they are as likely to persist to degree attainment as younger, traditional peers.

As noted previously, two-year community colleges differ from four-year colleges. At the same time, traditional students are different than nontraditional students in terms of demographics, career goals, enrollment, and life responsibilities, which factor into whether a student successfully completes a college degree. In addition, female students are different than male students. Nontraditional aged women students on a community college campus are one example of the diversity of learners, and yet within that group they are heterogeneous in terms of race, ethnicity, age span, educational goals, socioeconomic status, health status, attitudes about professional and personal life, and the need for workforce development.

Beyond the demographics of nontraditional learners, it is also important to answer the question – who are nontraditional learners in community college? Kasworm (2005), in a qualitative study of twenty-eight nontraditional students attending community college found that adults attending community college initially compared themselves through the lens of what they believed to be the ideal social and academic norms for college-aged students. Once they returned to the classroom, however, their experiences were positive allowing them to redefine and accept themselves as worthy of the privilege of education. Further, they noted that the whole of their life experiences, both educational and experiential were a valuable asset and supported their success as learners.

Women as Learners in Higher Education

In reviewing the literature over the past two decades regarding women in community college through the lens of theory, Twombly (1993) observes that

much of the literature on women in community college is based on a view of women as victims of oppression. In addition, programs for women in community college are viewed as in addition to existing programs.

According to the Bureau of Labor (2014), the educational attainment of women ages 25 to 64 has risen significantly over the last 20 years. In 2012, 38% of all women in this age group held college degrees, compared with just 25% in 1992. Conversely, in 1992, 10% women were classified as high school dropouts, compared with only 6% in 2012. In a study examining the phenomena of increased college graduation rates for women, Becker, Hubbard, and Murphy (2010) note that while the costs and benefits of college attendance for men and women have remained the same; women have overtaken men in degree attainment due a higher level of noncognitive skills or motivation to achieve. Goldin (2006) notes that the emerging role of women has been the most significant change in the United States labor market. These changes have occurred in three distinct phases, three evolutionary changes, and one revolutionary change. Women and their role in the work force have changed from one with static decision making with limited or intermittent horizons to one characterized by dynamic decision-making with long term horizons. Women historically have worked because either they or their families needed money, but have evolved to those who are employed because occupation is part of one's fundamental identity. Furthermore, Mott (1998) notes that women are remaining in the job market longer due to a shift in social and economic structures, an evolving attitude regarding the career aspirations of women, as

well as increased longevity and insufficient financial resources to retire. Goldin (2006) identifies the “Independent Female Worker” phase as occurring from the late-nineteenth century to 1920. Independent female workers were characterized as being young and unmarried who were employed as piece workers in manufacturing or as domestics or laundresses. In addition, a minority of women worked in educational and clerical roles. During this phase, the women were usually poorly educated, poorly paid, and exited the workforce at marriage (Goldin, 2006).

Phase two known as “Easing the Constraints on Married Women’s Work” occurred between 1930 and the 1950s when the number of married women in the workforce rose from 10 to 25% (Goldin, 2006). This time saw a greater number of women completing high school diplomas and resulted in an increased demand for clerical workers. Technology in the office increased the demand for skilled workers, while indoor plumbing, electricity, and technology such as the washing machine and refrigerator eased time constraints at home. In addition, elimination of marriage bars which forced single women to leave employment upon marriage contributed to the rise in married women in the workforce. World War II demonstrated that women in the workplace could be respectable both at home and to the employer (Goldin, 2006).

Phase three, identified as the “Roots of the Revolution,” occurred between the 1950s and 1970s, in which women’s participation in the workforce continued to grow, initially for older women ages 45-54, and then for younger women ages 25-34. During this time, work for women became more socially

acceptable, as well as the availability of part-time work. In spite of this, the earnings of most women were still considered secondary and their employment transitory as it was considered to be linked to that of their husband's primary employment status (Goldin, 2006).

Since the late 1970s, three factors have impacted the "quiet revolution" (Goldin, 2006). The first factor is expanding horizons in which women more accurately anticipated the need for formal education in their lives. During this period, young women participated in more college preparation courses in high school, increased reading and math scores, and as a result saw improved college attendance and graduation rates relative to males. In addition, in college women shifted away from traditional female fields that were consumptive in nature to those that were investment oriented. Women furthered their education in professional and graduate schools to achieve parity with men by the early 2000s. The second factor occurred within the women themselves in the form of altered self-identify. Women began to look at employment as a way of making a name for themselves. In fact, during their time, fewer and fewer women took their husband's surname at marriage, especially among those with professional and advanced degrees. Women began to consider work and employment as part of their need for personal satisfaction in addition to the need for financial support and stability. Finally, the third factor is that of relative earnings and occupations. The wage gap for women narrowed considerably due to women's greater work experiences and market-relevant skills. Other factors also caused a shift in the evolution of women in

the workforce, including an increase in age at first marriage and the availability of contraception.

In addition to the social forces affecting women's emergence into the workforce, divorce has affected women's emergence into higher education. According to Tian (1996) in a study of divorce patterns from 1970 to 1987, education, and unemployment in the United States and the United Kingdom, women's enrollment in college is significantly affected by the rising rate of divorce while men's enrollment is significantly affected by unemployment. The author hypothesizes that this phenomena is related to the fact that a male's enrollment in college is due to a threat to the man's role as a breadwinner, such as unemployment, whereas for a woman, enrollment increases when a woman's role as homemaker is threatened.

In the last century, both historical and social forces have influenced women's emergence and position not only the workplace, but created the need for higher education for women. Women increasingly understand that in order to change position in society, more education is necessary. However, depending on where an individual is in her life course, college reentry may produce additional stressors (Johnson, Swartz, & Bower, 2000). Similarly, the Life Course Theory may explain the changing social and education trajectory for women as they pursue life goals (Lewis, Zamani-Gallaher, & Bonapace, 2014).

Nontraditional Aged Reentry Women in Higher Education

While men and women approach higher education from unique positions, nontraditional aged, reentry women usually face distinct challenges, which can have an effect on persistence. From a life course perspective, the educational career of a woman can be viewed as a cumulative and interactive process in which decisions made regarding entry and exit from family as well as occupational and educational roles can occur throughout the lifespan (Bradburn, Moen, & Dempster-McCain, 1995). The educational trajectory for reentry nontraditional aged women has three distinct themes. First, that early life experiences and orientations shape subsequent life choices. Second, that life transitions, such as returning to school, are not necessarily limited to the early adult years, but can occur throughout the lifespan and may be contingent on other role trajectories, and third that historical shifts in opportunity, economics and motivation may affect the transition rates in women in different birth cohorts.

One phenomenon that can impact a woman's reentry into college is that of later life education among women who first give birth as teenagers. Rich and Kim (1999), using data from the National Longitudinal Study of Youth found in a study of over 4,000 Black, Hispanic, and white women that, by age 36, 22 and 26 percent of younger and older teen mothers have not only completed either a high school or GED, but have completed 1 or more years of college. By age 36, 33 percent of older Black teen mothers had completed one or more years of college, compared to 21 and 22 percent of white and Hispanic mothers

respectively. Despite the fact that the women experience a disruption in their regular schooling by giving birth early in life, they continued to pursue education well into adulthood.

Marital status can also be considered an important factor in the academic success of community college students. In a study of married and unmarried community college students, Yess (1981) found that married students, and in particular married female students, earned higher grades than their unmarried counterparts. Married women earned significantly higher grades in four programs of study--executive secretary, nursing, general business, and transfer studies. The author suggests that this may in part be due to financial needs of the family, spousal support, high degree of employability after graduation, and having well defined career goals.

As noted previously, women may return to college throughout the life course as they experience disruption in their other role trajectories. Felmlee (1988) notes that one of the factors complicating the study of reentry phenomena is that it is characterized by multiple and sometimes simultaneous drop in and drop out behaviors. For example, a woman may drop out of full-time work, only to drop in to full-time schooling while enrolling in college. While studying both white and African American women, Felmlee (1988) noted that women were more likely to quit a job to return to school when the wages at the job they were working at were low. In addition, they were more likely to quit a job when they had previous education, had a high IQ, were unmarried, or had no children. White women were more likely to leave a low prestige job to

attend college. Although college attendance increased the wages for both white and African American women, the effect was greater for black women. Another factor affecting the attendance of women in college was the presence of children, which caused women to have to remain in at least part-time work. The author surmised that the presence of children caused women to be less mobile, more likely to take a less prestigious job, and less likely to be offered a higher paying, more prestigious job.

Scott, Burns, and Cooney (1998) compared the motivation of mature aged female students who were classified as either graduates or interrupters. The motivation to return to college was similar for both graduates and interrupters. Interrupters, however, were noted to have more difficult life circumstances at home and were using college study as a form of escape or compensation. Jacobs and Berkowitz King (2002) in their study of the life analysis of women, found slightly different results regarding degree completion by traditional versus nontraditional students. In comparing degree completion between traditional and nontraditional women students, they found that age was not a factor; instead, the significant factors were part-time status and the competing forces of young children, full or part-time work, and the accumulation of social roles by nontraditional students as they reenter college to complete a degree. Younger mothers, described as those under the age of 25, were less likely to complete a degree than older mothers, perhaps due in part to greater experience with handling multiple roles, as well as having a greater appreciation for the need for more education. In addition, "having previous

spells of enrollment increase the chances of finishing for part-time students (Jacobs & Berkowitz King, 2002, p. 225). They also found that part-time students were more likely to finish their degree in the summer months, leading the researchers to conclude that summer enrollment has a positive effect for part-time students and emphasizes the nontraditional trajectory of part-time students.

Patterson and Blank (1985) conducted a study in which the purpose was to develop a profile of the mature woman who returns to postsecondary education. Data was collected from 151 students at two colleges including a woman's college and a community college. They found the majority of students were white, married, and had children. Most women cited the reason for return to college as personal enrichment or the desire to fulfill long term personal or professional goals, although when partners were asked the same question, they most often cited boredom as the reason for return to college. In examining barriers that the women encountered, the researcher found that the students most often cited test anxiety, difficulty with time management, and role conflict. For example, the women in the study noted that while their families gave verbal support and encouragement for return to school, this did not extend to assistance with household tasks. The women also noted that an unexpected consequence of return to school for women was a decline in interaction with previous social contacts while at the same time increased interaction with college classmates.

Didelot (1993) notes in a qualitative study of middle aged women at community college that as women transition between their roles of daughters, wives, mothers, and students, they experienced a variety of emotions. They noted feelings of low self-worth related to negative past experiences in learning environments, which impacted their own belief in the ability to be successful. In addition, pessimistic assessments by family members as to the value of higher education, compounded by spouses and significant others whose reactions to college enrollment ranged from discomfort at the idea of the woman pursuing higher education to outright hostility, made the transition to the student role all the more challenging. Conversely, nontraditional aged women undergraduates with children who were in securely attached relationships with high levels of social support and confidence in school and parenting roles experienced lower psychological distress and increased self-esteem (Quimby & O'Brien, 2006).

A qualitative study of eight women in nontraditional postsecondary educational programs examining how the women came to the decision to pursue a nontraditional career and their perception of the environment, found that while the women needed to support themselves and their families, the choice of a nontraditional career suited their interests. The researchers found that educational leaders could create an environment that enhanced enrollment and retention of women in nontraditional programs. The women also reported mild discriminatory behaviors from male peers and that bias in early education was limiting to the exposure to and choice of nontraditional

programs in postsecondary education. Furthermore, researchers found that all women experienced increased self-efficacy in a nontraditional postsecondary program (Stephenson & Burge, 1997).

Social support is particularly important for nontraditional aged women who reenter a community college. McAtee and Benshoff (2006) conducted a study of 125 women who had been laid off from manufacturing jobs and had the option of enrolling in community college for retraining or seeking immediate employment. White women were more likely to attend community college than to seek immediate employment. They were also more likely to report social support regarding return to school and in coping with job loss.

Coleman (2008) studied African American nursing students regarding their academic and social experiences in a two-year predominantly White nursing program and institution. The author found that African American nursing students experienced feelings of displacement and alienation from the fellow students and faculty. In addition, they described the college environment as unsupportive and, as a result, caused them to have few positive peer and faculty interactions.

Gigliotti (2004) conducted a study of the types and sources of social support available to women who were attending associate degree in nursing programs. The author found that women while women over the age of 37 received less social supports than those under aged 37, that what support they did receive lowered their Maternal Student Role Stress. Suitor (1987) conducted a longitudinal qualitative study of forty-four married women and

thirty-three of their husbands who attended university and were engaged in either full or part-time study. The author found that when wives entered the university as full-time students, they were more likely to adopt the academic community as a reference groups and, as a result, made the student role a priority over their role performance within the family. The change in priorities resulted in a decline in their husbands' satisfaction with the woman's performance of family roles and in return, the husbands' marital happiness. Women also became less happy with their husbands' family role performance over the year; however, their dissatisfaction focused on their husbands' provision of emotional support. They also experienced decreased marital happiness, but less than their husbands. The effects on both husbands and wives marital happiness was much less in the group who attended the university part-time.

In a similar study, Berkove (1979) conducted a descriptive study of 361 returning women students in which four aspects of the husband's support were investigated, including attitudinal, emotional, financial, and behavioral. Overall, women reported that the support of their husband was not only important, it was crucial to success. While the women reported attitudinal, emotional, and financial support, they noted that their husbands were less cooperative in terms of assistance with household tasks.

In a two-part study, Thomas (2001) examined the motivators, obstacles, and support systems for women who reenter college. In the first study of a diverse group of women in terms of race, partnered status, current occupation,

and program of study, the primary motivator for returning to school was career advancement and self-fulfillment. The major obstacles for women are managing multiple roles and time constraints. Despite these difficulties, the women were overwhelmingly positive on their decision to return to school and their ability to manage multiple roles. The second half of the study focused on African American women and resulted in both similar and divergent results. African American women reported career advancement and economic growth as the primary motivator for returning to college. They also related multiple roles, but that school interfaced well with their personal lives. The women, however, also reported considerable challenges unique to being African American, such as financial constraints, inadequate support systems, and institutional barriers. In addition, they also reported that they were unsure if additional education would lead to career advancement.

In a study comparing the psychological functioning, academic performance, and social supports of traditional compared to nontraditional women students, Carney-Compton and Tan (2002) found that nontraditional women were more likely to demonstrate better academic performance than their younger counterparts. In addition, despite the presence of children and additional responsibilities, nontraditional reentry women were less likely to report anxiety in spite of having fewer social supports. Although they reported fewer social support systems, they rated the quality of these supports highly. Traditional students were more likely to cite parents, grandparents, and

boyfriends as support persons, whereas nontraditional women were more likely to cite spouse, significant other, children, or other non-familial sources.

The educational attainment of reentry women can also impact the educational trajectory for their children. Suitor, Plukuhn, Gilligan, and Powers (2008) conducted a longitudinal study of married, nontraditional reentry women with who had attended a four-year university while having on at least one child under the age of eighteen at home. They found that women who completed their baccalaureate were more likely to have some or all of their children go on to complete college when compared to women who left college prior to the completion of the degree. Furthermore, among women who completed their degree, 77% of those with less educated husbands reported that their return to college influenced their children's aspirations when compared to 42% of women with husbands who had also completed a college degree.

In a study of women returning to college, VanEvery (1999) compared self-efficacy or self-growth of women on a community college campus. The students placed in one of three groups: one, the experimental group who participated in a personal growth support group; two, women who took a psychology class taught by a community college counselor; and a third group who served as the control group, who took a psychology class taught by the psychology faculty. The author found that those women who participated in the support group showed slight improvement in self-efficacy, providing rationale for the provision of support groups to assist adult women as they return to college.

Adult women attending community college, while placing high value on obtaining higher education, also experience significant stress related to attending school and in balancing work and home life. Despite the fact that women experience these stresses, they attend community colleges in large numbers, go on to attain college degrees, and become productive members of society. In addition, adult reentry women are not the typical student on a community college, but rather one of many nontraditional groups on a college campus of typically young people.

Much of the research to this point has focused on the barriers that female students face and the strategies college can use to assist students in order to be successful. In spite of this, some schools do not provide day care, mentoring, or support groups for women attending college. In addition, each of these strategies is extrinsic to the student herself. Research has not fully examined the internal motivation and characteristics women possess in order to overcome these barriers to completion of a college degree.

As noted previously, two-year community colleges differ from four-year colleges. At the same time, traditional students are different than nontraditional students in terms of demographics, career goals, enrollment, and life responsibilities, which factor into whether a student successfully completes a college degree. In addition, female students are different than male students. Nontraditional aged women students on a community college campus are one example of the diversity of learners, and yet within that group they are heterogeneous in terms of race, ethnicity, age span, educational goals,

socioeconomic status, health status, attitudes about professional and personal life, and the need for workforce development.

Women continue to be a steady component in the nation's workforce. More than half of the workforce is made up of women. In addition, women are more likely to take advantage of educational opportunities, which assist them with gaining employment. Women are less likely than men to drop out of high school and more likely to enroll in higher education and graduate with a certificate or degree. The career choices of women, however, are more likely to be low skill, low paying jobs in childcare, health care, and education. While these types of positions tend to be protected from downturns in the economy, women continue to earn less than men, and therefore continue to be financially disadvantaged.

The nontraditional aged woman returns to community college for a variety of reasons. She may have entered the workforce directly from high school and then returned in order to gain new job skills after experiencing job loss or in order to have more financial security. She may have started college, and then dropped out in order to marry and have children. Child rearing responsibilities may have kept her out of the college or the workforce during those years; however, once the full time childrearing responsibilities have ended, she too is essentially out of a job. A nontraditional woman may have had a college degree but worked only a few years after college, stepped away from the work force, but needed to return to the workforce because of a life-changing event such as the death of a spouse or divorce. When nontraditional

aged women return to community college, they frequently have additional responsibilities in terms of caring for dependents, which may be children or parents or both, partnered relationships, work, and home. In addition to these stresses, fear of failure or unfamiliarity with the college environment or culture compounds the stress of returning to school. Stress can also result in test anxiety, role conflict, and difficulty balancing work, home, and school.

While women often experience increased self-efficacy while attending community college, nontraditional aged women are also likely to carry with them past life experience that can negatively impact their belief in the ability to perform well in college or lack family support for the pursuit of higher education. On the other hand, while some women experience the emotional and psychological support of family and friends necessary to pursue higher education, they may simultaneously lack of assistance with household tasks.

Persistence among Nontraditional Reentry Students

The most widely posited questions in higher education include such questions as, why do students depart from the institution? What are the factors that influence a student to leave? What effect does the institution of higher education have on whether a student departs from an institution? (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Braxton, Milem, & Sullivan, 2000; Bers & Smith, 1991). Conversely, what causes a student to reenter, persist, and complete a degree? Despite the research on students who depart or persists within an institution, this remains a complex topic without well-defined answers.

Furthermore, one of the underlying assumptions of the institution's effects on

the student is that departure and persistence are at opposite ends of a continuum, the belief that the same factors and experiences that cause a student to depart, also cause a student to persist in the institution.

Similar to the phenomena of departure and persistence, is that of reenrollment in college after experiencing a drop out or stop out. In a study of 463 previously enrolled college students between the ages of 25 to 34 years of age, Schatzel, Callahan and Davis (2013-14), found that those expressed intent to reenroll were those who younger, single, full-time employment status and were members of a minority. In addition, those who had also been recently laid off, had previously earned more credits and held strong positive beliefs about the value of education were characteristic of intent to reenroll in college.

Braxton, Milem, and Sullivan (2000) examined the presence and influence of active learning strategies in the classroom of 718 first time, full-time students at a highly selective research university. Students complete surveys during freshman orientation, during the fall semester and during spring semester. The study also queried students about the presence or effects of class discussion, group work, knowledge level exam questions, and higher order thinking questions posed by faculty in class. They found that class discussions and higher order thinking activities positively influenced social integration, which in turn positively affected intent to return for subsequent years of enrollment.

Other factors not explained by traditional persistence or attrition models can also impact persistence in higher education. Leppel (2001) examined

persistence from the first to the second year of college and found that women were more likely to persist, especially those in education and health care fields, but are less likely to persist in business majors. Men were more likely to persist in business majors, but less likely if they were enrolled in health care or education. Interestingly, although female business majors who were least likely to persist, they also demonstrated the highest academic performance, and conversely male education majors were the least likely to persist, but also demonstrated the highest academic performance.

Financial aid can also impact the persistence of community college students. Dowd and Coury (2006) examined the effect of financial aid on the persistence of community college students. They found that students who took out student loans were less likely to persist from one semester to the next and had no effect on eventual degree attainment. In fact, only 20% of the sample group went on to obtain an associate degree, despite the higher lifetime earnings. The researchers surmised that students developed a negative assessment of the benefits of a community college education when compared to their peers, and failed to see the potential long-term benefits of a degree attainment.

In a study of community college students, Schuetz (2008) administered the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE), as well as qualitative measures to community college students. Schuetz found that engagement results in part from feelings of belonging, competence, and autonomy. The author also found that despite the fact that some of the

students observed and interviewed were well informed about college processes and requirements, they needed assistance to turn informational knowledge into working knowledge on how to be a successful student. For example, despite student's success in navigating an online orientation on topics as complex as the registration process, placement tests, and educational programs, new beginners still found it difficult to understand the consequences of the bureaucratic processes of education. In addition, new students were intimidated by faculty and therefore were more likely to interact with a peer in order to gain understanding of classroom processes. The author suggested that educational leaders who were experts at navigating institutions of learning needed to understand the simplest of processes from the student's point of view in order to ensure success.

Conclusion

The complexity of the lives of nontraditional women can be barriers to degree attainment for women. In particular, young mothers with children, part-time enrollment, or delayed enrollment can affect whether or not a woman successfully completes a degree or certificate program. Women are more likely to persist when they are enrolled in an applied program leading to direct employment. In addition, women use services available to them, such as study groups and technology, as well as seeking out key campus personnel.

Theoretical Perspectives

Life Course Theory. According to Elder (1998), “Historical forces shape the social trajectories of family, education, and work, and they in turn influence behavior and particular lines of development. Some individuals are able to select the paths they follow, a phenomenon known as human agency, but these choices are not made in a social vacuum. All life choices are contingent on the opportunities and constraints of social culture” (p. 2). Life course, as a developmental theory, focuses on the idea that changing lives causes an alteration in developmental trajectory (Elder, 1998). It is based on research done on children in the post Great Depression era and has four main principles. The first principle is that the life course of the individual is shaped by the historical context one’s life. Second, the timing of events or transitions in one’s life impacts development. Elder (1998) notes that historical events and the individual’s experience of these events are linked through shared experiences in relationship with others. The third principle is that of linked lives or patterns of interdependence on a shared network of relationships. The fourth principle is that of human agency in which an individual constructs life course through the choices and actions he or she takes..

According to the life course perspective, individuals move through a series of life events, settings, and social roles that are structured by social institutions. The educational system can be thought of as an institutional setting as an individual moves from elementary to secondary to higher education in a sequential manner. The family life cycle can provide yet another

series of social roles in which an individual moves from marriage, childbearing, early parenthood, launching children, and finally to the empty nesting. An individual's career can provide another series of roles in which a person begins as a novice in early career entry, to a senior level position with more expertise. Human agency is expressed in the individual's choices related to social roles and the timing of role transitions. "To examine agency in the life course, it is necessary to view the person as a developing agent embedding in a dynamic social environment with a changing sociohistorical context" (Crockett, 2001, p. 9). In addition, while it is important to examine life course within structured settings and processes, it is also critical to examine agency in the pursuit of consciously articulated goals. Pursuit of personal goals is the ultimate expression of agency since the individual is taking definitive action to achieve a desired outcome.

Tinto's Model of Institutional Departure

Although Tinto is one of the more widely studied frameworks for explaining departure and attrition in college students, it is often assumed that it is not applicable to community college students. Social integration, one of the key components of the framework, is thought to be unlikely to occur because of the community college student's lack of time to be able to participate in activities such as clubs or organizations (Karp, Hughes & O'Gara, 2005). Relatively little is known or understood about the forces that cause nontraditional students to depart or persist in an institution; however, outside demands for time leave nontraditional learners little time to integrate into social interaction with other learners. According to Tinto (1993), a nontraditional learner is more likely to attend college *in addition to*, rather than *instead of* something else. In addition, women are more likely to be subject to social forces, which cause them to leave when compared to men (Tinto, 1993).

Vincent Tinto began his work in the early 1970's, looking at student dropouts from college. He noted that students who dropped out from college because of academic failure were different from students who dropped out because they voluntarily withdrew or transferred to another institution (Tinto, 1975). Tinto developed a model of drop out processed in part based on the work of Durkheim's theory of suicide in which he notes that "drop out from college is a longitudinal process of interactions that lead differing persons to varying forms of persistence and/or dropout behavior" (Tinto, 1975, p. 93). The goal of Tinto's initial work was to establish a model which could predict who

would drop out of college, based on “not only background characteristics of individuals such as those measured by social status, high school experiences, community of residence, etc., and individual attributes such as sex, ability, race and ethnicity but also expectations and motivational attributes of individual social such as those measured by career and educational expectations and levels of motivation for academic achievement” (Tinto, 1975, p. 93).

Tinto’s theory of institutional departure is based on the belief that colleges are comprised of social and intellectual communities which influence a student’s decision to remain at the college (Tinto, 1993). While colleges are small social and intellectual communities, they are fluid with respect to the place that they hold in student’s lives. Students participate in these social and academic communities for a brief period during their lives and then move on. In addition, the college community reflects the larger society in that it is not homogeneous, but rather heterogeneous in nature, made up of several smaller communities or subcultures. Although there is not always a dominant voice on a college campus, there is similarity of purpose. This similarity of purpose requires a shared consensus with regard to values, and membership in the community as a whole, which contributes to persistence in the pursuit of higher education. In addition, membership in the college community is an interactive process whereby the individual participates in the environment.

Tinto (1993) notes that that there are both academic and social systems on the college campus. The academic system is concerned with the formal

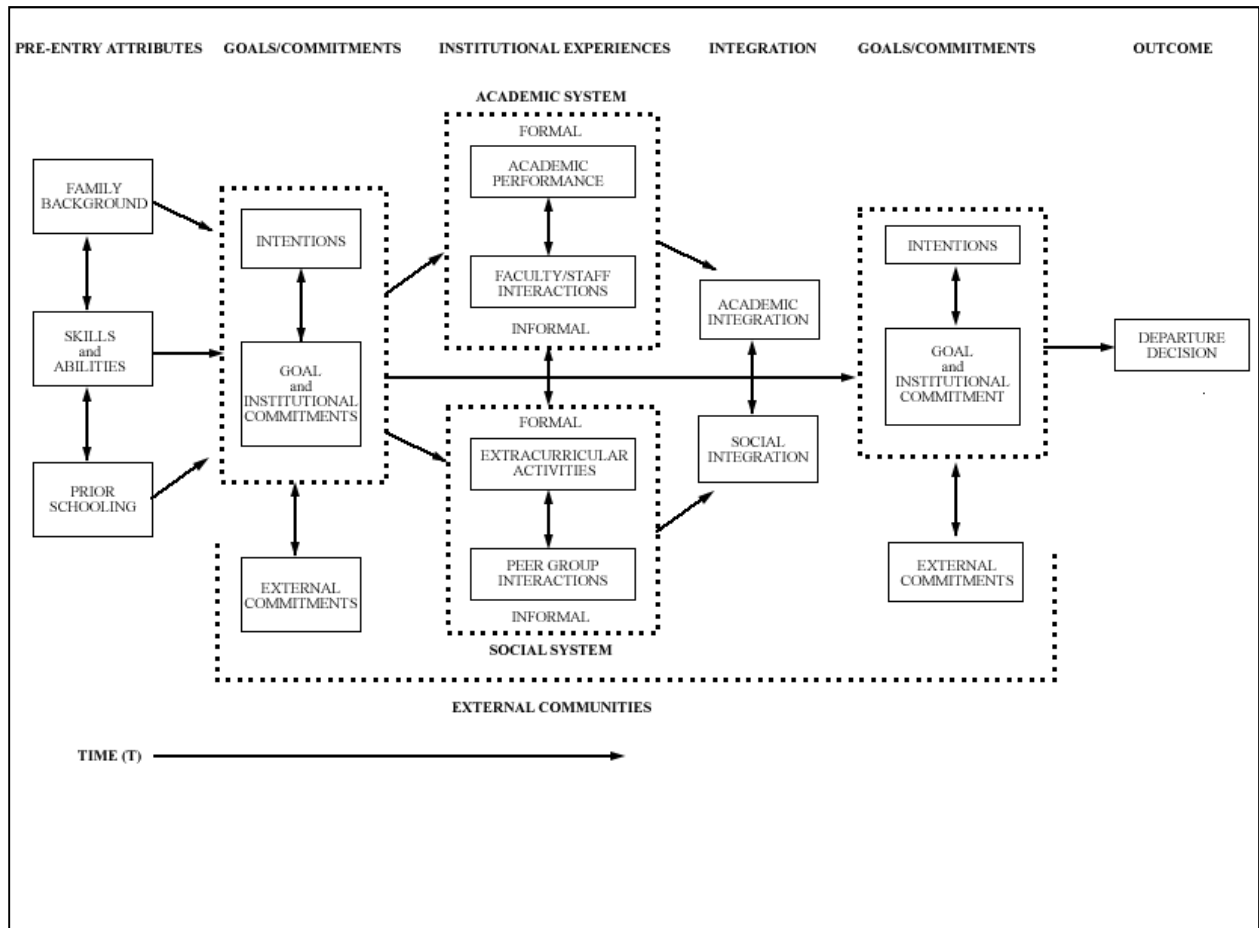
education of the students, and involves faculty and students in the classroom environment. The social system of the college centers on the daily life and personal needs of the students outside the formal academic setting. The social system can be described set of experiences that a student has which impacts departure or persistence. In addition, integration into one system does not automatically imply membership in the other system (Tinto, 1993).

Academic and social systems on the college campus can be manifested in either a formal or an informal manner (Tinto, 1993). For example, a student and professor may interact on a formal basis in the classroom, but may also have informal contact outside the classroom setting. Students may participate in extracurricular activities on campus such as student government or clubs, and have friendships with classmates that extend beyond the walls of the college.

Tinto also notes that external forces and external choices in the life of the student can have an impact on the college experience and therefore persistence of the student in college. External forces can include the actions of one's family, work, or community as well as state and federal organizations, which can influence departure from the college (Tinto, 1993). External forces can be of particular importance in the lives of students who do not live on campus or must work in order to attend college and therefore are unable to participate in the social and intellectual activities on campus, as is often the case for commuting students and those who attend community college. Tinto (1993) notes that community college students, as well as commuting students, are

more likely to be working while attending college attend school part-time rather than full-time and live at home while in college when compared to students who attend a four-year institution. In addition, these students can experience a number of social obligations, which draw energy and time away from campus life and thus make it difficult for students to interact with other students and faculty. While these social obligations can have a negative effect on the student and result in departure, they can also have a positive or reinforcing effect for the student to persist in college (Tinto, 1993). Figure 2 is a representation of Tinto's longitudinal model of institutional departure.

Figure 2. Tinto's Model of Institutional Departure



Tinto's Model as a Basis for Research in the Literature

Vincent Tinto's Model of Institutional Departure has been widely used as the basis for study of a variety of student populations and characteristics. Sorey and Duggan (2008) studied predictors of institutional persistence between traditional aged students and adults at a community college. They found that among traditional-aged students, encouragement and support, academic integration, and an expressed intent to leave the college and attend a four-year university were most predictive of institutional persistence. Adult students, however, responded that social integration, institutional commitment, and degree utility had the most influence on institutional persistence. Students who were enrolled in occupational or technical programs were more likely to persist than those who planned to transfer.

Researchers at Columbia University's Community College Research Center conducted a study of the institutional factors that affect the success of community college students, which revealed several interesting findings. Researchers found that institutional size was negatively correlated with successful students outcomes, meaning that the smaller the college, the more likely that the student would complete a course of study. In addition, higher numbers of students enrolled on a part-time basis were more likely to correlate with lower graduation rates. A higher percentage of part-time faculty members were also likely to correlate with lower graduation rates at community colleges. Funding at a community college also impacts graduation rates. The more

money a college spent on instructional expenditures and student services, the higher the graduation rates. In addition, when colleges relied more heavily on tuition than state funding, the more likely a student was to complete a program of study (Bailey, Calcagno, Jenkins, Kienzl, & Leinbach, 2005).

Goble, Rosenbaum, and Stephan (2008) examined institutional attributes and predictors of degree completion in students attending two-year colleges. The researchers used data from the National Education Longitudinal Study to look at the predictors of degree completion and the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System to determine institutional attributes. The sample of students was drawn from the 1988-1989 school year when students would have been in the eighth grade with follow up data collected every two years until 2000. Researchers allowed students a period of eight years in order to complete a degree assuming high school graduation occurred in 1992. The study found that in the entire sample, students classified as high achieving in high school were more likely to complete an associate's degree or higher. In addition, a significant relationship was found between the overall college's graduation rate and the individual's odds of completing a degree. In addition, researchers found that colleges with high numbers of minority students had lower rates of degree completion.

Many studies have examined the phenomena of persistence in traditional and nontraditional community college students. As noted previously, age can have an impact on the experiences of college students. Grosset (1991), in an application of Tinto's model, compared factors impacting persistence in

traditional and nontraditional aged students at a two-year institution. The most important factors impacting persistence in younger students were found to be the academic integration and goal commitment, and that the quality rather than quantity of academic integration was more important than social integration. Specifically, classroom experiences that included intellectual stimulation, encouraged interaction, involved faculty, and non-classroom interactions with faculty and advisers were associated with persistence in younger students. In addition, having specific academic goals was another factor in persistence. For older, nontraditional aged students, integration was not as important as self-reported cognitive and personal progress during the semester. Students who perceived that they were benefitting from their college experiences were more likely to persist from one semester to the next.

Pascarella, Smart, & Ethington (1986) also studied persistence/withdrawal behavior in community college students, examining five constructs of Tinto's model in relation to degree persistence and degree completion. For the purpose of the study, degree persistence was defined as continued progress toward the degree over a nine-year period, while degree completion was the completion of at least a bachelor's degree over the same time. For men, the three variables found to have significant positive direct effects on degree persistence were academic integration, institutional commitment and social integration. In women, the variables with significant positive direct effects on persistence were academic integration, social

integration, and socioeconomic status. A similar pattern was noted for degree completion in both men and women.

Much research has been done to examine the individual characteristics of community college students and the impact on persistence. Many noteworthy studies utilize Tinto's model as the framework for research. One of the main underlying assumptions of Tinto's theory is that the institutional organization plays a role in the persistence of the student.

Berger & Braxton (1998) studied the role of organizational attributes on social integration in their longitudinal study of 1,300 first year undergraduate students at a highly selective research university by administering the Early Collegiate Experiences Survey in the fall and the Freshman Survey in the spring. They examined six variables, including student background characteristics, initial institutional commitment, organizational attributes, social integration, subsequent institutional commitment, and withdrawal decision. They found that three organizational attributes directly influenced social integration. Institutional communication had a direct and positive effect on peer relations, while fairness and policy enforcement had a positive effect on peer and faculty relationships, and participation in decision-making positively affected faculty relationships. In terms of indirect effects on the likelihood of persistence, communication and fairness had a positive and direct effect, while participation had a negative indirect effect. Communication and fairness also had a statistically significant effect on subsequent institutional commitment. The researchers concluded that their findings supported Tinto's theory that

organizational attributes contribute to social integration and the intent to reenroll or persist.

In a study that examined social networking as a way of understanding student integration and persistence, Thomas (2000) studied college freshman at a four-year liberal arts college. The more socially connected the student and the more widely connected to a larger peer group, the higher the student's grade point average and more likely he or she was to persist, as opposed to students with fewer social connections who had lower grade point averages and were less likely to persist from one semester to the next. Strauss & Volkwein (2004) compared the level of institutional commitment of first year students attending two- and four-year institutions. They found that while academic integration and social integration were important to both two- and four-year institution attendees, student at two-year institutions demonstrated slightly higher institutional commitment scores than those at four-year institutions. When aggregated for specific contributors to commitment, the classroom experience was a more influential predictor of institutional commitment in students attending two-year institutions, whereas social integration has a greater impact on institutional commitment in students at four-year institutions.

In another study measuring persistence in community college students, Bers and Smith (1991) also looked at the extent to which academic and social integration and educational objective affected semester-to-semester re-enrollment in a study of 1,100 community college students at a midsized

suburban college. Student participants were asked to complete the Current Student Survey. They noted several interesting findings including that the more hours students were employed; the less likely they were to persist from one semester to the next. The results of their study indicate that precollege student characteristics, academic objective, and subjective experiences are all factors that significantly affect persistence in the two-year student population. They also note that the usual definition of persistence is from one academic year to the next, but that in the community college population, persistence is better defined as semester-to-semester due to a substantial amount of stop out behavior. They suggest, however, more longitudinal studies that focus on capturing stop-in and occasional attendance patterns common in community college students.

Napoli and Wortman (1998) used Tinto's model to examine the retention patterns of community college students, but looked specifically at the mediating influences of psychosocial factors such as life events occurring during the first semester of college, social support, self-esteem, social competence, psychological well-being, and satisfaction with the academic, administrative, and social systems of the college. They found that negative events and conflicts within the social, academic, and administrative systems of the college had an adverse effect on social integration, which in turn affected persistence. On the other hand, negative life events did not have an effect on social integration, academic integration, academic performance, goal commitment, or institutional commitment.

Tinto's model has not only been used to study persistence, but the likelihood of transfer from the community college to a four-year college or university. Students with high levels of academic and social integration were more likely to have a high level of commitment to their institution and educational goals, and thereby have a greater predisposition to transfer (Nora & Rendon, 1990).

In a study of nontraditional aged reentry women in community college, comparing the attributes of those who persisted compared to those who did not, Goldsmith and Archambault (1997) found that academic integration was very high between the two groups. Women who persisted and those who did not persist had similar grade point averages, enjoyed their classes, noted positive interaction with faculty, and felt intellectually integrated into college life. Social integration for both groups was noted to be low in that students did not socialize with either peers or faculty outside of the classroom. Women who were persistent, however, did cite strong needs to pursue and complete an educational goal as a means to a career because of a major life change. In addition, those who persisted were able to integrate college life into a well-established family and work life. Despite being anxious regarding their ability to perform college level work, women who persisted expressed strong levels of academic excitement and each positive or negative academic experience was viewed as an opportunity for personal learning. Women who were not persistent in community college were noted to be different from those who persisted in several crucial ways. Although they had career goals, they did not

see education itself as a goal to improve their lives, but rather one option. They enrolled in college because of another person's suggestion and funding. In addition, they tended to see their academic and personal lives as conflicted, and so when faced with adversity, chose to leave college. Finances seemed to be the biggest hurdle, although their financial status was not significantly different from the group of women who persisted in college.

Self Determination Theory

Self Determination Theory (SDT) refers to the belief that human motivation should be understood within the larger context of the innate psychological need for competence, autonomy and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000). It is important for researchers to understand not only goal directed behavior, but also that psychological development and well-being cannot be achieved without addressing the processes that influence an individual's goals. Specifically in the SDT, it is essential to understand the need for competence, autonomy, and relatedness in order to understand what the goal is and why it is being pursued.

Humans are able to obtain goals when they experience relatedness, competence, and autonomy. Competence is the need to have an effect on the environment while obtaining a valuable outcome from within it. Relatedness is the need to feel connected to others, to be cared for by others, and to care for others. Autonomy is defined as the desire to self-organize experiences and behaviors within an integrated sense of self. Furthermore, the satisfaction of these three needs is associated with psychological well-being, whereas the

failure to satisfy these needs is associated with deficits in well-being and the development of needs substitutes (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

According to Deci and Ryan (2000), SDT also notes that the intrinsically motivated activities are those that a person would pursue for self-interest or in the absence of known consequences; however, in order for these behaviors to be fully integrated, the individual must experience satisfaction of the need for autonomy and competence. Furthermore, intrinsic motivation will more likely exist if there is a sense of relatedness to others around them. "People will tend to pursue goals, domains, and relationships that allow or support their need satisfaction. To the extent that they are successful in finding such opportunities, they will experience positive psychological outcomes" (Deci & Ryan, 2000, p. 230). Nontraditional aged women have many forces that compel them in a variety of directions, however, rather than a deterrent to persistence; they could also be a motivating factor.

Integration of Tinto's Model of Institutional Departure, the Self Determination Theory, and the Life Course Theory

As noted previously, nontraditional aged women who re-enter the community college campus in addition to seeking higher education experience the simultaneous obligations of work, family, and home. While these responsibilities can deter a nontraditional aged woman from reentering college, these challenges can also be a motivating factor toward persistence, and ultimately success. Tinto (1993) notes that the degree to which an individual participates in the community can both have a negative and a positive effect on

persistence, particularly in commuting students. External forces, such as work, family, and community involvement, can cause a student to depart from the institution despite positive interactions or may reinforce persistence. Elder (1998) notes that the “principle of human agency states that individual construct their own life course through the choices and actions they take within the opportunities and constraints of history and social circumstances” (p. 4). The pursuit of goals can be an expression of agency in that it implies the belief in one’s ability to take action in order to meet a desired outcome (Crockett, 2002). Furthermore, goals can change over time as the individual enters new life stage or experiences a significant life event. As an individual ages, she gains new skills, capabilities, and resources. These changes in physical, mental, and social resources can in turn result in changes in goals, self-representation, and self-efficacy and thereby influence expressions of agency (Crockett, 2002).

Interactions among students within the institutional system are key to the development of social bonds, which serve to integrate the individual student into the social community of the college (Tinto, 1993). This is a parallel concept to the sense of relatedness that individuals must experience in order to pursue their goals successfully. As a student experiences a sense of connection to fellow students, to the institution, and to the goal of pursuit of higher education, the student will also experience feelings of relatedness, and therefore integration. Tinto (1993) also notes that the formal and informal experiences by students that contribute to academic integration are also

important. Academic integration and relatedness are key to the motivation and academic persistence of the nontraditional reentry female student.

Rewarding interactions between students, faculty, and staff can lead to a greater sense of intellectual development and academic integration within the institution. It can also give students a heightened sense of the many layers of the academic dimension and lead to improved academic performance. These positive interactions can affirm and reinforce academic success and lead to a greater sense of competence and autonomy. If nontraditional aged women experience autonomy, belonging, and competence, whether they retool their skills or work toward a degree while attending community college, they experience a sense of self-actualization, which provides the motivation to persist in educational attainment. Indeed, additional job skills or a new degree or certificate with the potential for enhanced financial rewards can lead to an even greater sense of satisfaction.

Brandtstader & Rothermund (2002) note that over the life span, a sense of agency focuses on intentional self-development. As people mature, they identify goals and strive to actualize them. These goals and ambitions can give meaning to life as long as they appear to be attainable or become a source of depression when they are not within one's personal control. The underlying assumption of the life-span development of self-development is that of assimilative and accommodative coping. In the assimilative model, individuals work toward influencing the situation in such a way that it conforms with the developmental goals of the desired self. In the accommodative mode,

developmental goals and aspirations are adjusted to situational constraints and available resources (Brandtstader & Rothermund, 2002). As noted previously, nontraditional aged students have multiple responsibilities in addition to community. In addition, women experience unique social forces, which can affect their academic experiences. Just as career and educational goals change over the life span, it is possible that a woman's ability to adapt to these challenges is impacted by motivating forces.

Figure 3 is the representation of the Tinto's Model of Institutional Departure with the mediating influences of Deci and Ryan's Self Determination Theory.

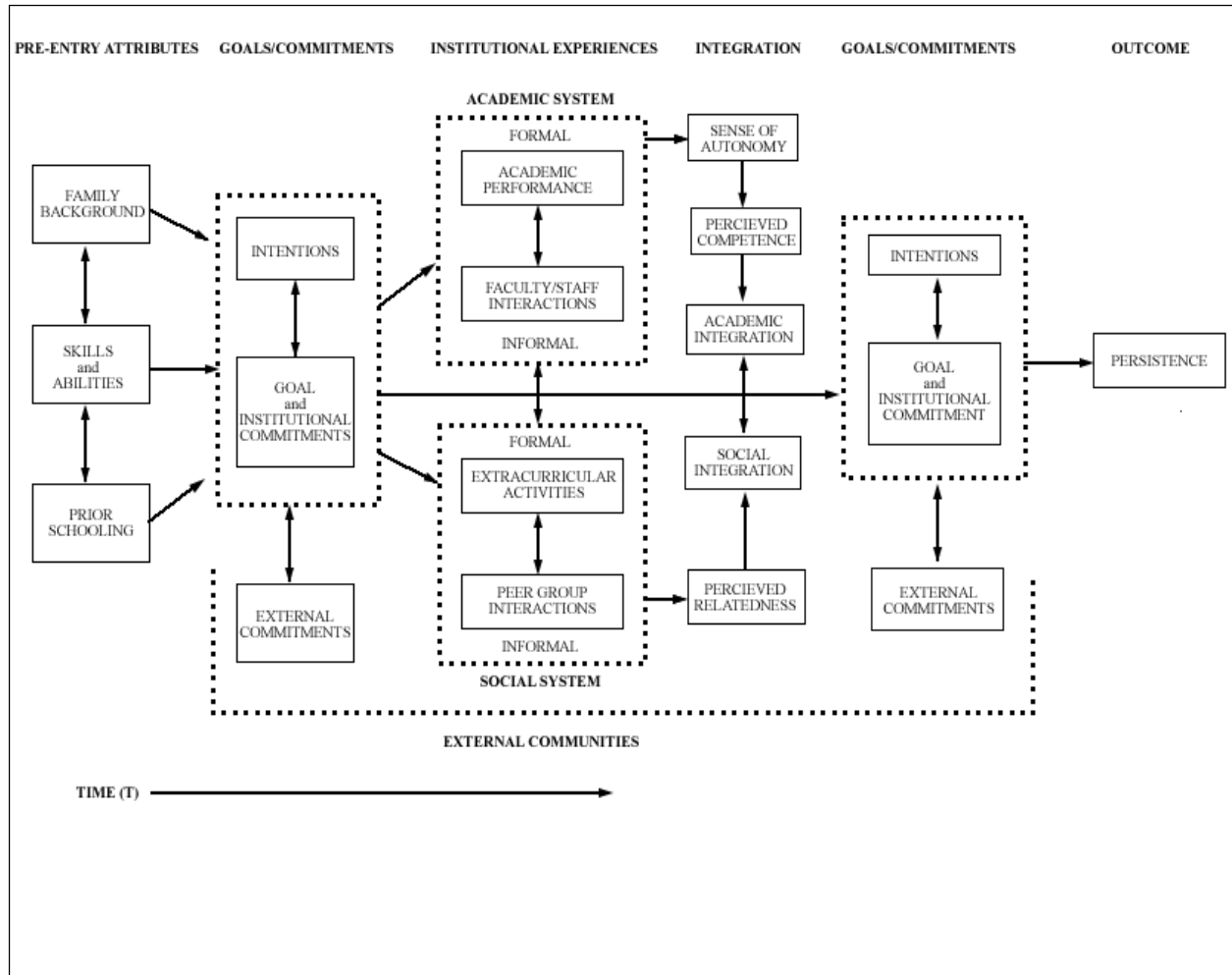


Figure 3 Concept Map representing the Tinto's Model of Institutional Departure with the mediating effects of Deci & Ryan's Self Determination Theory

Tinto's Model of Institutional Departure has been widely used as the context with which to study a variety of students in postsecondary educational settings. It has also been used to study differences in persistence and departure between groups such as men and women students, two-year, and four-year students, and traditional and nontraditional students. Although Tinto's model reflects a student's departure from the institution, this study will use the model as the lens through which to view how and why students persist

in college rather than depart. As noted previously, nontraditional aged women who reenter postsecondary education to the community college campus to seek higher education likely experience the simultaneous obligations of work, family, and home. While these responsibilities can deter a nontraditional aged woman from reentering college, these challenges can also be a motivating factor toward persistence, and ultimately success. I believe that the same forces, which cause students to depart from an institution, can also encourage the nontraditional aged woman to remain in college. In addition, there are also other motivational forces unique to nontraditional women that can impact persistence and that the story of the journey for these women as they seek higher education is important.

For the purpose of this study, the two elements of the model that will be examined are the degree to which academic integration and social integration impact the experiences of nontraditional aged women who have at one time attended and then left either a two-year or four-year institution, only to reenter the community college at a later time. In addition, how does motivation to achieve a goal affect the sense of social and academic integration? Does a sense of achieving autonomy and competence cause a nontraditional reentry woman to experience academic integration, and therefore commit to the goal of degree completion and persistence? Does a nontraditional reentry woman who experiences relatedness to the community of learners, also experience social integration and as a result persist to goal completion? Finally, pre-institutional characteristics of the student will be examined, specifically the previous

educational experiences and the reason for the woman departing either a two or four-year institution and then returning to the community college.

Conclusion

The proper formula for persistence is as complex as the attributes of the nontraditional learner on a community college campus. Nontraditional students face many challenges even before arriving at the community college campus, including the choice of a community college over a four-year institution. Delayed enrollment, life circumstances, and institutional factors, such as the numbers of part-time faculty, can all contribute negatively to the success of a community college student. In addition, there are institutional factors, which are thought to influence the persistence of nontraditional community college students. While some factors may impact persistence, it remains a concern for students and educators alike. For nontraditional aged women, a group more on the fringe of a college campus, the dynamic is even more complex given the dense and intricate fabric of their lives. This study will impact praxis by allowing educational leaders to understand the experiences of nontraditional aged women and in turn influence educators and institutions to change.

Chapter Three

Chapter 3 will outline the methodological approach used in this qualitative research study including methodology, research design, and plan for analysis. In addition, this chapter addresses the issues of ethics, subjectivity, and validity.

Methodology

Qualitative research is a broad approach to the study of social phenomena in which the researcher is interested in the complex social interactions in daily life and the meanings that the participant attributes to these interactions (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Qualitative research takes place in the natural setting of the participant, focuses on the context, evolves rather than prefigures, and relies upon holistic interpretation by the researcher. The researcher continually engages in systematic reflection both on unfolding study and on her own biography in relation to the study. Qualitative research requires complex and ongoing reasoning in order to reach meaning and understanding (Marshall & Rossman, 2006).

There are several research genres, which provided a framework for the qualitative research study. The phenomenological approach seeks to explore, describe, and analyze the meaning of the individual's lived experience. The underlying assumption of the phenomenological approach is that the participants have a point of view that, while unique, is also shared by others (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). A phenomenological study describes the lived experiences of several individuals about a particular concept or phenomena

(Creswell, 1998). This approach utilizes in-depth interviews with people who have experienced the phenomena that the researcher wishes to study. The method of data collection, narrative inquiry that assumed that the individual draws meaning by telling one's story (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Narrative inquiry as a method of qualitative research was advanced by feminist scholars who believed that it was crucial to give voice to those marginalized from mainstream psychological research (Lyons, 2007). Furthermore, Johnson-Bailey (2010) notes that narratives as a form of intimate expression not only help to construct individual meaning, but the community and world at large.

Pinnegar and Daynes (2007) note, "narrative inquiry embraces narrative as both the method and phenomena of study" (p.5). It requires that the researcher align thought and action toward four distinct themes. The first theme is the change in relationship between researcher and participant. Researchers who utilize narrative inquiry understand that humans and human interaction occur in context and that people, cultures, and events, which may have occurred in the past, affect the present. The second is the belief that word, rather than numbers, are reliable data in research. Third, narrative inquiry allows a shift from general and universal themes to those that are specific to the participant. Finally, it accepts alternative epistemologies or ways of knowing.

According to Rossman and Marshall (2006), life history is a method of inquiry, which utilizes in-depth interviews to gather information, analyze, and interpret the stories that people tell about their lives. It assumes a complex

interaction between the individuals' understanding of her world and the world itself. It also captures the individual's feelings, views, and perspectives. In this research methodology, the researcher examines the story told by the participant and seeks to have a deep understanding the individual's lived experience.

According to Marshall & Rossman (2006), life histories can focus on critical moments or events in an individual's life. They are useful in defining socialization and acculturation in institutions and professions, allowing the individual to create meaning within the culture. One advantage of this methodology is that it allows for the exploration of a person's life over a substantial period and for comparative study. Use of life history as a qualitative methodology requires that the researcher be sensitive, caring, and empathetic to the study participant (Marshall & Rossman, 2006).

In their landmark study of the higher education experience of 135 women of various ages, *Women's Ways of Knowing* authors Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1986) describe why women in particular need to give voice to their experiences because for many women "the move away from silence and an externally oriented perspective on knowledge and truth eventuates in a new conception of truth as personal, private and subjectively know or intuited; thus we are calling this next position subjectivism or subjective knowing" (p. 53). They further note, "as a woman becomes more aware of the existence of the 'still small voice' within her, she finds an inner source of strength. A major developmental transition follows that has

repercussions in her relationships, self-concept and self-esteem, morality, and behavior” (Belenkey et al., 1986, p. 53). They found that as the women gave voice to their stories and experiences in higher education, they developed a greater sense of autonomy and agency.

Research Design

This research study was conducted using nontraditional aged women who were enrolled either full or part-time in a degree or certificate program in community colleges in Michigan and Illinois. The setting for the study took place in community colleges in a variety of rural, suburban, and urban settings and varied by geographic location. Gibbs (2004) notes that although rural students perform as well as urban students in high school, people living in metropolitan areas were more likely to have completed college when compared to those living in rural areas. On the other hand, rural educational attainment continues to rise, reflecting the transition from a resourced based economy to a service employment, as well as the advanced skill requirements of jobs in all areas (Gibbs, 2004).

These nontraditional aged women participating in this study were between the ages of 29 to 57, all of whom had attended college at one time, but were returning with the intent to complete either a certificate of development or an associated degree from a community college in various geographic locations in Michigan and Illinois. Reentry or return to college occurred for a variety of reasons, including job loss, need for retraining, or due to a significant life event, including a death of a spouse or divorce. The study included 10

voluntary participants at which time a point of saturation had been reached. Participation in the study required that the women participate in structured face-to-face interviews with the researcher. The women participants were recruited through fliers posted on community college campuses as well as through snowball sampling.

According to Marshall & Rossman (2006), the success of the qualitative study relies heavily on the interpersonal skills of the researcher. Researchers who pursue qualitative research should be able to engage in active listening and have profound respect for the individual perspectives of others. This may require the relinquishing of the “academic armor” in order to establish rapport and engagement with participants. “The use of obscure academic language (linguistic armor) professional clothing and demeanor (physical armor), and assumptions of theoretical privilege (ideological armor) all create this academic armor” (Marshall & Rossman, 2006, p. 119). Dropping the academic armor allows the researcher and participant to have a more intimate interaction, and therefore richer understanding of the phenomena.

In addition, it is essential that qualitative researchers educate participants about the researcher’s role. At the beginning of the interviews, I described my role as a researcher and how the information was to be used. In order to assure honesty in answers and to ensure the protection of the participants, subjects were assured of confidentiality by the researcher and received a consent letter detailing the purpose of the study informing them that they were free to withdraw from participation at any time.

Individual Interviews

Patton (2002) notes that while interviewing study participants, the quality of information is largely dependent on the skills of the interviewer. It requires not only skills to enhance the quality of the interviews, but an authentic interest in the experiences of the person being interviewed. The approach for this qualitative study utilized an interview guide approach. The interview guide listed questions or issues that were to be explored in the course of the interview. In addition, the interview guide ensured that the same basic lines of inquiry were pursued with each person interviewed. The interview guide provides topics or subject areas within which the interviewer is free to explore, probe, and ask questions that will elucidate and illuminate that particular subject (Patton, 2002, p. 343). At the same time, the interviews were conversational in nature to allow the participant to feel comfortable in disclosing information to the researcher. It was also important that as the researcher, I remained flexible in my approach so that I could vary sequencing or wording of questions as necessary.

According to Patton (2002), the advantage of utilizing an interview guide approach is that use of predetermined topics and issues increases the comprehensiveness of the data. It also allows for systematic collection of data from one participant to another. The disadvantage of this approach is that too much flexibility in the wording or sequencing of questions could result in substantially different responses from the participants.

In researching the experiences of nontraditional reentry women in community colleges, the following questions will be used as an interview guide.

1. What are experiences of nontraditional women prior to entering community college?
 - a. What was the view of higher education within their family of origin?
2. What event or circumstance caused the woman to leave college?
3. What was the event or circumstance that caused the woman to reach the decision to return to school?
4. What has been the experience of nontraditional women students at community college?
 - a. How are the relationships between the nontraditional aged reentry woman and her students colleagues while at community college?
 - b. How are the relationships between the nontraditional aged reentry woman and the faculty while at community college?
5. What challenges have nontraditional aged women students encountered as they have attended community college?
6. What has motivated the nontraditional aged women to persist in attending community college?

The interviews took place at a variety of locations of the participants choosing in order to assure privacy and confidentiality. The locations included coffee shops, bookstores and on college campuses, as well as via Skype. Each interview took approximately 60 minutes. The interviews were tape-recorded and the subjects were notified of this prior to obtaining informed consent. In

qualitative research, accurate analysis and interpretation of the data requires a method of recording the participants' verbatim responses. In addition, the interactive nature of in-depth interviews requires that the researcher use a tape recording device to allow the interviewer to be more attentive to the interviewee (Patton, 2002). I also took focused notes during the course of the interviews with participants, which allowed me to formulate follow-up questions as necessary. Note taking serves as a non-verbal cue to the interviewee of things that are "noteworthy" and, as a result, are more likely to engage in further conversation (Patton, 2002).

Immediately following the interview, field notes were made to record observations about the interview as well as points of emphasis. Patton (2002) observes that taking field notes as the inquiry is unfolding can allow for early insights, which may be useful in later interviews and reflects the emergent nature of qualitative inquiry. At the completion of the interviews, the digitally recorded interviews were transcribed and kept with all notes taken in a fieldwork journal. A transcription service was used to assist in the verbatim transcription of the audiotapes. Verbatim transcription of the raw data is essential for qualitative analysis (Patton, 2002). Backup copies of the interviews, as well as duplicate copies of field notes, were kept in a secure location to ensure protection of the data and confidentiality.

Analysis and Interpretation

Holley and Colyar (2009) note the importance of narrative inquiry and analysis in documenting the human experiences, which require a nuanced examination of the stories of individual lives. The interpretive process allows the researcher to understand cultural assumptions about what matters and what information is valuable.

Management of data, analysis, and interpretation are the next step of the qualitative research process. Qualitative data is very complex and not easily reducible to standard units of measurement (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Analysis of the data should follow several steps, including organizing the data, immersion in the data, generating categories and themes, coding the data, offering interpretations, and searching for alternative meanings. Each phase of data analysis begins with reducing and summarizing the data, and then the interpretation of the data.

Analysis of data began with organization of the data at the inception of the study and was ongoing. This was done utilizing a log participants indicating name of participant and date, place, and time of interview. According to Patton (2002), content analysis begins with the development of a manageable classification or coding scheme. The first reading of the data is aimed at the development of codes or classification systems. The second reading is done to begin the formal coding process in a systematic way (Patton, 2002). Through prolonged immersion in the data, categories of information will be modified as patterns emerge.

Initially, I began by listening to all the tape recordings of the interviews. This was done because many of the participants spoke very emotionally about difficult subjects, as well as to ensure that the field notes were accurate and that appropriate emphasis in the verbatim transcripts were noted. Next, I read through all of the verbatim transcripts making margin notes as necessary. From this first reading, a chart was developed indicating the participant's age, marital status, children, initial college experiences, current college experiences, and curricular area of study. This was done to give context for coding according to themes. In addition, the minimum amount of time that one of the participants had been out of college prior to returning was ten years, with the maximum amount over thirty years. In that time, multiple life events had occurred both from a personal and educational perspective. Information was then coded according to theory-generated themes, including previous educational experiences, academic integration, perceived competence, autonomy, social integration, and perceived belonging. I then developed a document around each research question and read for the clusters of ideas, relationships, and themes in which I examined for significant classes of persons, experiences, and events, as well as the characteristics of these occurrences. As a researcher, I was sensitive to the codes and subsequent themes that emerge from the theoretical framework, as well as those that emerge that are outside the theory. At this point, I developed another chart to clarify and define these emerging themes and subthemes, as well as to look at frequency of occurrence. After a third reading, I sought out the services of a

second reader, Joanna Kolodziejz, an educator, with significant knowledge of education across the lifespan, feminist perspective, and experience as a reader on qualitative research. She read the verbatim transcripts, and in addition to developing a similar grouping of themes and subthemes, discovered other significant information.

Subjectivity and Critical Reflexivity

Patton (2002) notes that one of the strategic themes of qualitative inquiry is that of voice, reflexivity, and perspective. "The qualitative analyst owns and is reflective about his or her own voice and perspective; a credible voice conveys authenticity and trustworthiness; complete objectivity being impossible and pure subjectivity undermining credibility, the researcher's focus become balance--understanding and depicting the world authentically in all its complexity while being self-analytical, politically aware, and reflexive in consciousness" (Patton, 2002, p. 496). As part of the process of engaging the data, questions of reflexivity and voice must be asked constantly in order to assure subjectivity and validity. Reflexivity is triangulated by assessing self-reflexivity, reflexivity about those being studied, and reflexivity about the audience. When inquiring about self-reflexivity, I as the researcher asked myself, "What do I know?," "What has shaped my perspective?," and "With what voice do I share my perspective?" In assuring reflexivity about the participants of research, I as the researcher will asked, "How do they know what they know?," "What has shaped her world view?," "How do I perceive them?," and "How do they perceive me?" Questions regarding the reflexivity to

address the audience should include topics such as, “How do they make sense of what information as the researcher I have given them?” Assessment of reflexivity should be intentional and conscientious with the goal of understanding what the research knows and how they know it. Reflexivity requires that the researcher pays attention to the cultural, political, social, linguistics and ideological aspects of one’s own perspective and that of the research participant (Patton, 2002).

In order to remain disciplined regarding subjectivity, I kept a field journal with personal reactions to interviews as well as tentative categories of study. In addition, I debriefed my research analysis and findings with the second researcher, Joanna Kolodiejz throughout the process which helped to clarify themes, subthemes and in particular how they each fit together.

Ensuring the Validity of Qualitative Analysis

According to Ambert, Adler, Adler, and Detzner (1995), issues of validity or authenticity are vitally important in qualitative research because it is reliant on the informants’ own description and construction of reality. Validity can be described as the correctness of a description or interpretation (Maxwell, 2010). Validity is “assessed in relation to the purposes and circumstances of the research, rather than being a context-independent property of methods or conclusions” (Maxwell, 2010, p. 279). Therefore, the qualitative researcher examines the threats to validity as events or processes that could lead to invalid conclusions.

Maxwell (2010) notes research bias and reactivity are threats to validity in qualitative research. While qualitative research cannot eliminate bias and the perceptual lens of the researcher, it can understand how a researcher's values influence and impact the conduct and conclusions of the study (Maxwell, 2010). This is done by explicitly explaining one's biases. In this study, my biases result from my many years of work with nontraditional aged women in community college, as well as a life changing event, which caused me to return to graduate school. Further, although my educational experiences are different, I have also experienced some of the same events as the subjects of this study including children going to college and returning home, aging parents, and a significant change in financial status. It will be important that I recognize that my biases can influence the conclusions I draw from this research study. The second threat to validity, reactivity, is the influence of the researcher on the setting or individuals to be studied. In studies involving interviews, this is known as reflexivity, the fact that a researcher is always part of the world he or she studies. Again, most of my work as an educator has been done in the setting of a community college, in nursing and allied health programs where the overwhelming majority of students are women, many of whom are nontraditional aged women.

There are a number of processes that the qualitative researcher can put into place in order to minimize the threats to validity. Intensive, long-term engagement with the participants and the development of "rich" or detailed data allow the research to have an informative and enlightening depiction of

the phenomena (Maxwell, 2010). In turn, “thick, rich description provides the foundation for qualitative analysis and reporting” (Patton, 2002, p. 437) by taking the reader into the setting being described.

Validity can also be assured by respondent validation (Maxwell, 2010). Respondent validation is also known as member checking, in which the researcher shares the data and interpretation with the participants in order to get feedback on the accuracy of the information (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Respondent validation not only reduces the possibility of misinterpretation of what is being said by the participant, but is also important to identifying bias and misunderstanding in the researcher (Maxwell, 2010). Member checking is a method of triangulation of an individual’s description of the events or phenomena. Triangulation is based on the assumption that no single method of inquiry completely solves the issue of alternate explanations (Patton, 2002). Another method for ensuring validity is to search for discrepant evidence and negative cases. Searching for discrepant evidence and negative cases will involve thoughtful checking and rechecking of the data, as well as a purposeful assessment of alternative explanations for the findings in the study.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations are also important in conducting qualitative research (Bogdan & Bilken, 1992). There are two important considerations in qualitative research--informed consent and the protections of subjects from harm. Informed consent requires that the research provide the interviewee with the purpose of the interview, how long the interview will be, and how the

information will be used (Patton, 2002). In this research study, interviewees were notified that participation was voluntary and that they could refuse to answer a question or withdraw from the interview without consequences at any time. In addition, the risks and benefits of participation were fully explained to each subject at the beginning of the interview.

Protection of subjects from harm was done by assuring participants of confidentiality. Confidentiality includes the safe maintenance of data at all stages of the research project, including data collection, processing, storage, and dissemination (Nolen & Vander Putten, 2007). Participants' identities were protected so that the information does not identify, embarrass, or harm them in any way. Subjects were treated with respect and consideration at all times.

Another ethical consideration in qualitative interviews is that of reciprocity. Reciprocity is the compensation of participants in recognition of the time (Patton, 2002). In return for their time in participating in this qualitative study, subjects were given a gift certificate for a nominal amount of money to a retail store. The gift certificates were \$10.00, an amount that was not so much as to be considered coercion to participate, but enough so that they would be compensated for their donation of their time considering that they are busy women with multiple roles and responsibilities.

Narrative inquiry as a methodological approach in qualitative approach has both advantages and disadvantages in exploring the experiences of nontraditional aged women. It is important for those who narrate their stories to have others hear them, especially where repression, marginality,

exploitation, or even the needs for basic survival exists (Chase, 2010). In striving for a more democratic and socially just learning community, educational leaders need to create conditions, which support the learner. The first step in this process is to listen and understand the experiences of the learner through open inquiry, communication, and collaboration (Furman & Shields, 2005).

The disadvantage of narrative inquiry as a qualitative approach is the focus on the individual and not on social context (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Narrative inquiry seeks to understand the individual's lived experiences within the groups, communities, and associations that they have as individuals, but not through a wider social lens. In addition, the narrative inquiry approach is a labor-intensive approach, requiring a significant amount of time on the part of the researcher as well as the subject. As noted previously, nontraditional aged women who attend community college will likely have multiple responsibilities in addition to attending college, such as family and work obligations.

Chapter 4

Data Analysis and Results

Chapter 4 focuses on a description of the results of the interviews conducted with nontraditional aged reentry women attending community college. As previously outlined in chapter 3, the participants of this qualitative study were full or part-time community college students in a degree or certificate program in a community college. The settings for the community colleges included urban, suburban, and rural colleges from varied locations throughout Michigan. The women recruited for the study were to be over the age of 25 and had never attended college, or over the age of thirty who had previously attended college and had left with or without a degree, but were currently returning to college. The interviews took place at a variety of settings including college campuses, coffee shops, bookstores, and via Skype. Prior to the interviews, participants were asked to read and sign a consent form describing the purpose of the interview, the length of interview, and the way in which the information will be used. Participants were notified both in the consent form and at the beginning of the interview that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw from the process at any time or not answer a question for any reason. In addition to providing informed consent, participants were notified of the processes to ensure confidentiality. Confidentiality was assured by protecting the identities of all participants during the collection, storage, and processing of data. At the conclusion of each interview, participants were provided with a \$10 gift card to a retail store.

Ten women were voluntary participants in this research study. They ranged in age from 29 to 57 years old and were enrolled in a variety of academic degree and certificate programs in community colleges.

In studying the lived experiences of nontraditional reentry women in community college, three theories were used as the lens with which to view the participant's experiences. Tinto's Model of Institutional Departure was used to explore academic and social integration as factors in persistence to remain in community college despite life challenges. In addition, the Life Course Theory examines and acknowledges the perspective of participants as they move through a series of life events, settings, and social roles as structured by social institutions. The educational system is an institutional setting in which the individual moves from elementary to secondary to postsecondary education. The family cycle is one example of life events and includes marriage, childbirth, and child rearing. The trajectory of a career can also provide a series of roles through which an individual moves from novice to expert and back again. Agency is expressed in the individual's transition through these various roles. Finally, the Self Determination Model was used to understand the underlying motivation for persistence within the context of the individual's need for competence, autonomy, and relatedness.

In examining the experiences of nontraditional reentry women in community colleges, the following research questions were used to direct the study:

1. What are the lived experiences of nontraditional aged women prior to entering community college?
2. What causes the nontraditional aged woman to depart from postsecondary education?
3. What are the motivating factors and goals, which result in a nontraditional aged woman’s decision to reenter to community college?
4. What personal characteristics do nontraditional aged women describe which allowed them to persist in attending community college despite the barriers they encountered?

The following table summarizes the possible responses by the participants, including the research question, theme, category of responses, and the frequency of responses.

Table 1 Category of Responses by Theory and Theme

<i>Theory</i>	<i>Theme</i>	<i>Category of Responses</i>		<i>Frequency(n)</i>
Life Forces R1 What are the lived experiences prior to entering community college?	Prior Academic Experiences	1.	Positively viewed, encouraged	AZ, CC, CU, EG, KW, MB
		2.	Not discouraged, but not encouraged	DT, CG
		3.	Positively viewed, no assistance	JK, KK
		4.	Mother/stepmother key to desire to attain college education.	AZ, CU, JK, KW, MB
		5.	Attending college at the same time as child or sibling.	CC, DT, JK, CU, KK, CG
Tinto Theory of Institutional Departure R2 What are the forces that cause departure from a community college?	External Forces/External Choices	1.	Lack of Interest/focus	CU, EG
		2.	Financial Issues	KK
		3.	Marriage/Family	AZ, DT, CG, JK
		4.	Completed Degree	CC, KW, MB
		5.	Health Issues	AZ

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R3 What are the motivating factors and goals that cause a return to the community college?		1.	Job Loss	CG
		2.	Divorce/death of spouse	JK, MB
		3.	Desire for career change/improvement	KK, CU, CC, DT, EG, KW
		4.	Family	AZ
R4 What personal characteristics do nontraditional aged women describe which allowed them to persist in attending community college despite the barriers they encountered?	Academic Integration	1.	Seek out faculty	10
		2.	Seek out college services	9
		3.	Utilize no college or faculty resources	DT
	Social Integration	4.	Strong peer relationships	KK, JK, CG, KW, MB, EG
		5.	Other peer/support groups	AZ, CC
		6.	No peer/support groups	DT
	Challenges to commitment (more than one answer)	1.	Financial	8
		2.	Health Issues	AZ, CC
		3.	Mental acuity	MB, JK, CC
		4.	Work Life Balance	DT, CG, JK, CU, MB, KW, EG
Self Determination Theory	Intention to maintain goal/institutional commitment (more than one answer)	1.	Self-commitment	DT, CC, CG, JK (CC-unsure)
		2.	Family/financial future	MB, EG
		3.	Role model to children	DT, AZ
		4.	Accepting of new challenges in life	CG, KK, JK, CU, KW

Table 2 is a brief summary of the demographic characteristics of the participants including age, race, initial academic major, marital status, children, and current academic major in community college.

Table 2 Demographics of Study Participants

<i>Name</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Race</i>	<i>Previous Major</i>	<i>Marital Status</i>	<i>Children and Family</i>	<i>Current Major</i>
Amy (AZ)	41	White	Health Care-multiple stop out. Certificate of development as emergency medical technician-basic	Single, but has significant other	One son, aged 18 at home with adoptive parents.	Pre-allied Health in large suburban community college
Cindy (CC)	57	White	Business-multiple stop outs. Certificate in Cosmetology	Divorced	One son, aged 19, in college	Associate of Arts in large suburban community college
Debbie (DT)	45	White	Education-stop out	Married	Two daughters aged 14 and 16 at home	Associate of Arts in large suburban community college
Judy (JK)	50	White	General studies-stop out. Certificate as a certified nurse's aide as a high school student. Certificate as a signer for the deaf.	Divorced Remarried, and then widowed	One daughter, aged 22, in college. Cares for sister with bi-polar disorder at home	Associate of Applied Science in Nursing in large suburban community college
Karla (KK)	47	White	General Studies-stop out	Divorced, Remarried	One daughter	Associate of Applied

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					aged 24 who is married with one child, one son aged 21 in college, and one daughter, aged 12 at home.	Science in Nursing in large suburban community college
Courtney (CU)	30	White	Accounting-stop out	Single, but lives with significant other	No children	Associate of Applied Science in Accounting in small rural community college
Kim (KW)	31	Native American	Certificate of Development-Business Technology	Married	Three children under 6 and currently expecting fourth child	Certificate of Development in Nurses Aid in small rural community college
Elizabeth (EG)	29	Hispanic	Live Studio Recording-stop out	Single	No children	Associate of Applied Science in Culinary Arts in large urban community college
Melissa (MB)	51	White	General education at university-stop out. Certificate in cosmetology, medical transcriptionist	Separated	Two step children, 29 and 27 One biological child aged 17. Mother who is also	Associate of Applied Science in Marketing in small rural community college

					separated from her father lives in her home.	
Chris (CG)	55	White	General Education-stop out	Divorced, remarried	Two children, daughter aged 33, and son aged 36. Two grand-children	Associate of Applied Science in Nursing in large suburban community college

In examining the prior lived experiences of non-traditional reentry women in community college, three main themes emerged. The first theme is that of *being*. Within the theme of being, three other sub-themes emerged. For many of the participants, education was positively viewed within their family, and in fact, they were encouraged, most often by a mother or maternal figure to attend college. Early college experiences, however, appear to have lacked focus or commitment. In addition, participants were often simultaneously fulfilling many roles, including wife and mother, which further strained their commitment to attending and completing college. From there, the women withdrew from higher education to pursue these roles. In addition, they also entered the workforce in career paths that did not always satisfy. As years progressed through these roles of student, wife, mother, divorcee, and widow, the women found themselves returning to the community college. The current college experience is notable in that there is firm intent to complete the degree.

The second theme in the study of nontraditional reentry women is that of *becoming*. Not only are the women intent on completing the degree, but the experiences and effort are different. Their life experiences have giving them the ability to access both the social and academic resources available and utilize these resources toward the goal of completion of the degree or certificate. They are active participants in their educational experiences with the goal of becoming a college student. A sub-theme to emerge from the journey of *becoming* is feelings of anxiety and trepidation on returning to college of being older than the other students in a class or cohort. A second sub-theme is that relationships with faculty and peers, though while important, are a means to an end in order to complete the degree. A third sub-theme is that academic pursuits are challenging and that they have very high expectations of themselves. They are not only in pursuit of a college degree, but excellence in educational achievements. Finally, the third sub-theme is the challenge in balancing work, school, and family, and especially the challenge to the financial aspects of pursuing a college degree.

The third theme is that of *emerging*. The women participants look forward to emerging from their college experiences with a greater sense of agency and empowerment. They are confident that their completed degrees will give them a sense of personal accomplishment, as well as a financial benefit to their family and as a role model to children to pursue higher education. In addition, they are ready and eager to accept the new roles and challenges that their career change will bring.

Theme: Being--Student, wife, mother, worker, divorcee, widow and back again.

Family perception of higher education. For many of the women, the decision to pursue higher education after graduation from high school was influenced by their family. For some, they were part of the first generation to attend college; while for others, one or more parents had attended or obtained a college degree. Elizabeth, a 29 year old woman, had recently completed an associate degree in culinary arts, as well as a certificate in hospitality and restaurant management. She was single and had recently employed in a restaurant associated with a golf club. She had attended a large urban community college in central Michigan, and then later transferred to a large urban college in Chicago, majoring in live sound and audio recording, but left a year before completed a degree. She was out of college for a number of years before returning to community college to pursue and complete the degree in culinary arts.

Well, both of my parents are college graduates. My sister started attending; she is like 2 ½ years older than me, so she started attending before I graduated. I saw how well she was doing, so I knew that, I mean I was always brought up that you go to high school, you graduate, you work, but you also go to school for something that you want to do for the rest of your life, not just like short term. So I would say it was pretty important that we go to college, but whatever it was that we choose to do, it was our decision, up to us.

Melissa, a 51 year old woman who was returning to a rural community college to pursue a degree in marketing, noted that while her parents were not able to attend college, they were supportive of her decision to attend a large public university in central Michigan after completing high school.

Neither of my parents went to college. My father was in the service, and then my Mom ended up getting pregnant in high school, her senior year, and had my brother young, and then she had me three years later. She would have loved to go to college. My dad would have been a great college student too. They are both very smart people, but they didn't have the opportunity really. They had a family, so they had to go to work.

Of significance is the fact that while education is viewed as important, in these families work is also viewed as equally important. They are not only attending college, but working as well. Once they drop out of college, they continue to pursue employment.

Other women noted the importance of higher education in their family and that it was their mother or maternal figure that was the advocate for advanced education. For example, Amy is a 41 year old woman in a large urban college in southeast Michigan working toward a pre-professional associate degree in health care or allied health. Amy's mother is a registered nurse. When she was seventeen, she gave birth to a baby boy who eventually went into the foster care system and then was adopted by his foster parents. She described her family's attitude towards education in this way:

It was viewed as very important with my mom. My mom runs the show at home. I've got like a strict Jewish mom. And my dad's never said anything. He just, the women in our family wear the pants. So I always said, I'm never going to be like that, and guess what? I am like that. But she always, you know, stressed grades and the importance of going to college and getting an education. And my dad never said anything about it. They came from two very different cultural, religious, financial backgrounds. So he just kept quiet. But I've been on my own since I was 17, so she didn't really have that much of a say. I wanted to go to school when I was 18. She wouldn't help at that time. And I was too late for financial aid so, but she's always stressed, you know, how important it is.

Although Amy cited her desire for a stronger relationship with her son as the primary reason for her continued pursuit of a career path, it would also appear that her estranged relationship with her mother plays a significant part in her goals as well.

Kim is a 31 year old married woman pursuing a certificate of development in the certified nurse aid program at a rural community college. At the time of the interview, Kim was nine months pregnant with her fourth child and brought her oldest daughter, who was six years old, to the interview. After graduation from high school, she attended a tribal community college in the upper peninsula of Michigan, where she graduated with a certificate of development in business technology. Since that time, she has worked in a

variety of low skill jobs, primarily in the food service industry. She explained her family of origin's attitude towards education in this way:

My dad did not finish high school at all. I think he made it as far as 8th grade, and he was an older man. He passed away this past fall. My mom did some college. She started on a degree in Alpena and kind of pushed the rest of her kids, there are five total. Two of us have actually went to college. I don't think any of us have actually got a degree except for my certificate. I don't know about my brothers. She is the one that pushed us to get our education. My parents split when I was about 15, and then she just pushed us to keep in school. She just really tried.

The trend of a maternal figure encouraging the pursuit of higher education continued with the participants of this study. Many of the women noted that at the time that they were attending community college, they also had children attending either a two or four-year institution, including Cindy, Judy, and Karla. Debbie and Melissa had high school aged children who were either attending or considering attending college, and Courtney was attending the same college as a younger male sibling.

In addition, two of the women noted that male siblings were encouraged to attend college, while they were not encouraged to attend. During both interviews, these statements were made in very sad and pensive manner, reflecting a sense of loss. Debbie, age 45 and a recent graduate with an Associate of Arts from a large suburban college just outside of Chicago, noted:

I have one brother, and it was always very important that he go to college. And my dad, he would always say, "You don't need college. Wherever you go, you're going to end up great because of you and your personality. You don't need to go to college." And so, it was something he was not going to pay for if I wanted to go. It was something I would have to pay on my own. It was not . . . My dad really thought, I did not think, I needed it. And even when I went back years later, he never really understood why I was doing it.

Debbie's father passed away shortly after she had returned to school, and she noted that up until his death, although he was proud of her for pursuing her education, did not understand or see the need for her to have more education. It is interesting to note that despite her father's lack of understanding regarding her need to pursue and complete her degree, she is persistent toward her goal.

Similar to Debbie's experience, Chris, a 55 year old woman attending a suburban community college in southwestern Michigan and pursuing her lifelong dream of becoming a registered nurse, pensively noted:

In my house, my mother did not finish high school. And my father did, but he went right into the service. And so the only one of us that went to college was my brother, my oldest brother. And I was like his Irish twin. I'm eleven months younger. And so when it was time for me to go to college, I wanted to go to nursing school so bad. And my parents told me flat out, "Your brother's going. We're not paying for anything. You're on

your own.” It scared me to death at 17 years old, so I didn’t, I didn’t do anything, you know. Went to work and did that whole thing and had kids and so yeah. It was . . . Looking back, it’s really quite interesting to see how differently, you know, college was viewed for boys and girls. Yeah, so. That was, that was the reason.

Buchmann and DiPrete (2006), in an examination of the college attendance of men and women from the General Social Survey between the years of 1959 through 2004, note the closing of the gender gap with respect to college completion. They cite a number of possible theories for this phenomenon, including a decline in gender discrimination in the labor force, an increase in the perceived value of a college education, and improved access for women to baccalaureate degrees through community colleges. They also note that, in part, it is not simply that women are attaining the degree more frequently, but there is also a decline in men completing, especially when there is a father with only a high school education or is absent. Flashman (2013) concurs, noting that not only is community college attendance the gateway for traditional college attendance in women, but higher academic achievement in high school causes more women to consider college attendance. The nontraditional reentry women in this study came from homes that were largely intact, but very disparate in terms of parent’s education, with some parents not having a high school diploma, while others attended college. The women are in part supporting this trend of increased women’s degree attainment not only through their own return to college, but by role modeling this behavior to their

children, thereby encouraging them to complete higher education as well. Further, within the context of these families, although education is important, work is viewed as equally important. Within the family unit, the choice is to either attend college and work, or simply work.

Early college experiences-competing forces. Although the support and encouragement for the pursuit of higher education varied among the participants, all of the women in this study began at either a two-year or four-year college. When one's family did not have experience in higher education, competing forces, especially financial stress, affected the ability to persist in college. In particular, many of the women note that a family's lack of knowledge of available financial resources may have made a difference in persistence. Judy is a 50 year old woman attending a suburban community college in southwest Michigan, pursuing a nursing degree. Neither of Judy's parents had a high school diploma until later in life, when they both went on to obtain a General Education Development (GED) certificate. She said,

. . . my mother was a strong advocate of reading, even though she didn't have a high school education at that point and was able to bring me back up with a lot of hard work. And so I completed high school, I was college bound; I mean I had that in my mind. I wasn't a straight A student, but I worked hard. I was high B/A student. And then at that point I didn't go any farther because of our finances and because of where we were. And I didn't understand at that time, I really didn't understand about financial

aid and things like that. I was really clueless. I didn't see that as an option for me, and so I just kind of got stuck.

Karla, also pursuing a nursing degree, noted a similar lack of knowledge about the available resources, which would have allowed her to complete her degree after high school:

Well, I come from a large Catholic family, and there are seven kids in my family. I'm the third child. And my older sister went away to a four-year university. And she was the first person in either my mom or my dad's side of the family even in their extended family to go to college. So it was actually, it was approved of. It was something that I know my parents wanted for me to do. But they weren't in a financial situation to be able to support that. So it was up to us to pay for our own education.

Despite the fact that her family was not able to help financially with college, she enrolled in community college for two semesters. She also married her first husband.

And then I found myself in a situation where I needed to financially support myself as far a place to live and a car, so that required me to get a full-time job. And the job that I chose wasn't flexible enough in the hours to be able to do both—go to school and to work, so I chose to place my education on hold for a while, which turned into a much longer while. That was originally. Originally, I started taking some pre-req classes in the first couple of semesters, but my intention then was to get a business

degree. Pretty much, I changed the entire plan over the course of a life, almost 30 years.

Early marriage, childbearing, work, and school become significant competing factors toward the completion of a degree or certificate. Judy, graduated from high school with a certificate as a certified nurse's aide (CNA), but opted to continue on to community college to pursue a degree as a signer for the deaf. She was married for twelve years and during that time also had a daughter. She said,

I was married . . . I graduated in 1980, and my first marriage was in 1981. So I did marry right away. Because I wasn't making it on my own with my income. And because I had dated my husband for like two years of high school. So we pretty well decided to get married. But it was a . . . it was a difficult marriage . . . I actually uh, I am a non-certified signer for the deaf. And I was going to go into the interpreter program for signing. That was my goal at that point. Even though I'd been a CNA from high school, I just, I don't know if I didn't think I was smart enough to go to nursing school. . . What was happening in my life at that time with her father--I needed to step away, and I actually just put it on the shelf for a while.

Although she did not complete her program of study as an interpreter for the deaf, her certificate as a CNA allowed her to gain employment and support herself in her work at a hospice agency.

Despite the fact that her parents would not pay for her brother, but not her to attend college, Debbie eventually attended community college initially with an interest in the possibility of pursuing a degree in education, but again stopped out as a result of early marriage and childbearing:

What happened was, I went to high school, graduated. And then I went to a community college for maybe, probably two years or so, and took general type classes. And then about 16 or 17 years ago, I went back to the community college. I was thinking of getting a teaching degree. And as I started doing that, I got pregnant. That's when I had my first daughter. And so I kind of put it all on hold.

Chris also noted that marriage and childbearing as competing forces for her attention were factors in her decision to withdraw from community college.

No, I didn't go to college right away. I started, took some classes, really wasn't a good time, you know. So I quit, then I went back, then when the kids, you know, when the kids were little, I just found it hard, you know, I was so torn between needing to be home with the kids and take care of them and, you know, being able to put the time into this that I would need to.

Although Chris initially stopped out of college to spend more time at home with her family, she eventually took a position as a job as a secretary. In addition, during the same time period, her marriage began to experience difficulty and college attendance, child rearing, and a troubled marriage were too stressful to allow her to continue.

For Amy, in part, her experiences then and now are overshadowed by the fact that she was a young mother who placed her son in foster care, and subsequently was adopted by his foster parents. As a result of being a teenage mother, her parents kicked her out of the home, and she has had little contact, especially with her mother since that time. In terms of her education, she began in a massage therapy program, and then withdraws from college due to medical problems:

I was diagnosed with lupus nephritis and was on some heavy-duty chemo drugs that had a lot of side effects, so I left and moved back here to [named city]. Before [named community college], I was at [different community college] again. Uh, I was taking prerequisites for the Physician's Assistant program to transfer to hopefully Eastern and hopefully Wayne State. I did not complete that at that time. That was about six years ago or five years ago, I think. And before that, I was at the [named] Institute of Massage Therapy. I did not complete there either. And before that, I was at [named] Community College in the year 2000 and 2001. Did not complete. Had a hard time emotionally from losing my son. Before that, in 94/95 I was at [named] Community College. I did not complete. I was trying to learn how to be a young single parent and struggling. Before that, I went to Huron Valley Ambulance to be an EMT. I did complete that. And that's been all of my schooling.

As confirmed by the research, many challenges can impact the educational trajectory of nontraditional reentry women as they return to college

including marriage, child bearing, and child rearing (Rich & Kim, 1999; Jacobs & Berkowitz King, 2002; Bozik & DeLuca, 2005). While each of these women begins a college career with the intent to pursue some type of degree or certificate, the competing forces of college attendance, marriage, child bearing, and entering the workforce are manageable, until they experience marital discord in addition to all these other responsibilities. The marital discord becomes the tipping point for stop out from college.

Boswell and Passmore (2013) note that individual variables, such as early family configuration, the number of hours worked, marriage or cohabitation, and the presence of children, had no relationship to the persistence of community college students toward degree attainment or transfer behavior. It was not, however, studied as to whether the compounding effects of work, children, and marriage would impact persistence. Although any one of these events may not cause stop out, the presence of multiple life stressors can certainly be described as contributing to the lack of persistence. In addition, for each of the women as they are choosing to enroll in college and then stop out, the decision to do so is in response to the people and responsibilities in life. At this time in their life course, the choices and decisions are made through the lens of other people, and as a result, they are putting the needs of a spouse or child ahead of their own needs for education leading to a career. At this point in life, their decision making is based on their relationship with the other people and other roles in life. As they make the decision to return to college, the decision is less about the others and more

about themselves and their own needs for not only education, but also fulfillment.

Return to college-renewed commitment. For nontraditional reentry women, the motivating factors, which cause a return to community college, are complex and multifaceted, with a number of factors to consider. In this study, the majority of participants were returning to school seeking a change in career or improvement in career. There are other factors, which prompt a return to school, such as job loss and the need to retool job skills, as well as a change in marital status. In addition, upon return to community college, the commitment to persist is significant. For example, Amy, aged 41, pursuing a degree in pre-allied health, said,

I wanted to be able to help my son when hopefully he would come to me. And now he has and I have nothing, you know, to help him with, so mainly that—for myself and for my son. When I was thinking of going back into massage therapy school, it's a short program, and I'm very adamant about helping my son as much as I can. He doesn't have anyone, and I owe him. You know, the foster parents who became his adopted parents, they haven't had him living there since he was like 13. They've had him at these out-of-state, private, very affluent, like all boys religious schools for severely troubled emotional youth.

Similarly, Cindy, a 57 year old divorce woman attending a large urban community college pursuing an associate of arts degree, had a 19 year old son who was also attending college. She previously attended community college,

business college, and beauty school after graduation from high school and had worked at many jobs before and during her marriage, including as an assistant manager at a bakery and in the city municipal records department. She has experienced issues with memory since having had two closed head injuries, one as a child and one as a young adult. In addition, she is a breast cancer survivor who remains on an oral chemotherapy agent. While married, she worked as a legal secretary for her husband. During that time, she developed an issue with addiction, although she has been sober for seven and a half years. She remarked, "Well, I've been sober for seven and a half years. And I felt it was time to get a career going, but I couldn't find anything I fit into." Debbie, also noted that in addition to the desire achieve the next challenge, namely a college degree, that it was a challenging question from her high school aged daughter on why it was important to attend college, which renewed her interest in reentry:

You know what it was? My kids were getting older, and we talked about college a lot. And one day my younger daughter said to me, "I don't want to go to college, and I don't have to. You didn't. So I don't have to." And I thought, "Hmm." That didn't sit very well. And it was really one of those things that was sort of, if I had one regret in my life, it was always that I didn't get my college degree. And I just kind of felt like, you know, I'm a little older, my kids are older, and I just felt like it doesn't have to be a regret. That's something that was very easy for me to go back and do. And so I decided to do it.

In addition, Debbie noted that it was not only to be a good role model for her children, but for a sense of self improvement and agency. Debbie noted that over the course of her life, she had made many personal life changes, including losing weight, taking up running, and now was running races. She enjoyed taking on new challenges in life, and her one regret in life of not completing a college degree could be turned into another challenge for her to conquer.

Karla, who had since remarried and gone on to a career, noted that not only was the decision to return to college driven by a desire for a new challenge, but a decision that took time, resources, and planning to arrange her life so she could fully concentrate on college:

I actually worked; I began in '84 working for a company called Quality Dining locally. It's a franchisee, but locally I worked under the Burger King division. I started out as a crew member and then just grew from that position. I just worked my way through their career ladder, and when I left, I was an area manager or regional manager, supervising 19 restaurants, all in west Michigan. So I just really felt like I had mastered that, and I really wasn't feeling a whole lot of achievement from that anymore and realizing again over that course of a couple of years that I had more to give. And I have more that I want to learn. Again, I just got to the point where I didn't feel challenged doing that type of work anymore.

Karla noted that once the decision to return to college was made, she planned and prepared financially for a period of years so that she would not need to work while attending college. This was not only a commitment toward her education on her part, but on the part of her spouse and children as well

I had made a decision over the course of about two to three years to make a career change. I had worked for the same job that I had gotten when I originally quit going to school back in '84. And so I had been with the same company. So it took me a couple of years to prepare myself financially to be able to leave and so that I could be 100 percent committed to my education at the time and to make sure that I was successful. I haven't had any concerns at all about as far as the workload, the studies, or anything like that. Everything's been fine.

In addition, while the decision to return to college is often as a result of a change in marital status, the final push comes from family or friends to continue on in education despite difficult life circumstances. Judy's first marriage lasted for 12 years, and then she remarried at age 30 to a man who was twenty-one years her senior with significant health issues. His declining health and subsequent death while enrolled in college were not only the impetus for her return, but also for the decision to remain in community college to complete a degree in nursing:

. . . when I met my husband who's gone, we had been married probably four years, and I was working for Hospice of Michigan. And actually, we'd

been married longer than that. And I had one of my nurses; my triage nurse was just really pressuring me. "You've got too much knowledge to be doing, to just be a CNA. You're not getting any younger. You know, all it's going to take is one bad back injury and you're going to be done working. You need to have something to fall back on. She was a very good advocate, pushing me. And my husband at the same time was saying the same thing. "Judy, if something happens to me, I want you to be able to support yourself." I had a lot of, a lot of cheerleaders wanting me to go forward.

Judy also noted that her religious faith and her faith in herself were crucial to her ability to return to and persist in college, despite having to take a semester off to care for her ailing husband:

I have a very deep faith too, and I really felt like God was dealing with me, leading me. I know people have different ways of expressing it, but I felt like it was, He just assured me that it was time. And so that's where I'm at now. That's brought me to this point. And my husband, I had to quit for a while during his dying process. And actually my team (from hospice) took care of him when he died at home. We had a very good death, and being a hospice worker I can say that. He died with dignity. He had what he needed. But his wish was that I would not quit school. And I had to take a break for a while. I stepped out for a semester, and then I had to go back those last three months because I would have missed my window. And like you said, you do what you have to do.

Courtney also noted that, in her return after ten years to pursue an Associate of Applied Science in accounting degree, her commitment to her goal-to have a career had evolved to become clearer. Indeed her eventual goal is to pursue a baccalaureate degree and perhaps become a certified public accountant. She said,

Yes, I just felt like it was time because I have been working, but I would like to actually have a career, and I don't have kids, so I feel like right now is a good time to do it, and I feel like I am more structured now so that I wouldn't just blow it off, I guess. I found that before, I struggled with it, and since I have grown up quite a bit since then, that it has become quite a bit easier and that I can, not so much that the classes are easier, but that myself doing the work is easier because I am more committed to it, I guess.

Many nontraditional women reenter community college as the result of a change in employment or marital status. For two participants, Melissa and Chris, job loss was the primary reason for the return to college. Over the course of her life, Melissa had many jobs, including as a cosmetologist and as a medical transcriptionist. Her position as a medical transcriptionist ended when the hospital she was employed with in rural northern Michigan closed due to bankruptcy. Rather than seek employment elsewhere or simply broaden her skill set, she opted for a completely different career choice--one of her choosing:

Well, I was returning to school because I had lost my job, and when I went on unemployment, I discovered that you could get a student waiver and go back to school, and I have always wanted to go back to school. In fact, earlier in my marriage, I think we were living together at the time, I wanted to go back to school to be a doctor and my husband discouraged me, and I just didn't do it. I could have been a professional student; I just love going to school. If you had a student waiver, you could go to school and collect your unemployment. You had to go into certain areas that were going to be in the future. So you couldn't just pick any career, it had to be one that was up and coming in the future and marketing was one of them.

For Chris, after her first divorce and subsequent remarriage, she entered the work force, but experienced significant health issues and as a result lost her job. It was this job loss that prompted her to consider a return to her first career choice, nursing:

I was an administrative secretary for many, many years. And I got really sick. I'd been sick for a few years, so I lost my job. And then as things started to look up and get better, I just decided to do something that I've always wanted to do. So here I am. . . . You know, I mean I don't know that I believed in things that happen, coincidence, you know what I mean? And so I feel like this is the time I'm supposed to be here. I mean it just, it just worked. And all the other times that I've taken classes and doing things, something would come up, and it wouldn't work. And now

it's working. So the way I see it is this is what I'm supposed to be doing right now. So, you know. . . .

Elizabeth, a 29 year old recent graduate with an Associate degree in culinary arts, noted the change in commitment from her first college to her more recent experiences. She attended a large urban community college in south central Michigan before transferring to Chicago, where she attended for a year and left without completing a degree.

When I went right from high school, I was kind of unsure of what I wanted to do in the first place, so I was obviously taking the basic classes that I had to take for any degree really. You know I struggled but it wasn't like it was extremely hard, it was just like a different learning atmosphere than it was from high school. When I went back the second time, I had taken about a year or so off, and it was different. I was an older student compared to some of the students that were in there, but I felt like I could actually focus more as an older student. I was able to be more organized. I was able to manage my time better, you know things that you learn to do better than when you had done them a few years before when you graduated high school because it is such a transition between those two times that you aren't really used to it. Being able to manage work time, plus school time, plus getting to class and all that stuff I think came easier as an older student.

She made the decision to return to the same urban community college, but this time with a completely different academic focus, in part influenced by her Cuban roots:

Well yes, you know being in the culinary industry you can't just walk into a kitchen without any experience, or they probably won't hire you so I had to have some sort of background knowledge. That was the most interesting part really was the science behind everything and the creativity. I knew I needed to go to school, but where I was pretty set on the fact that the other schools in Michigan like the Art Institute, which are expensive, and I knew I would have to travel, you know so I needed something close because I was already working at (named) Community College. So I needed something close that I could afford and not have to travel so far to do it. So school was a definite and I knew I had to go back for it.

For each of the nontraditional reentry women in this study, her journey to the doors of the community college is indirect. It begins with uncertainty, but ends with sureness of purpose and a commitment to accomplishing their goal. As each of the women noted, this return to college was different than their previous experiences because their commitment was different. They were not only seeking to fulfill lifelong aspirations, but to complete a degree with a firmness of purpose—to have a meaningful and sustaining career. The commitment to completing a degree, in part, has to do with a shift in how decisions appear to be made. Initially the women were making decisions based

on the needs of the other people in their lives. As they return to college, however, they begin to make decisions based on their own need for self-efficacy.

Theme: Becoming a college student-

The second theme is that of *becoming* a college student. During this phase, the women have made a decision to return to school to obtain or complete a certificate or degree. Within this theme, there are three sub-themes. The first sub-theme is trepidation and anxiety over being a nontraditional student, specifically being “the oldest student in the room” or a maternal figure. The second sub-theme is related to social integration, which explores the depth and breadth of peer relationships. The final sub-theme is academic integration and the role of the academics as an integrative experience. The women who return to community college place high academic expectations on themselves, and yet are strong advocates for themselves and their learning, and take full advantage of available resources.

Return to college-anxiety and trepidation. When asked broadly to describe their experiences upon returning to community college, many of the women noted feelings of trepidation and anxiety upon return to community college with regard to their age and years away from the academic setting. Despite the fact that they were not asked specific questions about age or their status as a nontraditional student, many described their initial experiences in terms of their age in relation to their peers and especially the fear of “being the oldest person in the room.”

Debbie, a confident administrative assistant in a large national fitness company in Chicago, described what it was like the first time she entered the classroom after a long absence, and then later what it was like to take her most difficult class, Biology:

Yes, yeah, it's scary to go in and be older, but what I also found is that a couple of classes that I took, I took on Saturday. And there were definitely older people. It wasn't traditional college transfer with 18 and 19 year olds in it. It was definitely more people in their late 20's. I mean I was still probably one of the older ones, but there were people who were more mature, who I had a little bit in common with. So all the classes weren't as bad, they weren't *all* as bad. The first one I took was a lot of younger kids, and that was hard. When I walked into the classroom, it was really nerve wracking. All the younger kids in the class were sitting around talking, and so I went right over to a young kid who was looking through the textbook, because I thought, that's a good sign. And it was. We became study partners, and he really helped me get through that first class. After that, I thought, well, I can do this . . . Like you know what, the hardest class that I took since I went back was Biology, which I just took last semester actually. And it was a Saturday class, but there weren't as many older people. I would say they were mostly in their 20's, some younger, but that one was for some reason a really scary to me. And the hardest one I've taken since I went back. The other ones were a couple of Humanities classes, two Humanities and one Ethics class. You

know, more like writing. Writing comes easily for me. The Saturday class is like a 5-hour long class. You would have lecture and half the time would be lab. And I remember the first time I went to lab, I really . . . And everybody was, "OK here's what you do." And everybody starts getting all their stuff and doing all the work, and I'm like, "What the heck? Oh my God." And I'm really getting teary-eyed. And I'm not, I'm not an emotional person. I know I sound like it right now when I'm talking about it. But I was just so nervous at the kind of work we were doing, and I did not know what . . . The teacher was so nice. She came over to me, she saw me struggling. And the next week, I came in, we had a quiz. Every week you had to take a quiz. The first week comes, and I took the quiz and I failed. I've never failed. I've gotten straight A's in college. I have to take this class to get my Associate's degree; it's a required class. You know, we talked it through, and she (the teacher) said, "Don't quit. This is one area. Don't worry, you'll get it." And so I remember I felt like well, everybody's doing okay. I literally almost walked out of the lab. I don't know what kept me there, but I stayed. And thank God I did, because I did end up getting a B in the class. But the point is, it was hard, because, you know, these young kids, they're quick. And they know what to do and they just took Biology in high school and you know, and even those who were slightly older, some of them were nursing students. So they all knew anatomy and different . . . So it was just really, really hard.

Karla, a student in the nursing program, also noted anxiety upon returning to the classroom, despite significant experience in the workplace as a manager and extensive financial planning for her return to college:

I would say that I was apprehensive. Although I knew it was necessary to go back to school, because I needed or had made a decision to change careers. And so while I knew that it was necessary, it was awkward. At the time that I returned, my son was also going to the same school, so that was kind of awkward for him as well. And, but uh, actually, once I started attending and saw that there were several people my age and even older that were returning to school or were still attending college, that for sure made it easier. And honestly I would say at this point, age is not an issue for me at all. But I would say at the beginning it was awkward.

Chris, who is part of a cohort in a nursing program, summarizes the sense that although the nontraditional reentry women experience concerns regarding age, they are over time unfounded. In fact, as she concluded, a result in the decline in the economy, there are many nontraditional students in community college:

OK, it's interesting being in college at my age because, you know, the kids, the younger kids these days, they're just so different. And, you know, I think the really good part about being in college now for me as a really much older student is that because the economy is so bad, there really is a lot of [people in my] age bracket. So I don't feel like I'm

everybody's grandma, you know what I mean? There's 20-somethings and there's 40-somethings. I think I am the oldest in our, in our group, in our class, but not by much. I mean there's some like 40's in there, there's mid-40's, late 30's. I mean there's the whole range. And then we have the babies, the 20-somethings. So I don't feel at all like I don't belong there. And I find that when I do feel that, it's my own perception. Because when any, when it ever comes up, what my age is, everybody is like, "Oh my gosh, I think that is the coolest thing ever that you're doing this." So whatever that is, that I start thinking that it's a bad thing, it's what *I'm* doing. It's not because I get that from outside. No. And I find that quite interesting actually.

Over time, despite the initial anxiety as they return to community college over age and the ability to perform academically, the fears are resolved to the point where they are coming to view their life experiences as assets rather than a liability in relationship to the academic environment and their student peers. Furthermore, they are free to explore the other roles in life apart from wife, mother, and worker, toward that of student and scholar.

Social integration and peer support. Once, however, the participants are beyond the initial trepidation, they find connection and support from their student peers. In terms of social integration into the community college environment, many of the participants express positive interaction with peers. In addition, the women noted that rather than participate in college wide groups or activities, social integration took the form of more intimate

relationships in the form of support groups, study groups, and cohorts.

Melissa, a 51 year old student in the Associate of Applied Science in Marketing program and the mother of a seventeen year old girl whom she home schools, said this:

I love all my students. [laughs]. I love all the students. I get along with them all really well, young, and old, although I think I have only met two that are older than me. I was very nervous about keeping up, I think, with the younger generation because it has been so long, but I have managed to keep up, but it is hard. It's good but they kind of look at me as a Mom.

When asked for a specific example, both she and Karla noted that as a result of their experience and maturity, students look to them as a leader in the classroom. In their previous careers, they were both accustomed to having a high level of responsibility, as well as giving and receiving direction. Further, they are comfortable with being in a leadership role within the classroom or cohort group. Melissa, 41, pursuing an Associate degree in Science in Marketing, said,

In that they, they look to me for direction I should say, not so much advice but direction. If we have a project to do, they don't seem to want to move on it until I say, okay let's go, let's do this, let's move in this direction, and then they will start moving, and they will find all kinds of information. It just takes sometimes me to say, "Let's do this" and then they move.

Similarly, Karla, 47, pursuing an Associate of Applied Science in Nursing, said:

I'm pretty aware of the fact that I think some of my fellow students they, a few of them I've noticed, tend to maybe more avoid, my guess would be I'm probably pretty close to a lot of their parents' age. In this last semester in my clinical group, I believe there were eight of us. And actually we formed very good, probably lifetime friendships. And it really doesn't seem to be an issue for the majority of people. But I do, I am aware of the fact that some people tend to shy away from like picking me or studying together. It's totally fine with me, but I do see it. It's somewhat apparent to me. And there was a situation this last semester, you know, where one of the students, probably early 20's, you know, made a couple of comments indirectly about referring to my age, and just the fact that she felt like I was taking too much of a leadership role. And honestly I just think it's probably just going to, it's just who I am. It's more my personality as opposed to really not trying to boss anybody or anything but. . . . So there was one person that came right out and addressed it with me, which I appreciated. But at the same time, for me, I don't see really anything of significance.

Oh, you know, I mean obviously we're not going to uh, go to the bar and do that stuff that 20-somethings do, but I feel like I have friends in the college that range from one girl, I mean we hung out the whole last year. We met in the summer, and we made it a point to take classes together because we were both going for the same thing. And she just graduated

from high school. And yet we're, you know, we just, we got along and, you know. And so, it's really funny because I feel like we're friends in a very fun way, you know. I don't feel like they look, it's fun to not be looked to for advice or help or money or this or that. It's like I'm just who I am.

Chris, also part of cohort in a nursing program, discovered supportive relationships among her peer group, which deepened over time. When pressed further, she noted that over a period of time and experience with her classmates, she became a valued member of the class based not on age or experience, but rather in being another learner:

I'm just another student. I just happen to be older. And so I really like that part, because it feels like it takes some of the, some of the or maybe it adds, it doesn't take away, maybe it adds a fun dimension instead of always being the mom or the person to go to. You know what I mean? There's a lot of responsibility in being a woman, you know. And so I feel like that just adds a fun dimension because I don't have any of that. I'm just one of them.

In other instances of social integration, fellow students are not only friends and classmates, but in the form of study groups and cohorts are integral to academic success as well. Study groups and cohorts not only provide social integration, but promote academic integration in the form of accountability to one another. The connection in the form of the study group and cohort group provide a sense of connection to academic and content

knowledge, to a group and to the wider institution. Further, the social outlet of study groups, support groups, and cohorts not only provide a social outlet, but social integration is actualized through academic intentions, experiences and learning. For example, Judy, age 50, pursuing an Associate of Applied Science in Nursing, said:

I am connected to a strong study group, and that really helps a lot. Accountability is huge. And we've striven from the first, from the beginning. I feel like people need to feel connected and not in a co-dependent way. But I don't feel like there's anyone in our class, our whole class, that doesn't feel like they could go up to another person and say, "Hey do you have a pencil I can borrow?" or "Can you answer this question?" And we've really tried. We've worked it. There's a core group of people that have worked to foster that. And I know that, three of the instructors have said to me in conversation that they see that in classes like maybe almost two years down the road or towards the end. But from the beginning, our class has fostered that concept that we are a family that we need to get through this together; we don't want to leave anybody behind. And that's really helped. That's a huge thing.

Chris also noted that the support of her cohort and their shared experiences was a motivator toward persistence:

I think people higher in the program [other cohorts] saying, "It does get better. Just relax. Don't look out at what you have to do in November. It's

August. You know, just stay focused. Just get through this day.” And then the next day, we’d say the same thing. You can get through Wednesday, you know. And that’s really how we did it. Until about midway, and then we, then we felt like, “OK we’re feeling a little bit more comfortable now. We can do this.” So yeah, so that was it, just getting through each day.

The women in this study noted initial anxiety over return to the classroom after a long absence based on the initial assumption that they would be one of the older students in the classroom. Upon returning to the classroom, however, they easily transition from being “the oldest student in the room” to “just one of them.” Over time, they were able to shed their previous roles of mother, spouse, manager, and move toward being a student colleague and peer. In doing so, they were able to engage more fully in the learning environment as a result of the supportive peer relationships in the classroom, cohort, and study group reinforcement toward their educational goals. Further, when inquiring about social experiences in the community college environment, participants give examples within the context of the learning environment, which illustrate the marked connection of social integration to academic experiences.

Academic Integration. The women spoke very positively regarding their interactions and integration into the academic system. In particular, they spoke positively regarding interactions with faculty, whom they describe as responsive and caring. Similar to concerns about how their nontraditional

status might be viewed by their peers, they also assumed that faculty would view them negatively. Although they anticipated that they might be treated differently because of their status as nontraditional learners, this did not occur. Judy, a 50 year old nursing student, summarized the caring atmosphere fostered by faculty toward the students:

Yeah, I have a lot of respect for the faculty. I feel like there was only one gentleman in that group, but I feel like they're working women. Most of them have a job outside of college. And I just think that it takes an extreme amount of dedication, and I know that we all work because we need a paycheck partly, but that's not the only reason people teach. People teach because they have a passion for what they're doing, and they want to see other people do it and do it well and maybe not repeat the mistakes they've made or have a desire to open up their minds, you know, and so I have a great respect for our faculty. Do I always like how they do things? No. I think that sometimes things could be done better. I guess because when you think about when you're a student, whether you're a child or an adult, you're very vulnerable emotionally. And a teacher is a very, very powerful position. I don't care who you're teaching. It can be in church study. You are molding people's lives.

Karla and Elizabeth also described positive interactions with faculty and staff particularly within their program cohorts. Faculty members are described as knowledgeable, available, and interested in individual student success.

Furthermore, the sense of individual caring and concern on the part of a

faculty member regarding their learning and success impacts persistence.

Karla, age 47, pursuing an Associate of Applied Science in Nursing degree, explained:

Well, I guess one obvious thing that I would state about that is I'm probably, I am closer in age to my instructors than I am to the majority of the students that I'm taking classes with. But I've actually gotten into some very comfortable, for me, conversations with instructors. Obviously I have more in common in life conversations with them. But they've all been very respectful. They've all been very interested, like, "What brings you here?" I mean I've never worked in any, not one day in the medical field. So I think that there's some interest around that. And so I've had some of the instructors, you know, talk to me about that and allow me to ask questions of them too as far as maybe their reasons for choosing to be instructors of nursing as opposed to clinical nursing and what led them in those directions as I'm trying to decide, you know, what field or which area of nursing, you know, I would like to do after finishing my degree. So again to just summarize it I guess I would say that they've all been very open and encouraging and supportive. I've had three evaluations now by different instructors, encouraging me to continue on, that they see qualities that are going to benefit me in the nursing field. And so I would say they've all been positive.

Likewise, Elizabeth, age 29, who recently earned an Associate of Applied Science in Culinary Arts degree, said: I mean if I needed something, most of

the classes were hands on anyways so I would get the hands on help I needed in the kitchen or in the classroom. But yes, my teachers were great, and they all took an interest in every students learning and making sure that we were getting everything we were supposed to, we knew everything that was on the agenda for the day, the material. They were very supportive. I can't really say I had a terrible teacher. I mean I had a couple of bad teachers, but that was for a couple of academic classes as opposed to like the actual hands on like cooking classes and stuff. But yes, all the faculty and staff were fantastic.

Kim, a 31 year old student who was working toward a certificate of development in certified nurse's aide, also noted that her faculty member cared about her and took personal interest in her as an individual, but that she was highly motivated to complete her courses despite being pregnant with her fourth child:

Interaction with the faculty has been pretty positive. I email them and let them know what is going on if I'm not going to be there. It is pretty open communication. I can talk to them before classes. After classes I will talk to them. It's pretty open. I really like the teachers here. . . [and] being pregnant, I did not want to quit. I'm pretty driven. My teacher was teasing me yesterday. She says, well what if the doctor says you have to go on bed rest? I said, well, "I will just have my husband bring my computer in and I will just sit in the chair, recline, and listen." She said, "Well, that is some dedication." I just need three more classes for the certificate.

Cindy, a 57 year old who was working toward an Associate of Arts degree and had learning issues as a result of multiple head injuries. She returned to college after attending beauty school and business classes. She worked for many years in low skill jobs and finally returned to school after a divorce and recovering from drug addiction. As a result of her head injuries and other medical issues, Cindy received classroom accommodations, including a note taker in all her classes. Early in her college courses, she had been on the Honor's List, but as she progressed, she became extremely discouraged as a result of difficulty with a required math course, which she had already repeated. She was so discouraged that she was even considering not re-enrolling in the subsequent semester. Part of the reason for her frustration was due to the limited amount of tutoring she was able to receive from Learning Support Services:

I e-mail them when I'm going to be, when something's going on like if I'm going to be late with something or I want to know something, I e-mail them. And my math teacher's great. She's wonderful. She's a little bundle of energy. And she's tried to help me as much as she can, but she has the rest of the class to consider. So I don't know. I think I'm coming out of that class with a C if I'm lucky. . . With my teachers, I have an excellent rapport. I find them very supportive and helpful. At the Math Tutoring Center, I have trouble because they only allot for 15 minutes of their time. And I can't grasp what it is I'm supposed to be grasping in 15 minutes. And I stay and wait to get another, a second 15 minutes, you're

only allowed two a day, and I still can't grasp it. So it's been very frustrating, as far as the Learning Center is concerned, not the Support Services, but the Tutoring Center for math. I had great luck with my English classes. I'm a good writer. I have no trouble there. But like I said, the math has been an issue.

While every participant cited involvement with the academic systems, and in particular faculty, not every experience was viewed positively, and in fact can have a very negative effect on the student. For instance, Amy, age 41, in a Pre-allied health program, had both physical and mental health issues which complicated her academic process:

I've had a lot of good experiences. I've had some really good instructors. There's been a couple negative experiences. This last semester, I had a problem with the teacher. I was working with Learning Support Services for some of my medical problems. A drunk driver hit me years ago. That was one of the times I left school. I've had three back surgeries, fusions, laminectomy, micro-discectomy, discectomy. And from the gastric bypass, I have like irritable bowel. So my doctor wrote a note. Learning Support Services sent it to my teachers. And I had, one particular teacher still gave me a problem about it when I'd have to run out of the classroom. She embarrassed me not once but twice in front of the other class members and made me say verbally what the problem was. And wouldn't let me make up the work and so that was a bad experience, very bad. I didn't go back to the class, because she made me cry. You know, I

cried. The problem was never resolved. I made a complaint, nothing happened. I lost credit for that class and have to pay for that class. So those two experiences have been bad, but otherwise I've enjoyed going to school and learning and meeting people, but it just is an environment I feel like for kids, you know.

High academic expectations. The majority of the participants expressed the strong desire to perform well academically. This included not only working hard toward the goal of academic achievement, but a strong sense of self-advocacy. As Debbie, age 45, who recently earned an Associate of Arts degree, put it:

Great, I mean I was definitely the one . . . always sitting in the front row, and I would always ask questions, and I was probably one of the students who would, you know, if I didn't understand something, I would stay after class to talk to them, and . . . if I didn't understand why I got something wrong on the test, I was, you know, I was very, I had very good communication with all of my teachers.

Courtney, who had left the community college ten years earlier in part because she felt that she had received inadequate feedback from a faculty member on class assignments, was returning to retake the class in pursuit of an Associate of Applied Science in Accounting. She describes feelings of support from faculty, and as a result is more confident of passing the course this time:.

Especially the one class that I had the problem with last time is the class that I am taking this year. I have a different teacher, and she is great. She accepts emails if you have questions, and she answers you back. She really is there to try and help you out, so it's really good. [I feel] much better in taking the class. I feel like I can actually do it. I'm striving to get an A, but if I just pass it, then that is good for me.

High resource utilization. The women also describe the ability to access and utilize academic resources which enhance their ability to persist. In addition to the consultation with academic faculty, they noted the persistent use of academic advisors. Amy noted that she had used Learning Support Services and Disability Services. She was able to attend college because of financial assistance with Rehabilitative Services. Cindy described using tutors and Learning Support Services as well. Both Amy and Cindy were part of an addiction support group at their college. Judy also described how a friend suggested to her that since she was a widow, she should seek assistance through Special Populations:

They actually paid. I still had a balance of tuition before I could register for the next class. And they paid that balance, plus they reimbursed me some of my book money. And this semester, they've covered over a grand. I mean they really helped me. And I don't know how long this can last, but to this point I am blessed. I owe no student loans.

In fact, the skills that they have gained over a lifetime are an asset to themselves and their peers. Karla, aged 47, pursuing and Associate of Applied

Science in nursing degree, rose through the ranks of a fast food service franchise to become a district manager over a large geographic area in southwestern Michigan. She said:

One of the conscious realizations that I had in making the choice to leave my career and to start a new one was I thought I was picking a career where I could just be accountable more just for myself and my own choices, my own actions. But the more and more I learn about nursing, there's a lot about managing others, you know, involved in that. And so I think because of my background, it just comes, it's apparent, it's obvious to people. And it's really hard to turn that off. So I make conscious decisions, when, you know, like in a clinical setting, to ask questions of others as opposed to try to direct them so that it's not seen as me trying to lead them. You can do that in different ways.

As the women in this study enter the community college environment to pursue a degree or certificate, initially they face anxiety and trepidation due to their status as nontraditional learners. As they become integrated both socially and academic into the community college environment, they note an increased commitment toward their goal, and this further reinforces their movement away from wife, mother, and employee toward student, peer, and scholar. They incorporate their previous skills and characteristics, but they learn to use these skills within the context of their new career choices.

Challenges to persistence. Nontraditional reentry women encountered significant challenges to persistence for nontraditional reentry women encountered as they returned to school. As with their initial departure from

college, the majority of women cited financial challenges to persistence, but as with previous responses, these issues are often interwoven with other concerns, such as family and the ability to balance work and school. They also noted that when issues arose, they had the strong ability to problem solve in order to achieve the goal of completion. Amy, 41, in the Pre-allied health program, has had a number of interruptions in her educational journey, and the ability to persist has been a challenge due to financial concerns:

So yeah, financial has been a big problem in school and out of school, 'cause to go back to school I had to pay out of pocket, which I didn't have. So Michigan Rehabilitation Services, they paid for my books and supplies, and then I got my financial aid back. Because I had a successful semester and I completed another successful semester. Now I've lost it again. So finances school wise and outside of school because I'm on Social Security/disability, which, you know, is limiting.

Additionally, Elizabeth, 29, who recently completed a degree in the Culinary Arts, noted that it was not only finances that were challenging, but the ability to balance school, work, and home responsibilities:

Well, financially for sure. I did have to take out loans which helped tremendously, but I mean like I said I also worked at the school, so I was able to you know get my homework done when I needed to get it done. They make it so if you have time to do your homework, you can do it, that sort of thing. It was more or less trying to manage my time outside between, because I lived alone too, trying to manage the chores in the

house like the laundry and everything and I had the homework, I had to sort of find a schedule that worked. I had weekends off, so that helped, but I also wanted to do stuff in my free time, you know hang out with my friends and, you know, not always have my face in the books. But, most of the time I was studying, that is what I did. I had made a point to myself that when I started it, I was going to finish it, and once I got into it, I fell in love with the program and the degree, and when I came home, that is what I did. I did homework and put everything else on hold until after that.

Participants also noted that financial issues impacted them on a day to day basis. Melissa lost her job as a medical transcriptionist when the hospital in her rural community closed due to bankruptcy. In addition, she was in the process of divorcing her spouse, and her parents were also separated. Fortunately her mother was able to move in with her, providing both financial and house hold assistance with her teenage daughter. She described her challenges in this way:

Financial definitely. I am separated from my husband. My unemployment ran out last year just shortly after leaving my husband and the school year ended. I have been doing my husband's books for 15 years and not charging him. Basically I was the office manager for his construction business. So I told him, I have to get a job and that means I can no longer do your books. So he decided to start paying me to do his books. So, it is not a lot, but I do get paid to do his books. But now

he has told me, the season has come to an end, he cannot pay me anymore; you need to go back on unemployment. Now unemployment is going to be even less. So, yes I do struggle a little bit. You know, I am making it. And now with my mom moving in with me, it will be a little bit easier. I also have a different car. I used to have the car of my dreams, but it was a gas hog, so now I am back to having a car that gets better gas mileage. Also, the challenge of homeschooling my daughter. If I am not there, it is hard to make sure she does the work [and to] make sure that she even gets out of bed to do the work.

In addition to financial concerns, Amy, Cindy, and Chris all noted significant health issues which also challenged their ability to persist in the academic environment. Chris, who returned to community college as a result of her job loss due to health issues, continues to struggle with chronic fatigue despite the strong desire to pursue a career as a nurse:

Well, the financial part of it, you know, obviously, just because I haven't been working is a little bit of an issue. But I think more for me, it's the physical part. I just, I get tired easier, you know, I have to really look at what's coming up and plan things out so that I don't overdo one day, so that then I have to take the next day to recuperate rather than space my time out so that I can study some each day. So, I think my biggest thing is the physical part. Yeah, I just have to pace myself.

Melissa, in particular also noted that, despite the strong desire to pursue a challenging programs of study, decreased intellectual acuity and the need to

work harder at this point in time compared to earlier collegiate experiences for academic achievement was a challenge to continuing the pursuit of higher education:

My 50 year old brain. . . I don't absorb material like I used to. When I was younger, I think I could be half listening to a teacher, half read a book, not take any notes and still ace the class. Now I attend every class, I take notes while the teacher is talking, I read the books, and I do all the practice things just to get it to sink into my brain. And I usually end up talking to somebody about it, like my mother or my daughter or something just so I'm hearing myself say it so it is reverberating in my brain and it sticks. I do require good grades of myself, like I said, and that is an ego thing I think.

In addition, while Chris, Amy, and Cindy struggled with significant physical health issues, Judy also discussed mental health issues related to her husband's passing which challenged commitment to continuing to pursue a college education. Her daughter moved away to pursue college; however, she continues to care for a sister.

I've been going to school in the middle of my grief journey. And my husband was my best friend. And I have a lot of friends that are good friends. I'm blessed. I am. I know some people, they're lucky to have one or two friends that know you. And I have several. And that's huge. I know it is. But it's not the same as somebody who knows you knows you. It's not like we had this perfect marriage. But we had a good marriage. But

beyond the marriage, we had a good friendship. And I think it's a huge foundation in your marriage. So I've walked that road. And at the same time right as my husband passed, my daughter moved to Minnesota. So I was alone at that point. And so was she in our grief processes. A very difficult growing time for us. And then my sister came to live with me. And my sister is bipolar, and she has been kind of been tossed from pillar to post, staying with different people. I told her, "You need to just come live with me. And you need to find *your* normal. We'll find our own normal. We'll have our own family life. This is our home." But it's taken a year of really being consistent with her to decide that yes, this is home, and nobody's going to boot me out. And it's all good. And so there's been a lot of factors going on.

Kasworm (2008) aptly describes the nontraditional learner as having four distinct challenges to student identity development. The first is competency in navigating the college environment, specifically the campus and the classroom. The second challenge is full engagement with the environment due to competing forces and social roles. The third challenge is the integration of learning in the classroom and real life experiences. The final challenge facing a nontraditional learner is developing a sense of value and self-worth within the culture of higher education. Similarly, once the nontraditional reentry women in this study made the decision to return to community college, they faced challenges in the development of their student identity, which is integral to persistence. The first challenge was facing their own fears and anxiety

regarding their status as nontraditional learners as they initially navigated the classroom and campus. Balancing work, school, and home life was also a challenge; even as they transitioned from the early marriage and child rearing to children who were more independent, they still had significant care giving responsibilities at home. They also faced challenges in the classroom as they navigated relationships with peers, integrating their status as expert in skills gained through years of life experience to being a novice student. Prior to entering community college, they were expert and experienced as they manage work and home life, but when they return to college, they are inexperienced novices. The longer they remain in college, the more they integrate the personal and professional selves, the more knowledge they gain, they more they move closer to expert again, and in doing so, they transition from uncertainty to self-assuredness.

While many students, both traditional and nontraditional choose community college for cost, as well as the convenience and variety of course and program options (Mullin & Phillipe, 2009; Kane & Rouse, 1999), the women in this study continued to note finances as a major challenge to their ability to persist. In addition, the challenges the women in this study face similarly reflects those of other nontraditional female learners with regard to the competing forces of children, full or part-time work, and multiple social roles (Jacobs & Berkowitz King, 2002). In addition to the typical challenges, the women in this study, particularly those at the older end of the spectrum,

describe significant challenges to both physical and mental health as a factor in their ability to persist.

They meet these challenges in a number of informal and formal ways. Informally, they demonstrate the characteristics of all good students--high attendance in class, attentiveness, and acting as empowered advocates for their learning in the classroom. Formally, they all seek out available resources which will help them achieve their goals, including faculty.

In addition, even social relationships are means through which they work to achieve their academic goals.

Theme: emerging as a college graduate and professional.

The final theme is that of looking toward the future and *emerging* from the community college as a graduate. Despite the many challenges of being a college student, they are steadily working toward their goal. Judy, age 50, pursuing an Associate of Applied Science in Nursing degree, stated:

I think because 50 is an amazing age to be at. I don't feel like I'm over the hill. I feel like I finally have something to bring to the table, because I've experienced living some life. And I find that exciting. And I just feel like it's a pivotal time in my life. And so instead of sitting in a recliner with my feet up, I just feel like it's a springboard. And I think that kind of keeps me going. I'm not all about, I don't care if I don't have another relationship, which would be fine if it happened, but I want to. . . it's like I'm really finding out who I am as a person. And I want to live to my full

capacity. I don't want just live. I want to LIVE. And I don't want just to be, I don't want my mentality to be that when I get my degree, everything's going to be better. I want to live this journey on my own terms. What can I learn from my fellow students? What can I learn from my instructors? What can I learn from my patients that will make me a better nurse? What will make me a better person that will give me something in my basket to give to the next person? That's what keeps me going. Because I want to be everything that I'm supposed to be. Because nobody can take my place. Nobody can be what I was created to be. So I guess my goal, why I keep going, is I want to reach full potential. That may not happen, but it might. So that's my journey.

Sense of responsibility to family. For other participants, the goal of college completion is motivated by family, and in particular the desire to improve the lives of children and serve as a role model to their children. Kim, 31, pursuing a Certificate of Development in a Certified Nurse's Aid program, put it this way:

My family. Myself. I don't want to be a food and beverage person for the rest of my life. That is fine for some people, but there are other things I would like to do. There are a lot of things that keep me going. Mostly my kids. I would like to see them further their education.

For Amy, who placed her young son in foster care and then up for adoption, a recent reconnection with her son is motivating her to return to complete a degree in allied health:

Yeah, but he's a pistol all right, let me tell you. And it's hard to believe that's the same little boy. That's the person that I know in my head. I don't know this 18-year-old man. That's the one thing that's kept me going--my son, hoping I wanted him to find me one day and be proud of me or have something for him. Which I don't. I have nothing for him now, you know, and I think he's used to a more affluent life-style. His parents, adoptive parents were paying sixty grand a year to send him to these schools. So he's kept me going. And I think maybe I also wanted my family to be proud of me, you know, that I could accomplish something. They haven't talked to me in, since I lost my son, fifteen years. So I was always hoping, you know, if I got a degree, you know, my mom would come back into my life or something.

Although Chris expressed the notion that she is pursuing her lifelong dream of becoming a nurse for herself, her spouse's support is a significant source of encouragement and enhancement toward persistence:

Well, it's been real interesting, because when I first started taking classes, his response to people was, "Oh she's taking classes just to keep herself busy." And I don't know whether he really believed that and he was just saying that for something to say or what. But, you know, as things progressed and I was, you know, getting close to getting in the program and whatever, he realized I guess that, you know, this, I was serious. I'm going to do this. And he truly is, he has been so supportive, so supportive. He's just, he's thrilled, you know, that I'm doing this, that

I'm taking the time to do it, that I'm being successful. Yeah, he's been fabulous. . . we'll be getting ready to do something and he'll ask me if I'm sure that I'm done with my studying so that we can put that away and go do whatever it is that we're going to do. I'll get ready to go to clinicals or whatever and I'll have my scrubs and my lab coat on, and he just looks at me and goes, "Wow, you look so professional. I'm so proud of you."

Sense of responsibility to self. All but one participant indicated that they were distinctly moving forward in their journey toward completion. Again, as with the other research questions, the responses regarding persistence are complex and multilayered, indicating the complexity of their lives. In the words of Courtney, aged 30, pursuing an Associate of Applied Science degree, "Just the fact that I have waited so long to do it and now that I am actually doing it, I am not going to give up again."

While academics were challenging for every participant, Cindy was the only participant who indicated that she might not continue toward completion. At the time of the interview, she was clearly struggling and frustrated with a math course. Despite this, she did not appear to see herself as a victim; in fact, over the course of the interview, in telling her story and giving voice to her journey, she was able to recognize her accomplishment was empowering:

At first it was the good grades I was receiving. 'Cause I was on the High Honors Society. And I was really surprised by that, because I didn't think I was doing well in my class during the first semester, but I pulled down a 3.85. [I felt] stressed, but challenged, and challenged in a good way. A

certain amount of stress is normal, and I want to be as dedicated as I possibly can. I don't miss school. I make every class, every hour, because I figure that I'm paying for it,. I should make it. So I show up. I figure I need to be there in order to learn. To exercise my mind. So it's been a challenge, but it's been a good one. Now you're making me think twice about my decision not to go back. I'm just worn out. It's been a long semester.

Ready to accept new challenges in life. While some of the women noted that the desire to obtain a better job or career was a significant motivator and allowed them to persist, others noted that they were pursuing this for a sense of accomplishment, agency, and self-efficacy. In addition, they are pursuing goals beyond college which are for themselves rather than others. Karla, pursuing an Associate of Applied Science in Nursing degree, said:

Well, again, it's, at the risk of sounding somewhat conceited, I don't fail. I've never—with the exception of my first marriage—I can honestly say whatever I choose to do, I'm usually successful at it. And when I make up my mind to do something, that's what I do. And it's just not an option for me, as long as I'm enjoying what I'm doing, to stop doing it. And so there's also the financial part of it too. While I'm 47, I still intend to work to help secure our future after retirement, so there's the financial aspect of it. But for me it's more of a self-actualization I think of a need, I guess, to finish and to practice as a nurse. I guess it's that motivation or that's

what continues to motivate me to keep doing it, but I've would never seriously consider not doing it.

Judy also notes that she is ready to accept new challenges and roles in professional life, as she transitions from a long career as a nurse's aide to registered nurse, in part shaped by her experience with her husband's death:

I thought that I understood everything that goes on with the dying process, and I thought that I understood what my patients were going through from practicing for so many years as a CNA, but I was clueless. But when I was living my job and my team was coming in and taking care of my husband, when my team gave me 24 hours of respite, all I did was sleep while they were at my house taking care of my husband, even though I had my kids there, my step kids were there, which is different. Or, you know, when we were changing his pain medication. My husband had such chronic pain. When we were making the transition from his pills to injections and trying to cut back and just find that comfort level, and that first 24 hours when it just seemed like all he did was yell, even though I knew that he was hallucinating. When the nurse showed up in the middle of the night to help me and did not leave until his pain was gone, it was like it was a turning point in my mind. And I thought, "That is such a powerful place to be, to be able to alleviate someone's pain and their anxiety." One thing I love about home care is the empowerment, you know, on the level of a CNA they look at you like you're a miracle worker when you teach them how to use a turn sheet . . . It's like you

just are this scientist, that you figured something wonderful out, you know. On the aspect of a nursing, to be able to administer a med, or go to the comfort pack and work with what's there until you can get them comfortable in a home, and not leave until that caregiver is calm and that patient is calm--*that is an amazing place*. And I think I'm ready to switch roles. I want to be on that side of the room. So that's kind of what's keeping me going.

In addition to the transition from one position to another, the women also note that the degree completion as giving them the ability to look forward to the future with satisfaction and excitement. Elizabeth noted that the ability to look toward future possibilities in the culinary field as the motivator in persistence:

I would have to say the amount of possibilities there are in this field. You are not necessarily restricted to just a restaurant or just a chain restaurant. You can work at resorts, you can have your own food truck. You can bake. You don't even have to cook the food. You can be a food service manager. You don't necessarily have to be cooking. So there were a lot of opportunities which gave way to a lot of ideas of things that I could do or I would like to do in the future so yes, there are a ton of things I could do but I could go on for days. But it was mostly the goals that I wanted for myself once I graduated and started working. That was the real motivating factor for me. When I started my internship and then you know. There was a little bit where I had my internship, it wasn't a

place that I thought I would necessarily be forever but you know it was tough. It was long days and long nights for very little money. It was frustrating, and then I was kind of like “is this really what I want to do?” but I was too close to the end for me to turn back, but I still at the same time, still had that same passion, so I guess it was the passion and the goals that I had for the future that kept me going.

Melissa also noted that, in addition to improving her financial future, she was pursuing a career of her own choosing and on her own terms, rather than out of a sense of obligation. In addition, she is establishing goals for the future:

Knowing that any job I am going to get pretty much if it is going to be a decent wage, you have to have a degree. I want to get this degree to get a better job to support myself so that I can have a nice retirement and eventually, yes I want to be able to move south with this degree. I want to be able to open my own business and having a degree in marketing will help me with my business. I want to be able to be versatile, so if I decide I don't want to live in Florida and want to move to Arizona, then marketing is something you can move around with. [I want] a better life. One that I choose what I want to do. I felt like I was stuck before and now I am like this time it is going to be about me. . . . and I am really enjoying it. Number one, it is because I have a goal, this is what I want to do, but also it's for me. Before it was maybe because it was expected of me or something like that, but this is for me. To enrich me. It is what I want to do. So I am just glad. I'm glad I'm here. It has been a great

experience here. The people are just great at this college. I would recommend it to anybody.

Chris notes that beyond completing her associate degree in nursing, her eventual goal is to pursue missionary work, rather than the typical types of jobs or career paths that her peers were considering after graduation:

Well I guess the other thing I could add to my story is that one of my motivators is the fact that I don't necessarily want a traditional nursing job. I want to get some experience, but my, you know, and this sounds crazy because I am 55 years old. But my dream is to go to India. And that just keeps me going.

Further, Chris summarizes what others expressed regarding acceptance of uncertainty in the future, but excitement at the possibilities that completion of a college degree can allow. Further, all of the women expressed an openness and confidence in their future despite not knowing what their precise path in life beyond the walls of college. As one remarked,

So yeah, that's a really, it's a really serious commitment. And at this point in my life, I'll leave that to the younger kids. But we'll see, you know, we'll see. I mean the beauty of it is, and this is where I think my age is actually a help, the beauty of it is, all the younger kids are like, "I want to work here. And I got to go . . ." And I sense this competitiveness, and I'm just like, "It'll open up when I'm ready to go. That door will open. I'm not even worried about it." And they just kind of go, "Really?" "Nope, I don't even think about it. I just don't." So, you know, there are pros and

cons to being an older student in college, but just think of all the new brain pathways we're building, so we'll never get old and senile, right?

Chapter 4 summarizes the results of this qualitative research study on the experiences of nontraditional reentry women in community college, as well as the relationship between the women and the community college environment. Analysis of the data suggests the development of three themes: Being an early college student in which they began college, but often these early experiences were intertwined with the development of the roles of wife, mother, and worker. In addition, these roles were also often defined in relationship to others. The second theme, becoming a college student, is initially met with anxiety over a return to college, but later the women are able to describe successful integration into the academic and social environment of the community college with the goal of successful completion. The final theme is that of emerging, in which they are firmly on a path of self-discovery, but also they are looking toward the future.

Chapter 5

Conclusions, Implications and Recommendations

This research study was designed and implemented to understand the relationship between the nontraditional reentry woman and the community college. Specifically, the study sought to recognize and examine the experiences of women as they returned to community college, through the voices of 10 women, ages 29 to 55, who voluntarily participated. The purpose of the study was not only to explore current educational experiences, but also to consider the impact of past educational experiences and the influence of family view on higher education. This research study posed the following research questions: What are the lived experiences of nontraditional reentry women in community college? What causes a return to the community college? What are the motivating factors and goals of a nontraditional reentry woman? And finally, what factors do women consider in persisting in community college when facing barriers? In other words, what impacts a nontraditional reentry woman's persistence and completion of a degree or certificate at a community college, the extrinsic forces to the community college environment or the intrinsic forces of self?

Conclusions

There are many conclusions which can be drawn from this study of nontraditional reentry women in community college within the framework of the Life Course Theory, Tinto's Theory of Institutional Persistence, and the Self Determination Theory. As described in Chapter Four, three distinct themes

emerged from the participants descriptions of reentry into the community college environment. The first theme is that of *being*, in which women described the view of higher education within their family. Within the main theme of being emerged three sub-themes including a positive view of higher education, despite varied family postsecondary and higher education attainment. The second sub-theme was that of competing forces for attention during early college years. And finally, the third sub-theme is that once the decision to return to community college is discerned, the sense of renewed commitment to learning.

In this study, most of the women participants entered either a two-year or four-year college after high school graduation. All ten of the women describe higher education and learning in general as having been viewed positively within their family of origin despite the fact that a total of only six parents attended college, and four of the parents did not graduate from high school. Most of the parents of the women had a high school diploma or GED. When parents did not attend college, the reason most often cited was the imperative to enter the workforce. The result of this lack of familial knowledge regarding the institution of higher education is that, when obstacles arose such as lack of financial assistance, the parents are unable to advise the women on what resources would have been available at the time and may have impacted persistence. Individual and familial lack of institutional knowledge led to a loss of one's own sense of procedural agency. Furthermore, when the women complete or do not complete college, they model parental behavior by turning to

the workforce. They demonstrate the ability to work hard and contribute to their family's finances. By dropping out of college and entering the workforce, they are repeating the narrative and behaviors of their family. Often the jobs that they enter, however, are low skill, low wage positions. Both Cindy and Melissa attend Beauty College and work as cosmetologists. Kim graduates with her certificate of development in business technology, but works in a series of positions in the food service industry. Judy works as a certified nurse's aide for a hospice agency. All of these jobs could be considered low skill, low wage, and low prestige.

For the other women in the study, their early college experiences lack commitment and focus. Melissa describes leaving a large university in central Michigan because of "three literally crazy roommates." Courtney leaves the community college she attended as a dual enrolled student because she believes an instructor is not giving her adequate feedback on written assignments. Although she successfully obtains a certificate of development in business technology, she describes faculty as talking about personal issues too often and how it distracted from learning. Chris, Debbie and Judy all discuss attending college after high school, but are unable to specific a plan of study or career path. Amy moves from college to college and through a variety of different occupational programs.

For two of the women, Debbie and Chris, education was explicitly provided for their male siblings, while they were excluded from educational finances. Despite this, they both begin to attend college on their own, but this

becomes part of their internal narrative thirty years later as they are moving toward degree completion. Within their own family unit, they were not seen as worthy of allocation of family resources while at the same time, a male sibling was allowed this privilege. That is a very powerful message.

Nontraditional reentry women face a number of life experiences which can impact stop out and drop out behaviors including family. In addition to work and college, the women also experience other life events which impact persistence in college ultimately resulting in stop out, specifically marriage and motherhood. With the exception of Courtney and Elizabeth, all of the women marry and have children in their early to mid-twenties. The convergence of these significant life events seems to be the tipping point, especially as they try to balance marriage, motherhood, work, and college. In addition, as their early marriages became troubled, Judy and Chris both noted that rather than remain in college and pursue education, they opted to drop out and enter the workforce. This confirms the study by Scott, Burns, and Cooney (1996) of mature aged female students with children--those women with lower socioeconomic status (SES) were more likely to leave college because of lack of support for higher education, financial issues, lack of assistance with household chores, and lack of knowledge within the system of higher education. The lower socioeconomic status of the women was linked to husbands with low SES and concomitant more conservative values regarding the division of household labor and support for the mother's study.

Many of the women noted that it was their mother or other maternal figure that was most influential in their early decision to attend college. In turn, many of the women were attending college with their children or a sibling including Cindy, Chris, and Judy, while Melissa and Debbie had high school aged children who were planning to pursue higher education with their mother's encouragement. Whether due to the circumstances of their earlier life or a conscious choice to pursue a different path, the women participants are changing not only their life course, but that of their children as well. They are not only encouraging their children to pursue higher education by their words, but by their actions, further enhancing their motivation.

For the women who participated in this study, the decision to return to community college is multifaceted. As noted previously, women return to community college after experiencing a significant life event such as divorce, death of a spouse, or job loss (Johnson, Schwarz, and Bower, 2000). Several of the women in this study return to work after experiencing one or more of these events. Melissa both lost her job as a medical transcriptionist and is going through a divorce. Judy's spouse passed away after a long illness. Chris returns to college to pursue her dream of being a nurse after losing her job due to a long term illness. Cindy divorces her husband, but also has recovered from both significant physical and mental health issues. Kim has four small children at home. Coupled with these significant life events, they also express a desire for both personal fulfillment and a sense of having control over their future lives. For the others, the return to community college to complete a degree is a

more personal decision. Elizabeth, Debbie, Kim, Courtney, Amy, and Karla all describe the need for higher education in order to have a fulfilling career for personal, professional and financial reasons. The women in this study were on very diverse life courses--they had cycled through several roles and life changing events including student, wife, mother, divorcee, widow, worker, and then returning once again to student.

For each of the women, the first theme, that of *being*, begins with a look back toward their own personal history to examine how education was viewed within their family, and how their own initial educational journey began, was interrupted and continues to the present. The theme of *being* reflects the existing research the Life Course Theory, which notes that the individual's interaction with the environment informs how the individual will move toward life goals (Crockett, 2002). Early in their lives, the women's interaction with their environment in the form of external relationships and life circumstances impacted their forward movement toward their goals. This continues even to the present as spouses, children, family and work all continue to impact their lives, but now, in their present life course, rather than forestall their progress, they are able to adapt.

Once the women have made a definitive decision to return to community college, it is with a renewed sense of commitment. The second theme is that of *becoming* a college student. Although they are compelled to return to college, initially it is not without a sense of apprehension over being "the oldest one in the room," which is a sub-theme. Another sub-theme is the integrating into the

role of college student, which involves interacting with peers and faculty members. The third sub-theme is the positive interactions with faculty with whom they feel both reassurance and support. A fourth sub-theme is the high academic expectations that they have of themselves at this stage, despite having to put forth great effort. In order to achieve their goal of successful completion, the women describe the fifth sub-theme, which is high use of academic and faculty resources in order to achieve these goals. Through a series of interactions within the social and academic environment, the women move from being the oldest in the room to just one of the students. The final milestone of this theme is the recognition of connection to the faculty and their student peers. The connection to faculty and peers, as well as the classroom, enhances a sense of belonging to the college environment. Finally, the women describe significant challenges to their goal of persistence, including financial and family concerns.

In addition to the self-imposed expectation of high academic performance, they frequently acted as their own advocate in learning. A sense of academic and social integration resulted in behaviors and actions that demonstrated integrations which moved the women toward their goal of attaining a degree or certificate. For example, they described sitting in the front row of the classroom, emailing faculty, utilizing office hours, and frequently asking questions. Similarly, after some initial anxiety concerning age, the women describe the positive experiences with their fellow students. These relationships are intimate and are usually in the form of support groups, study

groups, and cohorts, which serve to further their goal toward of degree or program completion. Participation in other types of student activities within the college environment was not described. These examples of academic and social integration also indicate that the women have life experiences that allow them to act on their own behalf. It is not simply integration into the academic or social environment of the community college, but the life experiences that they have gained which allows them to access all possible tools at their disposal in order to be successful. Barnett (2011) confirms in a study of community college students that faculty validation in the form of faculty personally knowing students, providing a caring instructional environment, having appreciation for diversity, and displaying a mentoring relationship positively affected academic integration, and in turn persistence. Further, they expected to perform well academically, and as such used all available resources such as the library, learning support services, tutoring, and disability services in order to assure academic success.

In an extension of Tinto's Theory of Institutional Departure, Deil-Amen (2011) describes social and academic integration in a qualitative study of faculty, staff, and nontraditional students at public two-year institutions, and notes the importance of both social and academic integration as important to student persistence. She suggests, however, that rather than framing social and academic integration as distinct and separate phenomena, they be examined as socio-academic integrative moments in which social and academic interactions are simultaneously combined. Within the context of the academic

environment, social integrative moments such as events, activities, interactions, and relationships with faculty and other institutional actors result in feelings of college belonging, identity, and competence. Furthermore, through relationships with other students, information was able to be obtained regarding not only academics, but the institution of education as a whole.

Confirming the importance of peer relationships on learning, Lundberg (2003), compared adult students group in ages 20 to 23, 24 to 29, and over the age of 30. She found that for students of all ages, learning was enhanced by peer relationships and relationships with others on campus, in particular faculty and administrators. Further, for those over the age of 30, learning was enhanced not only by social peers on campus, but peers off campus with whom they discussed frequently educationally related topics. Crossan, Field, Gallacher, and Merrill (2003), in a qualitative study of 70 nontraditional students, also note that the learning trajectory for adults is nonlinear, and as a result, learner identities can be uncertain. With respect to nontraditional students, participation in learning strategies which incorporate life experiences can benefit learning in adult students.

Although each had traveled a different and varied life course, the thread that holds them together is the high level of intrinsic motivation as described by the SDT. In a study of 2,520 college students, Guiffrida, Lynch, Wall, and Abel (2013) note in a validation of the SDT that students who attend college seeing the intrinsic values of autonomy and competence were more likely to having higher grade point averages and expressed a greater intent to persist

than those who were not motivated by intrinsic needs. Additionally, students who expressed relatedness, in particular to faculty, were more likely to have higher grade point averages and intent to persist.

They described a strong belief in themselves-that this is the right time in their lives to pursue more education, a career, and to advance to the next level in life. As Chris noted, "I know this is what I'm supposed to be doing right now." They move away from making decisions based upon the needs of others, but rather their own needs. In making a pivot away from decision making based on the needs of others, they are moving toward and deepening the relationship with themselves. Further, integration of the social and academic environments gives each woman a sense of competence and belonging to the group. In addition, autonomous decision making enhances self-efficacy.

The final theme is that of *emerging* as a college graduate and professional. The momentum toward completion is fueled in part by a sense of responsibility toward their family members, but more importantly, a sense of accountability to self. In addition, the view of looking toward the future is the readiness to accept new challenges in life. As the women gain competence through institutional and educational agency and a sense of belonging through integration both with peers and faculty in the classroom, they move away from making decisions and pursuing goals solely based on the needs of others, but rather for themselves.

Despite the positive academic and social integration, the women participants describe significant challenges to persistence. The most frequently

described challenge was the financial strain of attending college, whether because of the costs of attendance or the decrease in the ability to work and contribute to family finances. Furthermore, the women described the challenge of balancing work, school, and family, as well as ongoing issues with physical and mental health. Despite the fact that a major life event including divorce, death of a spouse, and job loss propelled the women forward into community college to pursue or complete a degree, significant problems still exist at home, including health issues and the need to care for extended family members.

In the process of emerging from community college and into professional life, once again the women participants in the study describe a strong sense of commitment to their goal, but their reason for pursuing the next goal is for themselves. When asked to describe what kept them in pursuit of their goals, despite challenges at home, school, and work, the answers are twofold--while they want to continue for their family, more important is their strong desire is to choose this path for themselves. While Amy and Kim describe wanting to complete their degree for their children, they also describe the desire for a better life for themselves. Debbie and Courtney are looking toward pursuing a bachelor's degree. Elizabeth looks forward to all the possibilities that her degree in the culinary arts can bring to her. Melissa would like to move to a warmer climate and perhaps begin her own business in marketing. Judy, Chris, and Karla, who are all pursuing degrees in nursing, are looking forward to the professional responsibilities and challenges. Beyond having a routine job in a health care agency, Chris ultimately hopes to pursue missionary work in a

foreign country. Each of these goals, however, reflects a feeling of being open to the possibilities of life because their sense of the future is now wide open.

For nontraditional reentry women the evolution from being, to becoming, to emerging and its relationship to persistence is the movement away from decision making based on the relationships toward decision making based on the relationship with themselves. For the women, the pursuit of higher education results in a deepening of relationship and knowledge of themselves as individuals, rather than in relationship to the others in their lives as the focal point of decision making. They are not just obtaining skills and knowledge in terms of a career choice, but gaining knowledge as well as a sense of self efficacy. For all of the women, whether they were from the younger group to the more advanced in age, they evolved from looking at their past experiences and decision making from the point of view of parents, teachers, boyfriends, spouses, and children to “I, me, and my.” As they progressed toward their goal, their language changed. This shift in language suggest an increased sense of autonomy, enhanced by a sense of competence in their skills as learners and relatedness to social and academic environment. In addition, although they continue on the life course, the journey is their own, rather than in relation to others, further enhancing their sense of commitment to the goal.

Implications for Theory

In examining the educational experiences of nontraditional reentry women in community college, the framework provided by the Life Course Theory, Tinto’s Theory of Institutional Departure, as well as the Self-

Determination Theory, there are other theoretical perspectives which can provide dimension to these experiences.

The answers to the research questions of this study regarding the lived experiences of nontraditional reentry women prior to entering the community college can be summarized by noting that their lives were characterized by the usual roles of student, wife, mother, divorcee, and widow, only to return to student. The decision to enter college is influenced by the family, and their decisions to leave college are often influenced by family as well, but later, the family is a spouse or children. This is an example of extrinsic motivators influencing the entrance and exit from college; however, as the women return to college, they are motivated not only by extrinsic factors, but overwhelmingly by the intrinsic motivation of know that this return to college is for them.

The findings of this study of nontraditional aged women confirm the previous research utilizing Tinto's Theory of Institutional Departure as it examines the phenomena of student persistence and explores the influence of the student's ability to integrate into the social and academic environment of the college. Tinto (1993) notes the importance of an individual's commitment to his or her goals and the institution as central to departure or persistence. Further, the Theory of Institutional Departure notes that nontraditional students and students who attend community college are much more likely to attend college while at the same time experiencing the competing forces of work and home, which results in the inability to fully integrate into the social fabric of the campus. The experiences of the nontraditional reentry women in this

college appear to confirm Tinto's theory in that early college experiences appear to lack focus or commitment to a degree or plan of study. The initial decision to depart college was based influenced by the competing forces of family and was ultimately made based the best interest of her family members. After a period of time, however, they each made the decision to return to community college and although they were at a different state in life, the competing forces in their lives remain. For example, many of the women were in the stage of their life course where children were departing from the home, while at the same other responsibilities emerged in the form of extended family coming to live with them. Despite the fact that all of the participants describe financial issues as a result of returning to community college, it did not impacted persistence. Not described by Tinto is the competing force of health and wellness particularly as nontraditional students' age. Although a number of the women described significant chronic health issues in themselves or family members, it did not impact persistence. For nontraditional students, competing forces will always be a factor in their lives, but as they age, their coping skills, and in particular their motivating forces are able to overcome these challenges.

Tinto (1993) also notes the importance of social and academic integration as essential to the student's intentions and commitments, noting that negative experiences weaken commitments, particularly to the institution and increase the likelihood of departure. The Theory of Institutional Departure also describes the academic community in which students experience social and academic integration as "nested" within the external communities. The

participation of a student within these external communities, in nontraditional students, although positive, may negatively impact commitment and persistence.

Confirming Tinto's Theory, upon reentry to the community college, the women participants noted positive academic integration. The academic environment of the community college was described in overwhelming positive terms by the women participants. They described faculty as caring, responsive, and supportive of them as individuals. Small class size was also seen as a positive attribute as it was seen as leading to feelings of individualized attention.

Tinto (1993) describes social integration as interactive process in which interactions among students are integral to the development of social bonds which assimilate the student into the social community of the institution. The social community is viewed not only as informal interaction with peers, but in the more formal structures of the college, such as work-study, clubs and other extracurricular activities. In this study, the women again describe positive social integration as defined by Tinto; however, it is described the development of social integration occurs primarily within the context of the classroom. When asked to describe the nature of relationships with peers, they describe study groups, lab partners, clinical groups, cohorts, and support groups as the way in which they interact informally with other students. Beyond college sponsored support groups, none of the women participated in college wide activities or socialized with their peers outside of the classroom. In this study,

social integration is actualized through academic integration. Rather than social integration and academic integration occurring as a nested experience with the external community, it is social integration and academic integration which are the nested experiences. Further, these relationships with peers are distinctive in that they are close relationships, but with the orientation toward their own larger goal.

Tinto (1997) noted increased social and academic activities and greater perceived developmental gains over the course of an academic in a study of students enrolled in a coordinated studies program at Seattle Central Community College. Students who participated in the coordinated studies program were more likely to demonstrate the development of supportive peer groups and report shared learning through activities such as seminars, group projects, and class discussions. It was also noted that coordinated learning communities allowed for the social environment of the classroom to enhance the academic learning, and as a result, students became more active learners in the construction of content knowledge. Further, Tinto (1997) notes that it may be more accurate to describe social and academic integration as not occurring independently, but rather interdependently; in which the social community emerges from the academic sphere of the classroom which is inherently social.

As noted previously, the Life Course Theory refers to the examination of an individual's social trajectory through major life events such as education, work and family. The life courses of individuals are shaped by a number of

forces, including the historical events of a lifetime, the occurrence and timing of events in the lifespan, the linkages of social relationships, and finally the choices and actions within both social and historical circumstances (Elder, 1998). Despite the fact that societal institutions often provide a normative framework for one's life, individuals have the ability to make decisions which affect their lives is known as human agency (Crockett, 2002). The women of this qualitative research study, in particular those who were at the older end of the age continuum, were most certainly affected by both historical and social circumstances. For example, the view within a family that education was important for male siblings, but not necessary for female siblings may have reflected the societal belief in the varied roles of men versus women. While the belief that education was important for males, but not females may have been rooted in the historical context of the time, it is also fundamentally rooted in the life experiences of these women. Life experiences may have been shaped by the past, but in demonstrating human agency and consciously choosing a different path now, each is changing her own life history. As Shannon and Elder (2002, p. 154) note "social change often brings with it pervasive modifications in a society's institutions, organizations, small groups and interpersonal relationships. These organizational and relational modifications can undermine a person's ability to unify the life phases with goal-directed behaviors."

In their research on agency, motivation and the life course, Brandtstadter and Rothermund (2002) note activities related to intentional self-

development are goal directed, but that over the life course, some goals or activities may not have been possible over the life span, despite assimilative activities and accommodative processes. Reaffirming one's goal and the development of new skills can be seen as assimilative activities, while reappraisal of previous losses is an accommodative process. Goals over the life course are adjusted over the lifespan based on the available physical, psychological, social, material and temporal resources. Actualization of these life course adaptations is integral to successful aging. Each of the women had to intentionally reflect upon their past educational experiences, and accommodate those into their current educational experience, within their current life circumstances. As they developed new and relevant skills within the classroom, they assimilated their learning experiences which enhanced their motivation. It is important to note that the nontraditional aged women in this study had very complex lives and that the roles and responsibilities did not diminish with age, but rather morphed into different circumstances. For example, the significant changes in health status which occur with middle age and the re-emergence of aging parents or siblings into the home are impactful life events within the lives of the women in this study. Each of these experiences, required an adaptation of their available resources, but did not impact motivation toward their goal.

In summary, this study serves to describe the Life Course of nontraditional reentry women as they return to community college to pursue and completed a college degree.

In this study, in addition to participants' feelings of attachment to others within their classes, clinical groups, support groups, and study groups, their feeling of belonging enhanced their identity as students. The more the nontraditional aged reentry women experienced feelings of belonging to the peer group, the more they gained in the form of both institutional and educational agency, the more likely they were to have feelings of competence. A sense of belonging and competence within the educational environment led to increased motivation toward their goals. According to Deci and Ryan's Self Determination Theory (2000), motivation to a goal based on intrinsic motivation which is inherently derived from the performance of an activity is more influential on learning than external motivation or motivation to receiving an external reward. According to the SDT, there are three needs which potentiate intrinsic motivation: autonomy, relatedness, and competence. The SDT describes the characteristic of relatedness as important to the development of intrinsic motivation. This link or relatedness between past, current, and future educational and familial experiences enhances their motivation to persist. The nontraditional reentry women in this study experienced competence as a result of positive interactions with the academic environment through faculty and other college support systems which not only validated their experiences but included them as members of the community of learners. Not only did a sense of competence, autonomy and belonging give them enhanced motivation toward the goal of completing a degree or certificate, but they developed adaptive and assimilative skills over their life course which allowed each of them to

successfully navigate challenges to persistence. The findings of this qualitative study would appear to support the Self- Determination Theory, as well as support the intersection of the SD, the Life Course Theory and the Theory of Institutional Departure.

Marcia Baxter Magolda's Theory of Self-Authorship (2009) is a theory of development that is used to describe the young adult's development of an internal voice to guide decisions regarding beliefs, values, identity, and relationships. She notes that in young adulthood, there are a variety of crossroads at which external expectations and internal voices compete for ascendancy in the self. The journey of self-discovery occurs during three phases, specifically, moving toward Self-Authorship, Building a Self-Authored System, and Moving Beyond Self-Authorship. Progresses through the phases is made as individuals move through the phases as they make meaning or interpret life events within the framework of external formulas; however, when these external formulas no longer apply, they recognize the need to listen to their internal voice in order to re-evaluate the external influences. In the first phase, Moving Toward Self-Authorship, there are two necessary elements--first, to listen to the Internal Voice, in which there is a strengthening of core values and beliefs, and second, to cultivate the Inner Voice, in which the individual analyzes not only the decisions and but the decision making process as well. The second phase, Building a Self-Authored System is characterized by an increased ability to trust one's own Internal Voice. This is done by taking ownership for choices and decision making, rather than simply allowing fate to

take its course. As one becomes more accountable for decision making beliefs, values and identity are solidified, becoming foundational. This is known as Cultivating the Inner Voice. The element known as Security Internal Commitments is distinguished by individuals gaining understanding of their own internal commitments, living these commitments, and, in doing so, living their own convictions more authentically. And finally, the third phase, Moving Beyond Self-Authorship, is where the individual is able to gain perspective and reflect on past decisions without becoming enmeshed in them.

This study would appear to confirm the Theory of Self-Authorship in the description of the development of self. Despite the fact, that the nontraditional reentry women who participated in this study would not be considered young adults, but rather mature adult women who clearly moved through the phases of self-authorship development. As they began their academic careers after high school, many of the women faced the crossroads of marriage, childbearing, child rearing, entering the work force, and eventually leaving higher education. At the crossroads, the external expectations of the other roles in their lives and the demands of those roles often dominated over the internal voice of remaining in college. As they progressed in these roles and gained life experience, it allowed them to gain self-knowledge and understanding. The increased self-knowledge allowed them to enter the stage known as Building a Self-Authored System in which they made the decision to return to community college. As they entered the academic environment, they were able to take ownership of not only their decision to return to college to gain skills and

knowledge, but also to act as advocates on their own behalf within the academic environment. Courtney, age 30, pursuing an Associate of Applied Science in Accounting degree, describes this feeling:

I found that before, I struggled with it and since I have grown up quite a bit since then, that it has become quite a bit easier and that I can, not so much that the classes are easier but that myself doing the work is easier because I am more committed to it I guess.

As they persist and progress toward degree completion, they are able to express not only reflect back positively on their accomplishments and decision making, but have confidence in the ability to look toward the future even if the future is unknown or uncertain; they have a greater sense of confidence in themselves and therefore greater hope for the future. Their experience and education has allowed them to develop Self-Authorship in which they have ownership of their destiny. Chris, age 55, pursuing an Associate of Applied Science in Nursing degree, described this as “knowing.” She elaborates:

Knowing that . . . I don't know; it's weird. Because I know that this is where I'm supposed to be. You just know, you know. This is what I'm supposed to do. So and I love it. I love it.

The Theory of Self Authorship also has a number of implications with respect to the implications for adult learners. In application of this theory, Baxter Magolda (2009) notes that for educators, adult learners should not be seen as the receptacles of education, but rather active participants in their learning, specifically through the use of their own internal voices as the basis

for the development of their beliefs, as well as relational to their individual discipline of study. In this study, the women were acutely aware of their current educational experiences by looking through the lens of life experiences. For example, Judy's experience as a novice nursing student was informed by her experience with her husband's death. Karla's skill and expertise as a manager in food service, made her more acutely aware of the relationships with her fellow nursing students, as well as the role of the nurse as the coordinator of the patient's care.

A second theoretical implication for this study comes from the Belenky, Clinchy, Golderberger, and Tarule's (1986) seminal work *Women's Ways of Knowing* in which the epistemological traditions of women are explored. They note that women the ways in which women gain knowledge is on a continuum. The first way of way of knowing is Received Knowledge, in which women gain knowledge listening to others, including friends, family, and authorities. They not only gain literal knowledge by listening to the voices of others, but have the first glimpse of seeing themselves as part of the community of learners. This leads to a sense of self reflection and the initial development of a moral base, as they begin to see themselves as separate from others.

The second way of knowing is Subjective Knowledge: The Inner Voice. Similar to the Theory of Self-Authorship, this stage calls for the development of an inner voice. It begins with knowledge that the woman has inner resources. This way of knowing indicates a developmental shift as a result of events related to relationships, self-concept, self-esteem, morality, and behavior. As a

result, women develop self-protection, assertiveness, and self-definition. They develop a personal sense of authority defined as subjective knowing. In this stage, women are likely to experience an event in which the received knowledge, perhaps from an authority figure or perhaps someone closer, has proven to be wrong or hurtful. An example of this would be a failed marriage or an abusive spouse or partner. This further causes the woman to rely on her inner voice, sometimes in ways that are not easily articulated—the Just Knowing (Belenky, Clinchy, Golderberger and Tarule, 1986).

The third way of knowing is the Subjective Knowing: The Quest for Self in which the woman cuts ties with her past, and moves toward even greater self-knowledge. This way of knowing is characterized by the woman eschewing primary responsibilities for previous or traditional roles and moving more on a journey of self-discovery (Belenky, Clinchy, Golderberger, and Tarule, 1986).

The fourth way of knowing is the Procedural Knowing: The Voice of Reason. Women are able to move from subjective knowing to being more reasoned and reflective within the authority of a formal academic framework or standard. In this way of knowing, there is movement away from subjectivity to objectivity (Belenky, Clinchy, Golderberger, and Tarule, 1986).

The final way of knowing is Procedural Knowing: Separate and Connected Knowing, in which again there is movement toward knowledge as relationship toward self. In other words, women view knowledge as it relates to themselves, either gaining knowledge of artifacts and objects, known as

separate knowing or gaining knowledge for the sake of others, known as connected knowledge (Belenky, Clinchy, Golderberger and Tarule, 1986).

The nontraditional reentry women in this study exhibited various ways of knowing. As novice learners in their newly chosen career paths, they were clearly gaining Received Knowledge from authority figures. Others, however, were learning to know themselves and know the world around them in subjective knowing ways. In other words, the subjective knowledge or feeling that they were on the right path to the next phase in their lives. They were able to learning to cultivate the inner voice in terms of their future. In addition, they were able to reflect on past life experiences to inform their decisions going forward into the future.

Implications for Practice and Leadership

There are many implications with respect to practice and educational leadership in this study of nontraditional aged reentry women in community college. Tones, Fraser, Elder, and White (2009) in a study of mature aged students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, noted that while over time students learn to navigate home, work, and academics, the lack of awareness of services, lack of services at available times, and lack of communication in convenient formats were barriers particularly to students from lower socioeconomic status. While the women not only expressed but behaved in ways that demonstrated positive integration into the academic and social environment of the community college, it is clear that it was not the primary motivating factor. It is important, however, that the faculty, staff, and

administration of the community college ensure that the academic and social atmosphere continues to be a safe, supportive, and academically engaging environment for the nontraditional aged woman. This has significant implications for the educational leader from an institutional, structural, and pedagogic perspective. The organization structure of the community college needs to facilitate academic and social integration. From the time that the nontraditional aged woman decides to return to community college, information should be available and provided in such a way that it is easily understood by those who have not been previously immersed in the culture and colloquialism of higher education. Academic processes, such as completing an application, registering for classes, and following a curriculum guide, should be accessible and comprehensible. Academic advisors should be knowledgeable about and reassuring to nontraditional women regarding the angst most feeling about returning to the college campus and classroom. Reentry student should have “boot camp” or brief intense courses on basic subjects such as mathematics, reading, writing and computer literacy so that students feel well prepared for college work. Availability of first year support or study skills classes to ensure continued academic assistance.

Beyond academic administration and the structure of the organization, faculty, staff, and administration should be aware that for nontraditional students, academic and social integration, which are integral to student success, occur primarily within the context and environment of the classroom. Further, owing to the limitations of time and the complexity of the lives of

nontraditional learners, faculty members in particular need to make the most of this valuable time and resource, since the classroom is of prime importance to the nontraditional student. Adjunct faculty, who often comprise the majority of faculty members on a community college campus, also need to be aware of the unique academic and social integration needs of community college students. Adjunct faculty need to provide for and accommodate students who require additional time before and after class to address academic or personal issues. Furthermore, private office space beyond the classroom needs to be available to adjunct faculty on the community college campus to meet with students as needed.

In the classroom, faculty should encourage nontraditional students to build the connections between their previous life experiences and their current experience in the classroom. Students should be challenged to develop their own internal voices in the learning process through a variety of learning strategies including active research of ideas, peer group projects, and application of their life experience to in class topics.

In addition, faculty, staff, and administrators need to make nontraditional students aware early and often of the variety of services available to those who struggle either academically or financially. Services to aid nontraditional students should be accessible at times when they are more likely to use them, such as evening hours. Faculty members need to continue to be accessible, responsive, and encouraging to nontraditional learners, recognizing that they often leave the classroom for other life responsibilities. In

the classroom, faculty should encourage students draw upon life experiences as a context for learning.

There are a number of services which could assist the nontraditional woman to persist, including the provision of reasonably priced on-campus child care to accommodate day, evening, and weekend classes, as well as private spaces for breastfeeding mothers. Furthermore, educational leaders, aware of the multiple roles that nontraditional women balance, should be alert to the development of caregiver role strain. Support groups which address all aspects of the life course, such as those for single parents and those caring for elderly parents, could provide necessary encouragement and assistance to allow them to persist.

Recommendations for Future Research

The significant presence of women and in particular nontraditional aged women on community college campuses has implications for the continued study of this important demographic. Until recently, much of the research regarding social and academic integration focused on quantitative measures; however, as this qualitative study has shown, a more authentic measure would be the student's perceptions of these feelings of connection and its impact on persistence. Further qualitative study needs to be done to describe the student's perceptions of social and academic integrations, particularly as they occur within the context of the classroom, support groups, and cohort. Future research should also include larger cohorts of women, as well as explore the differences in experiences between younger nontraditional reentry women and

those of a more advanced age to explore the differences and complexities of the life course and its impact on persistence and learning. In addition, qualitative research should consider how and why knowing occurs in the learning community of the classroom and more intimate settings. Since this was a relatively small qualitative study, it should be replicated to include a larger number of participants.

Since the challenges to persistence appeared to change over time, in particular between the young participants and the more mature students, a comparison of women across the continuum of ages would be helpful to determine if the barriers to persistence and the motivation changes over time and life course, in particular examining the stressors in the more mature nontraditional students. Future research should also include comparison of the perception and behavioral aspects of social and academic integration among faculty, students, and administrators. In addition, research should be done to explore the impact student, faculty, and institutional use of social media on social and academic integration in higher education. Specifically, how does participation in social media by students contribute to feelings of social and academic integration? Furthermore, further research should be conducted regarding the effectiveness of the institutional structures and services available to women and how they impact persistence.

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